

GOOD AND BAD AS TWO INTERDEPENDENT FORCES ON THE BASIS OF *LIGHT IN AUGUST* BY WILLIAM FAULKNER

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The majority of critics agree that the structure of *Light in August* is based on two main stories – the account of what happens to Joe Christmas and to Lena Grove. Such is the case with Eric J. Sundguist¹ and David L. Minter.² Some other critics, such as Lawrence Thompson, go a step further and claim that William Faulkner arranged the two stories in such a way that the narrative presenting the quest of Lena Grove constitutes the positive brackets for the negative quest of Joe Christmas.³ Consequently, when contrasted with Joe Christmas, the figure of Lena Grove is viewed as the embodiment of such positive values in life as the natural, the intuitive, the vital, or even the pagan. In his critical evaluation of *Light in August*, Lawrence Thompson concludes that:

"A careful reading of *Light in August* should clarify the fact that the basic antithesis or counterpoint or polarity, here, is derived from Faulkner's rebellious insistence on contrasting certain pagan attitudes with certain Christian attitudes for purposes of honoring the pagan."(80)

To say that Faulkner contrasted the two stories represented by Lena Grove and Joe Christmas in order to express a total affirmation of the pagan is, however, an over-interpretation or at least a substantial simplification. It seems an over-simplification to approach in this way the whole labyrinth of connections between different characters in *Light in August*, for which the stories of Joe Christmas and Lena Grove are only background.

In his Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech, William Faulkner said that one of the most fundamental duties of all writers is not to forget about "the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself." Thus it seems more likely that Faulkner chose to bracket the negations of the Joe Christmas story within the affirmation of the Lena Grove story not so much to honor the pagan as rather to picture the invisible conflict between negative and positive, between rejection and affirmation, between good and bad as two interdependent forces creating the essence of human life.

¹ Eric J. Sundguist, *The House Divided*, Baltimore and London, John Hopkins University Press, 1983, p.75.

² David L. Minter, "Introduction", *The Twentieth Century Interpretation of Light in August*, ed. David L. Minter, New Jersey, Prentice-Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, 1969, p. 7.

³ Lawrence Thompson, *William Faulkner An Introduction and Interpretation*, New York, Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1964, p. 79.

Additionally, some critics suggest that only Lena is successful in her quest. Others of the main characters such as Joe Christmas, Joanna Burden and Hightower do not prevail in theirs. Indeed, none of the characters in *Light in August* is successful in this very sense. They are either too obsessed with Satan (like Joe Christmas) or, on the contrary, too passive and fanatical in accepting God's rules (like Hightower). Only Lena Grove seems to be successful in her search for peace. But her victory, however, seems illusory when we consider that she gains no deeper insight and, as such, rather represents the victory of instinct over the essence of true human existence. None of the characters finds the equilibrium between good and bad; none of them learns how to integrate society's need for ordered uniformity with the freedom of their own individuality. Neither Joe Christmas nor any other character in the novel learns to live meaningfully: that is, to create a balance between good and bad. They are not able to merge the order imposed on them by religion or social rules with the disorder of their own individualities and demons. Each of the main characters appears to be trapped in his own prison of order or disorder but none of them can join the two forces. This dichotomy of good and bad, order and disorder, as well as human limitations and an inability to create a new value out of the two factors, is the main reason why the characters created in *Light in August* fail in their quests.

It cannot be denied that Lena Grove's story brackets Joe Christmas' story, but hers is only one of many stories that parallel that of Joe Christmas. She is only a "passerby" that serves rather as a background, a pagan or pastoral landscape for presenting the true drama of the human soul. *Light in August* touches on the problem of the eternal struggle between good and bad, between God and Satan, by contrasting two other characters – Joe Christmas and Hightower.

Joe Christmas, a mulatto, is the physical embodiment of the fact that whiteness can and, in fact, does exist in reciprocal connection with blackness. Hightower demonstrates "the belief in the power of Satan while believing in the eternal truth of God" (Morozova 280). Both, Christmas and Hightower, are outcasts whose mysterious lives are represented by darkness contrasted with light. And just as it is never possible to see Joe Christmas in full light so Hightower is invariably sitting lonely by his window. He is sitting and waiting for the night to come.

"We don't know why he stays here. But any day you pass along there about the dusk or nightfall, you can see him sitting in the window. Just sitting. Just sitting there. The rest of the time the folks won't hardly see him around the place at all, except now and then working in his garden."(54)

There is, however, one more basic motif that makes Joe Christmas and Hightower even more homogenous. Namely, this is their fascination with light. Faulkner establishes this analogy between them by introducing in both cases the motif of the horse. By this means he introduces the myth of Phaeton⁴ and the phoenix. These dynamic motifs contrast sharply with the more static metaphors of his life as a classic and serene vase.

⁴ In Greek mythology he was the son of Helios. One day he drove the sun's chariot, and nearly set fire to the world when the horses bolted. Zeus struck him dead with a thunderbolt to save the world.

"He believed with a calm joy that if ever there was a shelter, it would be the Church; that if ever truth could walk naked and without shame or fear, it would be in the seminary. When he believed that he had heard the call it seemed to him that he could see his future, his life, intact and on all sides complete and inviolable, like a classic and serene vase, where the spirit could be born anew sheltered from the harsh gale of living and die so, peacefully, with only the far sound of the circumvented wind, with scarce even a handful of rotting dust to be disposed of." (453)

A horse, in contrast, is not only the symbol of the glorious past that haunts Hightower but also of freedom he yearns for.

"And I know that for fifty years I have not even been clay: I have been a single instant of darkness in which a horse galloped and a gun crushed." (300)

Even in the moment of his death, Hightower visualizes a horse. The overwhelming vision that Hightower experiences seems to evoke the emotions he has repressed throughout his life. For the very first time in his existence Hightower appears to be rather freed than confined by his vision.

"They rush fast, forwardly in the saddles, with brandished arms, with brandished arms, beneath whipping ribbons from slanted and eager lances: with tumult and soundless yelling they sweep past like a tide whose crest is jagged with the wild heads of horses and brandished arms of men like the crater of the world in explosion." (467)

"Now it is a close place: you can feel, hear in the darkness horses pulled short up, plunging, dashes of arms... You see before the crash in the abrupt red glare the horses with the wild eyes in tossing heads, sweatstained; the gleam of metal, the white gaunt faces of living scarecrows who have not eaten all they wanted at one time since they could remember; perhaps one or two had already entered the henhouse. All this you see before the crash of the shotgun comes: the black again." (459)

The quotation captures the concept of light and darkness, chivalry, and the past glory of history. In this respect, the motif of the horse also refers to the "city of sun" – Heliopolis – and to the myth of the phoenix. According to Greek mythology, this fabulous bird used to build a nest when it felt the approach of death. Then it was burnt to ashes by the sun. However, out of these ashes a new phoenix was born. The new-born bird would carry off its nest – the grave of its father – and leave it in the light of the sun.

Hightower's imagination in a similar manner not only brings to life this great lightness but also all the memories of his Confederate grandfather. Unfortunately, Hightower is not able to free himself fully from the burden of the past and that is why he has to perish. Metaphorically speaking, the oscillation between his urn-like static life and his wild visions of horses tears his existence into chaotically shattered pieces.

The scene that takes place at the dance where Joe Christmas is caught by his stepfather – McEachen – in the company of a cheap prostitute, appears to be the key scene in the context of the myth about Helios and his son Phaeton.

"He could not have known where McEachen had left the horse, nor for certain if it was even there. Yet he ran straight to it, with something of his adopted father's complete faith in an infallibility in events. The youth upon its back rode slightly, balanced lightly, leaning well forward, exulting perhaps at the moment as Faustus had, of having put behind now at once and for all the Shalt Not, of being free at last of honor and law. In the

motion the sweet sharp sweat of the horse blew, sulphuric; the invisible wind blew past. He cried aloud, 'I have done it! I have done it!'" (194)

Not only this scene but also the subsequent episodes connected with Joe Christmas are analogous to those associated with the mythical Phaeton. For Joe Christmas a horse is not only the embodiment of freedom but also the symbol of a masculine strength.

"Why in hell do I want to smell horses? Then he said, fumbling: 'It is because they are not women. Even a mare horse is a kind of a man.'" (101)

By introducing the myth of Phaeton and the motif of light (which is in the very title of the novel), Faulkner introduces the motif of darkness and light as two opposing issues. Both of these, of course, are not only crucial symbols in mythology, but also in the Judaic-Christian Bible. But the myth of Phaeton seems to convey quite a different message. Light, in fact, kills Phaeton.

If the crowd ostracizes Joe Christmas and Hightower and this is done on the basis of its perception of good (which actually kills both of them), how to interpret the words uttered by Hightower:

"They did their part; they played by the rules, he thinks. I was the one who failed, who infringed. Perhaps that is the greatest social sin of all; ay, perhaps moral sin." (461)

"But there are more things in heaven and earth too than truth, he thinks. More things indeed; thinking how ingenuity was apparently given man in order that he may supply himself in crises with shapes and sounds with which to guard himself from truth." (453)

The reader may ask what kind of "ingenuity" Hightower is thinking about. What kind of "ingenuity" is it that guards us from truth and at the same time from good? The quotations above may suggest that Hightower lives in a cage of the illusions projected by his mind. This causes not only his isolation from the community as well as his wife, but also, with the progression of time, leads to his total distortion of reality. Finally he understands that a man is not an isolato who is a self-dependent creature. In the scenes of Hightower's revelation, he gains a deeper insight about his own life and the motives for his actions. Hightower's belief in God's strict rules and the thread of Lord's judgement paralyse his life-force and suppress his natural, innate needs. His fanatical preoccupation with religion also causes the frustration that drives his wife to Memphis and subsequently leads to her death. It may be suggested that religion, which after all should guard people from evil, may become the cause of real tragedy. It seems to Hightower that God's rules will guard him from all evil of the world and any disorder that might spoil his orderly existence. In fact, the order of Hightower's safe life appears to be only an illusion, a nest suppressed true feelings and needs. Gail Hightower aspired to be a saint. In fact, at the end of his life when he decides to help Joe Christmas he becomes a criminal.

As the novel progresses, we see Joe Christmas – an indisputable criminal – as the symbol of Jesus Christ, as a victim, a martyr who has to pay for his major sin – being different. Hightower, in a similar vein, appears to be a martyr and his whole life a redemption. Just as in the case of Hightower, evil helps him recognize truth. Joe's blackness makes him more aware of being white. This paradoxical but prevailing fact is expressed in the following passage:

"He now lived as man and wife with a woman who resembled an ebony carving. At night he would lie in bed beside her, sleepless beginning to breathe deep and hard. He would do it deliberately, feeling, even watching, his white chest arch deeper within his ribcage, trying to breathe into himself the dark odor, the dark and inscrutable thinking and being of Negroes, with each suspiration trying to expel from himself the white blood and the white thinking and being. And all the while his nostrils at the odor which he was trying to make his own would whiten and tauten his whole being writhe and stain with physical outrage and spiritual denial." (212)

Hightower, however, by the same token reveals his belief in the overwhelming power of evil when, for instance, he is talking with Byron.

"But are you going to undertake to say just how far evil extends into the appearance of evil? Just where between doing and appearing evil stops." (289)

"You don't need my help. You are already being helped by someone stronger than me. For a moment Byron does not speak. They look at one another, steadily. 'Helped by who?' 'By the devil,' Hightower says." (291)

Evil nests within Joe Christmas; evil is present in the life of a "saint" – in Hightower. What is even more striking, it also exists within those who should be devoid of any sin – children.

Faulkner, however, endeavors to present a diverse picture of children. In *Light in August* it is children who instinctively discover that Joe Christmas is a "nigger". In their innocence, however, they torment Joe mentally calling at him and laughing:

"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." (125)

"Sometimes I think that children have a way of knowing things that grown up people of your and my age don't see. Children and old people like him, like that old man." (125)

If we compare the above passage with what Joe Christmas implies – "It was not her fault that she got too old to be good any more"(99) – it is clear that the juxtaposition of childhood and senility in *Light in August* is not a matter of coincidence. Both childhood and age are connected with evil. Such a juxtaposition could also suggest that not only the stereotypes that children absorb are the source of evil. The fact remains that it is man, the reflection of God, who is first of all responsible for the evil that lives within him from the very moment of his birth.

"Memory believes before knowing remembers. Believes longer than recollects, longer than knowing even wonders"(111), says the narrator in the Chapter 6. The above words could suggest that we acquire certain ideas proposed by the society without realizing it. Although we do so in our childhood, such are strong enough to survive within us even longer than our ability to remember. Even the children in the orphanage who do not meet black children within their own group are able to recognize Joe Christmas as someone different.

Unfortunately enough, perceiving someone of a black skin as different is only one of the ideas, the evil ideas invented by the society. There are many other like that to be absorbed by a child. Hightower says: "To be young. There is nothing else

in the world" (300) as he realizes the weight of the burden he must carry. But what Joe Christmas suggests in answer to these words is: "It is terrible to be young. It is terrible" (170). The question is whether it is better to be young and less conscious of the increasing burden of evil, or old and paralyzed by consciousness as Hightower is.

In *Light in August*, however, God is not the one who protects order in the world He has created. His vengeance is often directed toward those who do not deserve it. Joe Christmas dies for the "sin" of his mother; Hightower – one of the most valuable members of Jefferson society – is rejected by them; Joanna Burden is killed because of her sympathy for other human beings; Byron Bunch – the most decent and honest character in the book falls in love with the most sinful woman; Lena does not look for anyone else but Brown – this "poor bastard" who escapes responsibility without any punishment. The person who finally wins is Percy Grimm – the most cruel character in the novel.

In brief, it is not justice but paradox that governs the world, and the person who realizes it is Hightower – the one who as a minister should believe in a God that rewards good and punishes evil. Instead he says:

"I mind how I said to you that there is a price for being good the same as for being bad; a cost to pay. And it is the good man that cant deny it for the reason that there aint any way to make them pay it, like a honest man that gambles. The bad man can deny it; that's why don't anybody expect them to pay on sight or any other time. But the good-cant. Maybe it takes longer to pay for being good than for being bad."(369)

One could comment on this fragment by saying that religion may be a source of evil in the sense that it establishes the same model of happiness and suffering for everybody. Religion and its methods of rewarding and punishing are based on decreasing the value of real life. At the same time it distorts the real picture of reality and leads to the waste of human intelligence. Additionally, this devaluation of an earthly life results in neurosis as man is not able to face the number of restrictions that are put forward by the society. Such is the case with Joe Christmas who finally rebels against the rigor and constant punishment imposed on him by McEachen. On the basis of Joe Christmas' experience one observes that at times religion represses all inherent needs and instincts of man. Thus, instead of being a prerequisite for love, it becomes a cause of hate and aggression.

"Pleasure, ecstasy they cannot seem to bear: their escape from it is in violence, in drinking and fighting and praying; catastrophe too, the violence identical and apparently inescapable." (347)

Ethics which is based on religion offers the promise of a better life – a better future. Hightower is the one who should bring to light this very truth. Instead he perceives religion as habitual activity, and prayer is understood as a habitually repeated action. No longer is religion a source of power and strength for him. Perhaps, this is why instead of praying he prefers escaping into the world of poetry.

"I should never have let myself get out of the habit of prayer. He turns from the window. One wall of the study is lined with books. He pauses before them, seeking, until he finds the one which he wants. It is Tennyson. It is dogeared... Soon the fine galloping language the gutless swooning full of sapless trees and dehydrated lusts begins to swim smooth and swift and peaceful. It is better than praying without having to bother to think

aloud. It is like listening in the cathedral to a eunuch chanting in a language where he does not even need to not understand." (301)

Hightower finally understands that good can be achieved not by talking about it but acting according to a moral law. And the moral law he obeys does not comply with the law established by the society. This may be seen in his final decision to help Joe Christmas to escape. Hightower discovers that strict rules proposed by law can never be anything more than an oversimplification of the enormous complexities of human existence.

The representative of the order proposed by man in *Light in August* is Percy Grimm.

"'We got to preserve order,' he said. 'We must let the law take its its course. The law, the nation. It is the right of no civilian to sentence a man for death.'" (427)

Percy Grimm is a representative of the culmination of a society polarized to fanaticism as well as of the white man's culture. His was:

"... a sublime and blind obedience, and 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 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." (427)

This rage for order that Grimm represents and William Faulkner seems to suggest leads to one of the most evil phenomena on earth – racism. This is where man's desperate rage for order has led him – to dehumanization and violating the basic human need – the commandment of love. The preoccupation and *fanatical* belief in the superiority of order, white or good, is bound (as Faulkner suggests in his novel) to bring about the greatest evil and the highest disorder.

Out of all the characters present in *Light in August* only Gail Hightower finally realizes this truth.⁵ His apotheosis, however, comes after he decides to shelter Joe Christmas. Only after Hightower is hit by Joe Christmas, does he experience the greatest intensity of his vision or epiphany. What is more Joe Christmas comes to Hightower as God, radiating light.

"... they stooped and raised Hightower, his face bleeding, from the floor where Christmas, running up the hall, his raised and armed and manacled hands full of glare and glitter like lightning bolts, so that he resembled a vengeful and furious god pronouncing a doom, had struck him down." (438)

The fact that Hightower's head is split open by Christmas has its further consequences in the form of Hightower's final epiphany. Thus, Hightower's sheltering Joe Christmas (without whom the minister's apotheosis would have never taken place) seems to have a fundamental meaning for the final interpretation of the novel. Hightower's gesture of hiding and welcoming Joe Christmas seems to embody a total acceptance of evil as something valuable. In Hightower's final vision, induced by Joe Christmas' act of violence, the wheel of Hightower's imagination is freed and for the first time in his life he is able to experience a total freedom of the spirit.

⁵ Harvey L. Gable, *Hightower's Apotheosis in Light in August*, *Mississippi Quarterly*, 49, 1996, pp. 425–441. In his article, the author successfully proves the thesis that Hightower experiences a kind of apotheosis.

The sufferings of such a "criminal" as Joe Christmas are as moving as those of such preachers as Hightower. The antagonism of Joe Christmas' conduct to moral law, and the moral imperfection that such conduct presupposes, instead of raising a feeling of nausea fills the reader with pain and compassion. Faulkner wishes the reader to think "what Christmas committed was not so much a sin as mistake"(94). The same feeling, however, comes into existence when one traces Hightower's spiritual life in which he violates morality and then comes back to the moral law by repentance. The vivid link between Hightower's and Joe Christmas' experiences seems to suggest that this is not coincidental. Thanks to Joe Christmas' intrusion into Hightower's orderly life, the latter is given the chance to grasp the true meaning of his life. Although Hightower is not able to use this knowledge and find equilibrium between good and bad, his life cannot be treated as failure. He is the only character in the novel that has discovered the essence of his life and, thus, that he is the true "winner" in the novel. Many critics declare that it is Lena Grove who seems to be successful in her quest.⁶ What is more, it is suggested that her victory symbolizes an honoring of the pagan. Her story only serves as a background for the true drama of "the human heart in conflict with itself" (Faulkner *Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech*). Even if William Faulkner chooses to bracket the negations of the Joe Christmas story within the affirmation of the Lena Grove story, this is, surely, more to find a structural way of expressing the ongoing struggle between good and evil. Faulkner not only seems to satirize the simplistic evaluation of the world represented by Lena Grove but also endeavors to show the absurdity of any simple divisions. With the creation of the two such apparently different characters as Joe Christmas and Gail Hightower, Faulkner definitely rejects polarization into good and bad. Such polarization, as the author appears to suggest, invented by man to guard him from chaos, more often brings about feelings of confusion and frustration. By dividing the world into good and bad, black and white, thought and feeling man creates for himself the safety of order – how illusive, however, if we consider that he is unquestionably made up of good as well as bad. Not accepting this very truth, as the author of the novel implies, may lead to such tragedies as those represented by Gail Hightower and Joe Christmas.

⁶ See the first paragraph of this essay.