

Human Nature and William Faulkner (II)

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Light in August

Light in August introduces the main character Lena Grove, a young pregnant woman from Alabama. A Lucas Burch has enticed her into committing this sin. The opening chapter, dry but loving in its pastoral humour, centers on a picture of Lena. We find her sitting by a roadside in Mississippi, her feet in a ditch, her shoes in her hand. She is watching a wagon mounting the hill towards her, the noise of which carries for half a mile “across the hot, still pine-winey silence of the August afternoon.”⁽¹⁾ as Charles Shapiro says. She has been on the road for a month, riding in a long succession of farmwagons or walking the hot dusty roads with her shoes in her hand, trying to get to Jefferson. She firmly expects to find her lover working in a planning mill and willing to marry her.”

He accused the right man (young bachelors, or sawdust Casanovas anyway, were even fewer in number than families) but she would not admit it, though the man had departed six months ago. She just repeated stubbornly, ‘He’s going to send for me. He said he would send for me’; unshakable, sheeplike, having drawn upon that reserve of patient and steadfast fidelity upon which the Lucas Burches depend and trust, even though they do not intend to be present when the need for it arises.⁽²⁾

Lena believes that Lucas Burch did say, “I’ll send for you.” Faulkner expresses that unshakeable and sheeplike side to her nature. He indicates that it symbolizes her nature womanly wisdom and patience. He treats her character fully. Since the novel both begins and ends with Lena Grove, she becomes the symbol of modern loneliness. There is a direct contrast between her and Joe Christmas. Malcolm Cowley said “Faulkner is a solitary worker by choice, and he has done great things, not only with double the pains to himself that they might have cost if produced in more genial circumstances, but sometimes also with double the pains to the reader.”⁽³⁾ Faulkner creates a world where man is always solitary. Characters are subject to doom and fate in his work. Lena Grove’s world is a motionless, timeless and soundless one. Her world is that of Hellenism. In an interview at Virginia, Faulkner said his conception of Light in August “began with Lena Grove, The ideal of the young girl with nothing, pregnant, determined to find her sweetheart... As I told that story

I had to get more and more into it, but that was mainly the story of Lena Grove.”⁽⁴⁾ In Lena’s world the greek gods of Olympus exist somewhere. It reminded me of that time, of a luminosity older than Christian civilization. Matthew Arnold made a useful distinction in his essay, “Hebraism and Hellenism.” “Hellenism” he defined as “spontaneity of conscience.” Lena’s world is based on this very simple idea inherited from the Greeks. She always has a very continually hard time after she is persuaded to become a lover, but she feels happy as if she has climbed a steep mountain. She lives in the present. We can’t imagine what might happen even a moment away in the future affairs of the world. Indeed who can predict future events? However she does not doubt the future. She naturally waits expectantly for the return of happier days. It was through this fantasy than the beauty of pastoral life was appropriate to his work. Joe Christmas’s world, on the other hand, is one of “strictness of conscience”.

And that he carried his knowledge with him always as though it were a banner, with a quality ruthless, lonely, and almost proud. ‘As if,’ as the men said later, ‘he was just down on his luck for a time, and that he didn’t intend to stay down on it and didn’t give a damn much how he rose up.’ He was young.⁽⁵⁾

When Joe Christmas first appeared at the mill in Jefferson, he came to work in the only clothes he owned, a serge suit and a white shirt.

And that was the first time Byron remembered that he had ever thought how a man’s name, which is supposed to be just the sound for who he is, can he somehow an augur of what he will do, if other men can only read the meaning in time.⁽⁶⁾

Joe Christmas appears as an abstraction as soon as he is born. Faulkner puts forward the idea that Joe Christmas has to live up to the non-humanity of his background, the fact that his father had “some” Negro blood in him. The name “Joe Christmas” symbolizes guilt in the eyes of God. Faulkner decides Joe Christmas’s doom. Truly Joe Christmas’s negro blood and his being born in an orphanage must presage some eventful happening.

Nathaniel Hawthorne’s fiction resembles Faulkner’s in several ways —his philosophical and religious stance rooted in American tradition, his technical virtuosity and his symbolic intensity. Hawthorne’s work too, (like Faulkner’s) is infused with a kind of Puritanism, but Hawthorne is no mere disciple. He strikes out on his own. The Scarlet Letter is a criticism of Puritanism as well as of romanticism. An example in the Scarlet Letter, is a very beautiful woman (Hester Prynne), who, as a young girl, was talked into marrying an old man, Roger Chillingworth, a medical doctor and a cold intellectual scientist, who must have proved

unsatisfactory as a husband. She went alone to Boston, Massachusetts (in the 1630's), and fell in love with the brilliant, popular young clergyman Arthur Dimmesdale. They had a girl child whom her mother named Pearl. At all times Hester wore the red letter A, standing for adulteress on the bosom of her dress. Hester, (unlike Lena) never felt that she had sinned. She retained the sacredness of the individual. Faulkner's fiction suggests that Lena also had the right of the individual to happiness. Hester and Lena are splendid romantic heroines. They were indeed courageous and strong. Arthur and Christmas, in comparison, seem pitifully weak. The two women showed their solidly united selves but Arthur's and Christmas's fights were within themselves. Hester is a noble, frustrated, pathetic figure, but she is not a tragic figure because her mind is resolved. Arthur and Christmas are the persecuted, the tempted. The pains of hell have a hold upon them. Kazin says one of the most revealing phrases in Faulkner's rhetoric is "not that" ——— it is not peace, not an end that his people want. Violence may be "outworn", but it is a human passion. When Joe Christmas kills Joanna Burden in her house.

He saw it as soon as he entered, lying square and white and profoundly inscrutable against the dark blanket. He did even stop to think that he believed he knew what the message would be, would promise. He felt no eagerness; he felt relief. 'It's over now,' he thought, not yet taking up the folded paper. 'It will be like it was before now. No more talking about niggers and babies.

She has come around. She has worn the other out, seen that she was getting nowhere. She sees now that what she wants, needs, is a man. She wants a man by night; what he does by daylight does not matter.' He should have realized then the reason why he had not gone away. He should have seen that he was bound just as tightly by that small square of still undivulging paper as though it were a lock and chain. He did not think of that. He saw only himself once again on the verge of promise and delight. It would be quieter though, now. They would both want it so; besides the whiphand which he would now have. 'All that foolishness,' he thought, holding the yet unopened paper in his hands; 'all that damn foolishness. She is still she and I am still I. And now, after all this damn foolishness'; thinking how they would both laugh over it tonight, later, afterward, when the time for quiet talking and quiet laughing came: at the whole thing, at one another, at themselves.⁽⁷⁾

Joe Christmas knows that prevailing is never an easy matter. He expected trouble. In each case a physical defect is the symbol of human imperfection. Joe Christmas may be a

negro by blood but without this kin a person would be inhumanly perfect. The kinship, therefore becomes a symbol of Original Sin. Joe Christmas is “innocent”, apparently without guile, but this very guilelessness may lead to complicity. If Joe Christmas had not had kinship with the negro race, he would not have killed Mrs. Burden. This case is closely concerned with his complex, his vanity. Joe Christmas, thought that to be guileless, is never consciously guilty. At times his physical defect becomes more prominent. Might the kinship symbolize a kind of vanity? Might these persons stand for fatal human self-consciousness? We do not blame Joe Christmas for killing Mrs. Burden. Original Sin means human limitation. At the same time, the story seems to convey the idea that human perfection is not for this world.

They all want me to be captured, and then I come up ready to say Here I am *Yes I would say Here I am I am tired I am tired of running of having to carry my life like it was a basket of eggs they all run away. Like there is a rule to catch me by, and to capture me that way would not be like the rule says.*⁽⁸⁾

When Joe Christmas ran away he was helped by negroes. If they were of the same kind and the same colour, he would not have liked them. Joe Christmas had only one Universe —— man is prone to defiance, an other manifestation of Original Sin. Paradoxically, however, mans great heroisms and his great crimes spring from the same source.

Faulkner's concept of human nature is a heroic one. Man is capable of great heights and great depths, and he could not be capable of one without the other. It is in these terms that we come to understand why Joe Christmas, by running away from something he cannot escape, seems constantly to be looking back as he runs. Not only is one not free from his own past, but at the most critical moments he also has the sense of not moving at all, changing silently from position to position. The murder took place sometime after midnight on a Friday in August. Christmas was killed in Mottstown. On his head was heaped all sin since the race began. He suffers bitter agony and finally death, at the hands of “Soldier”, not unlike those who crucified Christ. Another Character who reminds one of Christ is Popeye in Sanctuary.

Popeye began to jerk his neck forward in little jerks, ‘Pssst!’ he said, the sound cutting sharp into the drone of the Minister's voice ‘Psssst!’. The sheriff looked at him;⁽⁹⁾

Popeye dies at last and gains satisfaction by living out his doom. Faulkner is, without doubt, fascinated by this kind of symbolism. The effect is, at best, threefold; first the reader

is shocked by the recognition of similarities to Christ in a character who, in other respects, is so un-Christlike; second the character is deepened and enriched by this added dimension; and third, the idea is conveyed, gradually and firmly, that Christian meanings can have a surprising ambiguity. It seems Popeye is also, in this respect, so un-Christlike, but actually his mind has, in part, similarities to Christ. He is of solitary mind and is a free thinker. He does not accept the dogmas of traditional religion. Faulkner reveals the fundamental duality of man's nature. Man is the child of God, made a little lower than the angels. He is also fallen man, born in sin and conceived in iniquity. Both sides are intensified by Faulkner, and elevated to high tragedy. The tragedy of man grows out of the conflict between high and low impulses and out of "the coexistence of potentialities" for good and evil. Faulkner likes to simultaneously project the two potentialities in order to shock the reader. Hawthorne places them together effectively in the portrait of Arthur Dimmesdale. Faulkner and Hawthorne probably arrived at the particular symbolisms of their own accord. "but the American author he most resembles is Hawthorne. For all their polar differences they stand to each other as July to December, as heat to cold, as swamp to mountain, as the luxuriant to the meager perfect, as planter Puritan ..."⁽¹⁰⁾

Faulkner had discovered how to write as he really wanted, "Faulkner is another author who has to wait for the spirit and the voice."⁽¹¹⁾ Like Hawthorne, "Pacing the hill-side behind his house in Concord, he listened for a voice; you might say that he lay in wait for it, passively but expectantly, like a hunter behind a rock."⁽¹²⁾ Hightower, in some ways, resembles Arthur. They both stood for the claims of the Puritan Law and are of the same religion. Hightower wants to play God to the orphan Joe Christmas. As Faulkner says:

'It's like she was in two parts, and one of them knows that scoundrel. But the other part believes that when a man and a woman are going to have a child, that the Lord will see that they are all together when the right time comes. Like it was God that looks after women, to protect them from men. And if the Lord dont see fit to let them two parts meet and kind of compare, then I aint going to do it either.'⁽¹³⁾

Hightower answers "nonsense". Hightower's nature is of the highest quality and he has depth of mind. He is pure and innocent. Human nature does not stop at rightness, he must be kind and comforting but human nature must not judge. Hightower is convinced it was only rightness but it was not. Hightower dwells so much on the past that he is incapable of facing the present. He is the prisoner of his own history. He can never set himself free. Faulkner saw this as a regional version of the original story. The fall of man from a simple or rural way of life into a modern, complex, industrial life. Joe Christmas naturally

developed from childhood to maturity and we are able to see his fall from innocence as a function of ignorance, weakness and dependency. "This function defined as ignorance, defines his role as Christ of the New Testament, but rather the rigid repressiveness which Faulkner had associated with Southern Protestant Morality in *Sanctuary* and *As I Lay Dying*. Christmas is more the helpless victim of a pharisaical society than Christ was. He is not only persecuted and killed."⁽¹⁴⁾ Faulkner is a favourite today because he takes a stand on human guilt. Every reader of the novel recognizes the inner recesses of his own mind. In the beginning, human nature was free and good and natural, but something else appeared. It was the evil of the mind. Doc Hines and Simon McEachern accept the changes in their lives. Alfred Kazin suggests "Doc Hines heard God addressing him personally, ordering him to act for Him." "Even Joanna Burden tries to play God to her Negro charges."⁽¹⁵⁾ They could hear the deep slow movement of their bosoms, their faces still a blur against the dark wall. God stood just inside the mind. They could feel him there and they were trying to watch that dumb spark of Universal Truth that each man carries inside, the slowly hardening of secret breath. *Light in August* is not one story but three. It is the account of Leana Grove, Gail Hightower and Joe Christmas, all three threads of the story are firmly united here. Faulkner uses the Christ symbol in this novel. Joe Christmas is equated with Christ; and he is forced to undergo the same experiences which include temptation in his life time, and death at the same age as Christ, when he is thirty-six.

In '*Light in August*' Faulkner cannot achieve the same tense effect as the bible because he is too concerned with tracing distinct similarities rather than ironic contrasts. Joe Christmas is a shadowy figure who observes rather than acts. Faulkner wants us to feel that the other characters have merely received the true worth of his humanity and divinity. We question the latest use of the Christ symbol because we cannot suppose Joe Christmas to be both a killer and a Negro.

How can Christ be a killer? How are we to believe in the palpable reality of Joe Christmas if we are so conscious that he is Christ? We believe in the reality of Christmas, and then in his symbolic value, feeling that more is suggested than is easily apparent. Christmas remains more of a symbol which stands in the distance rather than becoming an actual human being. We can learn to comprehend fully only in the future. Obviously, Faulkner has a wide understanding of the New Testament.

NOTES

- (1) Charles Shapiro, *Twelve Original Essays on Great American Novels*
(Detroit, Mich: Wayne State University Press 1958)
- (2) William Faulkner, *Light in August*
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- (3) Malcolm Cowley, *William Faulkner; Three Decades of Criticism* "Introduction to the Portable Faulkner"
(Michigan: Michigan State University Press 1963)
- (4) Ed. by Frederick L.Gwynn and Joseph L.Blother, *Charlottesville, Faulkner in the University: Class Conferences at the University of Virginia 1957-1958* (Va: University of Virginia Press 1958) P.74
- (5) *Ibid.*, P.25
- (6) *Ibid.*, P.26-27
- (7) *Ibid.*, P.204-205
- (8) *Ibid.*, P.253
- (9) William Faulkner, *Sanctuary*
(Penguin Books Ltd. 1970) P.252
- (10) Malcolm Cowley, *William Faulkner; Three Decades of Criticism*
(Michigan: Michigan State University Press 1963)
- (11) *Loc.cit.* P.108
- (12) *Ibid.*, P.109
- (13) William Faulkner, *Light in August*
(Penguin Books Ltd. 1971) P.227
- (14) Richard P. Adams, *Faulkner; Myth and Motion*
(Princeton, New Jersey. Princeton University Press 1968) P.87
- (15) Alfred Kazin, *The Stillness of Light in August*
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Additional References

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