

# FAULKNER'S *LIGHT IN AUGUST*: A NOVEL IN BLACK AND WHITE

BY DOREEN FOWLER

**O**N MORE than one occasion, William Faulkner stated that the title, *Light in August*, "has in a sense nothing to do with the book at all, the story at all" but refers instead merely to a "peculiar quality of light."<sup>1</sup> Responding to a question from a University of Virginia student, Faulkner seems to imply that the title is purely decorative: "[I]n August in Mississippi there's a few days somewhere about the middle of the month when suddenly there's a foretaste of fall, it's cool, there's a lambence, a luminous quality to the light, as though it came not from just today but from back in the old classic times. . . .but every year in August that occurs in my country, and that's all that title meant, it was just to me a pleasant evocative title because it reminded me of that time, of a luminosity older than our Christian civilization."<sup>2</sup> Like some of his other comments about his fiction, Faulkner's insistence that the title, *Light in August*, carries no thematic significance seems to be misleading.<sup>3</sup> Clearly, *Light in August* is a novel in black and white. Even a cursory reading of the novel reveals a plethora of dark and light images that demand to be explained.<sup>4</sup> Every character and every significant action is

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<sup>1</sup>Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner, eds., *Faulkner in the University: Class Conferences at the University of Virginia 1957-1958* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1959), pp. 74, 199.

<sup>2</sup>Gwynn and Blotner, p. 199.

<sup>3</sup>Faulkner's answers to questions were frequently inconsistent and sometimes contradictory. Noting this unreliability, Gwynn and Blotner caution readers to take Faulkner's words "for what they are worth" and to recall Faulkner's own dictum that "there are no definitive answers to anything" (pp. ix, viii).

<sup>4</sup>So prevalent is the light and dark imagery in *Light in August* that a number of critics have commented on it; none of these critics, however, has focused specifically on this imagery in an effort to find a consistent pattern of meaning, as I have attempted to do

described in terms of light or darkness. Lena sneaks out by night to meet Lucas Burch, and her child is born at dawn. Hightower sits each night by his window awaiting the coming darkness. Joanna Burden is a different person by day and by night. Joe Christmas does not know if he is black or white. And Byron Bunch walks away from Lena by night but returns to her by daylight. The list could go

in this study. In *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1957), Richard Chase identifies this imagery without exploring any specific instances and suggests that light/dark images reinforce the theme of "eternal contradictions" (p. 219) that Chase finds throughout the novel. Both Robert M. Slabey and Michael Millgate note the novel's light imagery in the course of discussing mythic patterns in *Light in August*. Slabey's article, "Myth and Ritual in *Light in August*," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 2 (1960), 328-49, considers only a few instances of light and dark imagery, and, by comparing *Light in August* to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, implies an interpretation that, I would argue, too closely associates light with positive values and darkness with negative ones. In *The Achievement of William Faulkner* (New York: Random House, 1966), Michael Millgate notes that Faulkner spoke of the title in terms of light from classic times and theorizes that a pattern of analogy relating to classical mythology might underlie the novel. In *Faulkner's "Light in August"* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), François Pitavy identifies this imagery but does not relate it to any thematic meaning. According to Pitavy, because Faulkner is an expressionist artist, his imagery conveys not ideas but emotions. Thus, Faulkner uses images to "manipulate the reader's emotions as he wishes, making him [the reader] share the full intensity of his [Faulkner's] own" (p. 147). Peter L. Hays, in a brief note, "More Light on *Light in August*," *Papers on Language and Literature*, 2 (1975), 417-19, has also commented on light images in *Light in August*. However, the focus of Hays's article is not light imagery but the novel's title, which Hays interprets as a reference to the religious feast of the Transfiguration. Hays's article seems to skirt the complexity of the light-dark imagery that pervades the novel. He makes no mention of any dark images and deals with only a relatively small number of light images that occur at the novel's conclusion. Recently, confirmation of my thesis is offered by Joan Peternel in her article, "The Double in *Light in August*: Narcissus or Janus?" (*Notes on Mississippi Writers*, 15 [1983], 19-37). Peternel's purpose is to explain the numerous instances of doubling, substitutions, and repetitions in *Light in August*; she makes no reference to instances of light and dark imagery. However, while discussing a different set of images, Peternel offers an explanation similar in outline to my interpretation of the light and dark imagery. According to Peternel, doubling in the novel results from the tension between "consciousness, the light side of the personality, the civilized self, and the unconscious, the dark side of the personality, the primitive self" (p. 22).

Much also has been written about the suggestion that the title, *Light in August*, refers to a country expression used of a cow or mare due to deliver her calf or foal in that month. Yet, when Faulkner was asked if his title alluded to this colloquialism, he specifically denied this interpretation and explained that the word "light" referred literally to daylight (Gwynn and Blotner, p. 74). In addition, Faulkner's original working title for the novel, *Dark House* (the title of the manuscript in the Alderman Library), seems also to indicate that daylight and darkness were always central to Faulkner's conception of this novel. For a discussion and refutation of the notion that Faulkner's title refers to a country expression for the completion of a pregnancy, see M. Thomas Inge's note, "Faulknerian Light," in *Notes on Mississippi Writers*, 5 (1972), 29.

on. Could it be that such an emphasis on light and darkness has, as Faulkner says, "nothing to do with the book at all"?

Another look at Faulkner's remarks about *Light in August's* title, however, reveals a second, possibly unconscious meaning implicit in the author's words. Even as Faulkner denies the title's significance, he uses the word "evocative," clearly implying that the title does carry meaning. Another clue is Faulkner's reference to light as symbolic or reminiscent of civilizations older than our own. Such comments suggest a thematically relevant meaning implicit in the title. In *Light in August* Faulkner is examining the nature of civilized societies and socialized human beings; light imagery is, I think, integral to this study. *Light in August* is about self and society and about how the individual must restrict himself in order to participate in the group.<sup>5</sup> Each character in *Light in August* is defined in relation to society and simultaneously in relation to the light. All those characters who step beyond, or are expelled from, society's borders live in darkness, while those who walk in step with society's norms are associated with light. The light in the novel represents the public world, the daylight world of conscious human thought and endeavor, the real world in the sense of a collectively acknowledged reality. Light, in short, stands for the collective product of the human race's waking activity, civilization and its values, values that in Faulkner's Jefferson, Mississippi, are emphatically Southern, Protestant, white, and, regrettably, racist. The darkness in *Light in August* stands for the private world

<sup>5</sup>Two seminal studies have discussed the theme of the individual and society in *Light in August*. In *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), Cleanth Brooks examines characters who have become isolated from their community and are later reintegrated into society. Similarly, Olga Vickery, in *The Novels of William Faulkner*, rev. ed. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1964), discusses the conflict between "the private world of an individual" and the "stereotypes which represent society's vision of itself and its past" (p. 67). My interpretation clearly builds on these two studies and extends their findings by examining the relationship between light-dark imagery and the theme that Brooks and Vickery identify. Neither Brooks nor Vickery addresses Faulkner's use of light and dark images in *Light in August*.

of the individual, a reality that is not shared, the solitary world of dream and imagination. Darkness reigns, then, over the nonsocialized world, the world of the unconscious; and to this dark realm are consigned all those whom the dominant white social class fears and rejects: all outlaws, madmen, rebels, nonconformists, dreamers, and a whole scorned and repudiated race—a race dark in color.

The meaning of the light-dark imagery in *Light in August* is complex and defies rigid or simple categorization. For example, the typical association—light represents goodness; darkness represents evil—does not apply. While light seems to stand for the outward world with its public morality and darkness for an inner world with its greater freedom, neither sphere is presented as morally superior to the other. If, on the surface, the light would seem to correspond to wholly positive values (restriction of the self for the benefit of the community) it should be remembered that the light in *Light in August* is frequently described as “terrible.”<sup>6</sup> The light stands for shared convictions, but these convictions are often unjust, even cruel. In Jefferson, Mississippi, for example, a widely accepted group-notion is racism. Similarly, in its most extreme form, subjection of self for the community can lead to the harshest and most life-denying forms of discipline and militancy. At its best, the light stands for reason, order, and community. At its worst, the light invokes a tyrannical police state that hunts down and stamps out any vestiges of dream, desire, or individuality.

Nor, on the other hand, can darkness be characterized as simply good or bad. Darkness represents the solitary inner world of the self, with its potential for creativity, emotion, and unreason. At its best, darkness describes the artist’s world, a world of dream and imagination, which is a safe refuge from the suffering that frequently accompanies human interaction. At its worst, the freedom

<sup>6</sup>William Faulkner, *Light in August* (New York: Harrison Smith & Robert Haas, 1932), pp. 298 and 439. All subsequent references to this work will be cited in the text.

that characterizes the separate, detached world of the self can become rebelliousness, irresponsibility, anarchy, or chaos.

All of the characters in *Light in August*, both major and minor, are characterized by light or dark imagery. For the most part, this paper will focus on the five major characters: Joe Christmas, Joanna Burden, Lena Grove, Byron Bunch, and Hightower. Extended descriptions of how each of the minor characters relates to the presence or absence of light would make this study unduly long. But in order to suggest briefly how this imagery applies to these characters, a few illustrations follow. Doc Hines, for example, who lives entirely in a world of his mind's creation, utterly severed from reality, is "incredibly dirty" (p. 348), "sootgrimed" (p. 118), and "coalgrimed" (p. 119). Mrs. Hines, who has lived in Mottstown for fifteen years without ever having been seen by some of her neighbors, is also "dirty" (p. 327), but "of the two" she is the "more conscious" (p. 349). Lucas Burch, whose alias, Joe Brown, suggests his kinship with darkness, blinks "in the sunlight" (p. 404) when confronted with Lena and their newborn child. And Percy Grimm was "a long time in a swamp, in the dark" (p. 426) until he found his place in the social hierarchy; when Grimm joins the State National Guard, "his life opened definite and clear" (p. 426). Similarly, when Grimm hunts down and kills Christmas, Grimm is acting as the agent of law and order and thus possesses the "serene, unearthly luminousness of angels in church windows" (p. 437). Because the cast of *Light in August* is so large, a number of other characters could also be placed with reference to the light. However, enough minor characters have been mentioned to indicate that, like the major characters, the minor ones also are seen in terms of light and dark.

In the cases of *Light in August's* five main characters, a somewhat similar pattern of light and dark imagery seems to gauge the progress of each character through the novel. As their stories begin, Joe Christmas, Joanna Burden,

Byron Bunch, Lena Grove, and Hightower are all, for one reason or another, found outside of society's starkly delineated borders. Accordingly, each of these characters is associated with darkness. At some point in the novel, each character, to a greater or lesser degree, draws nearer to the public world, and in every case this movement is heralded by images of light.

Among the major characters, Lena Grove's passage from darkness to light is most straightforward; Joe Christmas's and Hightower's most complex. For the most part, throughout the novel, Lena is associated with light. As a pregnant woman, she represents the continuity of the social order and thus embodies the "augmenting afternoon" (p. 7). Early in the novel, however, Lena is touched by darkness. By night, she sneaks out a window of her brother's house to meet with Lucas Burch. These illicit meetings with Burch take place in the darkness, and it is by darkness that Lena steals away from her brother's house, once again through a window, signifying her reduced social status. Pregnant and unmarried, searching for a man not yet her husband, Lena inevitably meets with societal censure, especially the disapproval of "good" women. Unlike Joe Christmas, however, who feels society's condemnation and responds with rebellion, Lena seems oblivious to the stigma attached to her, and continues to act like a community member in good social standing, welcoming charity, like Mrs. Armstid's, that is offered somewhat scornfully. For this reason, after her initial contact with darkness, Lena is almost always seen by sunlight, firelight, or lamplight. As the novel's conclusion clearly demonstrates, Lena is an enthusiastic and devoted supporter of the socialized world. The final scene of *Light in August* shows Lena visibly awed and delighted by the signs of civilization: with her baby in her lap, she rides in the back of a pickup truck, "looking out and watching the telephone lines and the fences passing like it was a circus parade" (p. 480).

Whereas Lena Grove is almost always found in the

light, Joe Christmas is, almost without exception, a creature of darkness. While Lena experiences darkness only briefly early in the novel and rapidly moves toward and remains in the light, Joe Christmas is born in darkness and lives in darkness until the final waning moments of his life when the long overdue light finally breaks. As critics have frequently noted, both Joe and Lena labor under societal stigmas—Joe, because of his alleged black blood; Lena, because of her illegitimate child. But whereas Joe accepts his role as social outcast, defining himself by it, Lena Grove never acknowledges any loss of social standing. Thus, Joe Christmas embraces darkness, while Lena Grove repels it.<sup>7</sup>

Throughout his life, Joe Christmas's every experience has taught him that he is an outsider. In replying to questions about Joe, Faulkner repeatedly stated that Joe "deliberately evicted himself from the human race."<sup>8</sup> It is important to note that Christmas repudiates mankind because he feels repudiated by men. From the moment Doc Hines allows Joe's mother to die for lack of medical attention, Joe's community fails to nurture him. Raised in an orphanage, from his earliest years Joe knows himself to be one of society's unwanted. As a child, Joe feels Doc Hines, his grandfather, watching him, and senses that the old man hates him. Soon thereafter Joe experiences the enmity of the dietitian, whom Joe innocently overhears making love. Such childhood experiences confirm Joe in his conviction that others want to destroy him. Significantly, at this time in his life the appellation "nigger" is attached to him. At first merely a childish taunt implanted in Joe's consciousness "before knowing remembers" (p. 111), the appellation is reinforced by Doc Hines and finally is accepted by Joe himself as he believes himself to be a "nigger" not only literally in the sense of

<sup>7</sup>In the words of Cleanth Brooks, "Joe repels, Lena attracts the force of the community into which they both come as strangers" (p. 55).

<sup>8</sup>Gwynn and Blotner, pp. 72, 97, 118.

having black blood, but also figuratively in the sense of having been labelled "inferior."

Convinced that his community has rejected him, Joe responds by emphatically repudiating the daylight world of human interaction and establishing himself as a rebel. For this reason, more than any other character in *Light in August* Joe Christmas is associated with darkness. His face, always "darkly and contemptuously still" (p. 28) expresses his hostility to the group—the light—and his acceptance of the role of outcast. Joe begins in darkness, exiled from the real world in an orphanage where the "bleak walls" and "bleak windows" are streaked with soot like "black tears" (p. 111), and throughout his life society's expulsion of him is described in terms of growing darkness: Joe is "laughing into something that was obliterating him like a picture in chalk being erased from a blackboard" (p. 195). In time, Joe becomes a "shadow" (p. 112), fulfilling Doc Hines's prophecy that Joe is dead "to all God's world forever" (p. 361).

While Joe is consistently associated with darkness, the forces that represent society are described in terms of light. Mr. McEachern, for example, who believes that only the harshest discipline can curb man's innately evil nature, is associated with light. It is on a bright Sunday morning ("*Sunday was invented by folks*" [p. 342], thinks Byron Bunch) and all through the daylight hours that McEachern attempts, in vain, to beat Joe into submission to God's law. While Mr. McEachern acts in the light of day, Mrs. McEachern sneaks Joe food at night and sits by his bedside in the darkness. Because her actions betray pent-up sexual and emotional forces, forces that society bans and represses, Mrs. McEachern is associated with darkness. Similarly, the young Negro woman hired by Joe and his friends as a prostitute is described in terms of darkness. Leaning over the prone woman, Joe "seemed to look down into a black well and at the bottom saw two glints like reflection of dead stars" (p. 147). In the case of the Negro girl, darkness is doubly appropriate. Not only



are the young men engaging in an act proscribed by society, but they also are performing this act with a woman of the outcast race. Thus, this illicit sexuality takes place at "dusk" when Joe "should have been miles toward home" (p. 146). Straying far afield of societal rules, planning to indulge in a forbidden sexual experience, Joe "had never before been this far from home this late" (p. 146).

Like his initial abortive sexual attempt, Joe's successive sexual experiences are outlawed and dark. For example, Joe's relationship with Bobbie Allen, the waitress-prostitute, is acted in darkness. Joe makes love with Bobbie at first in "the darkness outside, the night" and later in her "close" room behind "drawn shades" and under a shaded "single bulb" (p. 183). The restaurant where Bobbie works, a front for a brothel, is "dingy" (p. 161), and the house in which Bobbie meets her customers is "dark" (p. 186). A single image of light illuminates this dark phase in Joe's life. When Bobbie's friends, Max and "the stranger," are savagely beating Joe for putting an end to their illegal operation in Jefferson, the blonde woman prevents them from killing Joe. With this one exception, however, Joe's relationship with Bobbie is entirely dark, for eventually even the woman he loves rejects Joe, calling him "nigger," and confirming him in his posture of defiance. Thus, during his relationship with Bobbie, Joe begins his lifelong practice of squinting, an attempt both to repel and to protect himself from the painful glare of the light.

The next development in Joe's life is his involvement with Joanna Burden, a major character in her own right, who also undergoes a significant dark-light transformation. Like his previous sexual relationships, Joe's liaison with Joanna takes place in darkness. Eventually, however, Joanna leaves the darkness she shares with Joe to rejoin the public sphere. Joanna's subsequent attempt, like McEachern's before her, to

reform Joe and bring him into the light leads to a fatal confrontation.

As a Northerner, a "nigger-lover," and the granddaughter of an abolitionist, Joanna is, like Joe, an outsider. Ostracized by her community, she lives under a "shadow," a "black cross" (p. 239). Significantly, during her relationship with Joe, Joanna is described as two people, a different person by day and by night. By day, she exhibits her public self: working to advance the status of black people, writing letters to lawyers and schools, participating actively in a shared reality. During the daylight hours, Joanna is all order and control; she wears clean calico housedresses and her hair is covered by a sunbonnet. But at night she gives free reign to her private inner self and becomes a different person, free of all restraint, panting on her bed, her hair wild on the pillow. By night, Joanna surrenders to Joe and to the darkness in her own nature, exploring long-repressed sexual desires. For this reason, she loves to call Joe "negro" as they make love, savoring the societally forbidden nature of her sin. During this stage of their relationship, Joanna is enveloped by nighttime darkness. Each night, Joe, "a shadow," comes to Joanna, "the allmother of obscurity and darkness" (p. 216), finding her either in her unlit bedroom or hiding in a dark corner. But, as the narrator notes, "the sewer ran only by night" (p. 242).

For Joanna, this darkness is short-lived. Soon she leaves the darkness that she inhabits with Joe by night and becomes entirely her public self. She returns to the light of the group, resuming the position that her community has assigned her, a "nigger-lover" and an old maid. This return to the societal fold is accompanied by light imagery. By the shining light of the moon, Joanna first considers repentance and reformation: " 'I'm not ready to pray yet,' she said aloud, quietly rigid, soundless, her eyes wide open, while the moon poured and poured into the window, filling the room with something cold and irrevocable and wild with regret. 'Dont make me have to

pray yet. Dear God, let me be damned a little longer, a little while' " (p. 250). The moonlight is, however, "irrevocable"; inevitably Joanna will subdue entirely her detached secret self. Soon after wrestling with these moonlight thoughts, she exhibits the first signs of returning to the social order. She speaks to Joe of marriage, a societal institution that would legitimize and conventionalize their union. Firelight illuminates this final phase of Joe's relationship with Joanna. Each time Joe visits Joanna now she is seated before a lighted fire, staring into the flames as she visualizes Joe's future. Having resumed her own societal position, Joanna intends to rehabilitate Joe and to find him a place in the community as a Negro lawyer.

Joanna's attempt to bring Joe into the light of the social hierarchy is fatal to Joanna. Joe, who has dedicated his whole life to resisting group mores, will not change. To change is to admit that he has wasted his life. In Joe's words, "If I give in now, I will deny all the thirty years that I have lived to make me what I chose to be" (pp. 250-51). We fail, I think, to understand Joe's commitment to destroy Joanna, unless we see that this is a battle to the death between two equals who stand respectively for the forces of light and darkness. Joanna now represents the accepted social and moral order. She stands for discipline and subjection of self to the community rules. Joe, who has dedicated his life to defying the community norms, stands for assertion of self, the needs of the individual, the darkness outside the brightly lit community path. Thus, as Joe and Joanna duel, she is associated with light, he with darkness. Joe waits patiently through a day of light for the darkness of midnight before confronting Joanna. As he enters her dark room, Joanna commands him to "Light the lamp." Joe replies defiantly, "It wont need any light" (p. 266).

Once Joe has cut Joanna's throat, he enters the "black abyss which had been waiting, trying, for thirty years to

drown him" (p. 313). A murderer, now Joe is totally the enemy of society. As he flees the pursuing forces of order and retribution, he is associated with the color black and with the outcast Negro race. The Negro's brogans, which Joe wears to outwit societal forces, signal his increasing alienation from the outer, public world. To Joe, the "black shoes smelling of negro" resemble a "black tide creeping up his legs, moving from his feet upward as death moves" (p. 321). This dark imagery abruptly ceases, however, when Joe decides to abandon resistance and to surrender to the law. He allows himself to be caught "in broad daylight" (p. 331), walking up and down the streets of Mottstown on a bright Saturday morning until someone recognizes him. Significantly, this behavior outrages the townspeople: "That was what made the folks so mad. For him to be a murderer and all dressed up and walking the town like he dared them to touch him, when he ought to have been skulking and hiding in the woods, muddy and dirty and running. It was like he never even knew he was a murderer, let alone a nigger too" (p. 331). For Joe's community the two appellations, "murderer" and "nigger," signify the most complete social indictment and expulsion. And, instead of behaving as a social pariah should, "skulking and hiding," Joe is acting openly in the light, like an accepted community member.

Finally, as Joe attempts one last time to elude the forces of society, he seems, in the words of Gavin Stevens, like two people, one black, the other white. A number of other characters in *Light in August* have displayed a similar dual personality, among them Joanna Burden, Lena Grove, and Hightower's father. In every case of such duality, one person dwells in the public world, the other in the private world of the mind.<sup>9</sup> In Joe's case, his white

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<sup>9</sup>For example, Hightower's father is described as "two separate and complete people, one of whom dwelled by serene rules in a world where reality did not exist. But the other part of him, which lived in the actual world, did as well as any and better than most" (p. 448). Similarly, Joanna Burden seems like "two people" (p. 219) to Joe, and Lena Grove is described by Byron Bunch as a person "in two parts" (p. 285). Critics who have discussed doubling in *Light in August* include Darrel Abel, in "Frozen

self is the part of him which longs to be a community member; his black self is his private, solitary self. Thus, Joe's "black blood . . . snatched up the pistol" while his "white blood . . . would not let him fire it" (p. 424). Similarly, seeking expiation and readmission into the human community, Joe's white blood "sent him to the minister" (p. 424), while his black blood makes him "turn upon that on which he had postulated his hope of salvation" (p. 425). Again, the self-protective, defiant side of Joe's nature causes him to strike Hightower, while Joe's socialized self prevents him from killing the minister. In the ultimate moments of Joe's life, the white blood, the part of him that longs for a communal existence, prevails: Joe "let them shoot him to death, with that loaded and unfired pistol in his hand" (p. 425). When Joe allows himself, a self-declared social enemy, to be killed, he surrenders to the societal forces he has resisted and denied all his life. Appropriately, then, his death is attended by light. Joe's hands, the sign of his vulnerability and willing self-sacrifice, rest, as Percy Grimm enters the room, on the upper edge of the overturned table, "bright and glittering" (p. 439).

During Joe's dying moments light and dark images intermingle. From his "pale body" the "pent black blood" seemed to rush like "sparks from a rising rocket" (p. 440). The appropriateness of the dark imagery is evident. As the end of consciousness and the ultimate and irrevocable exclusion from the world of other human beings, death is the final encompassing darkness. But the light images are equally appropriate; for, in a sense, as he dies Joe is more closely linked to other human beings than he has ever been before in life. After a lifetime of defiant repudiation,

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Movement in *Light in August*," *Boston University Studies in English*, 3 (Spring 1957), 38; C. Hugh Holman, in "The Unity of Faulkner's *Light in August*," *PMLA*, 73 (March 1958), 155-66; Millgate, pp. 133-34; John T. Irwin, in *Doubling and Incest/Repetition and Revenge: A Speculative Reading of Faulkner* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), pp. 61-63; Hugh M. Ruppensburg, in "Byron Bunch and Percy Grimm: Strange Twins of *Light in August*," *Mississippi Quarterly*, 30 (1977), 441-43; and Peternel, pp. 19-37.

in the last seconds of his life, Joe Christmas joins the group.

In many respects, Hightower's story parallels Joe's. Like Joe Christmas, Hightower shuns his fellowmen and lives most of his life in darkness; and, again like Christmas, at the end of his life, Hightower admits the light and chooses existence in the public world. Just as Joanna Burden attempts to bring Joe into the light of social interaction, Byron Bunch is instrumental in leading Hightower back to participation in communal existence.

As his section of the novel opens, Hightower lives in self-imposed exile. Throughout his life, Hightower has sought immunity from the world of human interaction—first in the Church where he looked for “shelter” from “the harsh gale of living” (p. 453); then later in Jefferson, where he willingly endured the scorn and physical abuse of the townspeople, hoping to win the right to exempt himself from further participation in the living world. Having suffered, Hightower believes he has “bought . . . [his] ghost” (p. 464) and that now he can exist totally dissociated from other human beings. At this stage in the narrative, Hightower lives shrouded in half-light. His house, on a “dead and empty little street” (p. 293), is “unpainted, small, obscure, poorly lighted” (p. 44). The minister himself, “blackclad” (p. 291) and dirty, with “blackrimmed hands” (p. 291), wears spectacles to protect himself from the harsh glare of the light. Like a nocturnal animal, he sleeps through the day and meets with Bryon Bunch only by night. Because he lives on the very fringe of conscious existence, he is continually associated with twilight. Each night at dusk he sits by his window “dream-recovering” (p. 461), shunning the starkly lit real world in favor of a dim dream of a single perfect moment: the moment of his grandfather's dying heroism.

Just as Joanna Burden at first partially shares the darkness with Joe Christmas, so also initially Byron Bunch, with Hightower, seeks out the darkness of alienation. In an attempt to avoid the “trouble” inherent

in interaction with others, Byron spends his Saturday afternoons working alone at the mill. At this stage in their transition from darkness to light, Byron and Hightower meet only at night in Hightower's dark study, always sitting "just without the direct downward pool of light from the shaded lamp" (p. 71). Outside of the light, they are, as Hightower puts it, "not in life anymore" (p. 284).

This darkness soon lifts for Byron. Byron's love for Lena necessarily entails a commitment to the human community. As soon as he takes responsibility for Lena and her unborn child, Byron appears to be a different person. Breathing deeply, he walks with his head "erect" (p. 294), and, for the first time, does not stumble on Hightower's bottom step. On this occasion, Byron appears on Hightower's walk "in the full glare of the light" (p. 294), and, as Byron explains how he has provided for Lena, the two men talk in a "lighted room" (p. 296). When Hightower, appalled by these signs of involvement and commitment, directs his friend to leave "this terrible place" (p. 298), Hightower is referring not only to Jefferson but also to existence within the group where the potential for hope and catastrophe inseparably mingle.

Rather than heeding Hightower's directive, Byron instead commits himself to the human community and draws Hightower back with him into the fold of human interaction. Byron's next visit to Hightower's house occurs by daylight, and, finding the old man asleep, Byron both literally and figuratively awakens him; for this time Byron has come to ask Hightower to involve himself in the lives of others. After explaining that Joe Christmas has been captured, Byron asks the minister to say that Christmas was with him on the night of Joanna Burden's murder. Although Hightower angrily and emphatically refuses such involvement, the tears that run down his "flabby cheeks like sweat" (p. 344) signal a return to suffering and to social interaction. As Byron departs, Hightower is "lying full in the pool of light from the shaded lamp" (p. 370), an unmistakable sign that he has already begun the long

march back to conscious existence in the public world.

The act of delivering Lena's baby marks the turning point in Hightower's resurrection. Once again, Byron Bunch awakens Hightower, who has "given over and relinquished completely. . .that strength to cling to either defeat or victory, which is the I-Am" (p. 372). Before disturbing Hightower, Byron reflects that it is "*a poor thing*" but "it aint me that's waiting" (p. 372). Lena and her child, the living who endure and suffer, need and summon Hightower. As Byron brings the sleeping man back to consciousness, he pauses "to find the suspended light and turn it on" (p. 373). Prior to this moment the light of conscious existence has been "suspended" in Hightower's life; as it is switched on, the minister is once more in life. By the light of dawn, Hightower helps to give life to Lena's baby and becomes himself an active community member. This return to the social order is accompanied by feelings of heat and warmth. Returning home from Lena's cabin in the morning light, Hightower experiences "a glow, a wave, a surge of something almost hot, almost triumphant. 'I showed them!' he thinks. 'Life comes to the old man yet, while they get there too late'" (pp. 382-83). Fully sentient now, Hightower walks in "the intermittent sun, the heat, smelling the savage and fecund odor of the earth, the woods, the loud silence" (p. 384).

When Hightower next appears in *Light in August*, Joe Christmas, pursued by Percy Grimm and the sheriff's deputies, is entering Hightower's house. These men, the escaped prisoner and the agents of avenging society, are the living reality that Hightower had sought all his life to avoid. Because they embody the potential for cruelty and suffering inherent in every human interaction, all of the men who force their way into Hightower's house are harbingers of light. As he strikes down the minister, Christmas's "raised and armed and manacled hands" are "full of glare and glitter like lightning bolts" (p. 438). Grimm and the deputies, who are intent upon destroying Christmas, bring into the "cloistral dimness" of



Hightower's refuge "the savage summer sunlight" which was "upon them, of them: its shameless savageness" (p. 438). As Hightower and Christmas have always known, living within the human community is terrible. Now, however, Hightower, an active, grieving member of this community is a part of this terror: "in the gloomy hall, after the sunlight, he too with his bald head and his big pale face streaked with blood, was terrible" (pp. 438-39). In the end, Hightower proves his full participation in the fellowship of man. Attempting to sacrifice himself for Christmas, he tells Grimm that Christmas was with him on the night of the murder.

The penultimate chapter of the novel belongs to Hightower. Because the old man is dying, it is a dusky scene of "fading copper light" (p. 441); but two bright images penetrate this darkness: Hightower's white bandage and his vision of a brightly lit halo of faces. Hightower's heavily bandaged head aptly symbolizes his new awareness of the need for participation in a communal existence fraught with suffering. Now, at the end of his life, Hightower finally perceives his error and his guilt. Attempting to avoid the pain inherent in interactions with others, Hightower had deliberately alienated himself from other human beings. He sees now that by dissociating himself from others, he failed to meet his responsibility to his wife and to a multitude of others whose lives impinged upon his own. Because the human community is one and indissoluble, Hightower now realizes, no man can exempt himself from that community without harming others. This truth is reflected in Hightower's vision of a glowing halo "full of faces" (p. 465). The halo, a brightly lit circle, appropriately symbolizes the nature of human existence as Faulkner conceives it in *Light in August*. As a circle, the halo represents the endless unity and interrelationship of all human beings living and dead; as an image of light, it implies the necessity for every individual actively to endure the hope and the suffering of a shared existence.

Despite William Faulkner's protestations to the

contrary, then, the title, *Light in August*, does carry a thematically relevant meaning. Throughout the work, images of light are associated with one world, darkness with another. In a sense, darkness is man alone; the light is man together. Outsiders live in darkness; the group is defined by light. At the conclusion of *Light in August*, the meaning of both Faulkner's title and the novel's light-dark imagery is clear: like Faulkner's five major characters, who all leave the sheltering darkness to stand in the full glare of the harsh August light, we who read Faulkner's novel are also called to take a place in the light.

It should be remembered, however, that even as Faulkner encourages participation in a shared existence, he clearly delineates the terrors of such an existence, for it is in the daylight world of human interaction that man's inhumanity to man takes place. In the fierce August light, Joe Christmas is hunted, shot, and castrated. Joanna Burden and Mrs. McEachern, each in different ways, are both victims of the light. Joanna Burden's instinctual self is weighed down and eventually stifled by social interdicts; similarly, Mrs. McEachern is doomed by a domineering husband and a restrictive society to a passionless and sterile existence. The infant Joe Christmas, desperately in need of a nurturing community, is deemed an outcast by the presiding social order. Likewise, a whole race is unjustly labeled "inferior" and forbidden full inclusion in a white society. Finally, the so-called "justice" of the social order is frequently represented by fanatics like Percy Grimm. Clearly, with valid reasons, Hightower dreads social interaction and Joe Christmas rejects it. The reigning social order in Faulkner's Jefferson, Mississippi, urgently needs correctives.<sup>10</sup>

But, as Faulkner clearly demonstrates in Hightower's and Joe Christmas's stories, the answer to social sickness

<sup>10</sup>Several critics have noted Faulkner's indictment of the social order in *Light in August*. For example, in *William Faulkner: From Jefferson to the World* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1959), Hyatt H. Waggoner writes: "*Light in August* is Faulkner's most fully documented statement on what he sees as the religious errors and racist guilt of his region" (p. 101).

is neither escapism nor defiance. Joe Christmas's rebellion results in Joanna's murder and his own self-destruction, and Hightower's escapism wastes his own life and contributes to the degradation and demise of his wife. There is no easy answer to the excesses and cruelties of the light, only a slow and arduous one. Only by endurance and sacrifice, by working within the established order, and by recognizing the bonds of universal brotherhood can human beings create a more compassionate social order. In *Light in August* Faulkner uses his characters almost didactically to demonstrate how human misery can be reduced and social tolerance can be promulgated. Such illustrative models include Joanna Burden, as she writes letters to lawyers and schools in an attempt to help an oppressed race; and Byron Bunch, when he takes upon himself the responsibility for an unwed mother and her fatherless child; and Hightower, when he attempts to sacrifice himself for a man he has never seen before; and, finally, even Joe Christmas, as he passively accepts death for the sake of a community that failed him from the moment of his birth. Each of these characters exemplifies compassion, selflessness, and endurance—the human qualities that can make the world of light a world of brotherhood and love. In the final analysis, the light imagery in *Light in August* embodies a call to social action and social commitment, for only by such commitment can the social order be challenged or changed.

In a sense, *Light in August* retells a similar story five times. All five main characters stray from the community path, the rules that enforce conformity. The reasons for this rejection of community differ, but in each case, with varying degrees of painful self-sacrifice, these individuals eventually subject themselves to the community will and rejoin the group. For Lena, this reentry is most easily accomplished; as a pregnant woman she embodies the light, the continuity of the human species; for Joe Christmas, reentry is most costly, the price of readmission

is extinction as an individual. In each case, some aspect of selfhood is lost in joining the community. The light is often painful and glaring; life within the community requires subjection of self, occasionally the cruelest deprivation of fundamental human needs. The community sometimes stunts its members; its demands are sometimes life-denying, its values sometimes perverse. A solitary existence can seem to be a refuge, or even, as in Joe Christmas's case, the only means of self-preservation. Nevertheless, Faulkner advocates participation in communal life. Faulkner's message, implicit throughout the novel, appears most clearly in Hightower's story: however attractive the darkness of solitude and alienation may seem, human beings have a responsibility to admit the light. Only by actively participating in the human community can we build a public world that will nurture rather than maim life. It is not by chance that *Light in August* concludes with Lena's story or that Mrs. Hines sees Lena's child as Joe Christmas "without any living earth against him yet" (p. 367).<sup>11</sup> Lena and her baby represent the human community in its endless ability to endure; the life of Lena's child, like the life of that other baby, Joe Christmas, will be shaped largely by his community, by the "living earth." The living were "against" Joe; only by working together to redress social injustice can we hold out to Lena's child the hope of a brighter future.

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<sup>11</sup>Numerous other parallels connect Joe Christmas with Lena's newborn son. These connections are discussed by Abel, p. 38; Holman, pp. 165-66; and Peternel, pp. 28-32.