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**Social change and Southern
Paranoia in William Faulkner's
*Light in August***

Set in the 1930s in the American South, William Faulkner's novel *Light in August* focuses on the stories of a handful of characters from the margins of Southern society. Their lives intertwine throughout the novel, each of them signifying the changes in the social structure of the South. The South in the era Faulkner deals with is marked by "years of hysterical white reaction to any possibility of integration, which was seen as a dangerous infection of the white cultural body and a threat to the very foundations of Anglo-American civilization" (Ladd 139). The story of Lena Grove, a young pregnant white woman in search of her child's father, is contrasted with the story of Joe Christmas, a young man whose racial ambiguity causes him to be abused and mistreated all throughout his life. Putting the focus on these characters, Faulkner emphasizes the issues of the time, in particular the ideology, tied to the perception of blackness and the fear surrounding being on the wrong side of "the color line" (Fields 159). Ideology offers "a ready-made interpretation of the world, a sort of hand-me-down vocabulary with which to name the elements of every new experience" with a function to "make coherent – if never scientifically accurate – sense of the world" (Fields 153).

Joe Christmas's story is a story of alienation. His life from the moment he remembers it, beginning at the time of his early childhood in an orphanage, is marked by prejudice. At the very center of the novel is the question of his race. Though his mother is white, it is unknown whether his father is black or Mexican:

'It was a fellow with the circus, Byron says. She told him that the man was a Mexican, the daughter told him when he caught her. Maybe that's what the fellow told the gal. But he' - again he indicates the old man - 'knew somehow that the fellow had nigger blood. Maybe the circus folks told him. I don't know. He ain't never said how he found out, like that never made any difference.' (Faulkner 363)

Joe Christmas resorts to violence and murder on several occasions driven to it by the hatred he experienced, the vehicle for which was religion. His grandfather, after leaving him at an orphanage, comes back as a janitor only to teach the children his belief that Joe, by possibly having a black father, is related to the devil. Later, whoever forces Joe into prayer and uses it to control and abuse him ends up murdered by his hand. For the entirety of his life, the speculations about him not being white, although he physically looks like a white man, causes him to be ostracized as soon as his identity is revealed. It is more the ambiguity of his race that scares the citizens of Jefferson, than any of the behavior he exhibits. After finding out, the people feel as though they had been fooled:

Then yesterday morning he came to Mottstown in broad daylight, on Saturday with a city full of folks. He went into a white barber shop as a white man, and because he looked white they never suspected him. Even when the bootlegger saw that he had on a pair of second hand

brogans that were too big for him, they never suspected. They shaved him and cut his hair and he payed them and walked out and went right into a store and bought a new shirt and a tie and a straw hat, with some of the very money he stole from the woman he murdered. (Faulkner 331)

It is in this way that Faulkner "problematizes Jim Crow" (Ladd 164). It was Jim Crow laws that, starting with dictating "separate spaces on public transportation, including trains, streetcars, and trolleys", eventually "ordered racial segregation in marriage, education, and health care" (Guffey 45). Faulkner challenges the idea these laws depended on and he does so with the portrayal of Christmas's genealogy; "one way a white man could be a black man, or rather a slave, in the Deep South in the 1920s and 1930s was through illegitimacy. If the father of an illegitimate child is an unknown stranger the child might be the carrier of what the white racist would have understood as social and cultural contagion" (Ladd 164). The reveal that Joe Christmas is black, no matter the fact that it's based on speculation, provides the townspeople with a challenge. The story engages with blackness "through a kind of logic based on faith rather than evidence" (Ladd 170). The idea that race is a biological, easily definable fact crumbles in front of their eyes; "if whiteness can be acted, then the white/ black binary becomes vulnerable because it becomes determined by performance rather than biology, which they have so far relied on to naturalize the rest of their practices" (Al-Barhow 57).

For southerners, the obsession with racial purity was intensified after the Civil War because of "the way the Spanish American War and World War I changed the relationship of race and class in the South" (Ladd 164). Since a large number of black American men participated in the Spanish-American War, an image of "martial courage, obedience, and respectability as the standard of manliness for young black men" appeared in newspaper and art (Amron 421). While this changed the perspective of many white Americans in the North, whites in the South mostly felt threatened. Though these representations provided a guide for confronting racial violence for black men in America and the traits of "the ideal black man" changed, what stayed the same was "the conduit that carried these traits to the black masses—the image of the African American soldier—represented two decades later by the roughly 400,000 sable doughboys who crossed the Atlantic during World War I" (Amron 422). Before starting to illegally sell alcohol together, the father of Lena's child, a poor white man named Joe Brown and Joe Christmas worked at the mill together, which reflects the fact that "blacks had begun moving northward during the war years in order to take advantage of the employment opportunities in northern factory towns" and "the economic consequences for the white South were immediate and serious" (Ladd 164). Namely, Joe Brown's poverty and social status is what incites him to become partners in selling alcohol with Christmas. His "artificial blackness is far from being an individual case; rather, it is a symptom of a substantial social transformation during the Great Migration, when a class of poor whites replaced African Americans deserting the South altogether or moving from the countryside to urban centers within the South"

(Al-Barhow 62). The relationship between race and class significantly changing brought about the issue of the color line, "which still represented for the white American (and especially for the white southerner) the indisputable boundary between civilization and chaos." (Ladd 168) Therefore, by doing business with Joe Christmas, Brown is aware that in the eyes of the public "his whiteness has already been compromised" (Al-Barhow 62). Nevertheless, the idea that whiteness makes him inherently more trustworthy than Christmas is what saves him from being a suspect in the investigation of Joanna's murder. Though Joe Christmas's lover Joanna receives the same treatment for her relationships with black people while alive, after she is murdered, her death becomes the tool to chastise Christmas and for the white townspeople to prove to themselves that their whiteness keeps them from becoming violent, failing to see that their desire to lynch him is violent itself. Upon finding Joanna dead they immediately assume there could not have been a relationship between the two of them, but that the black man who killed her had raped her: "knew, believed and hoped that she has been ravished too: at least once before her throat was cut and at least once afterward" (Faulkner 271). This is how Christmas ends up castrated and killed by Percy Grimm, whose supposed goal is to avenge Joanna. Grimm's mindset is reflected in the paragraph: "a belief that the white race is superior to any and all other races and that the American is superior to all other white races and that the American uniform is superior to all men, and that all that would ever be required of him in payment for this belief, this privilege, would be his own life" (Faulkner 426). His act is only a reflection of the idea of white supremacy, which in the South was used by "the black-belt elite" to distract the poor whites suffering the economic situation from their similarities to the freed slaves (Fields 159).

Though Lena's story contrasts Joe Christmas's, as can be seen from their very different endings, hers with a child and newfound love and Christmas's in violent death, Lena is not merely there to amplify how tragic his fate is. Being an unmarried pregnant woman not only means she is judged in her household which she needs to escape, but the image of her travelling alone "taps the xenophobia associated with social and political change in the South during the 1920s, when plain folk had begun to move out of the backwater as Lena is on the move, in search of a legitimizing identity as Americans and as participants in the national mission" (Ladd 167). Having lost both of her parents and having left her brother's house, her genealogy is an issue just like Christmas's. Similarly, the rest of the central characters of the novel are isolated from society. All of them find themselves at the margins of Southern society and are in some ways proof of the social change happening in the South, reflected in the way Joe Christmas's grandparents come to Jefferson: "[...] she to save Christmas and Mr. Hines to take part in his lynching - and the way they leave with her in charge is one of the strongest suggestions that Christmas's death has divided the white community, at least on the margins, and did not do so in vain" (Al-Barhow 68). Similarly, Reverend Gail Hightower had been ostracized by the community that blamed his wife's suicide on him. Him stepping away from religion and making an attempt

to save Joe Christmas by hiding him proves the same thing. He gives up on his obsession with his family's past in order to participate in his community once again. By escaping the future Southern society is forcing onto him, Joe Brown shows "that there are more whites ready to compromise racial binaries" (Al-Barhow 63). Byron Bunch, a worker at the planing mill who narrates these events to Hightower lives "a rigid self-discipline and almost a complete adherence to the values of his society despite the fact that he lives on the margins of this society" before meeting Lena (Al-Barhow 63). After falling in love with her, he manages to break out of these confines. Faulkner points the finger at the imagined lines separating those in need, but shows that it is ultimately possible to break them once one realizes their artificiality. Not only that, but he steps away from the idea that the key issue of the South is race and that "race is a product of history, not of nature" (Fields 152). The retrospective technique of memory used frequently in the novel appears lastly when Joe Christmas is dying:

Then his face, body, all, seemed to collapse, to fall in upon itself, and from out the slashed garments about his hips and loins the pent black blood seemed to rush like a released breath. It seemed to rush out of his pale body like the rush of sparks from a rising rocket; upon that black blast the man seemed to rise soaring into their memories forever and ever. (Faulkner 440)

The way the social structure caused him harm overwhelmed his memory and turned him into a violent man. Though they don't realize before they commit the act, the memory of those who murder him for the sake of their ideology is now plagued with violence as well and they can never escape it.

In *Light in August* Faulkner depicts how the changes on a higher level impacted those on the margins of the society in the American South. Faulkner problematizes the intensified obsession with racial purity in the South after the Civil War, particularly in his portrayal of Joe Christmas whose ambiguous racial background brings out the paranoia of southerners' who are forced to face with the artificiality of the "color line". Further, he challenges the idea that race is a product of biology rather than history by portraying how the society similarly rejects the white characters whose genealogy is put into question or because of their proximity to Christmas. Lastly, he brings into question the idea that the central issue of the South is race and shows that breaking out of these structures and fears is possible.

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