

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY  
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

SUBJECTIVITY AND AGENCY IN FAULKNER'S *LIGHT IN AUGUST*

CHARLEE MYRANDA REDMAN  
SPRING 2012

A thesis  
submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements  
for baccalaureate degrees  
in English and French and Francophone Studies  
with honors in English

Reviewed and approved\* by the following:

Benjamin Schreier  
Malvin and Lea Bank Assistant Professor of English and  
Jewish Studies  
Thesis Supervisor

Lisa Sternlieb  
Professor of English  
Honors Adviser

Jonathan Eburne  
Associate Professor of Comparative Literature and  
English  
Second Reader

\*Signatures are on file in the Schreyer Honors College

## ABSTRACT

This thesis studies William Faulkner's novel *Light in August* (1932) and the various ways in which it interrogates the formation of gender, racial, political, and national identities in the post-Civil War and Reconstruction South. *Light in August* presents a set of characters confined within deterministic ideologies that govern their perceptions of themselves and others, establishing strict, seemingly impermeable boundaries between gender, race, and political/national affiliation. My thesis project will study how these boundaries are formed and how they function; I am interested in how Joe Christmas, Joanna Burden, Byron Bunch, the Reverend Hightower, and Lena Grove are situated in and interrogate various discourses (such as those of sexuality, gender, race, and power). My thesis will study these characters as discursive subjects who have or develop agential capacity through the act of recognizing themselves as subjects, or in other words as beings subjected to a pervasive, fluid network of ideologies. I utilize Judith Butler's conception of the intersection between agency and subjectivity from her book *Bodies That Matter* (1995) as a basis for these analyses. Joe Christmas is the primary character of interest in this matter, although all of the characters of *Light in August* are implicated in this analysis. Christmas, Hightower, and Burden are historical subjects, obsessed with the past and, to a great measure, determined by their obsession. The past, along with normalized conceptions of race, gender, and sexuality, becomes a discourse that acts on and envelopes Hightower and the other characters of *Light in August*. However, we see that these characters are not simply subjected, or dominated, by these discourses; Christmas and the like interrogate them and make them visible by the act of self-recognition. By recognizing themselves as subjects, they acknowledge the subjecting forces and expose their existence as such. They are not only discursive subjects, but disruptive subjects as well.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Ben Schreier, Lisa Sternlieb, and Jonathan Eburne for all of their help and support as I researched, planned, and wrote this thesis. I would also like to thank my parents and my grandparents for their love and support, and Roshan for keeping me sane (and providing plenty of distractions and encouragement).

Thank you.

## INTRODUCTION

Faulkner's *Light in August*, published in 1932, is one of his most complex novels. While its narrative is relatively straightforward, especially in comparison to those of his more experimental works like *As I Lay Dying* and *The Sound and the Fury*, it revolves around a cast of characters who are no less complicated than Quentin and Caddy Compson or the Bundren clan.

These characters' complexity is due to several factors, among them the power of their personal and familial pasts, narrative distance, and a gamut of conflicting societal norms and forces that seem impermeable, deterministic, and almost fatalistic in their inescapability. In the early twentieth century in rural Mississippi, only a few decades after the Civil War and the turmoil of Reconstruction, being anything but a white, Protestant heterosexual was to be ostracized and, potentially, prosecuted. The five principal characters of *Light in August* – Joe Christmas, the Reverend Gail Hightower, Byron Bunch, Joanna Burden, and Lena Grove – are all considered as anomalous outsiders to the townspeople of Jefferson. In various ways, they violate the town's norms.

Joe Christmas is suspected of being black and a murderer, Hightower is a disgraced unorthodox minister, Byron keeps to himself and becomes involved with Lena, Joanna is a Yankee transplant friendly to blacks, and Lena is both a stranger to the town and an unmarried, unaccompanied pregnant woman. And, it seems, these circumstances would subject these characters to the rule of the time's dominant social discourses and ideologies. For example, Christmas struggles with his identity and racial ambiguity, hopelessly stuck between the black and white worlds, never really belonging to either. His crisis constitutes the bulk of the novel, following his vacillations between different

identities. He, like the others, seems caught in a tangled web of discourses that attempt to dictate his identity and actions.

However, Christmas and the others are not simply determined by these discourses; all of them, at one point or another in the novel, have or develop agency, or the ability to act. More than just the possibility or the opportunity to act, though, they have the *capacity* to act, the capacity to exert themselves in a situation and cause change. Even if this agency is short-lived, as in the cases of Hightower and Joanna, it makes these characters more than simple avatars or pawns in the power of dominant racial, social, and gender-oriented discourses.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines agency as “action or instrumentality embodied or personified *as concrete existence*” (emphasis mine).<sup>1</sup> I wish to focus on this aspect of “concrete existence”; if agency requires a concrete existence, this existence must be based in a subject, or a character that can exist in the world. Agency, then, requires a subject. In her book *Bodies That Matter*, Judith Butler conceives of agency as being produced inadvertently by the process of “discursive rearticulation,” a process that describes how subjects are formed. She posits that this process of discursive rearticulation must occur because the “subject” or “I” (produced by discourse) is never finite or finished, but is continually reformed and reiterated in relation to the symbolic laws or norms that identify it as a subject.<sup>2</sup> The subject must first identify itself as a subject (the step which Butler calls discursive articulation), but this step must be

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<sup>1</sup> Agency, n. *Oxford English Dictionary*. Second edition, 1989; online version March 2012. <<http://www.oed.com.ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/view/Entry/3851>>; accessed 25 March 2012. Earlier version first published in *New English Dictionary*, 1884.

<sup>2</sup> Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: on the discursive limits of “sex.”* New York: Routledge, 1993. 105.

continually repeated, so the subject is continually recognizing itself as such, continually rearticulating its subjectivity. Butler argues that, if the process of identification were to occur once and be finished, there would be no opportunity for agency in the subject, no opportunity for change or action – as soon as the subject recognized him- or herself as a subject, he or she would be fully determined by the self-image he or she had adopted. Agency becomes possible because “a full and final recognition can never be achieved,” so the subject’s identification must be constantly reconstituted and reiterated for him or her to be an “agent,” for him or her to be something more than a static figure.<sup>3</sup> Taken in this sense, then, we can analyze the characters of *Light in August* to discover both whether or not each is an agent and why each character succeeds or fails to approximate agency. This analysis must examine each character first, then, as a distinct subject “formed” and related to the reader by and through discourse. Success or failure in attaining full “subject-hood” or subjectivity will determine agency.

As we shall see, the principal characters in the novel face various challenges to achieving full subjectivity; Christmas cannot identify himself as belonging to any race, Hightower is absorbed by the past, and a great narrative distance makes Joanna difficult to approach. However, we will see a division emerge: on one side, there is Christmas, Byron, and Lena – three characters who *do* have agency, though its appearance and development is quite different in each of the three. In fact, it seems that Christmas can do nothing *but* act, though his status as subject remains ambiguous. Byron develops agency through the course of the novel, as does Lena. On the other side, we find Joanna and Hightower, the latter of whom is the perennial observer, trapped by phantasmal figures

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<sup>3</sup> Butler, 191.

from his family history, unable to achieve agency. Joanna, like Byron, manages to develop agency despite the many factors that work against her – her family's past, her status as an old, unmarried white woman from the North, and her somewhat abusive relationship with Christmas. And although these five present a mixture of success and failure in attaining full subjectivity (and thus agency), they ultimately serve as disruptive subjects, making visible, questioning, and interrogating the very discourses that shape them.

## CHAPTER 1: THE ENIGMA OF JOE CHRISTMAS

Of all the characters populating *Light in August*, Joe Christmas is perhaps the most complicated and troubled. He becomes, while embedded within the circular trajectory of Lena's story, the focal point of the novel – Faulkner spends the majority of the book detailing his life, from his childhood at an orphanage, through his years in foster care with the McEacherns, to his adult life and, finally, his death. Christmas is also the character that the reader knows most clearly through the revelation of his thoughts in direct discourse and extensive narration of his actions. However, it quickly becomes apparent that the reader knows Christmas better than he knows himself – and here lies the essential contradiction in his character. Faulkner has been quoted as saying, “I think that was his tragedy – that he didn't know what he was, and so he was nothing...that he didn't know what he was and there was no possible way in life for him to find out.”<sup>4</sup> Faulkner critic André Bleikasten writes, in a very similar vein, that “to have an identity: to be one; to have two identities: to be no one,” pointing to the way that “everyone must be tied to a class, a race, a gender.”<sup>5</sup> Bleikasten goes as far as to say having a clear-cut identity is a “social imperative,” suggesting that a fixed sense of identity is necessary not only for oneself but for belonging and fitting into social parameters. Christmas clearly fails to meet this requirement – he is not clearly tied to a class or a race, and at times even his gender is thrown into question. And yet, despite lacking this fixed identity, despite being “nothing” and “no one,” Christmas is the most active character in the novel, the person

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<sup>4</sup> William Faulkner, quoted in Baker, Charles. *William Faulkner's Postcolonial South*. New York: Peter Long Publishing, Inc., 2001. 90.

<sup>5</sup> Bleikasten, André. *Light in August: The Closed Society and its Subjects.* In *New Essays on Light in August*. Ed. Michael Millgate. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987. 81-102. 83, 97.

with the most agency. He is constantly acting – he can do nothing *but* act, in contrast to Hightower or Joanna. Christmas presents an interesting problem; he has no stable identity, no stable subjectivity, but he has agency and can act in the world, affecting others and causing significant change. How then does Christmas achieve agency when so many of Faulkner’s other characters seem paralyzed by the same normalizing forces that affect, and almost torture, him? How does he act when he does not know who or what he is, when he is, as Faulkner called him, “nothing”?

I argue that Christmas achieves agency through his performance of several identities and subjectivities; he *performs* whiteness, blackness, and maleness, as well as the personae of both Joe McEachern and Joe Christmas. By performing all of these identities, or by temporarily adopting them and acting within them, he is able to achieve agency. This is evident in the varied and shifting roles he takes on within the novel: at times he passes for white, while at others he claims to be a negro, for example. Christmas refuses any one of these classifications and toys with each for a time, which allows him to escape being reduced to a single category or reduced to an abstraction or an allegorical or symbolic figure, as many critics have argued. Through this continual reformation and reconstitution of his own identity, or what Butler would call “discursive rearticulation,” Christmas opens up and takes advantage of his agential capacity.

Christmas’s initial problem seems to be that he does indeed lack a fixed identity; he is, as Martin Kreiswirth has written, “radically divided” because “he cannot locate any stable center around which to perceive or define himself.”<sup>6</sup> In fact, we first encounter

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<sup>6</sup> Kreiswirth, Martin. “Plots and Counterplots: The Structure of *Light in August*.” In *New Essays on Light in August*. Ed. Michael Millgate. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987. 55-80. 64.

Christmas as he begins to identify himself through others' perceptions of him. As a child, he is "like a shadow," a small unnoticeable, and, notably, a dark being.<sup>7</sup> Faulkner emphasizes that the scenes of Christmas in the orphanage in Chapter 6 will be formative ones:

Memory believes before knowing remembers. Believes longer than recollects, longer than knowing even wonders. Knows remembers believes a corridor in a big long garbled cold echoing building of dark red brick sootbleakened by more chimneys than its own, set in a grassless cinderstrewnpacked compound...where...orphans in identical and uniform blue denim in and out of remembering but in knowing constant as the bleak walls, the bleak windows where in rain soot from the yearly adjacent chimneys streaked like black tears. (119)

In this passage which introduces the biographical section that traces Christmas' life prior to the August of the novel, Faulkner suggests that Christmas developed his first conceptions of his own identity in the "bleak" environment of the orphanage, which is like "a penitentiary or a zoo" – both places of confinement separated from society. What he has in his memory, what he believes in his memory, will become what he knows – about who he is and his place in society. Faulkner also emphasizes that the orphans wear "identical" and "uniform" clothing; although the children are dressed in the same blue denim, Christmas quickly emerges as different from the rest.

The moment when Christmas eats the dietitian's toothpaste and gets sick is also a formative one; it encompasses both his aversion to women and his identification with blackness. Faulkner repeatedly uses the compound neologism "pinkwomansmelling" and focuses on the color pink to show how Christmas evolved from being attracted to the color to thinking of it with "passionate revulsion" (122, 125). From this primal scene and

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<sup>7</sup> Faulkner, William. *Light in August: The Corrected Text*. New York: Vintage International, 1990. 119. Quotations from *Light in August* will hereafter appear as parenthetical citations listing the page number.

its aftermath develop the seeds of Christmas' lifelong misogyny. The dietitian also serves as the catalyst for Christmas' identification with blackness; when she catches him in her closet, she calls him a "little nigger bastard," words she notices that the other children in the orphanage are repeating, seemingly at their own instigation (122, 127). This scene, interestingly, is also when Christmas first says to, "Well, here I am," declaring his burgeoning sense of self – which, nonetheless, is quickly muddled (122). But when McEachern adopts him and decides to change his name, the boy is not concerned: "He didn't even bother to say to himself *My name aint McEachern. My name is Christmas.* There was no need to bother about that yet" (145). At that young age, Christmas does not yet perform an identity: he accepts what is thrust upon him, and what sense of identity he does have is shaped heavily by his experiences and how others act towards him.

Throughout the novel Christmas continues to perceive himself as others do; he is veritably "poisoned" by the idea people have of him.<sup>8</sup> However, a difference emerges between the performance of identity and an identity "thrust upon" one; performing an identity is, by its very nature, an active *choice*, one that involves the taking on of an identity. Having identity "thrust upon" one, however, is a passive acceptance, one that is not questioned or challenged. As he grows older, Christmas rejects the McEachern identity and chooses to take on another.

At the beginning of Chapter 7, Christmas asserts that "On this day I became a man," already taking on both adulthood and masculinity (146). This experience comes from his encounter with a young black girl with whom he and the other boys intend to have sex. Christmas, though, already associates women with negative feelings, and he

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<sup>8</sup> Pitavy, François. *Faulkner's Light in August, Revised and Enlarged Edition*. Trans. Gillian E. Cook. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973. 95.

instead attacks the “womanshenegro” until “it was male he smelled, they smelled; somewhere beneath it the She scuttling, screaming” (157). This scene shows how Christmas’ initial abhorrence of females becomes mixed with McEachern’s hatred for blacks (for the expression also appears in the old man’s narration), resulting in his rejection of both as one entity. It also shows Christmas beginning to perform an identity: a male identity, one that has to oppress, in this case literally, the “She” to protect and express its own dominance. John Duvall writes that “the otherness of the women and the “Negro” serve as material figurations of a male crisis in sexual self-definition,” and it seems indeed that Christmas must suppress these figurations to assert and perform a masculine identity.<sup>9</sup>

The same “crisis of sexual self-definition” reappears overtly in Christmas’s affair with Joanna Burden; he constantly describes her with phrases like “manlike” and “mantrained,” even going so far as to say that being physically involved with her was like having sex with another man, “like I was the woman and she was the man” (234, 235, 258). During the affair, Christmas seeks both to dominate and resist her; at times he almost attacks her in a recreation of the earlier scene with the girl, thinking things like “I’ll show the bitch!” while at others he avoids her, afraid of her desire for commitment and her rampant sexuality (236). He even admits to fearing “corruption,” feeling as if he is trapped in “a bottomless morass” of sin (260). His relationship with Joanna shows Christmas performing a masculine identity, but it is a masculine identity being challenged and shaken – an identity in crisis, unstable, that he seeks to assert but cannot entirely

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<sup>9</sup> Duvall, John N. “Faulkner’s Crying Game: Male Homosexual Panic.” In *Faulkner and Gender: Faulkner and Yoknapatapha*. Eds. Donald M. Kartiganer and Ann J. Abadie. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1996. 48-72. 62.

uphold. He must “flee women or kill them to ensure his physical security,” as François Pitavy writes.<sup>10</sup> By performing and asserting this masculine identity, Christmas can act to deny Joanna and her claims on him as a possible husband and father, though he eventually resorts to extreme violence and murder to achieve that power.

The affair with Joanna also gives Christmas the opportunity to perform a black identity. While he first seems angry when she sets out food for him, repeating “Set out for the nigger. For the nigger,” he later accepts being black (238). When Joanna asks him how he knows that one of his parents was black, or partly so, he responds, “I don’t know it...If I’m not, damned if I haven’t wasted a lot of time” (254). Christmas *chooses* a black identity here, even though he has no real proof that he is at all black, even though he could easily pass as white. Joanna, in turn, reinforces his choice – she calls out “Negro!” while they have intercourse and offers to send him to a school for blacks so he can eventually take over her business affairs. However, Joanna (and her desire for commitment in marriage) is incompatible with Christmas; he thinks, “If I give in now, I will deny all the thirty years that I have lived to make me what I chose to be” (265). It is unclear, though, what Christmas has chosen to be, and what facet of his identity he is protecting by denying her – his masculinity, his blackness, or something else entirely. When Joanna suggests that Christmas does what he describes as “tell[ing] niggers that I am a nigger too,” he viciously attacks her (277). The black identity is, then, not what he has accepted, not what he has chosen over the last thirty years of his life. He performs it for a time in the context of his relationship with Joanna, but does not entirely accept it.

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<sup>10</sup> Pitavy, 97.

Charles Baker argues that Christmas's "lack of a definite heritage, apparently, condemns him to a racial limbo from which there is no escape," referring back to the idea that Christmas can be "nothing" without a fixed identity.<sup>11</sup> However, it is this very idea of having a "fixed" identity that, as we will see in the case of Hightower, is detrimental to the development of agency – to the capacity for choice and action. Butler explains that "identifications are never fully and finally made; they are incessantly reconstituted and, as such, are subject to the volatile logic of iterability."<sup>12</sup> Christmas *cannot* have a fixed identity – the very idea of this kind of static identification is a "perpetual méconnaissance" that "produces the expectation of a unity, a full and final recognition that can never be achieved."<sup>13</sup> It is this necessary "iterability" and "re-iteration" or re-articulation, this repeated process of recognition, that forms the subject.<sup>14</sup> And, Butler argues, this "discursive rearticulation" is what creates subjects, what allows them to be open to new meanings and possibilities – to have agency. Baker, who seemingly upholds that Christmas can be nothing without a fixed identity, also writes that Christmas is left "free to define himself as he sees fit."<sup>15</sup> However, this process of self-definition, as we have seen, is continual and protean, changing as Christmas adopts different identities and performs them, using them to act. It is a process subject to re-iteration and re-articulation. And nowhere, perhaps, is this process better visible than in his foray into the black quarter called Freedman Town.

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<sup>11</sup> Baker, 90.

<sup>12</sup> Butler, 108.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 191.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 226.

<sup>15</sup> Baker, 90.

Christmas's descent into Freedman Town in the first part of *Light in August* is one of the most interesting scenes in the novel in respect to his racial and sexual self-identification. It is both a literal descent and a figurative one, mirroring a sort of hellish experience such as Dante might have had in the *Inferno*. Christmas hears the voices of the blacks "murmuring talking laughing in a language not his" and thinks "the black life, the black breathing had compounded the substance of breath" (114). He feels "surrounded" and "enclosed," as if "he and all other manshaped life about him had been returned to the lightless hot wet primogenitive Female," so he flees back up the hill to the "cold hard air of white people" (115). This passage shows his aversion, once again, for women and sexuality, an aversion born of his childhood experiences with the dentist and in the McEachern home. It also shows how he compounds femininity and blackness into the "womanshenegro" that appears throughout the text. Here Christmas rejects all of these things – women, blackness, and sexuality, as various forms of perversity. They are all things that threaten to swallow him up, to overpower him. As with his relationship with Joanna, he must reject and suppress them to protect and ensure his own sense of identity. He feels as well that he does not belong in Freedman Town, that the blacks are so separate from him that they speak another language he cannot understand. He has to flee these things to assert any kind of security over his masculinity and his supposed whiteness. However, it quickly becomes apparent that he does not quite fit into the white world either; while walking back into town, he stands and looks at the houses and domestic scenes of the whites, an outsider. He thinks, "That's all I wanted... That don't seem like a whole lot to ask," suggesting that at least at that point in the novel, Christmas identifies more with the whites than the blacks, despite his inability to permanently

assume that identity (115). He is, as André Bleikhasten points out, “both white, black, and neither.”<sup>16</sup> In this state, where he does not actively perform a white or a black identity, all he can do is run, fleeing a space defined as “black” to a “white” space where he must linger on the periphery.

Christmas does not reject blackness for the majority of the novel, however. The first moment when Christmas refers to himself as black comes before he leaves the McEacherns, when he thinks, addressing the wife, “I dare you to tell him [McEachern] what he has nursed. That he has nursed a nigger beneath his own roof, with his own food at his own table” (168). However, Christmas continues to perform a white identity and the thought of his blackness does not surface again for some time, until his relationship with Bobbie. It is at the start of their liaison when he first reclaims his name as “Christmas” rather than McEachern, already choosing and performing an identity contrary to the white, Protestant farmer his foster parents raised him to be (184). This assumption of the name is significant; Butler writes that the “occupation of the name” is what makes one “situated within discourse” and also what “sustains the integrity of the body,” suggesting that names serve as signifiers that place one within a certain symbolic system and also as a kind of unification for the body and the subject.<sup>17</sup> By choosing to go by “Christmas” rather than “McEachern,” then, Joe decides to place himself within the context of his own personal past – a context that marks him as black rather than white. It is what Butler describes as the accumulation and convergence of the repeated “calls” of a name that produces the “I,” the subject. Joe as subject, then, is formed in part by his

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<sup>16</sup> Bleikhasten, 83.

<sup>17</sup> Butler, 72, 122.

assumption of the name “Christmas” and all it signifies – his personal and familial history, his childhood in the orphanage, and his supposed “blackness.”

He further enters into his performance of this identity by telling Bobbie, “I got some nigger blood in me,” although he qualifies the statement by adding, “I don’t know. I believe I have” (197). Again, although he has no reliable source for this information, Christmas claims a (partially) black identity as he continues to pass for white to everyone except Bobbie. The assumption of his original name, while significant to him, does not tell anyone else that he is black – just unusual. It is only after he kills McEachern at the dance that Bobbie reveals his “blackness,” complaining that he betrayed her “that always treated you like you were a white man” (217). Her associates beat Christmas before leaving, trying to find out “if his blood is black,” foreshadowing his demise at the end of the novel (219).

After this episode, Christmas most clearly “performs” and uses his black identity. He passes as white, but during his travels “bedded with the women and paid them when he had the money, and when he did not have it he bedded them anyway and then told them that he was a negro. For a while it worked,” getting a reaction (224). This use of blackness seems somehow to give Christmas a perverse joy; by “tricking” the women into doing something they disavow, he corrupts them and is satisfied by doing so. However, when he encounters a woman who does not recoil from him, he cannot comprehend that his supposed race does not horrify her:

He did not know until then that there were white women who would take a man with a black skin...he would remember how he once tricked or teased white men into calling him a negro in order to fight them, to beat them or be beaten; now he fought the negro who called him white...He lived with negroes, shunning white people...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 and 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 strain with physical outrage and spiritual denial. (225-226)

Christmas clearly chooses here to perform blackness, “shunning” white people and provoking blacks to call him white because of his light skin. The extent of his performance of this identity is large; he attempts to integrate himself into a black community, even taking a wife. However, Christmas realizes that all of his efforts to enact and assert this identity are nothing more than performance – he cannot escape his whiteness, visible in his “white chest,” even as he tries to breathe in and encompass the “odor,” “thinking and being of negroes.” His very body rebels against this effort, his nostrils ironically “whitening” in revolt. Christmas can act “black,” but he cannot erase the “white” from his mind and body. André Bleikhasten argues that Christmas “might choose, he could “pass,” yet he chooses not to choose, refuses to settle for either of the ready-made identity patterns urged upon him by Southern society.”<sup>18</sup> However, it seems that this is not so much a choice as a mental and physical impossibility. He *cannot* choose to be either one race or the other, but he *can* choose which to perform and when, as well as how to use and enact these identities.

The final scenes in which Faulkner depicts Christmas seem to suggest that he ultimately becomes associated with blackness. Near the end of his flight, as he approaches Mottstown on a wagon, Faulkner describes his shoes as “black shoes smelling of negro: that mark on his ankles the gauge definite and ineradicable of the black tide

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<sup>18</sup> Bleikhasten, 83.

creeping up his legs, moving from his feet upward as death moves” (339). What is interesting and arresting in this description is the artificiality of this “black tide”; it is not something that comes from Christmas himself or from his body, but from the borrowed shoes that he puts on. The shoes “mark” him as black. The description also associates blackness with death, which, while perhaps an obvious connection on the basis of color and popular culture, takes on another dimension here. For Christmas, becoming black means dying, and his death does indeed reflect this to some extent. After Percy Grimm kills and castrates him, depriving him of life and his symbolic masculinity,

from out the slashed garments about his hips and loins the pent black blood seemed to rush like a released breath. It seemed to rush out of his pale body like the rush of sparks from a rising rocket; upon that black blast the man seemed to rise soaring into their memories forever and ever. (465)

This description, while graphic and rather disgusting, is notably ambiguous. The blood that comes from Christmas’s body is “black,” but Faulkner also re-iterates the paleness of his skin in the next sentence. The “released breath” of the blood rushing out recalls the moment earlier in the novel when Christmas attempted to “breathe in” blackness and failed, suggesting that he succeeded in some measure. The tone of the second sentence also implies that Christmas becomes something positive to the people of Jefferson; his death is likened to a firework, “the rush of sparks from a rising rocket,” a ceremonial gesture that plants him firmly, “soaring,” into the town’s memory – he is almost a sort of martyr. Even in death, Christmas performs both white and black identities, becoming a spectacle for the town.

Christmas is constantly being “read” as belonging to different identity groups, even though he lacks a kind of bedrock signifying system in his own mind. Through his performance of various identities, he avoids being inscribed definitively or categorically

into any signifying system. Perhaps one could say that he is “over-signified,” read as meaning too many disparaging things, subject to a barrage of diverging interpretations. Once the town hears that he is “black,” he is nothing but a black man to them, whether or not it is true; they insert him into their signifying system of what is “black” and what “white.” He responds to these readings imposed on him by others by alternately performing and refusing these categorizations. It is his ability to perform several identities and resist being definitively “read” that ultimately gives him agency. Even in death, he cannot be conclusively read as black or white, but some undefined, ambiguous combination of the two. François Pitavy, in addition to many other critics, writes that Faulkner’s characters often become nothing more than allegorical or symbolic structures, avatars for a greater idea. As we will see later, Lena and Joanna must particularly deal with this interpretative tendency wherein words “qualify and represent the whole person,” and “the abstract eventually becomes that person’s substance.”<sup>19</sup> Christmas resists this kind of symbolical and abstract reductionism through performativity and adopting different identities. He is not, as Charles Baker has argued, the symbol of “a universal past” or “a personification of racism, miscegenation, and violence” or “the curse of the South,” but an irreducibly complex performer, protean, and mysterious to the last.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Pitavy, 58.

<sup>20</sup> Baker, 92.

## CHAPTER 2: HIGHTOWER: TRAPPED BY THE PAST

The Reverend Gail Hightower, along with Joanna Burden, poses an interesting contrast to Joe Christmas. While Christmas is constantly acting, to the point where it seems he can do nothing *but* act, Hightower is characterized most by his lack of agency. He is defined, first, as an unkempt slob, decaying alone in his house. Faulkner associates Hightower with images of dirt and degeneration, focusing on the “thick smell of the stale, mankept house” in which he lives and his “plump unwashed flesh and unfresh clothing – that odor of unfastidious sedentation” (299). In these physical descriptions of Hightower, his age and dirtiness become his defining qualities, centered on his corporeality. The inclusion of the adjective “mankept” further emphasizes the unproductive nature of this space: it is male, infertile, and stagnant, devoid of any possibility of developing life. The compound “mankept” here becomes associated with “sedentation,” decay, and ultimately death. Even Hightower’s environment, as Byron observes, takes on some element of the reverend’s decay; looking at Hightower’s lawn chair, Byron “thinks how the mute chair evocative of disuse and supineness and shabby remoteness from the world, is somehow the symbol and the being too of the man himself” (362). This “remoteness from the world,” embodied for Byron in the chair, is an extremely apt classification for Hightower. Not only is it a symbol for Hightower – it is his entire *being* encompassed in a static, decaying object. Even more than simply being encompassed in the object of the chair, Hightower’s being is restricted and entrapped, incapable of motion and of action. It is precisely Hightower’s remoteness from the world and his “entrapment” in the past that prevents him from being or becoming an active agent like Byron or Christmas.

Hightower himself describes his situation as “not in life”: ““I am not in life anymore, he thinks. ‘That’s why there is no use in even trying to meddle, interfere. He could hear me no more than that man and that woman (ay, and that child) would hear or heed me if I tried to come back into life’ ” (301). He occupies a space that is neither in life nor death, a marginal locale where he is not only unwilling but unable to act – he says there is no point to meddling, because even if he “came back into life,” the people around him would not “hear or heed” him. All that he is capable of doing is watching the world from his study window, exactly as Faulkner describes him doing numerous times throughout *Light in August*, positioning him from his first entrance into the novel in a space that is “small” and “so hidden [it is] that the light from the corner street lamp scarcely touches it” (57). It is from his study window that he watches the world, watches Byron act, watches Christmas run to his death. The study window separates Hightower from the rest of the world while remaining transparent, a barrier that sets him up as the perpetual observer. When Byron makes the monumental decision to move Lena out to the Burden land and stay to watch over her as her baby’s birth approaches, Hightower watches him walk towards the house, focusing on Byron’s youthful vigor and his capacity to take action as a living being fully in the present:

He passes from sight walking erect and at a good gait; such a gait as an old man already gone to flesh and short wind, an old man who has already spent too much time sitting down, could not have kept up with. And Hightower leans there in the window, in the August heat, oblivious of the odor in which he lives – that smell of people who no longer live in life: that odor of overplump desiccation and stale linen as though a precursor of the tomb. (317-318)

Again, Faulkner underlines Hightower’s position as someone who “no longer lives in life,” this time associating his stale odor with death as “a precursor of the tomb.” And again, Hightower is associated with images of sedentation, corporeal decay, and death.

It is interesting to note here that Hightower is, for the great majority of the novel, restricted to the domain of windows and chairs – restricted, in short, to a domestic space set up in opposition to the outside world, and to agency. As we shall see later, it is only when Hightower leaves his house to birth Lena’s baby that he has agential capacity, and he abruptly loses this capacity upon returning home and falling asleep in his chair. For Hightower, at least, the domestic is always associated with observation rather than agency, restriction rather than movement or action.

Hightower is not yet dead, but he is not living in the present either. He can observe, but not act – he cannot engage with the outside world beyond discussing it with Byron from the comfort of his armchair. Because he is not *in* life, not *in* history, the possibility of him acting is negated; Hightower only exists in the past, stuck in a single moment of his family’s history. He can imagine agency solely through the figure of Byron by constantly speculating on Byron’s actions and thoughts. Hightower lives, as Faulkner describes,

dissociated from mechanical time... Without recourse to clock he could know immediately upon the thought just where, in his old life, he would be and what doing between the fixed moments which marked the beginning and the end of Sunday morning service and Sunday evening service and prayer service on Wednesday night (366).

This “dissociation” from temporality reinforces Hightower’s remoteness from life and from the present; his only referents are his memories of his “old life.” But even this former life, in the time when he still preached before his wife’s disappearance and death, Hightower was not “in life.” As he himself recognizes, thinking back on his life, “for that fifty years I have not even been clay: I have been a single instant of darkness in which a horse galloped and a gun crashed” (491). This “single instant of darkness” completely defines and encompasses Hightower’s entire being, his entire existence; he is not even

made of the “clay” of other humans created by God, but of a much more insubstantial, intangible substance: memory. Clay as opposed to the insubstantial substance of memory here recalls the idea that agency requires a “concrete existence” of subjects, a strong physical presence in the world. Hightower has too ephemeral, too insubstantial, of a presence. The moment he describes is the only real moment in his life, to which his thoughts run incessantly. Even his move to Jefferson is determined by his obsession with his grandfather’s death: “God must call me to Jefferson because my life died there, was shot from the saddle of a galloping horse in a Jefferson street one night twenty years before it was ever born” (478). In a sense, Hightower admits that his life never began, that he was and is always already dead. He could never enter into life, having been denied that entry by his mania for the past. Everywhere he goes, he can think only of “the apotheosis of his own history, his own land, his own envired blood” rising up from the land, anchoring him in Jefferson and condemning him to deterioration and actual death (367). It is interesting to consider the contrast between Hightower and Christmas here; while Hightower was “always dead” due to his obsession with his own past and origins, Christmas is violently alive, exploring and re-exploring the alternatives that his own dubious past provides. Christmas is displaced but not trapped by the past as Hightower is.

Hightower’s inability to exist in history, or to exist in what Faulkner calls “mechanical time,” can be attributed to his disjointed relationship with reality and temporality, a misalignment which can be attributed to his rearing as a child. Faulkner details Hightower’s family history, situating him growing up in a family of “ghosts” and “phantoms,” obsessed with stories of his grandfather’s exploits in the Civil War (477). Hightower’s only identifications as a child, then, are with the ghostly figures of his

grandfather, his distant father, his bedridden dying mother, and the female slave who told him stories about his grandfather and her own husband, who also died in the war.

Faulkner describes them as having a corporeal existence in the family home: “They were the house: he [Hightower] dwelled within them, within their dark and all-embracing and patient aftermath of physical betrayal (475). His reality lies completely in the past, in the realities of the dead, and he is thus incapable of entering history or having agency.

This incapacity to act or have agency can be attributed to the way in which Hightower sees himself as only one, static thing: a product of his familial past, a product of a single historical moment. He does not “rearticulate” his identity or his recognition of himself as a subject; there is no “discursive rearticulation” in his past. His “I” is finite and finished and it is not “reformed” or “reiterated.”<sup>21</sup> Because the process of identification occurred once and was finished for Hightower, there is no opportunity for him to attain agency; as soon as Hightower recognized himself as a subject, he was fully determined by the self-image he had adopted. Agency becomes possible because “a full and final recognition can never be achieved,” so the subject’s identification must be constantly reconstituted and reiterated.<sup>22</sup> Hightower, however, has finished the process of identification long before the events depicted in *Light in August*. For him, his first and final self-identification lies within the image of his grandfather riding a galloping horse through Jefferson years before he was born. His “I” is static, removed from history before it ever had the opportunity to enter it. As Faulkner scholar François Pitavy diagnoses, Hightower is afflicted by “an intimate adherence to a past become destiny,” over-

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<sup>21</sup> Butler, 105.

<sup>22</sup> Butler, 191.

determined by his unshakeable compulsion and his inability to move beyond it.<sup>23</sup> While the past does not become his “destiny,” it does entrap him and prevent him from reiterating and rearticulating his identity and attaining agency.

However, as Byron notices, there remains in Hightower “something yet of pride and courage above the sluttishness of vanquishment like a forgotten flag above a ruined fortress” (363). In *Light in August*, Hightower is given two chances to act; he can choose to provide an alibi for Christmas, as Byron and the Hineses ask of him, and he can choose, in a sense, to enter life after delivering Lena’s baby. Hightower acknowledges that he reaches a critical point in the novel; he thinks, “the past week has rushed like a torrent and that the week to come...is the abyss, and that now on the brink of cataract the stream has raised a single blended and sonorous and austere cry, not for justification but as a dying salute before its own plunge” (368). He knows there is a moment for change, but it seems that he already knows what he will choose – the stream gives out a “dying salute” before its fated fall. As Hightower foresees, the choices given him do not prove easy. He adamantly refuses to take the first chance, reacting in an unc customary, dramatic fit of anger to the Hineses’ request that he provide an alibi for Christmas. He shouts, “I won’t do it!” repeatedly,

his hands raised and clenched, his face sweating, his lip lifted upon his clenched and rotting teeth from about which the long sagging of flabby and puttycolored flesh falls away. Suddenly his voice rises higher yet. “Get out!” he screams...Then he falls forward, onto the desk, his face between his extended arms and his clenched fists. (391)

Faulkner focuses on Hightower’s corporeality as a marker of his mortality in this passage, describing his “rotting teeth,” the sagging of his “flabby and puttycolored flesh,” culminating in a scene reminiscent of death where Hightower falls forward and does not

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<sup>23</sup> Pitavy, François. *Faulkner’s Light in August, Revised and Enlarged Edition*. Trans. Gillian E. Cook. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973. 50.

move again. Even as he finds the energy and passion for this outburst, resulting in a display of violent vitality, it is essentially an unproductive effort ending in an image of death, depicted in his prone state and the descriptions of his aging body. Byron notices, watching Hightower later that day, that he seems to have “surrendered,” thinking that the old reverend has “relinquished completely that grip upon that blending of pride and hope and vanity and fear, that strength to cling to either defeat or victory, which is the I-Am, and the relinquishment of which is usually death” (393). What Byron observes is that Hightower has lost (or rather, does not possess) full subjectivity; the “I” is not present in his body or mind, relinquished to his fantasies of the past, rendering him incapable of action and life. Later, however, when Christmas takes refuge in Hightower’s house and the police arrive, intent on killing him, Hightower does attempt to provide the alibi for Christmas that he had previously refused to give. Percy Grimm, the young vigilante, replies to his claim by questioning Hightower’s sexuality: “Has every preacher and old maid in Jefferson taken their pants down to the yellowbellied son of a bitch?” (464). When Hightower finally does act, it is too late and his action is rendered useless and negated, along with his male sexuality. This final deprivation is echoed earlier in the novel; Faulkner describes his stomach as so obese that it is “like some monstrous pregnancy,” ascribing “female” characteristics to the old man (308). Some critics, such as John Duvall and Robert Dale Parker, have interpreted Hightower’s character as homosexual, claiming as well that Joe Brown/Lucas Burch and Joe Christmas are covertly homosexual.<sup>24</sup> It seems, however, that the suspicion of homosexuality thrown

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<sup>24</sup> Parker, Robert Dale. “Sex and Gender, Feminine and Masculine: Faulkner and the Polymorphous Exchange of Cultural Binaries.” In *Faulkner and Gender: Faulkner and*

over these men serves more as an additional threatening veil of “otherness” applied to characters perceived as outsiders or outliers to the social norms of Jefferson’s community. Claimed sexual identity, as Butler writes, is a fundamental aspect of the formation of the subject; the assumption of sex “will be one of the norms by which the “one” becomes viable at all, that which qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility.”<sup>25</sup> Foucault too claims that each individual must go through sex “in order to have access to his own intelligibility...to the whole of his body...to his identity.”<sup>26</sup> However, Butler also explains that the subject will “also always fail to approximate that position” of sex because it is an imaginary identification, an ideal of unity that is unattainable, and this failure will be perceived as “the threat of punishment, the failure to conform, the spectre of abjection.”<sup>27</sup> Hightower, who does not fit into the community’s idea of a normal heterosexual male and whose failure to “approximate the position” of male sexuality is hyper-visible, is automatically seen as deviant and threatening; to them, his sexuality must be aberrant and “other.” In a sense, then, Hightower’s failure to “assume” sexuality, as well as his obsession with the past, prevents him from being a full subject, which in turn prevents him from achieving agency and being “in life.” Interestingly, Hightower’s second chance to act is closely tied to issues of sexuality, gender, and birth.

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*Yoknapatapha*. Eds. Donald M. Kartiganer and Ann J. Abadie. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1996. 73-96. 82.

<sup>25</sup> Butler, 2.

<sup>26</sup> Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. Vol. 1. Trans Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage Books, 1990. 155.

<sup>27</sup> Butler, 101.

After delivering Lena's baby in the cabin on the Burden property, Hightower walks home and wonders what to do next, wandering through the empty rooms in his house.

Neither does he go to his bedroom to try to sleep. He goes to the door, looks in, with that glow of purpose and pride, thinking, 'If I were a woman, now. That's what a woman would do: go back to bed to rest.' He goes to the study. He moves like a man with a purpose now, who for twentyfive years has been doing nothing at all between the time to wake and the time to sleep again. Neither is the book which he now chooses the Tennyson: this time also he chooses food for a man. (405)

Delivering Lena's child finally gives Hightower a "glow of purpose and pride" after half a lifetime devoid of ambition and aspiration. He chooses, very deliberately, to avoid the bedroom because going to sleep would be a woman's action, and he decides to read Shakespeare's *Henry IV* rather than Tennyson because it is "food for a man." Hightower consciously dissects the modes of behavior that would define him as a man or woman, choosing those of the man. Tellingly, however, he falls asleep in the midst of reading his *Henry IV*, succumbing eventually to the end he had attempted to avoid. Once again, Hightower fails to assume a complete and unified sexual identity. These literary choices of *Henry IV* and Tennyson also reinforce and reiterate aspects of Hightower's character. Hightower is easily the abandoned Falstaff to Byron's Hal/Henry V, spurned by the younger generation as it moves to prominence. The Tennyson also echoes Hightower's character; the English poet's obsession with his friend Arthur Henry Hallam's death, about which he took seventeen years to write his famous poem "In Memoriam," mirrors Hightower's fixation with his grandfather's death.

At this point, however, it seems that Hightower may actually enter life again. He begins to think of his legacy, about that fact that he does not have a namesake; he attempts to console himself, thinking, "But I have known them before this to be named

by a grateful mother for the doctor who officiated. But then, there is Byron. Byron of course will take the *pas* of me” (406). It is still Byron who has agency, Byron who, at least in Hightower’s mind, will have a namesake and possibly a child of his own in the future. Hightower, however, remains the sedentary figure sitting in his study window, observing, living vicariously through the younger man, slipping back into the past. Even as he goes to visit Lena at the Burden cabin, still in the throes of his new “glow of purpose,” he starts to sidle back in time; it seems to him that

he can see, feel, about him the ghosts of rich fields, and of the rich fecund black life of the quarters, the mellow shouts, the presence of fecund women, the prolific naked children in the dust before the doors; and the big house again, noisy, loud with the treble shouts of the generations. (407)

While this image is full of life and almost overwhelmingly fertile in its use and repetition of adjectives like “rich,” “fecund,” and “prolific,” it paradoxically captures a time far removed in the past — a time that is dead. The Burden house has burned down, the cabins abandoned except for Lena and the baby. Hightower’s short-lived sense of purpose can find no end or goal: he will not have a namesake, and his decision to provide an alibi for Christmas proves to be useless. He has agency only as he imagines it through Byron, questioning Byron’s every move and speculating on his thoughts. And after Byron leaves, Hightower no longer has a conduit through which to project a phantasmal sort of agency. Indeed, the last scene in which Faulkner presents Hightower shows him descending once more into the past, this time with a sense of finality. He stills sits, as always, at his study window, lapsing into the past with an exhalation of all that is left of his momentarily restored vitality; “leaving his body empty and lighter than a forgotten leaf and even more trivial than flotsam lying spent and still upon the window ledge which has no solidity beneath hands that have no weight; so that it can be now Now” (492). As

he falls more and more into the imaginary scene, Hightower's physical body begins to dissipate, first with the body left "empty" and lighter than a leaf, then becoming trivial and insignificant, and finally insubstantial, made of hands "that have no weight."

Faulkner also signals a temporal shift in this scene with the repetition of "now": the past and the present merge between the "now" and "Now," left unpunctuated or contained by the grammatical stop of a period. Hightower's vision of the past, of his grandfather riding to his death, appears in the twilight and disappears, but "it seems to him that he still hears them: the wild bugles and the clashing sabers and the dying thunder of hooves" (493).

This time, the past does not recede back from the present, and Hightower becomes completely absorbed. He does not, and ultimately cannot, come back into life, determined as he is by the past.

## CHAPTER 3: BYRON BUNCH: THE EVERYMAN

Byron shows himself to develop agency throughout *Light in August*. He stands in contrast to both Christmas and Hightower, though in different ways: whereas Christmas is always acting, Byron spends much of the novel thinking, speculating, and discussing his actions with Hightower, avoiding what he calls “trouble.” And unlike Hightower, he does finally develop the capacity to enact what he discusses, spurning the old reverend’s advice and moving on from Jefferson to travel with Lena and her child. Byron transforms from a diffident, self-exiled hermit to a significant player in the affairs that rattle the town. From the role of the observer and narrator he becomes the actor, choosing to “re-enter” life and all of the meddling that accompanies it.

Byron Bunch, much like his fellow characters from the novel, is often read and interpreted as a stereotype. Throughout the novel, he is referred to as the eternal laborer, barely noticeable, a “small man who will not see thirty again, who has spent six days of every week for seven years at the planing mill, feeding boards into the machinery” (47). Faulkner employs the term “nondescript” several times to describe him, calling him a man “whom no man or woman had ever turned to look at twice anywhere” (401). The furniture repairman in the final chapter is perhaps the harshest in his judgment: he says Byron is “the kind of fellow you wouldn’t see the first glance if he was alone by himself in the bottom of a empty concrete swimming pool,” a man who “looked like except when he was at work, he would just be something around” (495-496). To the people of Jefferson, Byron is simply the hardworking, ascetic man with, as Hightower depicts it, “the face of a hermit who has lived for a long time in an empty place where sand blows” (302).

Hightower's choice of the word "hermit" proves apt, at least for the beginning of the novel; Byron starts out in retreat from the world, ensconced in his work, self-exiled to the outskirts of town even on Saturdays. To return again to Hightower's terminology, he is not really "in life," but rather a passive figure, a conduit for the narrative, always "downlooking" when talking to Hightower in his "dull, flat voice" (300). Byron spends much of the novel relating events to the reverend, reciting long stories about the action surrounding Joanna's murder, Brown's antics, Christmas's flight, Lena's predicament, and the Hines family history. He effectively disappears into these narratives and is almost entirely eclipsed by them, even from the first moment he appears in the novel. The first sentence of the second chapter begins, "Byron Bunch knows this: It was one Friday morning three years ago" (31). Even as he is introduced as a character, as a knowledgeable subject, Byron's importance becomes subordinate to the story he recounts.

However, one could also read this Byron-narrator as a productive force: it is through Byron's memory that the reader is introduced to Christmas's story, and to much of the novel's plot. He is a witness, and it is his act of witnessing, and his subsequent storytelling, that helps to launch him back "into life," into agency from his monkish life working at the mill and avoiding others. Even as he is presented as a conduit for the narrative, his presence and being as a subject are insisted upon in his entrance: the declarative "Byron Bunch knows" places him firmly into the novel. Byron moves in a trajectory from inaction to action during *Light in August*, transforming from a passive subject who "knows" and "remembers" to a functioning agent meddling in the affairs of Lena, Christmas, Brown, Hightower, and the town of Jefferson in general.

Faulkner's use of tense reveals much about his characters. While Christmas, Joanna, and Hightower are fairly consistently presented in the past, Byron appears largely in the more immediate, dynamic present (as does Lena, to a more limited extent). Byron enters the novel with the phrase "Byron Bunch knows," and in fact, his first meeting with Lena is one of the novel's few scenes written in the present tense (31, 51). This grammatical choice signals, from the book's commencement, that Byron inhabits a space somewhat different from that of Hightower, even though Byron is not really yet "in life." Byron, unlike his reverend-mentor, actively *chooses* to be a hermit in retreat from the world and the Jefferson community. Faulkner establishes a kind of narrative distance to show Byron as a sort of mystery to the town: an omniscient voice declares that the townspeople "think he works for the overtime he receives. Perhaps this is the reason. Man knows so little about his fellows," taking an obvious step back from Byron's point of view (47). In fact, Faulkner tells us that no one in the town knows much about him, neither his landlady Mrs. Beard nor his friend Hightower, and that he is someone "even fewer of the country people than knew either the murderer [Christmas] or the murdered [Joanna], knew by name or habit" (416, insertions mine). Byron's air of mystery comes from his self-imposed exile; he explains to Lena, "For a fact, it looks like a fellow is bound to get into mischief soon as he quits working," an attitude echoed a little later in the text: he believed "that out here at the mill alone on a Saturday afternoon he would be where the chance to do hurt or harm could not have found him" (55). Out of fear of trouble, Byron enforces his own retreat into passivity, avoiding other people and relying faithfully on the very Protestant virtue of labor to restrain him. He removes himself from the possibility of acting in a way that affects the lives of others.

However, Lena's arrival serves as a catalyst – she is the trouble, arriving at the mill and spurring Byron into action. The omniscient narrator speaks up in the moment of change, announcing, “Then Byron fell in love. He fell in love contrary to all the tradition of his austere and jealous country raising which demands in the object physical inviolability” (49). He is situated once again as an outsider, not only to Jefferson, but now also to the norms of his societal environment and upbringing, because Lena is not virginal but bearing another man's child. Byron does not, however, immediately accept this return to life. He feels burdened by Lena at first; he thinks desperately, as he tries to find a place for her to stay and prevent her from hearing the news of the murder and Brown's involvement in it, that “if he could only get her across the square and into a house his responsibility would be discharged” (83). But he does not intend to avoid the responsibility of “the evil to which he held himself for no other reason than that of having spent the afternoon with her while it was happening” (83). Byron feels that he has obligations to Lena – a sign that he is beginning, at that point, to somewhat reluctantly “re-enter” life, as Hightower would put it. While his first responsibility, of having spent the afternoon with Lena, is rather passive, his second responsibility involves “getting her” to a house – his transition from passivity to activity is already visible, though he has done little.

Byron's progression back into life becomes a reality when he acknowledges that he is in the midst of what he calls “a matter of doing,” as opposed to a matter of “not-do,” as he explains to Hightower (300). Byron makes the decision to help move Lena to the cabin on the Burden property, a decision of which his confidante and counselor Hightower quickly disapproves. But this scene encapsulates the moment when Byron re-

enters life. He speaks with “immediate finality” rather than his usual hesitant “I reckon,” and the change is palpable in his physical movements as well as his speech. Hightower notices that

Tonight Byron is completely changed. It shows in his walk, his carriage; leaning forward Hightower says to himself *As though he has learned pride, or defiance* Byron’s head is erect, he walks fast and erect; suddenly Hightower says, almost aloud: ‘He has done something. He has taken a step.’” (311)

Rather than pride, perhaps, Byron has learned defiance – and he has taken the step back into life, into the world of action and decision. He no longer speaks diffidently to Hightower while “downlooking,” but with confidence. He also no longer stumbles while entering the house, the reverend notices, but he enters “before Hightower has finished his sentence. He enters immediately, with that new air born somewhere between assurance and defiance” (312). Byron is described in this scene with immediacy, through repetition of that adverb and through Faulkner’s astute use of the present tense. Hightower too marks Byron’s newfound agency; he remarks in contrast that “Sometimes it would seem to Hightower that he would actually hale Byron into the house by a judicious application of pure breath, as though Byron wore a sail” (312). While Byron was a passive figure who could be easily maneuvered about, he is that no longer. He is now “confident,” “decisive,” “quite determined,” and speaks in a voice “brief, terse, each word definite of meaning, not fumbling” (313-314, 363).

This sense of definitive meaning returns to Byron upon the birth of Lena’s baby. He thinks, “*It was like me, and her, and all the other folks that I had to get mixed up in it, were just a lot of words that never even stood for anything, were not even us, while all the time what was us was going on and going on without even missing the lack of words*” (402). What Byron realizes is that he now attributes a sense of meaning to himself and he

stands for something, and this attribution of self-meaning and identity is his comprehension of his own subjectivity. In a crowd of himself, Hightower, and the Hines couple, “Byron alone seems to possess life”: Byron effectively re-enters life through his decisions and actions, and in doing so re-affirms his own identity and subjectivity (386). Hightower notes bitterly that Byron “of course will take the pas of me” and “engender” children as “the good stock peopling in tranquil obedience to the good earth” (406). From ascetic hermit, Byron becomes a productive figure, participating in the creation and continuation of life and procreation; unlike Joe Christmas or Hightower, Byron can and will (at least, we are lead to believe) father children. And while Byron has perhaps “wasted too much time” by exiling himself away for thirty-five years, he is changing throughout the novel and making use of the present time. He likens himself to dynamite when it “first begins, fathers itself for the now Now NOW, the shape of the outside of the stick does not change; that the people who passed and looked at him could see no change” (417). The change, however, is great. Byron’s “now Now NOW” is explosive, dynamic, leading to his departure from Jefferson; it stands in great contrast to Hightower’s “now Now” as he sinks backwards into his daydreams of the past.

Byron experiences yet another moment of transformation in the novel that further cements his role as an agent. When he tries to leave Jefferson the first time, he is resolute: he does not look back, thinking about seeing the sea (423). But Byron also considers the dissolution of himself, that he could pass the “edge of nothing” where “Byron Bunch he wouldn’t even have to be or not be Byron Bunch” (424). This line of thought continues as he rides away, contemplating the nature of names and identity: he imagines the trees

saying, “you just say that your are Byron Bunch. And in the third place, you are just the one that calls yourself Byron Bunch today, now, this minute” (424).

Calling oneself a name is a sort of interpellation, a call that, over time, leads to the formation of the subject.<sup>28</sup> Byron here emphasizes the way that this “call” must be constantly re-iterated; he recognizes that it is only “now, this minute” that the call is effective in classifying him as Byron Bunch. As Butler argues, this identifying call must constantly re-occur to form a coherent subject. And although Byron seems at this moment to be preparing himself for some kind of retreat, another stepping back from the world or from his own subjectivity, he does not. He feels “a cold, hard wind...blow through him. It is at once violent and peaceful, blowing hard away like chaff or trash or dead leaves all the desire and the despair and the hopelessness and the tragic and vain imagining too” – it is “conviction, quiet and assured” (425). Upon seeing Brown fleeing the Burden property, Byron makes his momentous decision to stay and act, to re-involve himself with Lena’s affairs and fight even though Brown has a greater advantage. Byron thinks, “I cant marry them, because I aint a minister. And I may not can catch him, because he’s got a start on me. And I may not can whip him if I do, because he is bigger than me. But I can try it. I can try to do it” (426). It is Byron’s trying, and his resolution to try, that constitutes his newfound agency.

When the confrontation finally occurs, Byron “did not hesitate,” although he is aware that he is going to “get the hell beat out of me” (439). He fights Brown because Brown “done throwed away twice inside of nine months what I aint had in thirtyfive years,” and the act of fighting, fruitless though it may be, is a symbolic act of revenge

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<sup>28</sup> Butler, 121. Butler is here paraphrasing the concept of interpellation as Louis Althusser discusses it.

(439). In a way, Byron claims the history and the experiences he missed in his thirty-five years by acknowledging it and engaging in the fight. Interestingly, Byron feels as if he needs to “reenter the world and time” after the fight; Brown has knocked him out of sync, to the edge of nothing where he and all the other characters are just “small objects which had never been alive, which he had played with in childhood and then broken and forgot” (440). But with an approaching train and its whistle comes hurtling “the world and time too,” rushing “down on him like a flood, a tidal wave,” and Byron again re-enters life with “hope unbelievable and certainty incontrovertible” for the future (441).

While the novel’s final scenes depict a Byron frustrated by Lena’s refusal of his advances, the picture is not so bleak. Byron has chosen to leave Jefferson, leaving the safe realm of labor, to travel with Lena. His final words are “I done come too far now,” “I be dog if I’m going to quit now” (506). Byron transforms throughout *Light in August*, metamorphosing from a passive, hardworking hermit to a dynamic, decisive agent leaving for a journey without end or destination, moving forever on a long and winding dusty road.

## CHAPTER 4: JOANNA: BEARING BURDENS

Joanna Burden, like Lena Grove and many of Faulkner's female characters, seems rather inscrutable at first glance. These women are often presented solely through the narration and words of their male counterparts, accessible only through the thoughts and speculation of others. Joanna's subject-hood, or identity, is formed in *Light in August* primarily by outside observations made from a distance by the townspeople of Jefferson and then by Joe Christmas: they see her as the mysterious recluse, a manifestation of her family's past and Northern origins. For most of her life, Joanna shares an apparent lack of agency similar to Gail Hightower's inability to act; she too lives disjointed from the reality of the present. In her case, however, she experiences a jolt back into life during her relationship with Christmas, culminating in her failed attempt to commit a double suicide. Joanna, like Byron, develops agency throughout the novel.

Joanna first appears in the novel through hearsay, as a "middleaged spinster named Burden" about whom rumors circulate (16). While we first meet Byron and Lena "in the flesh," Joanna, like Hightower and Christmas, is mediated first to the reader through others' tales. Unlike them, however, she is mediated *only* through others for the entirety of the novel; the reader *never* has direct access to Joanna's thoughts. The people of Jefferson know little about her beyond her name and her status as an outsider as well; she is "a stranger, a foreigner...A Yankee, a lover of negroes" who has "something dark and outlandish and threatful" in her character (46-47). What is "outlandish" and "threatful," perhaps, is the challenge she poses to the town's social order and normal ways of life. Not only does she live alone, but she descends from a family that fought for the Union and abolition and she supports schools for black women. Christmas remarks

how her accent still identifies her as a stranger, that even after forty years, “among the slurred consonants and the flat vowels of the land where her life had been cast, New England talked as plainly as it did in the speech of her kin who had never left New Hampshire” (240). Joanna is characterized, from the novel’s beginning, as a dangerous Other, rooted in and unable to escape her family’s anomalous history. Even after her death, she remains an “outlander” to the town, with a “kind of heritage of astonishment and outrage, for which, even though she had supplied them at last with an emotional barbecue, a Roman holiday almost, they would never forgive her and let her be dead in peace and quiet” (289). Even in death she is left looking backwards, as if towards the past; a witness describes how “she was laying on her side, facing one way, and her head turned clean around like she was looking behind her” (92).

Throughout the “starved years, like a gray tunnel” of her life Joanna is plagued by the “curse” her father tells her about while visiting the family burial plot during her childhood (264). He tells her she is “doomed and cursed to be forever and ever a part of the white race’s doom and curse for its sins. Remember that. His doom and his curse. Forever and ever. Mine. Your mother’s. Yours, even though you are a child” (252). This great, rather abstract pronouncement over humanity comes to hang heavily over Joanna, whose very surname signals difficulty, responsibility, and toil. She carries the burden, quite literally, of the white race and her family, named for a dead relative, given a heritage of torment. It is no wonder, then, that she struggles to form a cohesive identity and escape from the snares of history, and no wonder that her identity may undergo a sort of fragmentation in the process.

Joanna is divided, Christmas speculates, into “the abject fury of the New England glacier exposed suddenly to the fire of the New England biblical hell” that “concealed an actual despair at frustrate and irrevocable years, which she appeared to attempt to compensate each night as if she believed that it would be the last night on earth by damning herself forever to the hell of her forefathers” (258). In this description, Christmas captures two integral aspects of Joanna’s character. First, he remarks that Joanna is composed of two fundamentally different halves, the glacier and the fire of hell. This binary dichotomy begins to characterize Joanna, signaling a divisive split in her identity and sexual identity as the novel progresses. When Christmas first sees her, he thinks she “did not look much more than thirty,” but he quickly reappraises her age and raises his estimation to forty. His immediate impressions of her contrast as well; her voice is “calm, a little deep, quite cold,” but she also has “the softungirdled presence of a woman prepared for sleep” (231-232). Already, Joanna exhibits contradicting qualities of coldness and femininity, a disparity that quickly leads Christmas to think that “he didn’t know her at all,” that “there were two people” within her (232). This conflict increases throughout Christmas and Joanna’s relationship as he refers to her “other personality” with masculine language (262). He calls their first sexual encounter a “hard, untearful and unselfpitying and almost manlike yielding,” her “strength and fortitude of a man” (234). In this scene, he explicitly describes her two sides:

A dual personality: the one the woman at first sight...the other the mantrained muscles and the mantrained habit of thinking born of heritage and environment with which he had to fight up to the final moment. There was no feminine vacillation, no coyness of obvious desire and intention to succumb at last. It was as if he struggled physically with another man... (235)

Christmas emphasizes Joanna's split identity, accentuating what he sees as her "manliness" and lack of femininity, even claiming that she doesn't know how to be a woman (240). However, he is not unwavering on this point; he also describes her as going through "every avatar of a woman in love," which "more than shocked him: she astonished and bewildered him" (259). He sets Joanna up as non-normative, classifying her as a man by using the compound "mantrained," suggesting that she departs from the standard gender ideology defining what is and should be "feminine." By emphasizing her "manliness," Christmas also emphasizes her frightening "otherness" and lack of belonging to a clearly defined gender role. Christmas's choice of words here is significant; her actions are those of an avatar, or a manifestation or a representation of an idea or person rather than the thing itself. Joanna, he suggests, takes on various representations or personas; she never has a single, definitive identity, but rather a protean one that shifts and evades identification. Just before her death, he describes her voice as "sexless," beyond even classification (281).

To return to Butler's claim that identity and subjectivity must be re-iterated to create agency, it would seem that Joanna's resistance to identification helps her to develop agency. Her resistance to identification signals a dynamic identity rather than a lack of identity; Joanna as subject is not re-iterated as a single person but constantly redefined as a woman, a man, a recluse, a stranger, a spinster, a lover, "a combined priest and banker and trained nurse" (258). She does not belong to a clearly defined and bounded sex, but traverses the frontiers of what is "masculine" and "feminine," performing both identities, much as Christmas performs both "black" and "white" identities. Joanna as a subject or an "I" is "never fully and finally made," but is

“incessantly reconstituted”; she performs different identities, as Christmas does, and it is these performances that become part of the process of “discursive rearticulation,” the process that allows for the subject to have agency.<sup>29</sup> By crossing the boundaries of sexual norms, Joanna becomes a transgressive, disruptive subject. By refusing to be clearly defined and classified as a single, unvarying sex, she evades the discourses of sexuality that would pin her down and stop the process of reconstitution. She is constantly being re-identified, both with her gender and with her past.

Minrose C. Gwin suggests in her book *The Feminine and Faulkner* that in Faulkner’s works woman “traverses the space between her own subjectivity and her bounded status in discourse,” that the women have the ability to change and cross between different subjectivities – that which is their own and that which society (or, more specifically, men) defines for them.<sup>30</sup> In Joanna’s case, it seems that even Christmas’s discourse, or his names and descriptions for her, fail; he cannot encapsulate her in any of his identifications. Joanna overrides the bounds of discourse. And not only does she resist this sort of conclusive classification – she takes definitive action during her affair with Christmas.

The second integral aspect of Joanna’s character that Christmas identifies is her perpetual ensnarement by her familial past. He points out that she “damns herself” to stay that way; Christmas suggests that Joanna *chooses* to condemn herself to her great-grandparents’ Puritanical hell. Joanna’s choice, her attempt at compensating for a life not lived, marks her re-emergence into life, the very act that Hightower proves incapable of

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<sup>29</sup> Butler, 105.

<sup>30</sup> Gwin, Minrose C. *The Feminine and Faulkner: Reading (Beyond) Sexual Difference*. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1990. 14.

doing. She is influenced but not determined by history. Hightower does not “damn himself” to his family’s past, but feels it encompasses him without any will of his own. While Joanna spends years somewhat passively writing to women, students, and her lawyer in Memphis and dispensing advice, she finally takes action during her affair with Christmas. He notes that she “changed her life completely,” transforming from the virgin spinster to amorous lover, to jealous lover, to would-be-mother, to the cold, fanatical figure he perceives her as immediately before her death (271). Joanna demonstrates her ability to act in two final measures before Christmas murders her. She strikes him with her hand in rebuttal to his insulting comments on her age, and she attempts to kill him, failing only because of her gun’s mechanical failure (277). Christmas relates the way she held the old pistol, describing how

the shadow of it and of her arm and hand on the wall did not waver at all, the shadow of both monstrous, the cocked hammer monstrous, back-hooked and viciously poised like the arched head of a snake; it did not waver at all. And her eyes did not waver at all. They were as still as the round black ring of the pistol muzzle. But there was no fear in them, no fury. There were calm and still as all pity and despair and all conviction. (282)

In this description, he focuses on the fact that Joanna does “not waver at all,” repeating the phrase three times in two sentences to emphasize her conviction. Joanna decides to kill Christmas (and herself, he surmises, guessing she was planning a murder-suicide), taking action and remaining steadfast in her certitude in both mind and body. The comparison to the arched head of a snake, dangerous and ready to strike, furthers this idea. The repetition of “monstrous” reinforces Joanna’s apparent inscrutability; Christmas does not understand her or her actions – he cannot read her. This is why, at the end of the scene, he describes her eyes as “calm and still as *all* pity and despair and *all* conviction,” reverting to the use of stereotyping, symbolism, and abstraction (emphasis mine). The use

of “all” in front of “pity” and “conviction” signifies that Joanna represents, at that moment, a greater totality – she becomes symbolic, or the *avatar*, to use Christmas’s own word from earlier in the novel, of universal abstractions. In this case, however, Joanna proves to be more than a symbol; she pulls the trigger without wavering, and only her malfunctioning pistol prevents her from killing Christmas.

While Joanna has agency in these final scenes, she is still represented as unreadable, a fluid, protean subject of dubious intent, sexuality, and purpose – at least as she is presented through the lens of Joe Christmas’s mind. Like Lena Grove, she has a dynamic subjectivity that resists the clear-cut systems of signification and definition with which the male narrators attempt to portray her, and it is this resistance to definitive definition that allows her to develop agency.

## CHAPTER 5: LENA: SURPASSING THE SYMBOLIC

Just as Joanna Burden becomes at last nothing more than a stereotype for Joe Christmas, critics tend to interpret Lena Grove as solely symbolic. Michael Millgate, in his essay “A Novel: Not an Anecdote,” dismisses Lena, “whose individuality seems scarcely separable from her timeless representativeness, and whom it is therefore possible to think of as being captured forever as a figure in a landscape, an image on a vase.”<sup>31</sup>

What Millgate claims is that Lena has no identity other than that of a representative, an avatar; he interprets her as a static figure. Other critics have called her “some sort of Earth goddess, the Mother Earth of all ancient mythologies,” “a syncretic combination of feminine myths,” “the serene incarnation of eternal femininity and of the earth’s fertility,” “elemental, in complete harmony with the earth, she is Nature itself,” among other things.<sup>32</sup> All of these descriptions posit Lena as an almost mythological creature, embodying the qualities of nature and underlining her as a “figure of female fecundity.”<sup>33</sup>

The harshest critique of Lena comes from Ellen Douglas, who writes

As for Lena Grove, though we are repeatedly told that she is quiet, pleasant, friendly, alert, and nobly determined to give her child a father, she is presented as perhaps the most mindless of all Faulkner’s females. Although the evidence is overwhelming, it never penetrates her thick skull that the father she seeks for her child, even if she found him, would be worse than no father at all. Quaintly and good-naturedly and invincibly stupidly she gains from her travels not the least notion of where she is or how far one place is from another; and at the end of the

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<sup>31</sup> Millgate, Michael. “‘A Novel, Not an Anecdote’: Faulkner’s *Light in August*.” In *New Essays on Light in August*. Ed. Michael Millgate. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987. 31-54. 43.

<sup>32</sup> Pitavy, François. *Faulkner’s Light in August, Revised and Enlarged Edition*. Trans. Gillian E. Cook. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973. 79-80, 105, 114.

<sup>33</sup> Rogers, David. “Maternalizing the Epicene: Faulkner’s Paradox of Form and Gender.” In *Faulkner and Gender: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha*. Eds. Donald M. Kartiganer and Ann J. Abadie. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1996. 96-120. 101.

book she is presented as deliberately making a fool of the shy, kind man who has selflessly befriended her and who loves her with deep devotion.<sup>34</sup>

The critique Douglas offers here claims that Lena is stupid and naïve, unable to even assess her situation or comprehend her surroundings – she is characterized as a sort of idiot or imbecile with malevolent intentions, dismissed as brainless and incapable of thinking for herself. Douglas’s interpretation of Lena too resorts to a kind of reductionist stereotyping.

Minrose C. Gwin notes this preponderance of critics viewing Faulkner’s female characters, and Lena in particular, as “stereotypes, archetypes, and projections of their creator’s own gender-based conflicts,” and suggests that these generalizations are “clearly problematical” and may “distort and oversimplify” Faulkner’s texts.<sup>35</sup> Despite her gesture towards re-interpreting Faulkner’s women as something more than stereotyped figures, Gwin declines to propose that any of his female characters are autonomous subjects.<sup>36</sup> These archetypal interpretations not only oversimplify Lena, but they fix and limit her character, relegating her to the “timeless,” unchanging realm of an incarnation of some mythical ideas of nature and the feminine. While Lena is depicted with images and phrases that suggest an affiliation with larger abstractions involving the earth and maternity, she resists being read as a one-dimensional representation. Her identity shifts, moving between symbolic associations, and she is often mediated through the eyes of other (usually male) characters. She is, I argue, an autonomous subject, not at all “thick skulled” or “invincibly stupid”; she is, as François Pitavy writes, “a complete

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<sup>34</sup> Douglas, Ellen. “Faulkner’s Women.” In *“A Cosmos of My Own”: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha, 1980*. Eds. Doreen Fowler and Ann J. Abadie. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1981. 149-167. 157.

<sup>35</sup> Gwin, 22-23.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

and rounded being,” capable of making her own decisions and acting of her own accord as a free agent.<sup>37</sup>

Faulkner uses a wealth of descriptions to depict Lena. She is characterized from her first appearance as “unshakable, sheeplike...patient and steadfast” as well as “deliberate, unhurried and tireless as augmenting afternoon itself,” pregnant and traveling alone from Alabama to Mississippi (6, 10). Lena is compared here to the slow progress of the natural world, almost as if she moves with the steadiness of time. She hears and feels “the implacable and immemorial earth, connected to Nature more closely than any other character (29). Even her surname, Grove, associates her with natural imagery. And she is always serene, “placid, unchanged, timeless,” with “an inwardlighted quality of tranquil and calm unreason and detachment” (18, 399). Descriptions such as these have prompted many critics (and even Hightower, at one point) to interpret Lena as the bodily incarnation of Mother Nature, detached from the normal world of humans and, as the above quotation specifies, from reason or, perhaps, intelligence (406). In her first encounter with Byron, he sees upon her face “the grave astonishment of a child,” infantilizing her (50). While this association with nature is clearly intended, Lena is not a simpleton. She is clearly ruffled at other points in the novel, albeit in a most subtle manner; Byron detects her concern when she realizes Lucas has changed his name and forgotten her, and Hightower notes her worry over Byron after the baby’s birth, realizing that she has tried to arrange her hair when she expects him to visit her in the cabin. These changes in Lena’s mood, however, are only mediated through the narration of Byron and Hightower, through male discourse that necessarily distances Lena not only from these

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<sup>37</sup> Pitavy, 79.

masculine narrators but from the reader as well. Just as Joanna is “unreadable,” so is Lena – for most of the novel. Faulkner often uses qualifiers like “apparently,” “seems,” and “as if” in front of descriptions of Lena and her actions, creating an air of doubt around her. It is impossible to know if Lena really thinks or reacts in the way the narrator portrays her – all is supposition. Faulkner only allows the reader to approach Lena in direct discourse, or through access to her thoughts, in the very beginning and very end of the novel. As soon as Armstid appears in his wagon, the narration switches from Lena’s point of view to his (9). Interestingly, this switch also includes a change in verb tense. Lena’s narration is in the present, creating a sense of temporal and tactile immediacy, while Faulkner uses the past when he moves to Armstid’s point of view and changes back to the present to describe Lena sitting on the side of the road (11). This grammatical technique further emphasizes the distance between Lena, the men she encounters, and the reader. Faulkner does not allow access to Lena’s thoughts again until the end of the novel, when she finally meets with Lucas – and at this point she only gets two sentences (430). By the final chapter Lena is removed to an even greater distance, presented through the narration of the furniture repairman and dealer who recounts to his wife the story of his experience with Lena and Byron.

Faulkner further adds to Lena’s ambiguity and complexity by associating her with imagery of the Virgin Mary in the beginning of the novel. She wears “a shapeless garment of faded blue,” a sunbonnet of the same color, and carries a palm leaf fan (also with a weathered blue border) during her travels (9, 11). This imagery adds a Christianized element to her rather pagan character, and it also provides a note of irony. Lena is no saintly figure receiving the miracle of Immaculate Conception, but a young,

unwed mother traveling unaccompanied. Faulkner stresses that her garments and fan are a “faded” and “weathered” blue, referring perhaps to the overuse of such images. Lena does not fit precisely into the Virgin Mary figure; it is a flawed representation that captures and expresses only a part of her, just as the Mother Nature images cannot account for all of Lena’s identity. She eludes and surpasses these limiting definitions.

Lena also resists the interpretation that she is “mindless,” “stupid,” or detached to the point of “unreason.” On the contrary, she is constantly being described as knowing, or having some sort of special or clairvoyant knowledge. Byron muses that he doesn’t even have to keep anything from her, that “it was like she already knew beforehand what I would say, that I was going to lie to her. Like she had already thought of that herself” (301-302). The furniture repairman describes her in a remarkably similar way, explaining that she somehow knew Byron would return after his disappearance: “and her looking at him like she had known all the time what he was going to do before he even knew himself that he was going to” (506). Lucas Burch, during his very brief reunion with Lena, also alludes to “her grave face which had either nothing in it, or everything, all knowledge” (432). Tellingly, both Byron and the furniture repair man use the qualifier “like” in describing Lena’s presumed knowledge, reiterating the distance and speculation with which Faulkner presents her.

All of these techniques make Lena resistant to being “read” – she is almost always held at a distance, a subject of conjecture and hypothesizing, described as a sort of allegorical representation of motherhood or nature or time. This resistance to being read is also a resistance to being defined or classified, as in the cases of Christmas and Joanna; Lena, like those two characters, cannot be “tied down” to a single, definitive identity. She

can be at once a kind of Mother Nature, a Virgin Mary, and Lena Grove, at once a child and a wise adult. Lena does not fit neatly into any symbolic system, but shifts and evolves. She is constantly being re-identified and re-classified – she is incessantly re-articulated as a dynamic subject, open to new meanings and possibilities, open to the possibility of action.

Lena is portrayed as an active subject – one with agency, like Joanna, Christmas, and Byron. She is a wanderer, unlike the rather stationary Hightower, and is never depicted in a particularly domestic context – the setting that Faulkner almost seems to suggest prohibits agency. Lena begins and ends the novel in her travels, first in coming to Jefferson from Alabama, then continuing into Saulsbury, Tennessee (507). She provides a circular trajectory for the novel, but it is not a closed circuit without progress, as many critics have implied. The novel's end is not solely repetition, but variation – a reconstitution, a rearticulation, to use Butler's terms. Lena, as the furniture repairman surmises, is on a rather independent journey. He tells his wife,

I think she was just travelling. I don't think she had any idea of finding whoever it was she was following. I don't think she had ever aimed to, only she hadn't told him yet. I reckon this was the first time she had ever been further away from home than she could walk back before sundown in her life... And so I think she had just made up her mind to travel a little further and see as much as she could. (506)

The way he interprets Lena (because Lena is mediated only through his narration) imparts a sense of independence to her actions – she is travelling and seeing the world, refusing to marry Byron or settle down immediately with her baby. Neither is she really “mindlessly” searching for Lucas Burch, the man who would be a terrible father to her child. Several characters often interpret Lena as an acting subject, a subject who makes choices and has some power or influence over others. The sheriff narrates to his deputy

information Byron had told him, including that she “had him [Byron] pinned down” and that he “couldn’t stop her” moving out to the cabin on the Burden property (321).

Hightower alludes to this as well; he says, referring to her situation as a new, unmarried mother on the cusp of a relationship with Byron, “This is not anything yet. It all depends on what you do with it, afterward. With yourself. With others...Let him go. Send him away from you” (411). Hightower suggests that Lena has both the agency to change her life and make something different out of it, as well as some power over Byron. She resides in a realm of possibilities, a realm inaccessible to Hightower. And it is up to her, he says, to “let” Byron leave, to “send him away” – she has control of the situation. The furniture repairman also recounts an episode in which Lena has a sort of dominance over Byron; when he makes advances on her one night, she easily and calmly rejects him, prompting the repairman to say “I be dog if I don’t believe she picked him up and set him back outside on the ground like she would that baby if it had been about six years old” (503). Byron here becomes infantilized, relegated to the role of a child remonstrated by his mother.

Lucas Burch finds himself in a similar situation when he visits Lena in the cabin. He thinks, as he desperately searches for a way to leave, “It was as if she held him there and that she knew it. And that she released him by her own will, deliberately,” only to restrain him again moments later, as she “held him neither with rods nor cords but with something against which his lying blew trivial as leaves or trash” (432). She holds him, as she holds Byron, with her *will* – her ability to exercise agency in various human relationships and situations as well as in her personal decisions. Despite the stigmas surrounding unwed mothers and women travelling alone at the time period, she serenely

persists on her journey, moving farther and farther away from Alabama, making progress with each slowly plodded mile.

## CONCLUSION

In a sense, *Light in August* turns in a circle, a complete trajectory that begins and ends with the figure of Lena Grove walking or riding a wagon on a dusty road, praising the distance she has travelled from Alabama. The novel's trajectory is far from a perfect circle, however; it is more of a spiral, a line coming into Jefferson and veering off to the side. The lines of its beginning and its end do not touch, do not meet. A perfect circle would imply that nothing had changed in the course of the novel, that all of the book's events did not alter the course of the characters' lives or disrupt Jefferson's equilibrium.

And, of course, this concept of perfect circularity is not true. The novel's five principal characters are found in vastly different circumstances at the end. Christmas and Joanna are dead, Hightower has descended finally into the oblivion of the past, and Lena and Byron have departed on a seemingly endless journey together with Lena's child. We have seen the success or failure of each of these characters to attain full subjectivity and, thus, agency; while Christmas is the perennial agent, always acting, Hightower sits always at his study window, unable to "re-enter" life. Byron emerges from his self-exile to journey with Lena, leaving Jefferson behind.

While these characters have varying rates of success in becoming agents, they are all ultimately disruptive subjects. By their simple nonconformance to dominant ideologies and discourses, their "outsider" status, they stand in contrast to the townspeople of Jefferson and make visible the very discourses that shape them, inadvertently serving to interrogate these ideologies by their presence. Christmas's existential dilemma, as well as the town's reaction to the knowledge that he is not only a murderer but a black man, demonstrates the power of racial discourses. Whether he is

actually white or black does not matter – it is the perception of his race that rattles the town, that rattles him throughout his life. Because he violates this norm of whiteness, Christmas makes racial ideology clearly visible, and he constantly disrupts it by his nonconformance and his inability to “belong” to either race. Joanna and Lena challenge gender norms and expectations; both are unwed, Joanna is a Northerner, and Lena is pregnant without a husband. The town’s disapproval of them is evident throughout the novel. Hightower fares similarly, as his unorthodox religious views, his wife’s adultery and death, and his unusual lifestyle cast him as an outsider, disgraced and subject to suspicion by the rest of the town. Byron too is an outsider – a mysterious loner who is known to associate only with the old reverend.

All five of these characters disrupt the sleepy, small-town life of Jefferson. They challenge and defy the racial and gender-oriented discourses that attempt to shape them, as well as the determining influence of history. They all, except for Hightower, resist being defined or governed by these forces, instead performing a fluid assemblage of identities that allow them to develop and change.

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## ACADEMIC VITA of Charlee Myranda Redman

Charlee M. Redman  
5238 Cheryl Drive  
Bethlehem, PA 18017  
cmr5291@psu.edu

Education: Bachelor of Arts Degree in English, Penn State University, Spring 2012  
Bachelor of Arts Degree in French, Penn State University, Spring 2012  
Minor in International Studies  
Emphases in Creative Writing and French Culture and Literature  
Study Abroad: Université de Paris, IES French Studies Program, Fall 2010  
Honors in English  
Thesis Title: Subjectivity and Agency in Faulkner's *Light in August*  
Thesis Supervisor: Benjamin J. Schreier

### Related Experience:

Internship with Penn State University Press; acquisitions department  
Supervisor: Kendra Boileau  
Summer 2011-Spring 2012

Internship with WPSU (writing a blog on local music)  
Supervisor: Nathan Tobey  
Fall 2010-Spring 2011

Internship with Awareness Audiobooks; assistant to the content editor  
Supervisor: Lee Clifford  
Summer 2009

### Awards:

Phi Beta Kappa  
John W. Moore Award for Undergraduates in English  
Dean's List  
Benjamin Cantwell Memorial Scholarship in the Liberal Arts  
Schreyer Ambassador Travel Grant

### Activities:

Co-editor of Problem Child Literary Magazine  
Tutor in math and French for Volunteers in Public Schools  
French Tutor for Penn State Learning