CHAPTER – III

LIGHT IN AUGUST: THE NARRATIVE OF LISTENING AND TELLING

The other is formative of the self in the sense that one is not able to know oneself without the interacting presence of the other (Bakhtin 1984 60).

Each and every word expresses the ‘one’ in relation to the ‘other’. I give myself verbal shape from another’s point of view, ultimately, from the point of view of the community to which I belong. (Voloshinov 1973 86).

Light in August seems to get the disapproval of most of Faulkner's critics. They object to what they call its lack of unity and inability to convey the author's views. Although this opinion has prevailed for a long time, it has begun to change lately. Slatoff speaks for those critics when he says, "certainly the themes and threads [have] connections between them, but the connections are far more tenuous, the themes and emphases far more numerous, and the meanings far more ambiguous..." (Slatoff 175). Donald M. Kartiganer seems to understand the relationship among the various elements of the novel a little better than Slatoff. In The Fragile Thread, Kartiganer argues that Faulkner’s works, including Light in August, are “process novels” in which we see the instability of organization in terms of “the broken form, the incompatibility of twin commitments to flux and design, process and product” (38). He goes on to write that Faulkner, in Light in August, moves toward the resolution of problems posed by The Sound and the Fury and As I Lay Dying, and produces a novel in which “design emerges as the voice of a chaos that is signified by and subverts that design” (39). For Kartiganer Light in August is an example of the modernist novel as an experiment that confirms its own premise in striving for an impossible wholeness the failure of which is a kind of modernist self-fulfilling prophecy: the very fractured wholeness it desired to achieve in the first place. In “Plots and Counterplots: The Structure of Light in August,” Martin Kreiswirth argues that the “lopsided organization” of the novel is “not an accident or miscalculation,” for the “novel does not, indeed, project wholeness, but precisely its
opposite, positively flaunting its disunity, structural lapses, digressions, asymmetries, and imbalances” (55). Kreiswirth further argues that in *Light in August*, along with Bakhtinian polyphony and “recurrence, analogy, and simultaneity,” structural ambiguity creates a “centrifugal movement toward fragmentation and instability [that is] countered and held in check by a cumulative, centripetal pull toward interrelation” (57-8). Thus, the unifying principle is conscious narrative disunity. Kreiswirth concludes by accounting for narrative instability with the “reader’s experience of the wholly dialogical and thus indeterminate nature of the text’s ordering of materials” (77). As we see the structure of the novel has a close relation with its theme and contents.

Mikhail Bakhtin remarks of Dostoevsky’s novels that the text is woven in “[a] plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses” (6, italics Bakhtin). The same characterization applies to the narrative of *Light in August*. According to Bakhtin, Dostoevsky’s polyphony is mainly attributable to dialogue in characters who are “not only objects of authorial discourse but also subjects of their own directly signifying discourse,” and therefore the novel is structured “as a whole as a ‘great dialogue’” (7,40, italics Bathtin). Polyphony and dialogic relationships in *Light in August*, on the other hand, do not occur at the level of characters but rather occur in the context of communication among characters in an array of word-of-mouth communications such as conversation, dialogue and hearsay.¹ A large part of narrative in *Light in August* is consisted of communication represented by rumors and its transmitting process. The discourse of the town is created through “their” talking to each other, and is transmitted either by Byron-Hightower dialogue, or by the external narrator. “They” are white men, such as “the clerks, the idle, the countrymen in overalls,” who perpetuate ideologies of Southern whiteness (348).⁸ The reader learns how Southern white male ideology is brought into the town’s discourse through the perspectives of Byron and Hightower, as well as the perspective of the external narrator.

In *Light in August*, perhaps even more than the earlier novels, the need for a response from the others become a major theme. The two protagonists, Joe Christmas and Lena Grove seek some kind of mutual acceptance. While both of them do not fit completely with their society's norms, the response they get from other people has to do with their expectations and their outlook. In fact, this novel centers on communication, or rather the lack of it. All its major characters, and a number of the
minor ones, are playing the role of listeners and tellers; a process that takes into consideration one's expectations of a response. At the same time, the speaker takes into consideration his listener's objection or acceptance of what s/he is saying. This communication process begins the minute Lena sets foot in Jefferson. The gathering men start speculating about her circumstances, and Lena starts thinking and acting in anticipation of what people might think of her. Lena lies to people about her relationship with Brown because she expects them to respond negatively to the truth. Mr. Armstid, on the other hand, anticipates his wife's reaction to his bringing Lena home with him. Armstid thinks, "I know exactly what she is going to say. I reckon I know exactly (Light in August 12).

This alertness to the listener's response continues to play a major role throughout the book. In fact, disaster strikes when people fail to anticipate the other's reaction. Joe decides to kill Joanna only after he feels trapped by her. He kills her because she insists on ignoring his objections to her attempt to make him the "nigger" she wants him to be. Similarly, Hightower's estrangement from his wife, which ends in her suicide, comes from his inability to hear her cry for help and affection. The Jefferson community isolates Hightower for his failure to listen and respond properly to its warnings when his indulgences are used to illuminate "them" from the background. The voices of black characters and white female characters, therefore, are not dialogical but monological, thereby conveyed to the reader as static objects. Kartiganer thinks that "All the characters in the novel but Christmas follow the model of Jefferson: they commit themselves to a clear pattern designed to resist the complexity of actual conditions. One means of carrying out this commitment is the strategy of objectifying an inner reality, transferring fear or desire, a chaos scarcely to be met as one's own to an object outside the self." Contrary to what Kartiganer believes, all the major characters of Light in August face the problem of understanding themselves and others (Kartiganer 50). In their attempts to reach self-realization, they are confronted by the way other people view them. While Joe Christmas, Joanna Burden, Lena Grove, Gail Hightower, and Byron Bunch may differ in several ways, they all have to confront the community's expectations. Their hardest struggle, therefore, is to find themselves despite the obstacles that the community, as "other", puts in their way. In Light in August, this struggle takes on several shapes in accordance with the personality of the character experiencing it.

The major characters of this novel, like the rest of Faulkner's heroes, are
affected by the way others see them. However, their success depends on their ability to respond to the others and to adjust to their expectations without sacrificing their individuality. Nevertheless this task is not as easy as it may seem.

Each of the major characters holds a unique view of the world. Their points of view, like those of the protagonists of *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*, although perhaps more subtly, are juxtaposed to each other. Some of these viewpoints complement each other, as in the case of Byron Bunch and Lena Grove. Others, such as Joe and Lena, oppose each other. And sometimes these viewpoints conflict strongly, as in the case of Joe and Joanna. However, each of these characters represents a living voice and is not merely a tool in the hands of the author. I would try to show how Faulkner lets these voices speak freely without siding with one voice or the other. I also would try to emphasize on the community’s discourse-making process and how such discourse is transmitted, while elaborating on Joe Christmas and Lena Grove in relation to the community’s Ideology.

*Light in August* starts with Lena coming to town pregnant, and ends with her leaving with a baby. During her stay in the town, Christmas’s crime reveals town’s obsession as well as that of Christmas. While observing the community’s response to Christmas as a character who is “neither/nor” in relation to the town’s discourse, and Lena as a character who is “both,” we can examine how such relationships reflect the structure of the text as a whole.

**Polyphonic Discourse of the Town**

“They,” a dominant group in the town, talk about Christmas and his crime. It may be a fact of the text that Christmas killed Joanna Burden. But it is not necessarily true that he is “black” and she is a “Southern” woman. Christmas’s racial background is unknown, for his circus “Mexican” father might have a “black” ancestry. Joanna, in contrast, was born in the town, “yet she is still a stranger, a foreigner,” “[a] Yankee, a lover of negroes” (46). The town’s consensus, however, is designed to fit the discourse that a “nigger” killed “our” southern white woman, which serves to expel and eventually kill Christmas.

What motivation might we attribute to Christmas’s expulsion and murder? The most important reason is that the town of Jefferson is in crisis. According to Rene Girard, collective violence often occurs when any of the following conditions are met: first, a state of social and cultural crisis, which is to say, a generalized loss of
differences; second, the presence of crimes that “eliminate differences”; third, the identified authors of these crimes possess the marks that suggest he or she may become a victim, the paradoxical marks of the absence of difference (Scapegoat 24). The town of Jefferson meets all of these criteria. First, the town, like other Southern communities of the 1920s, is in a social crisis, about to face the erasure of difference, which were established by structure of racism. Hierarchical racial order as a social system, on the one hand, has been abolished in terms of slavery, but on the other hand the racism was reaffirmed by the “separate but equal” policy. As a result, the structure of racism became more internalized. Secondly, in such times of “an extreme loss of social order evidenced by the disappearance of the rules and ‘differences’ that define cultural divisions,” black-on-white crime, which eliminates difference, presents a threat at a level of unarticulated emotion as well as an unforgivable violation of community rules (Girard 12). Thirdly, according to community judgment, Christmas’s way of life is racial passing. Although passing is “a phenomenon of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century,” it is most evident in the 1920s and 30s, in which context Light in August appears (Sollors 247). In the frenzy of Christmas’s capture, “they” comment that “He don’t look no more like a nigger than I do” or that “He don’t look any more like a nigger than I do” (346, 349). “[w]hat made the folks so mad” is that Christmas “never acted like either a nigger or a white man” (350). Christmas, whom they think is “pretending to be a white man,” is a threat, until at least they see “niggerness” when they see him “not saying anything: just bleeding sullen and quiet” when he is hit (349-50).

The fear of the social system’s disruption manifests itself as the fear of miscegenation. As soon as people hear the rumor that Joanna was murdered, the crowd, “ranging from individuals to entire families,” gathers around the burning house (287):

Among them the casual Yankees and the poor whites and even the southerners who had lived for a while in the north, who believed aloud that it was an anonymous negro crime committed not by a negro but by Negro and who knew, believed, and hoped she had been ravished too: at least once before her throat was cut and at least once afterward (288).

The fear of miscegenation effects differences among the white spectators and substitutes cohesion in its place. Jean Novel Kapferer argues: “To believe a rumor is
to manifest one's allegiance to the group's voice, i.e., to collective opinion. Rumors provide a group with the opportunity to stand up and be counted, and to express itself; in general that takes place at the expense of another group which is taken as a scapegoat” (104, italics Kapferer). Christmas at this moment becomes a representative of blacks or of blackness itself, and a scapegoat to be persecuted by the town. Brown’s words to the sheriff that Christmas “told me he was part nigger” is what “they” waited for more than anything. The town of Jefferson expected that the murderer was a black man, long before Christmas’s race is mentioned. Even the sheriff ordered the party to “[g]et me a nigger,” despite the fact that the first witness of the fire said that the man he saw in the burning house was a white man (291). The information that Brown delivered answers the hopes, fears and forebodings they hold with respect to miscegenation, given that they “knew, believed, and hoped that she had been ravished” before and after “her throat was cut” (288). This information, of course, is immediate and significant to the Southern community, as the crime is considered to be subversive of white male supremacy. Although Percy Grimm is actually the one who killed Christmas, the town “had accepted Grimm with respect and perhaps a little awe and a deal of actual faith and confidence, as though somehow his vision and patriotism and pride in the town, the occasion, had been quicker and truer than theirs” (456-57). The people of the town reaffirm this by saying, “He’s the captain of them. Special officer sent by the governor. He’s the head of the whole thing. Sheriff ain’t got no say in it today” (458). The law-abiding spirit represented by the sheriff is easily defeated, or more precisely, none of “them” hoped that Christmas would be executed by the law from the beginning. Even Cleanth Brooks argues that Christmas is not lynched but rather killed by Percy Grimm “when, during his trial, he breaks away and tries to escape” (51). Confronting the crisis of the disappearance of differences, the town needed someone to occupy the position Grimm came to occupy. Grimm, a racist extremist and a male supremacist, represents racist male-dominated society. The town, in other words, just betrays its real nature.

The original source of the rumors about Christmas’s race is Doc Hines, whom everybody considers insane, He claimed that Christmas’s father, whose racial ancestry is unknown, was a “nigger,” in order to make his unmarried daughter’s affair appear more sinful. Olga W. Vickery states that Doc Hines “looks for a scapegoat who will bear the guilt and punishment. By calling her lover a nigger, he can transform a commonplace seduction into the horror of miscegenation” (69). Since Doc Hines life
is driven by hatred and the justification of hatred he attributes to the fury of a Calvinistic God, Christmas is a perfect “instrument” to pursue his lifelong hatred. And because, as Thadius M. Davis says, “Doc Hines’s God is a reflection of Hines himself,” whatever he thinks is God Will is his own will (Negro 145). Doc Hines’s thinking based on the self-made God is similar to Jefferson’s stereotypical discourse in terms of the way that self-satisfaction is attained by seeing individuals as “instrument.” Just like Hines is seeking somebody to hate, the town is always looking for somebody to exclude.

Exclusion is rather arbitrary and based on a dichotomous categorization of either/or. In this respect Brown played his best card. Brown himself was the prime suspect before he brought up the subject of Christmas’s race. He was the suspicious man in the burning house. The time that he claims to have found the fire, eight o’clock, is three whole hours earlier than the time it was reported, near eleven. And people know that he turned up with an eye on the thousand-dollar reward. When it was found that he had lived with Christmas in the cabin of the Burden house, the rumor was so disadvantageous to him that “everybody begun to tell about Christmas and Brown, … one of them or maybe both of them to murder that lady (Joanna)” (93). James Snead acutely explains that Brown is “so anxious to darken and destroy Joe, because he is Christmas’s darker double, who looks more like a foreigner and nigger and murderer than Christmas does (he has a ‘little white scar by his mouth’), thus is likely to have black blood (92-93)”. It is conceivable that Brown knows by experience that the darker of two suspects is likely to be accused, as well as that once one is labeled “nigger,” the other gets free of the suspicion. The way that the town abandoned two identical figures, Christmas to death and Brown to be exposed, reminds us of Girard’s argument about how twins in primitive societies were abandoned in order to avoid contagion. In such societies, Girard writes that “twins inspire a particular terror” because they “invariably share a cultural identity, and they often have a striking physical resemblance to each other. Wherever differences are lacking, violence threatens” (Violence 56-57). Like primitive societies, Jefferson categorizes sociological twins, which resulted in the persecution of one as a “nigger,” and exposed, the other as nothing.

This either/or structure applies to the murderer and the murdered. Once Joanna is humiliated by a “nigger,” her whiteness becomes so emphasized that they give her the status of “our” woman. It is again a question of degree. “[T]hey would never
forbear to her and let her be dead in peace and quiet” at bottom, “even though she had supplied them at least with an emotional barbecue, a Roman holiday almost”(28). In comparison with the “nigger,” how and how much they had hated her is ignored.

According to the terms of the town’s monolithic white male ideology, individuals are the objects of a dichotomous categorization: either one or the other. The problem here is that there is no language to describe a person like Christmas, who is neither/or. Since we perceive a thing mostly through language, it is almost impossible for us to perceive a thing that is not explained in that language. Besides, since facts are distorted to fit the limits of what is possible as discourses in Jefferson, people will be able to see neither facts nor limitations of the discourse, which both support and are supported by the limitations of such binary thinking.

Unlike The Sound and the Fury and As I Lay Dying, Light in August has an omniscient narrator. However, this narrator refrains from judging the major characters. In fact, his point of view on the protagonists seems to merge with their views of themselves. Edwin Hunter, who shows a good insight in understanding the narrative technique that Faulkner applies here, even though he considers Faulkner the narrator of the novel, says, “the novelist is reaching for a more direct communication (Hunter15). This directness is not so much between the author and his characters as it is an attempt to consider the other’s point of view. For this reason the vision of this narrator is limited, and his reliability is sometimes to be suspected. Faulkner’s practice here agrees with Bakhtin’s description of the author of the polyphonic novel where the later seems to talk to his characters rather than talking about them.” Faulkner’s use of a narrator with a limited point of view illustrates his belief in the independence of those characters. Now this background it is worthwhile to examine the rules of the narrators as the tellers and listeners of Light in August.

The Role of the External Narrator

In Light in August, the point of view becomes extremely prominent and complicated. As usual, we do not have to contend with one dominant point of view. However, we have to find the meaning of the story by looking at several points of view. Moreover, the characters’ perspectives are overshadowed by the perspective of the external narrators whose point of view has an extreme importance to our understanding of the book. This narrator’s voice is heard throughout the book. We can hear it alongside the voices of the protagonists as well as the less important characters. Sometimes he assumes
the reader's position, and sometimes he plays the role of the judge who evaluates the characters' situations and analyzes their thoughts and feelings. While he provides a psychological depiction of the characters, as do the novels of James Joyce and Henry James, he refrains from giving the final word on them. For instance, he does not condemn Hightower or Christmas. However, this narrator is not always objective as he has his own bias and prejudices. In fact, he reveals a number of misogynistic and racist opinions at several points in the novel. For instance, he says of the dietitian at the orphanage, "The dietitian was twenty-seven—old enough to have to take a few amorous risks but still young enough to attach a great deal of importance not so much to love, but to being caught at it. She was also stupid enough to believe that a child of five not only could deduce the truth from what he had heard, but that he would want to tell it as an adult would" (114-15). Similar misogynist and racist comments are made by the narrator on other occasions. For example, when Joe, as a teenager, attacks a black girl with whom he and some other boys had arranged to have sex, the narrator tells us that Joe stood there "smelling the woman, smelling the Negro all at once; enclosed by the woman's Negro and the haste driven, having to wait until she spoke... Then it seemed to him that he could see her—something, prone, abject; her eyes perhaps. Leaning, he seemed to look down unto a black well and at the bottom he saw glints like the reflection of two dead stars" (147). This is, of course, Christmas' point of view, but the narrator seems to sympathize with it.

Todorov says that only referential sentences allow construction to take place. However, maxims and un-referential sentences used by the narrator could help us in our construction because they shed some light on the narrator's intentions and his attitude. Significantly, the external narrator does not commit himself to a definite interpretation. Notice how he uses words like "perhaps" and "may be."

The narrative structure of chapter 19 is an example that the external narrator introduces “their” communication in order to reveal and criticize the self-satisfied and monolithic discourse of the community. The chapter is composed of three parts: how “the town wondered” about Christmas’s escape; Gavin Stevens’s dialogue with his friend who remains mute; and the narrator’s depiction of the death scene of Christmas. Let us look at the passage in which he describes the death of Joe Christmas to the reader as the last information about him:

Then his face, body, all, seemed to collapse, to fall in upon itself, and 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. They are not to lose it, in whatever peaceful valleys, beside whatever placid and reassuring streams of old age, in the mirroring faces of whatever children they will contemplate old disasters and never hopes. It will be there, musing quiet, steadfast, not fading and not particularly threatful, but of itself alone serene, of itself alone triumphant. (465, my italics)

The intention is apparently to disclose the limitations of the narrator who too uses dichotomous narrative. The narrator, while criticizing the town’s dichotomous thinking as the cause of ignoring human beings as they are, has no other language than that of the town. Because in the narrator’s term there is no language to describe this state of Christmas apotheosized and presenting him as “a superhuman figure.”

The communication of characters can be regarded as the nexus where their lack of objectivity is revealed: none of the perspectives of the characters is without its own prejudice. The external narrator and Byron are no exceptions: they relay communication as tinged with their own concerns. Polyphonic structure, in this respect, serves to save the text from being a collage of unreliability, avoiding the possibility of any one perspective taking on a position of authority. Yet the voice of the community is set as an axis of the narrative and the narrative focuses predominantly on the community. Since none of the perspectives is infallible, we might say that the fallacy of the community as a whole is most emphasized.

**Byron Bunch: The Narrator as Reader**

Byron plays a crucial role in *Light in August*. He acts both as a partial narrator and as a reader of Joe's story. He, on the other hand, narrates parts of Lena's story and is one of its participants. Byron is described by the external narrator as an honest, hardworking and decent man. We thus can trust him as an observer and narrator of Joe's story. Byron does not talk to Joe, but he observes him from a distance. Later on, he learns more about him from the townspeople. Thus Byron occupies a similar position to that of the reader with respect to Joe. Arthur Kinney points out this affinity between the reader and Byron as he explains the significance of the sentence “Byron Bunch knows this” which portrays Byron's reflections on his first encounter with Joe (16). Kinney brilliantly analyzes the passage which portrays Joe from Byron's perspective. He says:” Byron struggles to
understand what first strikes us as supplying and shaping the rhythm of the passage in his insistence on basing his conception in his perception and the perception of his associates (in whom his bewilderment here often takes refuge) (17). I think this is also true of the other characters and the reader. Each of the major characters in *Light in August* gathers information, which s/he gets through observing and listening to the other characters. Hightower, for example, learns about Joe and Lena from Byron. Listening is perhaps the most important factor here as the characters' success depends on their ability to listen and respond effectively to the others.

In our attempt to understand Joe, we, as readers, have to adopt Byron's unbiased attitude as he reflects on his first encounter with Joe. We, like Byron, have to play several roles, which alternate between our empathizing with and detaching ourselves from him (Ibid. 18 and also 26-7). We may identify with him as a suffering fellow human being, but we detach ourselves from him as a criminal and a person with an unhealthy disposition. Again, like Byron, our knowledge of Joe is colored by our preconceptions, imagination, feelings, and of course our personal histories. Thus what the narrator says about Byron applies to the reader as well. We therefore agree with Kinney when he says "the reader knows this" (Ibid.1). The Byron-Hightower dialogue is a model for showing communication transpires between the narrator and the reader. Hightower is a "narratee," who, as Martin Kreiswirth argues, "is not only the recipient of Byron’s narrative but also functions as a model for the reader by explicitly calling attention to the means of making the narrative meaningful" (68). On the other hand Hightower satisfies all the qualifications for the role of narratee that Gerald Prince enumerates: the narratee “constitutes a relay between the narrator and the reader, he helps establish the narrative framework, he serves to characterize the narrator, he emphasizes certain themes, he contributes to the development of the plot, he becomes the spokesman for the moral of the work” (23). What we should not forget about the Byron-Hightower communication is that their conversations occur only at Hightower’s house, just outside of town. As Byron thinks that if people found out, “they’d take us both out and whip us,” their relationship is restricted by the town and paradoxically strengthened by the fact that the town believes that nobody has “even been inside that house in twenty years” (73,59). The taboo on talking and listening intensifies the secrecy of their communication and stimulates their desire to talk and be heard. As a result, they get to the heart of the matter. Such a condition also creates a space out of mundanity, which is similar to the condition when the reader
reads the novel. Hightower and the reader, away from the town’s hysteria, quietly examine “their” talk—which is to say, the discourse of the townspeople—about Christmas, which Byron relates. We should also remark the asymmetry in the relation between Teller and Hearer. Although their discussions tend to analyze the town’s ideology with some antagonism, Byron is referred to as “a man of mystery” while Hightower is called by the more definitive epithet of “Gail Hightower Done Dammed in Jefferson,” having been alienated and still residing in an alienated position (49,61). The gaps between Byron and Hightower correspond to the gaps in the text-reader relationship: “the asymmetry” of the whole structure, Wolfgang Iser argues, “stimulates a constitutive activity on the part of the reader” (169-70). Since the constitutive activity of Hightower is predicated on his experience of the town’s brutality and cruelty, this process itself stimulates the reader to bridge the gaps between what happened to Hightower twenty five year ago and what is happening to Christmas now. In other words, what the reader focuses on most through Hightower is the community’s collective violence.

Byron is paired with the narrator in terms of his narrative position. Byron’s transparency is very often emphasized: he is “a small man who had lived in the town seven years yet whom even fewer of the country people than knew either the murderer [Christmas] or the murdered [Joanna], knew by the name or habit”; he 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” (495,416). His invisibility serves the reader to concentrate on what he says more than what he is. His remark that “most of what folks tells on other folks aint true to begin with,” and his comment, “I reckon I aint no better than nobody else,” are congruent with the novel’s fundamental narrative characteristic, which avoids forming any authoritative monologic view (54).

Before Byron appears as a narrator in chapter 4 and talks to Hightower how the town is propagating rumors about Christmas’s murder and his race, Byron’s reliability as a narrator is fully presented. Chapter 3 shows that when Byron first came to the town, one of “them” those anonymous and exchangeable citizens, told him how the town’s rumors triggered the lynching of Hightower by the Ku Klux Klan. Expected to eventually become an insider, the teller revealed the town’s hidden and unwritten rule to Byron that the town unhesitatingly resorts to violence if somebody disturbs its order. Despite “their” intention of making him an insider, Byron sees the town objectively when he says, the situation is “[a]s though… the entire affair
[about Hightower] had been a lot of people performing a play and that now and at last they had all played out the parts which had been allotted them” (72-73). He analyzes “that the town had had the habit of saying things about the disgraced minister which they did not believe themselves”(74). He makes generalizations about human behavior, including “how people every where are about the same, but that it did seem that in a small town, where evil is harder to accomplish, where opportunities for privacy are scarcer, that people can invent more of it in other people’s name”(71).

Juxtaposition of the unreliable frivolous town and objective philosophical Byron not only foregrounds but also relativizes the fallacy of the community. Byron’s being so wary that “the chance to be hurt could not have found him” prevents him from being an outcast, until he becomes “wellnigh a public outrage and affront” for his seven days’ behavior towards Lena (42,417). The position of being neither an insider nor an outsider provides him a certain externality as well as the ability to communicate with both “they” and the alienated persons. As a result he becomes the most informed character in the community where as a rule the communication between one group and others is completely impossible.

Byron’s narrative, however, is invested in his own condition. From the scene when a “countryman” found Brown in the burning house, we can surmise that Byron and the narrator differ in the way that they relay information. In chapter 13, the narrator relays the scene to the reader, focusing on the man’s race. Byron’s words to Hightower in chapter 4, on the other hand, is more invested in the dubiousness of Brown’s character, calling him “drunk man” or “drunk fellow” in spite of knowing his name. Byron relays the incident to Hightower as follows:

“It was Brown. But the countryman didn’t know that. He just said it was a drunk man in the hall that looked like he had just finished falling down the stairs, and the countryman said ‘Your house is afire, mister’ before he realized how drunk the man was. And he told how the drunk man kept on saying how there wasn’t nobody upstairs…. And besides, the man was too drunk to know, anyway. And he told how he suspected there was something wrong from the way the drunk man was trying to keep him from going upstairs. So he started upstairs, and the drunk fellow trying to hold him back, and he shoved the drunk man away and went on up the stairs. He told how the drunk man tried to
follow him... and he ... thought about the drunk fellow...” (90-91, my italics).

This is not because Byron is not interested in Christmas’s race. In fact his primary interest is the same as that of the narrator, as it is certain that his account of the rumor begins with speculation about Christmas’s race. He emphasizes Brown’s intoxication and makes Brown seem suspicious because he is in love with Lena, who is pregnant with the child Brown fathered and is looking for him. Jealous Byron is unconsciously prejudiced, although he speaks as if he were simply repeating information from the point of view of the person who first discovered the fire. The external narrator, in this sense, is narrating not from an objective point of view but in order to induce the reader to focus on race. What the external narrator is doing in chapter 13, therefore, is not only to clarify and redefine the information Byron related in chapter 4, but also to provoke the reader to focus on racial issues, through the terms of a dichotomous black and white discourse.

By means of the juxtaposition of Byron and the external narrator, the reader becomes aware of the perspective of the external narrator in relation to the community. Besides, the difference of these two narrators’ primary concerns—for Byron it is Lena, and for the external narrator, it is dichotomous discourse—foregrounds the narrator’s perspective toward the narrative.

Joe Christmas: the Individual versus the Community

A good part of Joe's story is related by the external narrator too. However, Joe contributes a great deal to the telling of his story. The story of Christmas’s life is embedded from chapter 5 to 12, in the middle of the chapters which articulate the town’s rumors in chapter 4 and 13. The account of his life is presented in the form of Christmas’s memory-narrating, being introduced such phrases as “[m]emory believes before knowing remembers” and “[a]nd memory knows this” (119,146). This memory-narrating continues till Christmas walks into Jefferson, and gradually falls into the hands of the narrator with Christmas as a focal character, although the tone of memory narrator remains.

But why is it memory-narrating? One of the reasons for this is, as we have observed in the previous chapter, to emphasize how the town’s consciousness totally neglects an individual existence. Because of this positioning, the reader sees Christmas not as an object of the town’s rumors but as an individual who struggles
with his life. Another reason is that Christmas is a reflection of the town, insofar as he is a prisoner of the Southern white male ideology. The shared obsession of Christmas and the town is stressed by that the chapters which treat his tragic life intervene between the chapters which deal with the town’s hysteria. Christmas is an embodiment of simultaneously the ideology of the Southern community and its ominous shadow image. This image is so strong that many critics view him as an abstraction or an enigma. Alfred Kazin’s view of Christmas as “an abstraction seeking to become a human being” is probably most often quoted (252). Kazin argues that “Joe Christmas is the most solitary character in American fiction, the most extreme phase conceivable of American loneliness” (253). Hugh M.Ruppersburg argues that “[t]he enigma he [Christmas] represents, like the enigma of every human being, lies beyond explanation. As the archetypal individual—in conflict with his heritage, nature, time, society, himself—he remains at the end the selfsame mystery he was in the beginning” (54). Christmas, however, represents neither American loneliness nor every human being. He is the representative of the Southern white males.

Eric J. Sundquist sees Christmas as “a figure rather than a person,” someone who is “at once a reminder (of the amalgamation of white fathers and black mothers during slavery) and a threat (of the amalgamation of black fathers and white mothers ever since),” for he “at a psychological level is a literal embodiment of the uncanny; while at a sociological level he is an emblem of his country’s heightening trauma, containing ‘within’ himself the fantasized projection of a further, invisible county within”(71). Sundquist is correct, yet we had better consider Christmas a person and not “a figure” because he has become “a figure” or “an emblem” in the society which does not consider a human being unless he or she is racially categorized. Every body in such a society holds the anxiety that in fact he or she might become another Christmas at any time.

How, then, is Christmas presented in terms of the ideologies he shares with the Southern white men? First, he is obsessed with dichotomous categorization. And because he cannot be categorized under this classification, he is the evidence that this scheme is completely untenable. His life, therefore, is precisely a series of trials and failures of categorization. From Doc Hines to the town, including Christmas, all are eager to label him as it suits them, and none of them succeeds. Among these attempts to characterize him, the condition in Memphis orphanage is the most significant as Bleikasten poignantly points out that this experience constituted “the beginning of his
[Christmas] schizoid sense of himself as self-estranged and heralded a future of isolation, alienation, and fragmentation” (Closed Society and Its Subjects 83). In particular, the black yardman, with whom Christmas tried to identify, is almost fatal:

[T]he nigger said ‘Who told you I am a nigger’ and the nigger says ‘You are worse than that. You don’t know what you are. And more than that, you won’t never know. You’ll live and you’ll die and you won’t never know.’ (383-84)

The yardman, who is no exception to binary thinking, invites Christmas’s self-contradictory feeling, determining his condition of nobody in southern society. Of course this episode is revealed not by Christmas’s memories but by Doc Hines. As Sullivan says, “Christmas repressed the painful memory of this event” (507). Because “nigger,” the first label applied to him, served only to alienate him, being isolated became almost his identity.

The best means for isolating himself is violence, hurting himself. Violence is another obsession for both Christmas and the Southern white men. It provides them an order and a system, as we can see in the relationship between Christmas and his stepfather McEachern, which clearly distinguishes between the ruler and the ruled, and the one who forces, orders and gives, and the other who resists, disobeys and refuses consequently:

He [Christmas] seemed to recognize McEachern without surprise, as if the whole situation were perfectly logical and reasonable and inescapable. Perhaps he was thinking then how he and the man could always count upon one another, depend upon one another. (159)

Doc Hines’s watchful gaze is violence too. This old man and McEachern have much in common. Both believe in Calvinism in their own ways and use Christmas as a tool: for Hines to hate, and for McEachern to obtain cheap labor (he looks at Christmas as if “he might have examined a horse or a second hand plow, convinced before hand that he would see flaws, convinced before hand that he would buy” when signing the promissory note in the orphanage) (142). They beat their wives, to whose suffering they are indifferent. Christmas learns mental violence, which is to say hatred, from Doc Hines and physical violence from McEachern.

Violence creates cohesion among the Southern white men, and it is strengthened by the opposing parameters of blacks and women. Christmas considers his stepmother, Mrs. McEachern, to be an enemy who tries “to get herself between
him and the punishment,” which Christmas accepts “as a natural and inescapable fact” whether it is “deserved or not, just or unjust” (167). In the following pages we read “It was the woman’s soft kindness which he believed himself doomed to be forever victim of and which he hated worse than he did the hard and ruthless justice of men” (168-69).

The parameters of men and women, represented in the division of the qualities attributed to them, such as by “hard and ruthless justice” and “soft kindness,” correspond to the similar division between whites and blacks by “cold hard air” and “summer smell and summer voices” (115,114). Just as he claims to be “doomed to be forever victim of” woman, Christmas is doomed to be victim of the concept of blackness. And all the white men in the South have internalized the concept of blackness and women. xi Hatred toward blacks and women is linked together and redirected into an even stronger hatred of black woman, a category which is termed “Womanshenegro.” In the case of Christmas it appears in the strongest way, because he is constantly conscious of his “blackness” in himself. Doreen Fowler points out that “of all Faulkner’s characters, possibly none is more relentlessly contemptuous of women than Joe Christmas,” arguing that his “vehement antipathy for women has deeply repressed psychic causes: when he lashes out at the women and blacks outside of him, he seems to be attempting to repudiate the womanliness and blackness within him” (146,153).

Christmas, never considers himself a black. His confession of his racial ambiguity is always articulated from the “white” side, as is shown is his expressions such as “part-nigger,” or “nigger blood in me.” When he lived “as man and wife with a woman who resembled an ebony carving,” he tries to dispel his whiteness in him (225):

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 watching, his white chest arch deeper and inscrutable thinking and being of negroes, with each suspiration trying to expel from himself the white blood and the white thinking and being. (225-26)

We can apply the above passage to a person who is fully “white” blooded. “Blackness” in him does not matter at all here.

Christmas has “black blood” only at a conceptual level and no more than that. In McEachem’s, it is a resort to destroy his relationship with his step-parents, and thus
is a passport to freedom. He thinks of telling Mrs. McEachern that her husband “has 
nursed a nigger beneath his own roof, with his own food at his own table” (168). In 
making up his mind to run away, “[h]e felt like an eagle: hard, sufficient, potent, 
remorseless, strong,... though he did not then know that, like the eagle, his own flesh 
as well as all space was still a cage”(160). What changed this is the lost love with 
Bobbie Allen. Christopher A. LaLonde observes that the relationship with Bobbie 
solicits Christmas into a “perverted passage,” “a passage marked by denial, violence, 
and disintegration,” and that the “identity is constantly regenerated by memory and 
actions that reestablish the pattern begun with Bobbie,” for the pattern for Christmas 
“is self-defining” (108). In slight modification to LaLonde’s view, we should not 
overlook the fact that the “perverted passage” is brought by Christmas himself. He 
tries to share his sweet secret with Bobbie to show his deep feeling of intimacy with 
her, but once the vice (“I got some nigger blood in me”) is introduced, Bobbie 
freezes up with the horror while Christmas remains the same (196). Christmas is too 
innocent to think that her denial is not about sharing his own imaginary world, but 
about being a “nigger’s” lover. He is satisfied with her resolution that “I don’t believe 
it” (197). In terms of being blind to others’ thinking and his self-satisfied reasoning, 
he is no different from the other Southern white men. As his grandfather’s God is his 
own creation, for instance, Christmas’s meaning of “nigger” is created just for him. 
No matter how familiar this definition is to him, it is extremely disturbing to others. 
Yet, Bobbie actually does not seem to believe it, because his secret is beyond all 
imagination. When he strikes down McEachern, she for the first time accepts his 
words to make sense of the situation by connecting the crime to the term “nigger,” in 
order to reject him. And Christmas, being rejected by his lover, for the first time sees 
his dream-like imaginary destroyed and his sweet secret changed into something 
bitter. “black blood” remains only as a weapon for the denial, violence, and 
disintegration of the others as well as of himself. On the way to get arrested after 
seven days on the run, he realizes that “he is still inside of the circle,” thinking, “a]nd 
yet I have been further in these seven days than in all the thirty years,... But I have 
never got outside that circle. I have never broken out of the ring of what I have 
already done and cannot ever undo” (339). The circle, from which he desired to 
escape in his boyhood, is the cage inside him and he is totally entrapped it.

Christmas’s voice is a voice typical of Southern white men as spoken from the 
inside. The town’s response to Christmas is a voice spoken from the outside. From
both inside and outside, each side cries out with the fear of their own ideology. This answers the question of why Christmas’s life is presented in the form of his memory-narrating, and why it occupies about two-thirds of the novel, and why it is placed in the middle of the town’s nest of rumors. The result of their refusal to see Christmas as an individual, due to being absorbed in labeling him “nigger,” is that “they” refuse to hear their own voice. Oppressed by their own ideology, all they can do is to keep hurting each other within it.

Here is a crucial point, although it is the external narrator relates what goes on in Joe's mind, he does not try to explain Joe's feelings. Instead he tries his best to portray Joe's feelings the way Joe sees them. Myra Jehlen, who reads the novel as a reflection of Faulkner's racial and misogynist views, sees Joe as "divided along racial lines, and can never fuse into a single human being—not even, that is, into one who is torn and schizoid (Jehlen 80). Like Kartiganer and Slatoff, Jehlen fails to see Joe as an independent character, and reduces him to an abstract representation of his creator's views.

Nevertheless we may conclude that, Joe fails to see any hope in his situation and let himself become a victim of circumstances which are beyond his control, or even his knowledge. Joe's vision of life thus becomes conditioned by his limited perspective of his background, childhood experiences, and his psychological make up. Faulkner reminds us of this fact constantly. In chapter 6 for instance, in which the story of Joe's life is told, the external narrator says: "Memory believes before knowing remembers. Believes longer than recollects, longer than knowing even wonders." (111) He thus emphasizes that Joe believes what his memory recollects. Of course what it recollects is colored by his feelings, misconceptions, prejudices, and other unconscious factors.

Joe becomes obsessed with the idea of being an excluded. He becomes a classic Dostoevskian hero both because of the obsession, and also because he challenges dialogically the norms of his community. Clearly, dialogism does not always lead to refining and improving an idea. What it does do in this case is sharpen Joe’s obsession.

Joe like the reader is searching continuously for bits of information to understand himself and "reality", to be more precise his view of reality. Joe may gather the wrong clues that affirm his preconceptions and prejudices. However, Faulkner asks the reader to put her/his prejudices and preconceptions aside as s/he tries to understand Joe's story. If we only had Joe to tell the story, we would have to contend with his limited point of view. Therefore we would be forced to choose between accepting his version and rejecting it. That is not what Faulkner wants for us to do. For him there is no "Truth" but several truths,
or as Bakhtin would put it, he believes in the multiplicity of point of views and voices. For this reason Faulkner provides us with other character narrators or part narrators of the Joe's story so we may have a spectrum of contradictory or complimentary viewpoints so that we would feel compelled not to probe deeper instead of accepting the story at its face value as some readers do. The narrators of Joe's story respond to it deeply, so that it becomes personal to each of them. Their involvement leads the reader in that direction. Thus the reader finds her/himself in a position where s/he is forced to compare her/his perception of the story with the perceptions of the various narrators. In fact, the reader finds her/himself in the same difficult situation that Byron finds himself in, when he tries to make up his mind about Joe's character.

**Lena Grove: Her Voice and Response**

Faulkner has stated that *Light in August* is mainly “the story of Lena Grove,” and that the “light” of the title, “just that luminous lambent quality of an older light than ours” connects with “Lena Grove, who had something of that pagan quality” (*Faulkner in the University* 74, 199). Is Lena, then, a character who only flavors the novel with her luminosity, as many critics of this novel analyze her as an abstraction, enigmatic figure, earth goddess, or wonderful creature? I would prefer to disagree with them. Lena may remain in the background of the novel but it is a background that illuminates the limitations of Southern white male ideology, just like the polyphonic narrative structure of the novel illuminates the limitations of their discourse.

Lena cares about neither the crime Christmas has committed nor his racial labeling, calling him “the one in jail, that Mr. Christmas” (409). Lena’s baby, fathered by Brown, who might well have black ancestry, as Snead points out, might “be another mulatto in a long string of uncertain progeny” (93). Viewed in this light, Lena is much more dangerous to the community than any other character. She is an opposing force to the ideology of Southern white males, but the town sees her as only a stranger coming and leaving, considering her nothing serious. The town cannot conceive that she is a threat because of its dichotomous perspective.

The town links Lena with Brown, who is connected to Christmas. We can observe the town’s arbitrary and binary ways of creating discourse: as soon as Christmas is categorized as “nigger,” Brown becomes inconsequential to the town, which perfectly fits with his shallow behavior. The Brown-Lena relationship, then, falls into a stereotypical story of the frivolous man and the abandoned woman, which
is thoroughly banal and boring compared to that of a “nagger” murderer and a slain white woman. In addition to this, community-centered perspective, which can only see things through the past, makes the town blind. It would not consider Lena a threat unless her racially ambiguous children revolted against the town’s order in the future.

As a matter of fact, none of the white men grasps Lena as a whole person. Lena is called a “whore” by her brother, and Vemer thinks her pregnancy is because “[s]he has no mother” (26). Byron, despite her pregnancy, fits her into the image of a virgin, who needs his good care. For Brown she is nothing but an object to satisfy his sexual desire. Armstid admires her belief in family, saying to himself, “she knows more than even Martha [Mrs. Armistid] does … about how the Lord will see that what is right will get done” (25). Hightower believes that “She will have to have [other children] … That will be her life, her destiny. The good stock peopling in tranquil obedience to it the good earth; from these hearty lions without hurry or haste descending mother and daughter.” (406, italic original) The furniture repairer and dealer sees in her a sturdy and independent woman, and marvels, “You cant beat a woman” (506). Each of them sees Lena partially, and as a result Lena is described as a kaleidoscopic woman. Since they do not need to attain any consensus on her, unlike they do with Christmas, their description of Lena becomes a mere reflection of their images of her.

We may say that critics who see Lena as a figure, such as an abstraction or a goddess, make the same interpretation. They of course express her as a total personality, but still conceive of her as an image rather than an individual. We may say that they too are caught reading in the same binary thinking of either/or. The life of Christmas is, as we have discussed, a series of categorization and it is narrated internally, in the form of Christmas’s memory-recall, and externally as the town’s rumors. On the other hand this practice of obsessive categorization which involves constant telling and re-telling induces the reader, or the critic, to see Lena as an object of categorization and to evaluate her in comparison with Christmas. But why do we suddenly need to compare these two characters based on the same kind of dichotomous categorization, just as the hysterical town does? We know that such categorization falsely labels a character and triggers a tragedy such as that which happened to Christmas. And furthermore, we know that the text itself makes it clear that such characters’ views are unreliable through the very act of telling and re-telling.
Given what we have learned in terms of method, then, how do we see Lena? In the first few pages of the novel, the narrator gives an account of two interesting episodes, one from Lena’s childhood, and one describing her flight from her brother’s house:

After she got to be a big girl she would ask her father to stop the wagon at the edge of town and she would get down and walk. She would not tell her father why she wanted to walk in instead of riding. He thought that it was because of the smooth streets, the sidewalks. But it was because she believed that the people who saw her … would believe that she lived in the town too. (3-4)

The sister-in-law told the brother [about Lena’s pregnancy] ….He called her whore…Two weeks later she climbed again through the window …She could have departed by the door, by daylight. Nobody would have stopped her. Perhaps she knew that. But she chose to go by night, and through the window. (6)

From these passages, we know that Lena pays enough attention to public eye to make herself look good, even though only she thought this worked. Even when she flees in the moonlight through the window, she casts herself as a loose woman, applying the norm of the town to herself. At Armstid’s home on the way to Jefferson, she has only a cup of coffee and a piece of cornbread because she thinks it is polite, “thinking with a sort of serene pride: Like a lady I et. Like a lady travelling” (26). Lena is the producer and the actress of her own image, and others to her are subordinates or audience, if not background.

Given this, her way of associating with people is skillful. Depending on how manipulable they are, she changes her attitude: the most manageable to her are men, and the least, women. Knowing the antipathy of women toward her, she places men between herself and them. For instance, she uses Armstid and Byron as a barrier against Mrs. Armstid and Mrs. Beard. While she never answers men when they ask invasive questions about her marital state,” she not only answers Mrs. Armstid but also confesses to her, “I told you false” (18). Among women, she clearly distinguishes Mrs. Armstid from Mrs. Beard, considering the former closer to what she considers male, and thus easier to manage than the latter. Mrs. Armstid’s toughness is emphasized, in her description as “the gray woman with a cold, harsh, irascible face,” “with a savage screw of gray hair at the base of her skull and a face that might have
been carved in sandstone” (15,18). Her view on men is rather mild, as seen in her tone of resignation, such as when she exclaims “You men,” or “You dum men” (16). On the other hand, Mrs. Beard, Byron’s landlady, is a middle class woman, “comfortable,” “with red arms and untidy grayish hair” (84-85). She is placed in the opposite position of men in that she is analytical and wise. Although she looks at Lena “as strange women had been doing for four weeks;” her eyes are not “exactly cold” but “not warm” because she understands the whole situation that Lena is with the man named Bunch, who is in love with her, and she has yet “to find a husband named Burch at the same time” (86). She knows what the dominant ideology is, and how Lena suavely utilizes it:

“They’ll take as much time and trouble and country money as they can cleaning up what us women could have cleaned up in ten minutes Saturday night. For being such a fool [Christmas]. Not that Jefferson will miss him. Cant get along without him.” (420) “you [Byron] would Know that women don’t mean anything when they talk. It’s men folks that take talking serious. It aint any woman that believes hard about you and her [Len] ...Aint you and that preacher and ever other man that know about her, already done everything for her that she could think to want?” (419)

Mrs. Beard is well aware of what Lena is doing. Lena, therefore, keeps absolutely quiet when the landlady and Byron talk about her, and she even moves to the cabin of the Burden house. To solve her predicament, Lena needs to make men feel that she is the victim of not just one irresponsible man, but all men, appealing to men’s unconscious feeling of shared guilt, without them noticing what she is doing. She explains to Hightower how Mrs. Hines mistakes her child for Christmas: “I don’t like to get mixed up. And I am afraid she might get me mixed up” (408). This is because she knows that Hightower once drove his wife to death for his irresponsibility. On the road, Lena is quite stubborn, believing what she wants to believe and ignoring what she does not want to accept. For example, no matter how often and how firmly she is told the man working at the planning mill is Bunch, and not Burch, she refuses to believe she may have gotten the name wrong, and insists that her interlocutors are wrong. Despite the fact that people insinuate that the man she is looking for has run away from her, she does not admit it. Upon arriving in Jefferson, she pays absolutely no attention when the wagon driver points out the fire
at the Burden house, instead focusing on her arrival. However, we find that she understands it well from her later explanation to Byron, that “We could see it from the wagon .... It’s a right big fire” (53). Conceiving of the men she meets on the road as modes of transportation to Jefferson, she acts the part of a weak-minded, abandoned woman. At the same time, she emphasizes her plight as an ignorant, vulnerable, and believing woman in order to make them feel superior to her. Knowing that men prefer essentialist ideology, Lena often repeats the homily that God will see to that “a family ought to all be together when a chap comes” and presents herself in a way that agree well with their essentialism (21). She accepts Byron’s lie that Brown is on business for the sheriff, because it is convenient to her. Byron almost becomes aware of what Lena is doing and tells Hightower, “It’s like she was in two parts, and one of them knows that he [Brown] is a scoundrel.... The other part believes... it was God that looks after women, to protect them from men,” but he is too in love with her to examine her deeply (302).

Once she settles her difficult situation, Lena shows the face of a strong and independent woman. When Byron tries to rape Lena on the road, she quietly but firmly scolds him, “Why, Mr. Bunch. Aint you ashamed” and treats him “like she would that baby if it had been about six years old” (503). When Byron comes back and tells her, “I be dog if I’m going to quit now,” she says. “Aint nobody never said for you to quit” (506). Lena is not at all the passive dullard she is often made out to be by critics. She understands the situation and plays the appropriate role of a town girl, a fallen woman, a lady seeking her lover or a happy mother. It is white male ideology that is monolithic and limited: she is either a whore or a virgin, passive or independent, credulous or unbelieving, and vulnerable or stubborn. But she is both and more, just like anybody else.

Given all these points, we may see Lena in the following trait. Because of her fertile body and her credulousness, she will be pregnant again and again, probably not by a single man but by several men. Some of them may have black ancestry like Brown, but it makes no difference to her, because she ignores anything that may be to her disadvantage. She will not act like the mother of “nigger” children, because she knows how to deal with white men, the ruling group of society. Lena, who is still travelling, is a threat to the future of the South from the point of view of white men. The key term here is “the future of the South,” for it is the main concern of the narrator.
Gail Hightower: Isolation as Refuge

Gail Hightower also plays a similar role to that of Byron and the reader. Hightower, however, like Joe and Joanna is a prisoner of his own point of view of himself and his world. The external narrator tells us what Byron has learned from the town about Hightower in chapter 3. He summarizes to us Hightower's life story as follows:

Hightower had just been a more dependable kind of man, the kind of man a minister should be instead of being born about thirty years after the only day he seemed to have ever lived in—that day when his grandfather was shot from the galloping horse—she [his wife] would have been all right too. But he was not, and the neighbors would hear her weeping in the parsonage in the afternoons or late at night, and the neighbors knowing that the husband would not know what to do about it because he did not know what was wrong (57).

Hightower fails to see the signals and indulges himself in reliving an imaginary glorious past that he recreates. This illusion and monologizing of the past ends in tragedy and isolation. His neglected wife commits adultery like Addie Bundren in *As I Lay Dying*. When he fails to respond to her emotional pain, she commits suicide. The community reacts to Hightower's response failure first by offering him advice followed by a warning and ending with isolating him. Hightower, like Joe, ends up paying a dear price for his errors of conception and inability to take the other's response into consideration. His narrow vision of his world and his indulgence in a mythical fantasy blinds him. However, Hightower, unlike Joe, is saved by Byron who forces him back into the human community as he involves him, despite the former's initial resistance, with both Lena and Joe. When Byron begins to tell Hightower about Joe and Lena, the external narrator informs us that Hightower "watches Byron now with a certain narrowness neither cold nor warm... And now there begins to come into Hightower's puzzled expression a quality of shrinking and foreboding as Byron talks as quietly, telling about how he decided after they reached the square to take Lena to Mrs. Beard's. And Byron continues in that flat voice: about how at seven o'clock he had decided on nothing; that when he and Lena reached the square he was still undecided" (76).

This involvement which starts at the passive level of listening develops into a complete participation in both stories, and culminates in Hightower's helping Lena in childbirth, and later on, in his attempt to hide Joe from his murderer, Percy Grimm. Hightower thus is saved, even if perhaps temporarily, when he succeeds to respond to the
other.

Because of his full immersion in his own personal history, Hightower, at first, fails, to understand Joe's and Lena's stories. While he shows compassion towards Christmas, he tries not to get involved in his story. As for Lena, he recoils at Byron's mentioning of her. As Byron continues the story, while watching Hightower's reaction, the latter's reservations begin to disappear and he breaks up saying, "Is it certain, proved, that he has negro blood? Think, Byron; what it will mean when the people—if they catch... Poor man. Poor mankind" (93).

The Furniture Dealer: An Outsider's Perspective

The furniture dealer is the last narrator in *Light in August*. The light tone that he adapts and his humorous attitude provide a comic relief to a book that is rather dark and gloomy. This narrator is reminiscent of Ratliff the other salesman in the way he employs suspense and humor to get his point across. However, he is certainly less tolerant than Ratliff. The furniture dealer provides us with a lighter point of view of the Lena-Byron story as he sees the humor in the situation. Joe's tragedy is only mentioned in passing. This fact stands in contrast to the external narrator's assertion in chapter 19 when he says that the citizen's of Jefferson,"are not to lose it[Joe's murder], in whatever peaceful valleys, beside whatever placid and reassuring streams of old age, in the mirroring faces of whatever children they will contemplate old disasters and newer hopes" (440). On the other hand, this chapter can stand on its own as a short story. However, it remains an integral and important part of the book because it provides us with another point of view on Lena's and Joe's stories, and consequently a more optimistic view of the world."

Like the reader, the furniture dealer is an outsider who is completely removed from the stories that take place in the book. Moreover, the external narrator does not provide us with much background information about this narrator. This, I believe is a clever choice made by the author who protects the reader from being distracted by not going into the biography of this last minute narrator. Instead, he lets the latter reveal himself through his narrative. This narrator, however, proves not to be much different from the reader in the way he observes, anticipates and reaches conclusions, or passes judgments on events and the other characters. However, the reader has the advantage of having all the information s/he needs to understand the story. The furniture dealer makes fun of Byron. The humor nevertheless has no malice. It is all done jokingly and cleverly. Moreover, the furniture dealer becomes more than a mere observer and reader of story of Lena and Byron, but an
active narrator with an audience, his wife. In fact, the furniture dealer, like a writer, uses suspense and humor to make his story interesting to his listener. He also as a writer has to anticipate her reaction as he tells her the story. Perhaps this chapter provides us with an excellent example of fiction reflecting upon itself and exploring how it works. For instance, she asks the dealer "what was it [that Byron] aimed to do?" and her husband answerers "You wait till I come to that part. May be I'll show you, too." (472) This instance and the following questions and their answerers parody the interaction between the reader and the writer. The text raises questions in the reader and the writer anticipates these questions and attempts to provide the answerers for them. Todorov sums this up as follows:

Construction appears as a theme in fiction simply because it is impossible to refer to human life without mentioning such an essential activity. Based on the interpretation he receives every character must construct the facts and the characters around him; thus he parallels exactly the reader who is constructing an imaginary universe from his own information (the text, and his sense of what is probable: thus inevitably reading becomes one of the themes of the book (Poetics of Prose 78).

Faulkner improves on this by making the act of writing itself another theme of the book. Once again, point of view plays a major role. An uninvolved and easy going narrator like the furniture dealer clearly undermined the dark and gloomy atmosphere that envelopes the earlier parts of the book. On the other hand, we get in this chapter a summary of the Lena-Byron episode, the story that asserts life over death, while Joe's tragic story is only mentioned in passing as Lena tells the furniture dealer that her baby was born in Jefferson and the dealer comments by saying "Oh. Where they lynched that nigger. You must have been there then." (470) Faulkner contentment with this casual mention of Joe, I believe, emphasizes the fact that life goes on even after something so horrible as the lynching of a man takes place. Todorov's comment on point of view is helpful in this regards, he says, "The 'vision' we have of the events evoked by the text clearly determines our work of construction. For example in the case of a positively slanted vision, we take into consideration the event recounted, and the attitude of the person who sees the event (Ibid. 471).

Another important factor is repetition. In the furniture dealer chapter, as well as through out the novel, repetition plays a central role. We hear several versions of both Lena's and Joe's stories. These versions differ "ranging from total disagreement to down
right contradiction” but “they help us establish the facts as in a police investigation or disapprove the facts” (Ibid. 72).

*Light in August* succeeds as a novel because of Faulkner's ability to allow all the voices he invokes to be heard and to interact with other voices. His mastery is illustrated in the way he maneuvers these voices so that they would complement or contradict each other and bring the various themes in the novel into play. Fiction is also one of its themes. It is true that it is a story about human suffering and human endurance, but it is also a story about the art of fiction itself or meta-fiction. This interest is reflected in the interaction between the furniture dealer, the story teller, and his wife, the audience. For example the wife says, “I reckon the reason you knew you never had to worry was that you had already found out just what she would do in a case like that.” The husband answers, “I didn’t aim for you to find that out. Yes, sir, I thought I had covered my tracks this time.” She adds, "well go on what happened?” (476) Faulkner, once more, succeeds in combining his concern for "the human heart in conflict with itself with his complete mastery of the art of fiction.

Finally the contrapuntal method of *Light in August* forces the text's multiple elements to work dialectically; during the reading process the individual parts - stories, characters, themes – constantly combine, break apart, and then recombine in new configurations. The reader is put in an active, structuring role: he or she is confronted with difference not coherence, multiplicity not unity, dialogue not monologue (to use Bakhtin's terms), and must pull together materials, locate connections, and perceive similarities and dissimilarities. The different "pieces," moreover, do not achieve a progressive synthesis, but move rather toward a kind of uneasy suspension or temporary accord. Viewed in this way, the text thus opens up, and indeed rhetorically emphasizes, ambiguities, instabilities, and tensions.
Endnotes

I Stephen M. Ross points out that “the South’s oral tradition exerted a profound effect on Faulkner’s story-telling, from his admiration for the literary heritage of Twain and South-west Humor, to his love of oratory, to his development of narrative techniques derived from an oral heritage’s shared habits of gossip, swapping yarns, and telling and retelling stories about fellow humans” (3).

II White women in the town are incorporated into the category of “they” by virtue of the fact that they comply with the ideology of “them,” though without being given a voice themselves. Black men and black women are never included in the group of “they,” and thus are never given voices, unless the voices are used to illuminate “them” from the background. The voices of black characters and white female characters, therefore, are not dialogical but monological, thereby conveyed to the reader as static objects.

II According to Werner Sollors, passing “is used most frequently... in the sense of ‘crossing over’ the color line in the United States from the black to the white side” (247).

IV Kapferer expresses the rumor’s making-process in a formula: Rumor = Importance x Ambiguity, explaining that “a geometrical or multiplicative relation is at work here: were the event of no importance whatsoever or totally devoid of ambiguity, there would be no rumor, the energy behind the group’s mobilization would be lacking” (8, 51). Because the news of Joanna’s murder is important and ambiguous, it spreads quickly: the crime occurs Saturday morning, just after midnight, and on Sunday night Byron tells Hightower what happened in the town, including Brown’s showing up on Sunday night. Byrne tells Hightower what happened in the town, including Brown’s showing up on Saturday night.

V Several critics associate Light in August with the author’s short story, “Dry September” in terms of the Southern definition of “lady” and “nigger.” For instance, Eric J. Sundquist discusses as follows: “by making Joanna a ‘nigger-lover’ before making her a ‘nigger’s lover,’ Faulkner deflected attention away from a more unsettling possibility he had already explored in the brilliant story ‘Dry September’... in which the ‘rape’ of a white Southern spinster by a black man is clearly suggested to be a product of her own diseased imagination. It may be that Faulkner found this possibility too dangerous to elaborate in Light in August and thus countered Joanna’s explicit desire for violation with her New England abolitionism” (84).

VI Bakhtin says: “The degree to which a character's represented discourse is objectified may vary. It is enough, for example to compare words of Tolstoy’s Prince Andrei with those of Gogol’s characters, for instance, Akaky Akakievich. As the direct, referential impulse of a character’s words is intensified and their objectification correspondingly decreased, the internal interrelationship between authorial speech and a character's speech begins to approach the interrelationship between two rejoinders in a dialogue. The perspectival relationship weakens, and they may come to occupy a single plane. To be sure, this is present only as a tendency, as a striving toward a limit which is never quite achieved” (Problems of Dostoyevsky’s Poetics 188).

VII The external narrator makes speculations concerning the other characters the same way Mr. Compson and Shreve do in Absalom, Absalom!

III Hightower was only a nuisance in the community, for his sermon did not really address “the church and the people” and he used “religion as though it were a dream” (61). Christmas, too, was merely somebody different from “them,” a foreigner. The town resorts to violence when its expectations are betrayed. Hightower did not leave the town after resigned the church because of his wife’s suicide; Christmas is determined to be a “nigger” after he committed a crime.

VIII In terms of memory-narrating, it is possible to think as follows. The community’s consensus on Christmas is that he is a “nigger.” If he were black, his voice would be reported to the reader as a monologue or a static thing according to the basis of the narrative in this novel. But the narrator knows that Christina’s race is ambiguous, that he might be a white. His racial ambiguity makes his position in
the town incalculable, and this invites the narrator’s indecisive attitude. The narrator, therefore, lets not Christmas but his memory narrate.

About Christmas’s tragedy, Faulkner said, “he didn’t know what he was, and so he was nothing. He deliberately evicted himself from the human race because he didn’t know which he was.... He didn’t know what he was.... [w]hich to me is the most tragic condition a man could find himself in—not to know what he is and to know that he will never know... [T]he people that destroyed him made rationalizations about what he was. They decided what he was. But Christmas himself didn’t know and he evicted himself from mankind” (Faulkner in the University 72). my italics. The author’s usage of what and which to mean the same thing also indicates that racial categorization is prior to any other category in the South.

Philip M. Weinstein argues, in Light in August black is “not the color of a man’s skin but instead a murderously projective state of the white male mind, that which blasts the community’s precarious chances for mutual acceptance and peace” (Marginalia 178).

Such examples are “world of nature with its total indifference to both moral and social categories” (Vickery 80), and “kind of impersonalized catalytic force, effecting change but itself unchanging” (Millgate 125). Weinstein discusses that how first six pages of the novel compose “a lyrical celebration of Lena Grove as a ‘wonderful’ creature” (Meditations 86). Bleikasten says Lena “is a very earthy earth goddess,” associating her name with “Helen and Diana” (1986 131). Judyth Bryant Wittenberg argues that “we realize that she is leaving the community in the same impersonal, enigmatic way in which she arrived” and points out that “we see an intriguing struggle on the part of the narrator and characters such as Byron and Hightower between an effort of ‘real’ Lena in realistic terms and a wish to regard her as an almost abstract force” (116).

For instance, Weinstein compares Lena with Christmas, arguing that in Light in August “the most solitary figure is Lena Grove” and “there is no one like her in the novel,” because Christmas “is like McEachern and Hines in their unbending misogyny. like Grimm in his impatience with natural processes, like Burch in his being on the run, like Hightower in his latent homosexuality.... Lena, by contrast, is like no one else” (Meditations 86-88). Vickery also compares these two characters, pointing out that “[t]he same almost anonymous figures who attach the label of Negro to Christmas in order to lynch him also forget the social stigma of Lena’s pregnancy in order to help her” because “while Joe comes bearing death for himself and others, Lena comes bearing life” (80). Millgate argues that Lena “provides a steady imperturbable ground note, an onward linear progression that offers a contrast to the desperate contortions—moral, emotional, and physical—of the other characters” (125).

Wayne C. Booth picks up this scene as an example of “how one character misinterprets another’s unspoken thoughts or motives” and argues that “[t]he fact of the misinterpretation is something only the omniscient narrator could know, since it is made up of the father’s private judgment and the daughter’s private motive; yet the scene would be pointless as a clue to Lena’s character unless the misjudgment were made clear to us” (172-73). This incipient episode forebodes that this novel is composed of a mixture of judgment and misjudgment, understanding and misunderstanding, and interpretation and misinterpretation.

See, for example, Light in August, 28,50-51.

Faulkner said he presented Lena with “pagan quality ... that’s—the desire for that child, she was never ashamed of that child whether it had any father of not,” and “she didn’t especially need any father for it ....It was enough to have had the child” (Faulkner in the University 199).

The furniture dealer is reminiscent of the comic heroes of the medieval carnivals that Bakhtin talks about in his Rabelais and in his The Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, where the clowns and comedians make fun of everything reverent and thus emphasize the positive and communal aspects of life.