

Murdering America :

Segregation and Racial Consciousness in *Light in August**

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The United States of America is a multi-racial country. To a certain extent, the history of the country has been that of a struggle for this consensus, that is, for liberation and recognition of minorities. This kind of struggle is frequently depicted as the one between dichotomic categories. *Light in August*, William Faulkner's seventh novel, has also been often read as such : a book "dominated by the imaginary of dualism : whiteness and blackness" (Kartiganer 38).

However, the dualism is only "imaginary" : dividing the novelistic world too simply as such, the dualism tries to make it obscure that we are really dealing with not only one concept but a complex amalgam of different concepts or issues. To overlook this is a crucial flaw in arguing about *Light in August*, for such arguments frequently result only in the reinforcement of the supremacy of either side.

Therefore, when we read the novel, we have to notice that this kind of division of the world has been repeatedly and arbitrarily used by the Establishment in order to defeat its opposites : by defining its antagonists as the single-conceptual and inferior being and itself as the superior one, it has enabled itself to be protected against its rebels. But by doing so, the Establishment may also remain blind to the true figure of its own.

Light in August clearly exemplifies these problems. In its novelistic world, the Southern white community eliminates beings alien to itself and

tries to keep its own order : thus in the community, racial or ethnic varieties are always reduced to the inferior group labelled Negro, and by doing so the community defines and stabilizes itself as the good.

At the same time, however, the novel implies the very possibility that the inferior group may bring to us a new and more realistic vision of the South or America, the possibility of pluralistic or multi-racial society to be or to revive. Through the reading of *Light in August*, we will argue these issues. In doing so, we will see what the meaning of being American is.

As the first step of our argument, we here deal with so-called racial problems in *Light in August*. Its novelistic world is dominated by the white Southerners whose Calvinistic doctrine inevitably polarizes all the people in their society into two groups : White Anglo-Saxon Protestants as the religious good, and others, especially Negroes, as evil. However, this separation actually makes the former category unduly privileged and consequently degrades the rest of the people by regarding them as the inferior group. This is quite crucial to people whose family pedigree and race are ambiguous, for, as long as they try to be accepted in the WASP community, there is no way of self-definition but adapting themselves to the inferior identity the society forces upon them. Therefore, this kind of self-definition functions as the segregation system in the novel, and the life history of Joe Christmas, who persistently struggles for self-definition, exemplifies how the system functions.

Joe's problem is that he has no genealogy and racial identity. His father may be either a Mexican or a part black, but there is no evidence ; his mother is a white girl named Milly Hines, a daughter of a fanatical Calvinist Eupheus (Doc) Hines. Immediately after his birth, Joe is left behind in front of an orphanage by Hines, where he spent his early life without knowing his parentage. A black worker at the home shows to us how the situation Joe was put in in his childhood was : " 'You [Joe] are

worse than that [being a Negro]. You dont know what you are. . . . You'll live and die and you wont never know'. . ." (384).

We should notice here that in the South Joe's familial ambiguity is inevitably associated with racial one, and that he cannot be allowed to become a member of the white community because of his father's racial uncertainty ; he also must be either a part black or a half-Mexican, and even if his father could be proved to be a Mexican, he cannot be better than a stranger, for his "parchmentcolored figure" (120) would let him be recognized not as a pure white but as a foreigner. In this sense, from the beginning of his life, Joe is doomed to be either a black or, at best, a foreign stranger.

Joe first becomes conscious of his identity problem at the age of five, and for him that is necessarily associated with a sense of sin. When he lived in the orphanage, he would sneak into a female dietitian's room to eat her toothpaste. One day while he was having it in her room, the dietitian and her lover came back there and began to make love, so Joe had to hide himself at a corner of the room. "By ordinary he would have taken a single mouthful and then replaced the tube [of toothpaste] and left the room" (121) so that she would not miss it, so this "was the first time he had taken more" (122). This made him sick, and he vomited in "the rife, pinkwomansmelling obscurity" (122). Tortured with the physical pain of vomiting and a sense of guilt, he showed himself before them. Since he understood that he deserved to be punished, he was waiting for it, believing

that he was the one who had been taken in sin and was being tortured with punishment deferred and that he was putting himself in her way in order to get it over with, get his whipping and strike the balance and write it off.
(123)

Unfortunately for Joe, the dietitian thought that he was spying on her and said to him in desperation : “‘Tell!’ . . . ‘Tell, then! You little nigger bastard! You nigger bastard!’” (125).

Through these incidents, Joe learns the mystery of fatal femininity and what the word “nigger” connotes, each of which is associated with the sense of sin in him. When Joe shows himself, he expects punishment as a result of his peeping and the relief of his sense of guilt, but it was not given. Hence he, as Robert Dale Parker says, has to suffer from “the sense of expectation. . . of punishment” (97) until he can finally take it, and until then these two experiences—vomiting in “the pinkwomansmelling obscurity” and being called “a nigger”—substitute for the true punishment. Thus Joe’s sense of guilt unwittingly but necessarily concerns these experiences : one connotes blackness of sin ; the other implies evil lechery, as the word “pinkwomansmelling” suggests. These two elements, blackness and lechery, define the sense of sin in his mind. And for Joe, the relief from the sense of sin must be accomplished not by getting rid of the substitutes but, paradoxically enough, by accepting utterly the self-definition as the very punishment he wants.

The important point to note here is that this process of substitution imprints on Joe an impression that he is not only a sinner to be punished but racially and thus socially an incomplete or ambiguous being. Before the events, Joe had his identity, though vaguely, as a “little white trash bastard” (384) : when the dietitian labelled him as a “nigger,” which terribly confused him, he began to doubt his identity. In order to banish the doubt, he ultimately cannot but submit to the label because he has no way to disprove it. Thus he tries to acquire a black personality so as to be socially recognized as such. Furthermore, Joe believes that the recognition must be given to him only through the delayed punishment he needs, for he symbolically equates his ambiguous identity with the postponed punishment. Thus

begins Joe's lifelong struggle for identity and atonement.

The goal of Joe's struggle is to let the society admit him as a lecherous "nigger" sinner who deserves punishment. But all the while the sense of the deferred punishment tortures him again and again so that he cannot help committing another crime to get rid of it. And it is only after he has committed the decisive one, the murder of a white spinster Joanna Burden with the razor, that he is truly authorized as the "nigger" sinner by the society.

When Joanna's corpse was found in her burnt house, all the townspeople in Jefferson, even before they were informed anything about the murderer, intuitively but firmly believed that

it was an anonymous negro crime committed not by a negro but by Negro and . . . knew, believed, and hoped that she had been ravished too : at least once before her throat was cut and at least once afterward. (288)

From this passage we can see that, as Eric J. Sundquist says, "the Negro as beast" has been "long a stock figure in the South" (82). But it is such racial prejudice that eventually makes it possible to give Joe the identity as an abnormal, cruel and malignant Negro to be punished by death.

At the same time, the prejudice indicates that for the Southerners anything harmful to them should be caused by Negro. Needless to say, this idea is associated with another one that they are different from and morally superior to Negroes. This firm conviction categorizes the Southern society into two groups : the dominant WASP community and that of the others. Each of them is, as we can see in the following passage quoted from the words of Joanna's father, religiously allegorized as the good and evil :

'You must struggle, rise. But in order to rise, you must raise the shadow

[of black people] with you. But you can never lift it to your level. I see that now, which I did not see until I came down here. But escape it you cannot. The curse of the black race is God's curse. But the curse of the white race is the black man who will be forever God's chosen own because He once cursed him.' (253)

For the Southerners, sin is put on them by "the black race" which is everlastingly cursed by God and the white people are the victims of the black curse. Thus, for them the black race is the reified sin. This Calvinistic determinism so prevails in the Southern community that almost all the people in the society cannot but see the world under the influence of this allegorical dualism, and hence the religious and ethical polarization is inevitably superimposed upon the racial segregation.

In such a dualistic world, those whose racial identities remain ambiguous are destined to be put onto the worse side of the dualism, just as Joe is. In order to examine this further, we should mention two paternal figures in *Light in August*, both of whom are also white Calvinist worshippers and completely controlled by the dualistic vision : Eupheus Hines, Joe's half mad grandfather, and his Puritan foster father, Simon McEachern.

Hines is a fanatical Calvinist who shoots Joe's father and lets his daughter die in agony because they had a premarital sexual relation. He firmly believes in "God's abomination of womanflesh" (373) and as the janitor of the orphanage keeps watching Joe while he lives there, only to see if the God's final punishment falls on Joe. Although this may seem quite irrational for us, he feels completely justified because he thinks that there is nothing worthier for him than being obedient to God's providence and accusing the little black symbol of sin.

The other Calvinist, McEachern, too earnest but less harsh than Hines, is also a firm believer of God. He also observes the Christian doctrine very

strictly and forces Joe to do so, although Joe gradually gets out of hand and at last beats him down and goes away from him and his instructions.

Both of them see the earthly world only as a metaphor of Christian doctrine and behave as if they were guardians of it : for Hines Joe is no more than the symbol of his daughter's transgression ; for McEachern Joe's folly is the omen of his fall ; and interestingly, for both of them lecherous women are Jezebels who tempt men (especially Joe) to commit sin. They stand for "the patriarchal and paternalistic values of the ruling class [which] permeated Southern society" (Bleikasten, 49), although their Calvinist view hardly seems to have "encouraged largeness of sympathy, tolerance for weakness of the flesh, a qualified relativism in matters of human behavior" (Aaron 331). They are the representative of the values of their community, and their obsession that the "guilt Christmas is made to expiate is. . . unconsciously projected and discharged upon him by the whole community" (Bleikasten 52). It is this kind of paternal authority that finally brands Joe as the rebellious Negro. But Joe, only by accepting the black identity as "a social imperative" (Bleikasten 51), is able to participate in the community. In this sense, for both Joe and the Southern community, the murder of Joanna and the lynching of Joe are a sacrificial initiation of the stranger.

While wandering around Yoknapatawopha county after the murder of Joanna, Joe feels the blackness gradually encroaching upon his body, through a pair of brogans he robbed of a Negro : "the black shoes smelling of negro : that mark on his ankles the gauge definite and ineradicable of the black tide creeping his legs, moving from his feet upward as death moves" (339). This passage implies that Joe is also becoming a Negro who should be

being hunted by white men at last into the black abyss which had been

waiting, trying, for thirty years to drown him and into which now and at last he had actually entered, bearing now upon his ankles the definite and ineradicable gauge of its upward moving. (331)

Driven by the blackness creeping into him and the fanatical white persecutors like Hines, Joe has finally given up his resistance to the society. However, there is left one more procedure necessary for the completion of Joe's self-sacrificial initiation into the Southern community : lynching him. Percy Grimm, a young fanatical patriot, undertakes the duty.

Grimm is a militaristic white-race supremacist who has been wishing to demonstrate his "sublime and implicit faith in physical courage and blind obedience" to the United States, believing "that the white race is superior to any and all other races and that the American white is superior to all other white races and that the American uniform is superior to all men" (451). Since his desire is to "let the people see that" he has "worn the uniform of the United States" and "that Uncle Sam is present in more than spirit" (453), Joe's crime is the best opportunity for him to show off his existence. So he gathers young fellows in the town and organizes a vigilant committee to capture and lynch Joe.

Lynching such a black brute practically seems justified in the Southern community, though illegal, as we can see in John B. Cullen's essay on a murder which took place in Lafayette County in the late August of 1908 and was very similar to that of *Light in August*. In that case, a black man named Nelse Patton cut a white woman's throat with the razor to death. The murderer, once imprisoned in jail, was shot there, taken out of the jail and hanged by a furiously excited mob, led by a US Senator W. V. Sullivan. His remarks on the lynching is as follows : "I led the mob which lynched Nelse Patton and I am proud of it" and "I did everything I could to see that he was lynched," or "Cut a white woman's throat ? and a negro ? Of course

I wanted him lynched" (Cullen 97). These remarks show that the murderer was so hated because of his race and was not regarded as even deserving a court trial : in short, he was only semi-human from the point of view of the whites. The same formulae were applied to Joe.

At the same time, Grimm's hostile attitude to the black race is a reaction formation against the crisis of the supremacy which threatens the Southern society. After he shoots Joe, Grimm castrates him with the butcher knife, saying "Now you'll let white women alone, even in hell" (464). His violence represents, on the one hand, the revenge of the community on the traitor ; on the other hand, the act of castration symbolically shows the whites' fear of the blackness permeating their community. In this sense, the community tries "to keep the negro blood from passing into the white race" (Greenbaum 147). Thus the castration of Joe is a metaphorical expression of the whites' drive to forbid the dissemination of black seeds among them and to keep their racial purity by executing Joe, the malignant Negro. Thus the whole process of the persecution is the "way of warding off further violence [against the community] than he is" (Sundquist 93).

For Joe, however, the execution is the deferred punishment he has wanted. By accepting it, he is liberated from his racial ambiguity which causes the sense of sin he has suffered, even though he gets it only at the cost of his own life. So, punished as a murderer, Joe looks "up at [the executors] with peaceful and unfathomable and unbearable eyes" (464-65). The end of Joe's lifelong struggle for identity lies upon the point on which converge the drive of the Southern white community to maintain its racial purity and supremacy and the stranger's desire to become defined as a man with a clear identity, though it is only forged.

We have hitherto examined the way of self-defence of the Southern white community. The white community divides the society into two racial groups, that is, whites as the superior and blacks as the inferior, and the

former forces this dualism upon the latter. By doing so, the former maintains its racial superiority over the latter. In this sense, in the Southern society identity or individuality is “imperative” and dependent ultimately upon circumstances. There people whose race is unknown is necessarily regarded as the inferior. This is the segregation system of the South which keeps its own social stability, and Joe Christmas, suicidally accepting the forced identity as a black, escapes the agony of being neither black nor white.

However, Joe is sometimes paradoxically unwilling both to accept and to refuse the black identity imposed on him. For example, Joe furiously refuses Joanna’s offer to send him to a law school for black people because he must admit that he is a black, while he has “fought the negro who called him white” (225). Further, curiously enough, it is always him that discloses his secret first, which lets people around him persecute him. In this sense, Joe has been Negro because “he has lived his life in accordance with his conviction that he is part Negro. . . . The empirical fact is meaningless” (Fowler 33-34): it is Joe’s self-consciousness of his doubtful mixed blood that eventually kills him. This seems to me the key to his hesitation, and in order to find the answer, we should further examine the background of the segregation system in the South: the next object for the examination is the paternal figures which constructs social standards in the novel.

As we have already seen, there can be easily found paternal figures whose visions of the world construct the father authority in the novel: the strict Calvinists Doc Hines and McEachern; the Yankee Puritans Joanna Burden and her forefathers; the forlorn ex-minister of Jefferson Gail Hightower. Hines plays the role of God’s agent who represents His wrath upon Joe; McEachern is a mentor of Calvinist doctrine in the secular world; Joanna gives us the deterministic vision of the cursed race she inherits from her father; and Hightower, haunted by the phantom of his

grandfather, holds a fatalistic view about women that, borrowing Jason's phrase in *The Sound and the Fury*, "once a bitch always a bitch" (180).

The framework they make polarizes the society into the dichotomy between the genuine white Southerners as the dominant, and the cursed blacks plus the white fallen women like Hines's daughter or Lena Grove, the young unmarried pregnant girl, as the dominated. In such a vision, Joe's struggle for identity is simply attributed to a conflict between black and white blood, as we can see in the following passage cited from the monologue of Gavin Stevens, the District Attorney in Jefferson :

It was. . . all those thirty years before that which had put that stain either on his white blood or his black blood, whichever you will, and which killed him. . . . And it was the white blood which sent him to the minister [Hightower], which rising in him for the last and final time, sent him against all reason and all reality, into the embrace of a chimaera, a blind faith in something read in a printed Book. Then I believe that the white blood deserted him for the moment. . . . It was the black blood which swept him by his own desire beyond the aid of any man, swept him up into that ecstasy out of a black jungle where life has already ceased before the heart stops and death is desire and fulfillment. And then the black desire failed him again, as it must have in crises all his life. He. . . defied the black blood for the last time, as he had been defying it for thirty years. He crouched behind that overturned table and let them shoot him to death, with that loaded and unfired pistol in his hand. (448-49)

Stevens's remark on Joe reflects a typical superstition among the Southern whites that a slight mixture of Negro blood fatally influences over human personality (Sundquist 83). However, what is more important now is that Joe is regarded as part black only after he has committed murder because the crime must be of Negro to the community. We should remem-

ber that there is nothing to convince the townspeople of Joe's guilt other than the testimony of Joe's fellow bootlegger named Joe Brown, who is really Lena's lover Lucas Burch. When Brown is arrested on the suspicion of murder, he tells that Joe once confessed he was part black, though he never specifies who killed Joanna.¹ But this is enough for the townspeople to believe Joe's guilt, for the murderer must be a Negro and now that Brown testifies that Joe has black blood : thus Joe, a Negro, shall be guilty.

Once they assume him to be a Negro, anything he does is retrospectively rationalized as that done by a "nigger" :

He [Joe] dont look any more like a nigger than I [townspeople] do. But it must have been the nigger blood in him. . . . If he had not set fire to the house, they might not have found out about the murder for a month. And they would not have suspected him then if it hadn't been for a fellow named Brown, that the nigger used to sell whiskey while he was pretending to be a white man and tried to lay the whiskey and the killing both on Brown and Brown told the truth. (349)

Joe must be a "nigger" because he made foolish mistakes. To define a person's identity like this is utter nonsense, but such a definition enables them to describe Joe as "white nigger" (344). This oxymoron shows the arbitrariness of the concept of "nigger" most clearly : that is a "socially defined term" (Davis 132) rather than a mere biological or racial one, and deciding the race of a person whose racial identity is ambiguous ultimately depends on his circumstantial conditions. In short, the black identity adapted to Joe is no more than "a myth created for him by others" (Vickery 69) for their own sake, and once so defined, he must be black, no matter how white he looks.

This proves that the Negro in *Light in August*—the figure which is

assumed to be rude, cruel, indolent, cunning but stupid, and lecherously loving white women and thus threatening to the community, the figure applied to Joe—is nothing other than a product of the Southern society. In this sense, the word “Negro” in *Light in August* is “served primarily a symbolic function and seldom appeared from behind [its] various masks” (Aaron 333) : in brief, there can be found no real blacks per se but a simulacrum of them made by the white race. This indicates that, as long as one lives in this ideological world, even black people have to be socially and culturally domesticated by the white Southerners’ ideology, that is, the white ethnocentrism underlying *Light in August*. What is, then, the *raison d’être* of the black category ? In order to answer this question, we should now carefully examine the relationship between its ideological background and that of Joe Christmas.

As I have already mentioned, Joe’s father is said to be either a Mexican or a part black, but there is no evidence of it except the mad Hines’s firm conviction, and Hines’s killing Joe’s father causes the loss of the key to the truth, which leads Joe to the final surrender to “the social imperative.” We should not overlook the significance of his absence, for that seems quite relevant to another absence in the novelistic world, that is, the absence of another father authority in the post-Civil-War South.

In *Light in August* there are rarely found postwar generations free from the antebellum ghosts : Joanna is obsessed by the black shadow which she inherits from her forefathers ; Hightower is possessed with his grandfather who was a cavalryman killed in the Civil War ; Hines’s deterministic view of the world is also the same as theirs. Although Grimm seems interested in World War I rather than in the Civil War, his white supremacist attitude and hatred for the black race are fundamentally the same as these three. Thus all of them cannot and will not escape the influence of the social and religious standards in the antebellum South : for them, the New South is no

more than the *ancien régime* of the Old South under postwar conditions (Aaron 286–87). Thus there is left a crucial gap between Southern whites' view of the ideal South and the real conditions of the postbellum South.

One of the most crucial changes the postwar South experienced is the actualization of the people of mixed breed. Before the War, such people were similar in their anonymity to another anonymous beings, “anonymous negro[es]” (288). After the War, however, the white Southerners are forced to see them not as mere slaves but as individual beings equal to themselves, so their existence becomes alien to the Southern community. Realized as such, the anonymous beings, people other than whites, come to be a latent threat to the society for the following reasons.

First, as we have already seen, their existence, especially that of mulattoes, reveals the contamination of white blood by miscegenation. This is threatening the Southern whites because the loss means that of their racial identity and thus social superiority, and that menace does inescapably permeate them, as the black tide devours Joe's body.

Secondly and more crucially, their anonymity itself brings about another threat to the social order of the Southern community. In the community, where the a priori monolithic standards of the white *ancien régime* had been dominant, the anonymity is necessarily linked with an ambiguity which eludes its old standards : that is the emergence of those who are variously different from the genuine whites in their raciality. These existence may encroach on the rigid order of the a priori world of the South, for that claims against the society to admit some mulattoes and non-pure whites also as whites, which is almost impossible for the society. In this sense, Joe is dangerous for the community precisely because he inherits such anonymity and ambiguity from his father, for the anonymity, which did not matter at all in the antebellum South, reveals indefinability eluding the social and cultural standards of the Southern white community.

Joe's father is of great importance concerning this issue : his racial ambiguity suggests his irreconcilability with the Southern social standards ; his anonymity—no one knows his name, identity or antecedents—indicates his indefinability and elusiveness as a socialized individual ; and, slain by Hines without leaving any clues to his identity, he occupies the position of the absent father to Joe. Being thus absent, the father engraves on his son his own ineradicable ambiguity and anonymity, as the lesson of the antebellum ghosts like Joanna's forefathers remains imprinted on her. In this sense, though paradoxically, he is the sole existence that could re-define Joe not as a so-called black but as quite a different other. And Joe, inheriting the elusiveness, might become another new standard for the postwar generations in the South, though he eventually accepts the forced Negro identity.

We can thus say that Hines's killing Joe's father is an attempt to prevent the father's characteristics from being actualized so as to preserve the social order. Ironically, the attempt is also ambivalent in that it consequently brings about another potential threat, Joe Christmas, who "is the Faulknerian symbol of what is beyond comprehension" by which the society is "threatened, . . . for the mode of his being and his characterization are. . . destructive" (Kartiganer 39). Further, he is all the more perilous to the society because he, though looking as if a foreigner, is almost indistinguishable from white people, that is, because he represents the latent black blood permeating secretly the white veins and society. Therefore the exterminating process must be repeated through the whole story of *Light in August*, this time by Percy Grimm.

As we have already argued, Grimm's fanatical nationalism deeply concerns the white supremacism of Southerners, which polarizes the society into the dominant whites and the dominated others. This kind of racism, associating with fascist and totalitarian thought, survives the Civil War and is hidden everywhere, as Faulkner himself clearly admits.² Its aim is to

exterminate others, especially those who can be harmful to the stability and genuineness of the community, and this desire drives the young fascist and his fellow persecutors to execute Joe. In this sense, they are the reified will of the Southern white community, rather than individuals : for example, during the persistent pursuit of Joe, Grimm's blind faith in the "white" America made him believe that he

could now see his life opening before him, uncomplex and inescapable as a barren corridor, completely freed now of ever again having to think or decide, the burden which he now assumed and carried as bright and weightless and material as his insignatory brass. . . (451)

At the same time, the persecution reflects the absence of another father authority in the postwar South, which causes the people there to depend on some substitute for the new authority, like, for Grimm, the military and nationalist one. These are the reasons why the white community depicted in *Light in August* cannot help being driven to exile the Joe figures again and again.

Now we seem to find the answer to our questions. Murdering Joe means to annihilate the possibility of the permeation of ambiguous beings in the Southern white community, and by so doing, the society tries to maintain the social standards of its *ancien régime*. For this purpose, they use the dichotomic division of their society into the dominant themselves and the dominated others, integrating the latter to the inferior category "Negro." Although the categorization is now out of date, the postwar generations have also been trying to control the dominated in their community by this way. By doing so, the dominant reduces the ambiguous and thus elusive or invisible beings threatening itself to a single and visible concept of "Negro," and by regarding them as perilous beings, it justifies eliminating them.

This justification is achieved through the process of persecuting and killing Joe in order to reinforce the social standards. Therefore, the murder of Joe is symbolically to forbid the dominated ones to transgress the social standards of the Southern white community. Thus the inferior category is formed and exists only to integrate all the others in the society into that and, by doing so, the community maintains its superiority and stabilizes itself repeatedly.

Needless to say, this shows the arbitrariness of the categorization. As we have seen, the “Negro” supposed by the community is the product of the reaction formation of its anxiety for the social stability and fear of its dislocation. Thus neither real Negroes nor any other races per se exist in the novelistic world : they are completely *whitened* by the community.

Therefore, what actually kills Joe is not the conflict between the two types of blood but the white ideology which despotically controls the world of *Light in August*, and here lies the significance of murdering Joe and his father. These killings are not mere murders but the denial and elimination of the actual racial complexity in the South. Therefore, as I have mentioned before, Joe’s unwillingness to be either black or white is all the more crucial : his hesitation is the sign of the refusal of involvement in the white society and in the black community which is defined by and confined within the white supremacism. If we here suppose Joe and his father as metaphors of the post-Civil-War America in that they represent the possibility of the plurality or multi-raciality of today’s America, then murdering them signifies a defiance of her present situation. But this is what the community depicted in the novel is aiming at : annihilating all the others, refusing to accept any changes coming up, and remaining in the empire of the antebellum illusion of their own : in short, murdering the new America. This conservative and reactionary desire is what the postwar Southern white community wishes. *Light in August* shows us this through the process

of persecution and murder of Joe, the true figure of re-forming America that angrily resists the Southern *ancien régime*.

Before I finish this essay, I would like to make a brief consideration about Lena Grove, a young woman who travels looking for her lover Lucas Burch, for her existence seems to give us another point of view to realize the South in *Light in August*.

Lena—an orphan girl who, like Joe, runs away from her brother blaming her for her premarital pregnancy—should also be persecuted for the misconduct by the townspeople in Jefferson, but she is actually not throughout the novel: on the contrary, she is almost always helped and protected by them. Her most devoted helper is Byron Bunch, an earnest bachelor in Jefferson who falls in love with her at first sight. He loves her so much that he cannot fully understand that he is “nothing in this world to her” and “she was not a virgin” (401), so he finally decides to leave Jefferson and follows her travelling as her guardian. In this sense, as Christopher A. Lalonde suggests, Lena is a dangerous temptress whose woman- and motherhood tricks an innocent naive man but nullifies his sexual potency by refusing his courtship (98-100). Hightower notices this and tries to persuade him not to break the Christian laws of the community and marry that wanton girl, but Byron disobeys his father authority.

John N. Duvall sees in them success in “the males’ subversion of the male-subjective/female-objective dichotomy” (130). “In accepting Lena,” Duvall says, “Byron is much more than a fool [who disobeys his father authority Hightower]; he is a traitor to the patriarchy” (35). He also considers premarital childbearing as the gravest threat to the name of the father because “sexually active unmarried women [like Lena] bear children with no father name” (123), which seems to correspond with the fatherless situation of the postwar South. His view suggests Lena’s transgressive and subversive potentiality against the male-white-Christian-dominant society

in *Light in August*.

Another important issue is that Lena can go through Jefferson in safety while another lawbreaker Joe is killed. There is not enough space to discuss the reason here, so I would like just to point out that her indifference to the world around her prevents her latent danger to be actualized and makes her secure, as is found in Kartiganer's comment that "she is herself barely conscious at all" (59). Unlike Joe, Lena cares about neither herself nor her conditions. When the people in Jefferson find her forlorn and think with pity and sympathy that "she is thinking of a scoundrel who deserted her in trouble and whom they believe that she will never see again," she actually "is not thinking about this at all" (26): she has no tragic thoughts in mind; what she has is only blind faith in her lover, and her optimistic innocence makes her seemingly harmless. Being irrelevant to her own existence, Lena survives through the Christian-patriarchal community. By doing so, her existence frames Joe's life history.

At the very beginning of the novel, we see her sitting beside the road in Jefferson, thinking "I have come from Alabama: a fur piece. All the way from Alabama a-walking. . . . *although I have not been quite a month on the road I am already in Mississippi, further from home than I have ever been before*" (3). And the very last scene of the novel also ends with her words " 'My, my. A body does get around. Here we aint been coming from Alabama but two months, and now it's already Tennessee' " (507). Even after her journey through Jefferson and childbearing, Lena still remains unchanged: she lives, as it were, in an almost timeless and changeless world of tranquility. Her quiescent world makes a contrast to Joe's violent life and surrounds it, and the contrast helps objectify his story: Lena's story reveals that Joe's is not utterly universal world of the South but only another vision of it. Showing the world outside Joe's story, she proves its limitedness. She takes us out of Joe's South with herself travelling through

it. By so doing, she tells that Joe's violent and tragic world is ultimately no more than an illusory aspect of the real South, and that we can escape from that world from which Joe cannot. If Joe is the metaphor of racial complexity struggling tragically with the society, Lena's quiet, innocent and enduring figure is that of one who survives through the struggle : transgressing the social standards of the Southern white community, she shows us the way to today's America.

* This essay is an expanded and revised version of the paper presented at the 46th General Meeting of the Chûbu branch of the English Literary Society of Japan on October 1, 1994.

Notes

- ¹ Parker, referring to Meats' suggestion that the true murderer is not Joe Christmas but Joe Brown, comments on the uncertainty of the suspect as follows :

Meats reminds us of the abundant circumstantial evidence indicating Joe Brown (Lucas Burch) as the killer. . . . [Brown] tells his interrogators that his partner, whom he accuses, is part black, which single characteristic alleged by a habitual liar persuades them that his partner, Joe Christmas, must be the murderer. Presumably, as Byron guesses, Christmas killed Joanna, and then Brown is covered the body and, fearful and confused, set the fire to destroy any evidence that might implicate himself. . . . Our confusion over the matter permits the moral drama in which *the town believes Brown innocent and Christmas guilty merely because of Brown's remarks about Christmas's being part black, merely because of transparently facile formula*. And the same confusion forcibly reminds us that the actual murder remains withheld. (89, my italics)

His comment clearly shows that Christmas is assumed as the criminal by the townspeople exactly because of nothing but his racialty, which is ambiguous,

too.

² Faulkner comments on Grimm as follows :

I wouldn't say [Grimm is merely] prevalent [in the modern South], he exists everywhere, . . . what he was was a Nazi Storm Trooper, but. . . I wouldn't say that there are more of him in the South, but I would say that there are probably more of him in the White Citizens Council than anywhere else in the South, but I think you find him everywhere, in all countries, in all people (Gwynn 41).

Although Grimm is a typical fascist, what is important is that the Grimm figures are found anywhere and usually seem to be natural or harmless beings in our world. *Light in August* shows that such "ordinary" people can represent the powers and influences of the Establishment on its members, which unwittingly legitimizes exercising such powers.

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Synopsis

Murdering America :

Segregation and Racial Consciousness in *Light in August*

By Arinori Mori

This essay aims to consider how and for what purpose the social classification in *Light in August* functions.

The Southern society found in the novel is dominated by the Christian-white-male-centered rules. In the society social classification depends especially on racial differences, and there anyone must be specified either as a dominant white or as a dominated black. For that kind of society, people who, like Joe Christmas, the protagonist of the novel, have an uncertain racial identity become problematic, for there they remain beyond definitions. In order to divide the society clearly into the dominant and the dominated, the white community forces such beings to accept some racial identity, and the compelling process is represented by Joe's lifelong quest for identity.

Joe's racial ambiguity has caused his desperate struggle with circumstances. He is racially defined only when he kills a white spinster named Joanna Burden, although that is retrospectively given to him by the Southern society just as a token of his cruel character which is the stock figure of the black people in the society. Because of the given identity, Joe is persecuted by the society and finally lynched as a black traitor to the Southern community.

However, the lynching is necessary to both Joe and the society for the following reasons : for Joe, it is a rite of recognition as a member of the society and thus that of self-definition, even though that is lethal one ; for the Southern whites, it symbolically means to defy their fear of miscegenation which may nullify their racial purity and supremacy.

On the other hand, defining Joe as a Negro has another significance in *Light in August*. The society consists of the postbellum generations, which are not able to have their own social standards and thus cannot help observe those of the

Southern *ancien régime*, although the older ones cannot cope with the postwar South any more, especially with people like Joe whose racial ambiguity is never definable. Murdering Joe thus means the extermination of such indefinable beings : first defining him as a Negro of the stock figure and making him visible or perceivable for the society, then the society executes him. By so doing, the society tries to deny the racial plurality Joe potentially contains in his mixed blood and keep itself unchanged. However, this is to defy the real situation of the postwar South and, in a broader sense, of the United States. Murdering Joe means, therefore, the utter refusal of accepting the true changing figure of America. Joe's life history shows this reaction formation of the Southern white community to the social change toward a pluralistic society.

At the same time, however, we can find another figure which is also potentially threatening the South but escapes its harsh extermination : Lena Grove. She also could threaten the social frame of the community with her lawbreaking actions as equally as Joe does, especially with her premarital childbearing, but since she is always not conscious of her own latent danger and thus does not actualize it, she can elude the strict censorship of the community. We can see in her a figure that survives and leads us to the present America.