



Faulkner's *Light in August*: A View of Tragedy

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William Faulkner, like Herman Melville in *Billy Budd* and Ernest Hemingway in *The Old Man and the Sea*, finds a significant image for our time in the Christian agony of the death and resurrection. Melville used it because he believed that the atheism of the French Revolution had provoked a "crisis for Christendom," perhaps even delivered a death blow, while itself going down to defeat, but that it provoked an infusion of new breath "to belly philosophy's flattened sails," come from some source of primitive innocence to be crucified by authority and revived by art. Hemingway stresses the limitations of the flesh, set against the indomitable spirit of the Old Man. In the resulting conflict, he suggests victory in defeat, a theme that had been portrayed in at least two of his earlier works: "The Undeclared" and "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber." William Faulkner utilizes the myth of death and regeneration in three novels. Underlying the events of Easter Week in *The Sound and the Fury* is the concept of degeneration-regeneration, decadence and a suggested re-birth in Southern society. In *The Fable*, admittedly an allegory, the surface story is controlled and illuminated by the underlying image of innocent Man crucified by authority in an attempt to preserve Truth. In *Light in August*, Faulkner utilizes the concept in its most comprehensive and enlightening form.

William Faulkner's principal subject in all his fiction has been the rise and decline of Southern society. At its best, this society contained energy, honesty, and beauty; yet even at its height it embodied the seeds of failure in its history of human injustice in dealings with the native Indians and its Negro slaves. The weakness of this society consisted, in part, in its very aristocratic ideals, which denied the possibility of change, and the drama of most of Faulkner's works results from this attitude; an attitude of arrogance towards the inevitable movement of time; a pride in the society it had created, which is both admirable and tragic, but doomed.

Modern life, as Faulkner sees it, is characterized by change, but marked by the absence of the old virtues, a loss of personal responsibility and a lack of individual skill or pride in skill. It is mercantile rather than agrarian, thus removed from nature. It is greedy in its utilitarianism, confused by an absence of real values.

At its most general, then, Faulkner's problem is one of permanence and change. It presents a contrast between a view of life as static, therefore putting little emphasis upon time, and a view that sees life as in constant flux. Above all, it is a view that sees man, on the one hand, separated from nature, viewing nature as something created for his own use; on the other, viewing man in an existence close to nature, respecting the force and power of nature and acknowledging his responsibility and subjection to it.

Faulkner has been accused, at times, of weighting his fiction in favor of an aristocratic South, and such critics have seen him as urging a return to the past and the past values. In one respect this may be true, for Faulkner had no such distrust of the world of the past as that which motivated Ernest Hemingway's Frederic Henry to distrust even the old words. Yet whenever one of his characters attempted to remain in the world of past values, the result was, at its worst, pathetic, at its best, almost tragic. Through attempting to hold such a belief, a character might be driven to alcoholism, to insanity, suicide, and even murder.

Yet regardless of the sympathy with which Faulkner presented such characters, regardless of the effectiveness with which the reader might be moved by the events, both characters and events were celebrating a way of life that was dead or dying; they were not prefiguring a world that lived or promised to live. Even in the hopefulness of the by now famous short story, "The Bear," we are more impressed by a sense of an end of something than we are by a suggested beginning. Such is not true of *Light in August*, where the expiatory figure of Joe Christ-mas, combined with the innocent faith of Lena Grove, provide a moving and eloquent (though not uncomplicated) image of sacrifice and regeneration.

The background of the novel, as is usual with Faulkner, is the legendary town of Jefferson, with a few of the familiar names appearing briefly, but containing on the whole a singular cast of characters, the most important of whom are not from Jefferson at all whose lives cross there momentarily to fulfill the purposes of the narrative. More important than the characters, for our present purpose, despite the skill with which the author presents them, are the meanings that we derive from them as they take their places in the expertly woven tapestry of ideas.

The story is told with Faulkner's familiar shifts in time, so that the narrative begins at a point very near its end, but continually shifts into the past to supply background events in the lives of many characters, all of whom are to become involved, in one way or another, with the climactic scenes of death and regeneration that provide a climax. The two principal characters, Joe Christmas and Lena Grove, never meet, although their lives intersect to provide the central images of crucifixion and resurrection. Joe is the baffled figure of one who is at once "every-man" and "no man," because he is white with Negro blood, the doomed object of Man's curse. Lena is the husbandless mother, who plods perseveringly from Alabama to Mississippi, with the unerring and implacable sureness of purpose of nature itself.

Yet the contrasts in the novel are not between Joe and Lena, who combine to represent Man's totality, as they are between Woman and Man, between intuition and knowledge, between Negroes and whites, between the present and the past. Lena symbolizes the enduring present that will in the future prevail. Joe Christmas is the agonizing present that is doomed to suffer and die amidst the horror of not knowing what or who he is. Lena is primarily presented as a vague, phantom-like creature, performing her symbolic journey toward the future, while Joe comes nearer than any other fictional character since Captain Ahab or Milly Theale to becoming a genuine hero. Despite his symbolic function, Joe Christmas comes close to rising, as the tragic hero must rise, above any definition, and he fails finally to achieve heroic stature only because of the author's overriding image of him as Christ-like.

Nevertheless, the searching journey of Joe Christmas to discover his identity and purpose, from the moment he is left a foundling on the doorstep of an orphan's home until his end by shooting and emasculation at the home of the Reverend Hightower thirty years later, represents more than initiation, for it is a defining of the stuff of tragedy, even if it does not become itself tragic. When a man carries the mixed blood of two races, in the indiscernible manner that makes him suspect to both, the author seems to be saying, he is bound to become a scapegoat-the sacrificial offer for the expiration of the guilt of both; yet it is only through such ceremonial horror that the curse can be removed and the rebirth occur.

Joe's wandering is not only through the worlds of black and white, but also through a world of men and women. At the orphanage, he unwittingly becomes a witness of an act of sexual aberration by two of the attendants and is immediately caught between the interests of the girl, who would have him removed by revealing her suspicions that he is part Negro, and of an old man, whom Joe does not know is his grand-father, who has devoted these years of his life to concealing Joe's Negro blood. Instead of being sent to a Negro orphanage, Joe is put out by adoption to a Scotch-Presbyterian farm family and takes the name of Joseph McEachern. There for many years he suffers the tension of being pulled between the puritanical piety and severity of his foster father and the womanly indulgence of his foster mother. In a nearby town, he experiences sex for the first time with a generous waitress prostitute, but is mocked as a "hayseed" by the girl's employer, who also complains of the girl's generosity in a situation that he sees purely as a business arrangement. When Joe's affair in town is discovered by his foster father, the two fight, and Joe strikes him over the head with a chair. He leaves the McEacherns, taking with him the savings of his foster mother, not knowing whether or not he had killed McEachern.

For the next fifteen years, Joe traveled to all parts of the country, living now as a black, now as a white, now married, now unmarried, not caring whether he was inside or outside the law. Eventually he arrived at a house near the outskirts of Jefferson, where he took up quarters in an abandoned outbuilding and began an affair with the spinster owner of the house, who was the descendant of an abolitionist family from the North that had moved South to assist the Negroes. In this affair, Joe achieves a kind of apotheosis in that he finally proves his manhood by feminizing the masculine Miss Burden; but the moment of apotheosis becomes also the beginning of Joe's doom, for Joanna Burden makes their relationship a means of expressing her white man's guilt. When

their relationship ends with Joanna's "change of life," she reverts to her masculine role, finally repeating the demands of the pious McEachern when she insists that Joe get on his knees and pray with her for forgiveness. Joe refuses, and she attempts to shoot him with a faulty old revolver that misfires. In desperation, Joe slashes her with his razor. Then begins the furious chase that is to end finally with his surrender, then in an attempt to escape again, then in his final capture, emasculation, and death.

It is at the moment that Christmas murders Joanna Burden that Lena Grove enters Jefferson. She had heard that the father of her un-born child was working in a planning mill in Jefferson, having neglected his promise to send for her and marry her when he found work, and she has come with full and unquestioning faith, not only that he would be pleased to see her, but that he would be anxious to marry her before the baby is born. In fact, her former lover has been employed at the mill, but he has changed his name, so that she does not know that he had been engaged with Joe Christmas in the sale of bootleg whiskey or that he is at the moment in the same town with her, attempting to get the one thousand dollar reward for Joe's capture. She is taken in hand by Byron Bunch, the foreman of the mill, a serious and pious young man, who guesses the identity of the person she is seeking, but who refrains for several days from telling her, because he knows her lover, once named Burch, now Brown, is in the custody of the sheriff. He does, eventually, install her in the cabin where Brown and Christmas had formerly lived, and with the aid of his friend and counselor, the Reverend Hightower, finally sees the baby born safely. He also brings Brown to her, but Brown stays only long enough to realize what is expected from him, then disappears from the country all together.

The relationship of Byron Bunch and the Reverend Hightower is significant. They are at once similar and different. Hightower had come originally as the minister of a local congregation in Jefferson, because the town had been forever imprinted in his mind as the scene of his grandfather's heroic action during the Civil War, when he had come as one of a daring band of horsemen to burn the stores of the occupying General Grant. Hightower's obsession with the past amounted to a kind of madness that tintured his religion and drove his wife to debauchery and death. His wife's death lost him his ministry, but made it impossible for him to live anywhere except Jefferson, where he stayed on, doing good whenever it became necessary, but absorbed by his dreams of the past. His Southern past, like Joanna Burden's Northern past, led to debauchery and death, parallel in many ways, but differing as Hightower was male, Joanna, female. Byron Bunch, on the other hand, had singularly little past and no particular attachment to any place; but he was a steady and honest worker, and he had a firm sense of moral responsibility.

It is these two men, the one a representative of the static idealism of the Southern past, the other a suggestion of moral sensibility that foretells the future, who are given the care of Lena and the birth of the child, a labor of necessity for one because of his code, of love for the other because of his sense of moral rightness.

At the same time, another contrasting relationship enters the novel in the late stages, this one composed of the reappearance of Joe Christmas's grandfather, along with his grandmother, whom we meet for the first time. Here, again, the contrast is in terms of masculine and feminine

characteristics, as it was with the McEacherns. Old Doc Hines, the grandfather, had attempted to disguise Joe's Negro blood, not for Joe's sake, but for the sake of the idea of blood supremacy. The grand-mother, from the beginning, had accepted Joe for what he was, her daughter's child, and she had grieved his loss ever since her husband had taken him away to the orphanage. The old couple happened to be living in the town where the chase for Joe ended-where he had chosen to allow himself to be captured. They recognize him at once as their lost grandchild, but the old man is at the fore of those who would immediately lynch Joe for his murder of Joanna Burden, while the old woman encourages Joe to try to escape. Ironically, it is the grandmother's encouragement that leads to Joe's violent end, similar to that which her husband and the mob demanded. Thus, Joe is destroyed by the feminine power of love, in the manner advocated by the masculine force of hate.

As the grandmother had, inevitably, become involved with Hightower and Bunch in her attempt to find someone who would help her free Joe, she also happens to be present when the birth of Lena's child occurs. In her old woman's mind, weary with the events of the day, she gets two events mixed, so that she imagines that the mother is her daughter, Milly, the mother of Joe, and that the newborn child is Joe. Thus William Faulkner resurrects Joe Christmas in the person of Lena's child, who has been born, as Hightower thinks, from "The good stock peopling in tranquil obedience to the good earth; from these hearty loins without hurry or haste descending mother and daughter."

So, in the person of Joe Christmas is the guilt propitiated, while in the symbol of Lena's child a new innocence is born. But it is not quite as simple as that either, for the "good earth" of Lena's world is the world of evil. It is in the masculine world that the dream of something higher exists, even if the dream is a mistaken one, as it was with Doc Hines, McEachern, Hightower, and the masculine side of Joanna Burden. Byron Bunch, when he undertakes to become Lena's guide, at first in search of Brown, then as Lena's unmarried husband, has already had his purity corrupted; indeed, the corruption began the moment he fell in love with her and, in order to protect her, was forced for the first time in his life to lie. So it is that in the novel Joe Christmas is more often spoken of as the devil than as the Christ. If he is the Christ, he is the Christ who was required to take on flesh and submit to the devil's torment, and that is what he is called finally. Faulkner has Hightower refer to him as "poor man," subject to "poor mankind."

Because Joe is a symbolic hero, not an actual one, the meaning here. as in the Christian allegory, is that the tragedy of Joe is the tragedy of mankind-or society; for, as Joanna Burden's father tells her in relating the story of how her grandfather and brother had been murdered by Colonel Sartoris for aiding the Negroes: Your grandfather and brother are lying there, murdered not by one white man, but by the curse which God put on a whole race before your grand-father or your brother or me or you were even thought of. A race doomed and cursed to be forever and ever a part of the white race's doom and curse for its sins And as Joanna tells Joe Christmas:

I thought of all the children coming forever and ever into the world, white, with the black shadow already falling upon them before they drew breath. And I seemed to see the black shadow in the shape of a cross. And it seemed like the white babies

were struggling, even before they drew breath, to escape from the shadow that was not only upon them but beneath them too, flung out like their arms were flung out, as if they were nailed to the cross.

It would be a mistake to take Faulkner's images as referring to the Negro problem only, for everyone including Faulkner knows that if there had been no racial problem in the South, the problem of Man's evil would still have existed. He would have found other means to express his limitations, as indeed he has elsewhere than in the South. Ironically, it is often the impulse to achieve the highest kind of good in a society that results in the greatest evil, and implicit in such an irony is the terrifying paradox of tragedy. The Greeks called it hubris; perhaps our word is arrogance: the arrogance of the man who believes he can draw inspiration from the heavens, not from the earth. In portraying such a concept, William Faulkner, if he has not achieved tragic dimensions in *Light in August*, has at least affirmed the tragic view.

Implicit in tragedy, however, is the hope, even the faith, that evil can be overcome by good, if not permanently, at least momentarily. Society, like the individual, is born in innocence, educated into knowledge, and decays to death; but neither society nor the individual experiences this process in isolation-only the hero. If the Greeks saw their heroes as splendid, but terrifying, individuals, defying the gods, we see them as born in innocence, but already bearing the cross of society's violation of that innocence-its violation of nature. The conditions of Greek culture and our own are different, but the effects of tragedy are similar. The great educating force on a society is its literature, on its individual members, its heroes; and if Ralph Waldo Emerson was right in saying that the great artists and the greatest heroes were those who read nature truly and recorded it for posterity, then Faulkner (regardless of how much he differs from Emerson) is right too when he says that it is only through man's coming to know nature, as Sam Fathers, and Ike Mc-Caslin, and Dilsey, and Lena Grove were one with nature, that a regeneration of society can be accomplished.

When we have come to see this, when we recognize that the struggle between the demands of nature and the demands of our dreams are as terrifyingly real as a former society saw its struggle between its gods and its human institutions, then we shall have learned to feel the struggle. We shall have achieved the tragic sense. Something like this is what William Faulkner's portrayal of the agony of Joe Christmas and the innocent faith of Lena Grove seems to be saying to us.

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