

Joe Christmas :  
The Problem of Personal Identity  
In Faulkner's *Light in August*

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Among Faulkner's protagonists, Joe Christmas in *Light in August* is the most heavily burdened with the twentieth century problem of human beings: that is, alienation from community and oneself.<sup>1</sup> Christmas suffers from an identity crisis because of his ambiguous racial origin, and searches for integrity beyond Southern racial codes. Against his radical sense of selfhood, however, he is made "Negro" to represent its connotative meanings invented by white people. He revolts against the alienation from himself and becomes an infuriated rebel. It is only in his acceptance of the label of "Negro" that he acquires peace in his mind; and he dies as a sacrificial "Negro." As Charles H. Nilon says, "To the extent that the search for selfhood and the awareness of isolation are a part of each human experience, Joe is Everyman;"<sup>2</sup> outcast and murderer though he is, we recognize in him sufferings and struggles common in modern human experiences.

Christmas is an uprooted modern man living in isolation from other human beings. As soon as he appears in Jefferson, "the stranger in his soiled city clothes," is seen to have "something definitely rootless about him, as though no town nor city was his, no street, no walls, no square of earth his home."<sup>3</sup> This isolation is deeply related to his alienation from himself. At

the center of his estrangement from self is the uncertainty about his racial identity. Christmas grows to believe that one of his parents was part black. However, there is little evidence about his having black blood; he looks white as any other white does, and the truth is never known. When the child Christmas says, "I aint a nigger," the black man at the orphanage answers, "You are worse than that. You dont know what you are. And more than that, you wont never know. You'll live and you'll die and you wont never know" (336). Faulkner thus says at the University of Virginia:

". . . That was his tragedy, that to me was the tragic, central idea of the story—that he didn't know what he was, and there was no way possible in life for him to find out. Which 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."<sup>4</sup>

The question must be debated solely within himself; he must be responsible for what he is, whether black or white. The burden is overwhelming, and he is alienated from himself.

When he reflects that "[a]ll I wanted was peace" (97), Christmas is asking for the peace of mind in "the integrity of being," which may be recognized in Lena Grove.<sup>5</sup> Paraphrasing Sartre's formula, Lee Jenkins describes it as the condition "when existence precedes essence, when *being* itself is the highest value in life, and is inviolable . . . without reference to artificial classification."<sup>6</sup>

In the South as exemplified in Jefferson, however, people are classified by class, family, and most of all, race. The Southern society demands one to be a social being before individual.<sup>7</sup> It does not allow one to be simply oneself without reference to the social codes, especially the racial ones.

Christmas himself, as he was born and brought up in the South, knows well that there is no room for him in the rigid society. Since he does not know whether he is black or white, he can belong to neither; he repudiates involvement in the community and remains an outsider. However, Christmas cannot bear estrangement from himself. He explores the possibility of establishing the solid identity in the society without reference to the racial group; his search for selfhood is life-long.

Racial identity in the South must be considered in its socio-historical context. Race in the literal sense of the word refers to one's biological origin; and the difference between the black and white is based on the distinctions in physical features. However, the cultural and psychological value, through the course of Southern history, are added to the biological differences between the races. Whites created an abstraction, the "Negro," or "nigger," to carry the myth of the black race they invented for convenience.

The most naive and simple view, with a connotation for the "Negro," contrasts black and white as evil and good.<sup>8</sup> Lee Jenkins in his psychoanalytic study identifies the black with the negative double of the white's ego, "a metaphor for the unconscious mind and repressed impulses and thoughts" in the white.<sup>9</sup> Thadious Davis, in her illuminating book on the question, analyzes the more complex aspects of its meanings: conceptual structures, historical contexts, and social change related to the "Negro."<sup>10</sup> While various meanings are accumulated in the word "Negro," whites falsely formulated the tyrannical social codes upon their invented abstraction, and kept them up under the cover of tradition.

Through the life of Christmas, Faulkner illustrates connotative meanings of the "Negro"—what it means to be "Negro" and what "Negro" means

to the society.<sup>11</sup> Upon Christmas's uncertainty, people project their own ideas of what the word "Negro" connotes; Christmas is used by others to embody their abstraction. Therefore, his supposed "Negroness" arises not so much from his physical traits as from the social attitudes of himself and of those around him. The constraining stress from the connotations of "Negro" thwarts his search for integrity of being and evokes uncontrollable agitation in his personal identity. The pressure is high and the struggle exhausting; talking about his obscure belief in being a part "nigger," he says sardonically, "If I'm not, damned if I haven't wasted a lot of time" (223).

Christmas's identity crisis concerning "Negroness" needs to be clarified by examining the particular abstractions cast upon him by the surrounding white characters—Doc Hines, the dietitian, Bobbie, Joanna Burden, and Percy Grimm—who form and direct his course of actions.

Christmas was born an orphan into the preconception of the mad grandfather, who regards the child as reminder of profanity against his God. Doc Hines is a fanatic racist-misogynist, believing himself to be God's instrument, designed to revenge His abomination of female flesh and His curse on the "Negro." Learning of his daughter's seduction by a circus man, he is convinced that the seducer is part "Negro," although there is no proof but another's casual remark. The illegitimate lechery is in accordance with his idea of "Negroness." He thus defines the child, the result of the debauchery, as "Negro," and deserts him at the door of an orphanage.

Doc Hines yet keeps his eye on the child at the orphanage with such intent caution and hatred that Christmas grows clearly aware of his existence; "[i]f the child had been older he would perhaps have thought *He hates me and fears me. . . . That is why I am different from the others: because he is*

*watching me all the time* He accepted it" (120–21). Christmas is made to feel different from other orphans; and he already accepts it as his nature.<sup>12</sup> The self-knowledge he comes to in his earliest days is that he is different, hated, and feared. The recognition duly corresponds to Doc Hines's attitude toward the abstract "Negro," and it becomes the germ of Christmas's own belief in his "Negroness."

Then, other children begin to call him "nigger"; Christmas, conscious of his difference from others, accepts their idea, which is crude but fundamental, that the "nigger" is different from the white. When he stops playing with others, Christmas is unconsciously submitting to the social pattern set between the white and the "Negro"; consequently, he concedes his "Negroness" in relation to the society.

"Memory believes before knowing remembers" (104); he "[k]nows remembers believes" the most traumatic experience from his childhood at the age of five. It had determined his problematic relation with other human beings, especially with women, and impressed the label of "nigger" on his heart.<sup>13</sup> The dietitian at the orphanage had condemned Christmas, "You little nigger bastard!" (107), as he happened to be hiding behind the curtain while she had a secret affair with a young doctor. Her reason for calling him "nigger" is again abstract, except that she has heard him called so by other children, and seen Doc Hines's strange gaze on him. She is outraged in fear that he will tell on her. Thus, she wants to cover her own guilt of lechery by laying any disadvantage on him to outweigh hers, however irrational it may be.

In order to bring up some crucial reproach on the child, she remarks his "Negroness" as well as bastardy. These marks of inferiority and guilt will deprive him of any advantage and exempt her from retribution. Moreover,

finding the potential blackmailer unbribable, she attributes it to an unreasoning obstinacy of the "Negro." His "Negroess" will be convenient for her self-justification and eventually expel him from her sight. Along with the reinforcement by Doc Hines, the dietitian makes Christmas into a "Negro," on whom the white may lay one's guilt and expect the other's mute servility.

The end of his formative years is marked by an emotional catastrophe, which again ends up in accusation of his "Negroess" by a white woman. By the time he is adopted by the McEacherns as a white child, Christmas becomes vaguely aware of the gravity of his ambiguous "Negroess." Sincerely in love with her, he tells Bobbie, a part-time prostitute waitress, about his secret doubt. As long as their affair goes favorably, she does not believe or care about it. However, when he gets her in trouble, she rebukes, "He told me himself he was a nigger! The son of a bitch!" (190). To Bobbie, Christmas becomes the "Negro," because he makes her suffer humiliation of being called "harlot" in public, and implicates her in felonious violence. Now that she considers him to be a "Negro," Christmas must bear her betrayal and curse.

With the bitter knowledge of how the "Negro" is to be treated by the white, Christmas enters "the street," which runs like a circle for fifteen years, and he comes to Jefferson to live in a negro cabin at Joanna Burden's. Joanna plays a crucial role to drive him into his final ruin: she coerces her dogmas about the "Negro" upon him, and he strikes back to protect his selfhood.

She tells him "how a particular concept of the Negro . . . came to dominate her life and her family's."<sup>14</sup> The Burdens came to Jefferson to champion the cause of the "Negro"; they were Yankees hated by whites in the

town because of their association with the "Negro."

However, their fundamental concept of the "Negro" is not different from that of the fanatic racist Doc Hines. Her grandfather Calvin says, "Damn, lowbuilt black folks: low built because of the weight of the wrath of God, black because of the sin of human bondage staining their blood and flesh" (216-17). Her father Nathaniel tells the young daughter that she must remember God's curse of the black race and that she cannot escape from the curse, the overwhelming shadow:

"... 'You must struggle, rise. But in order to rise, you must raise the shadow 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.'" (222)

Joanna thus no longer knows blacks "as people, but as a thing, a shadow," which is both curse and her only hope for salvation.

The affair of Christmas and Joanna goes through three phases. After her manly surrender in the first phase, the old maid gives herself in maniacal sexuality. As if to compensate for her days of dogmatic repression, Joanna actively absorbs corruption to the point of saturation. Then, it enhances her desired sense of guilt, to have the "Negro" as her illicit lover. "[I]n the wild throes of nymphomania," she shouts at Christmas, "Negro! Negro! Negro!" (227); she is not having intercourse with just any man but with her abstract "Negro" which satisfies her image of debauchery.

When the third phase comes, Joanna goes back to her old belief in her mission and salvation to raise the black shadow; she starts to pray over Christmas for the salvation of them both. Now she must have him act out her

dogma, because "he is the Negro, the symbol of her responsibility, her sin and damnation, and most important, her salvation."<sup>15</sup> In order to serve her God, she wants him to play the role of an enlightened "Negro," and take over her business affairs to promote the amelioration of the "Negro." Joanna makes his choice between the racial labels imperative, for the sake of her beliefs, while he has avoided choosing, trying hard just to be himself. The conflict between them thus brings about the catastrophic end. Thinking, "Maybe it would be better if we both were dead" (243), Joanna tries to kill him and herself; and Christmas is driven to kill her.

In spite of this uncertainty about his racial origin, Christmas has the radical sense of selfhood within him. When his foster father talks about changing his name to be McEachern, the child does not care, because it is self-evident for him that he is nothing but himself—Joe Christmas:

"He will eat my bread and he will observe my religion," the stranger said. "Why should he not bear my name?"

The child was not listening. He was not bothered. He did not especially care, any more than if the man had said the day was hot when it was not hot. He didn't even bother to say to himself *My name aint McEachern. My name is Christmas.* There was no need to bother about that yet. There was plenty of time. (127)

He intuitively knows that no label which others impose upon him can express or change what he is; the self is intrinsic and immutable. These last lines foreshadow his later rejection of "Negro" label; the time does come when he has to fight for his selfhood.

The radical sense of personal selfhood in Christmas, however, lacks substantial support to prove itself. He has no bonds to family, friends, or community, and no allegiance to either racial group, which the Southern



society regards as a prerequisite to define a human being. The absence of racial definition thwarts the security of selfhood. Therefore, the self which knows no racial identity becomes a burden to Christmas.

The selfhood has ambivalent value to Christmas. He wants to preserve it, but at the same time, to escape from it because of its ambiguity. Once he can align himself to either race group, there will be no more agony. Yet, whiteness and "Negroness"—not biological black blood—are both integrated elements in Christmas. Physically he can easily reside in the white world, and has lived only in it until he enters "the street"; not only his apparent features but also his way of thinking is mostly white. Nevertheless, as "[m]emory believes before knowing remembers," he has accepted it deep in his heart that he is different from others, hated, and feared in the white world; he is made psychological "Negro" by those whites who take advantage of his racial uncertainty. He can never thoroughly conform to the white world, nor feel at ease in it.

Thus, when he presents himself as a "Negro" (which leaves out the case with Bobbie and Joanna to whom he confessed his doubt of it), Christmas expects to provoke the pattern reaction in whites; that is, revulsion, aversion, or fear. He thinks of telling Mrs. McEachern to hurt her feelings, or tells white prostitutes to evade payment when he has no money. When one of them breaks the pattern by failing to show any disgust, he falls sick, as though he cannot accept such violation of the principle, which has ruled and directed his life.

Oscillation in his racial identity turns the wheel of his journey on "the street." He tries to abandon his whiteness and choose his "Negroness" to secure his identity. However, he cannot extinguish his integrated whiteness in the radical self, which is never escapable. In the north he attempts

to assimilate to the "Negroes," by living, eating, and sleeping with them. He even lives "as man and wife with a woman who resembled an ebony carving" (197). Yet, as he tries to absorb the genuine "Negroness" from her, he paradoxically grows more aware of the whiteness in himself:

At night he would lie in bed beside her, sleepless, beginning to breathe deep and hard. He would do it deliberately, feeling, even watching, his white chest arch deeper and deeper within his ribcage, trying to breathe into himself the dark odor, the dark and inscrutable thinking and being of Negroes, with each suspiration trying to expel from himself the white blood and the white thinking and being. And all the while his nostrils at the odor which he was trying to make his own would whiten and tauten, his whole being writhe and strain with physical outrage and spiritual denial. (197)

The whiteness in his body and psyche resists the conversion to "Negroness." The radical selfhood does not allow him to negate any part of it.

Christmas's confrontation with Joanna's demand to claim himself as a "Negro," thus, brings up perturbation within him. He resists her imposition, because it will make him into her imaginary, abstract "Negro"; and thereby he will lose his personal selfhood. On the other hand, there is his longing for peace and security, which tempts him to assume the role and even to raise a family with Joanna:

... "Why not?" she said. And then something in him flashed *Why not? It would mean ease, security, for the rest of your life. You would never have to move again. And you might as well be married to her as this* thinking, "No. If I give in now, I will deny all the thirty years that I have lived to make me what I chose to be." (232)

The idea is attractive; but he chose to be a nonconformist to racial codes designated by the society. He cannot undo his life.

A similar and one last wavering in his mind brings him into Freedman Town, the black section of Jefferson. His wandering there implies another awkward inclination to identify himself with "Negroes":

Without his being aware the street had begun to slope and before he knew it he was in Freedman Town, surrounded by the summer smell and the summer voices of invisible Negroes. They seemed to enclose him like bodiless voices murmuring, talking, laughing, in a language not his. As from the bottom of a thick black pit he saw himself enclosed by cabinshapes, vague, kerosenelike, so that the street lamps themselves seemed to be farther spaced, as if the black life, the black breathing had compounded the substance of breath so that not only voices but moving bodies and light itself must become fluid and accrete slowly from particle to particle, of and with the now ponderable night inseparable and one.

. . . On all sides, even within him, the bodiless fecundmellow voices of Negro women murmured. It was as though he and all other manshaped life about him had been returned to the lightless hot wet primogenitive Female. He began to run, glaring, his teeth glaring, his inbreath cold on his dry teeth and lips, toward the next street lamp. Beneath it a narrow and rutted lane turned and mounted to the parallel street, out of the black hollow. He turned into it running and plunged up the sharp ascent, his heart hammering, and into the higher street. He stopped here, panting, glaring, his heart thudding as if it could not or would not yet believe that the air now was the cold hard air of white people. (99-100)

The "Negro" world appears abysmal and threatening to him in combination with his aversion to femalehood. Despite his timid inclination, Christ-

mas becomes frightened and impatient, unable to submit himself to the enclosing "Negroness."

Passing by the white houses to glimpse the peaceful and comfortable living of the white people, he thinks, "'That's all I wanted,' . . . 'That dont seem like a whole lot to ask'" (100). The passage is articulated in the past tense, in the tone of resignation. He has asked for integrity of being and security of selfhood, but the white society would not allow them to him.

In resistance to her imposition of the racial categorization and her way of living, Christmas murders Joanna. Ironically, however, it will provide the community with the reason to label him "Negro." As Davis explains, "[i]n death she becomes a modern link in the region's collective fantasy of the white woman and 'the Negro'—precisely the roles she invents for herself and Joe."<sup>16</sup> As soon as the fire and murder at Burden's is reported, some whites willingly "believed aloud 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" (251).

Disclosure by Joe Brown, his accomplice in the bootlegging business, that Christmas is the nigger seducer and murderer now gives the white community just what they need—that is, someone to enact their abominable invention concerning the white-"Negro" relation. Further, Brown's repeated cry, "Accuse the white man and let the nigger go free" reinforces the community's *idee fixe* on the "Negro" in contrast to the white. Olga Vickery's point is appropriate that "[o]nce he pronounces the word 'Negro,' the actual guilt of Joe Christmas, the circumstances, and motivation, all become irrelevant, for the connection between 'Negro' and 'murder' is part of the public myth."<sup>17</sup> Christmas loses his personality to the white com-

munity in the name of the "Negro."

Percy Grimm, another fanatic racist, will put an end to Christmas's hard-ridden life. He dedicates himself to absolute supremacy of the white race, and to fascistic faith in the white community and America. In order to prove his valor and service to the white community, Grimm assaults the "Negro," the white men's sexual opponent and threat to white women's chastity. He not only shoots Christmas but castrates the dying man to satisfy his imaginary heroism to stamp out the "Negro": "Now you'll let white women alone, even in hell" (407).

Even after his death, or rather because he is already dead, Jefferson's townpeople hold various theories about the "Negro" Christmas. Faulkner presents Gavin Stevens "the District Attorney, a Harvard graduate, a Phi Beta Kappa," who could be taken as a most conscientious intellectual. The effect is subtle; Stevens manifests his thoroughly race-biased, unreal view of the "Negro." He theorizes about Christmas's last hours as a specimen of mixed blood conflict in a mulatto:

"... the black blood drove him first to the Negro cabin. And then the white blood drove him out of there, as it was the black blood which snatched up the pistol and the white blood which would not let him fire it. And it was white blood which sent him to the minister, which rising in him for the last and final time, sent him against all reason and all reality, into the embrace of a chimera, a blind faith in something read in a printed Book. Then I believe that the white blood deserted him for the moment. Just a second, a flicker, allowing the black to rise in its final moment and make him turn upon that on which he had postulated his hope of salvation. 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 blood failed him again, as it must have in crises all his life. He did not kill the minister. He merely struck him with the pistol and ran on and crouched behind that table and 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." (393-94)

He is giving expression to the myth of the black. The racial distinction is very clear: "Cowardice and criminal tendencies are the by-products of black blood. White blood accounts for the rational and human side. Black blood is equivalent to primitive lust, instinct, and irrationality; white blood is the civilizing and moral influence."<sup>18</sup> The view exemplifies the connotations of the "Negro," his imaginary creation.

Bearing whatever fantastical projections white people make, Christmas dies as the "Negro." The words are passed around, as articulated by a country furniture repairer and dealer, that "they lynched that nigger" at Jefferson (435). Since he committed Joanna's murder, he has become a publicly recognized "Negro." Thus, Faulkner illustrates that in his last flight Christmas himself has accepted to be a "Negro," to assume the allotted role. Though he did not acquiesce to it at Joanna's request, Christmas now accepts the role on a symbolic level to be a sacrificial figure for the community. The assumption of the role means the abandonment of the radical self, to which he has clung, even in taking Joanna's life. As he gives up his selfhood, Christmas moves to final destruction.

Christmas's acceptance of the "Negro" role is symbolized in his wearing black brogans, which he gets from a black woman. Looking at them,

recognizes himself as a hunted "Negro":

He paused there only long enough to lace up the brogans: the black shoes, the black shoes smelling of Negro. They looked like they had been chopped out of iron ore with a dull axe. Looking down at the harsh, crude, clumsy shapelessness of them, he said "Hah" through his teeth. It seemed to him that he could see himself 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. (289)

He already feels the ominous effect of the role, which does not seem utterly strange to him; he seems to have long anticipated its coming in spite of his persistent resistance. Moreover, he now regards himself as a brother to "Negroes." Thinking of the last supper he had, he recollects that it was a cabin of the "Negroes" and that "they were afraid. Of their brother afraid" (293).

The role he has accepted is symbolical or rather functional. He is to serve as a sacrifice, for not the ultimate truth of human nature but the communal truth. The community is looking for the "Negro" who assaulted the white woman, though it never admitted Joanna as its member but rather jeered her as a "Nigger lover" (255). Going through "an emotional barbecue, a Roman holiday almost," it is asking for "someone to crucify," no matter what the actual circumstances may be (252).

Submission to the communal truth, in a way, relieves Christmas of the personal struggle to decide what he is: he thinks, "*Yes I would say Here I am I am tired I am tired of running of having to carry my life like it was a bas-*

*ket of eggs*" (294). His life has been difficult and hard to preserve; exhaustion comes over his worn-out self. In nature, he now perceives the searched-for peace in the air; however, his thoughts are again already in the past tense, implying the unattainability of the peace and the irrevocability of his life: "He breathes deep and slow, feeling with each breath himself diffuse in the neutral grayness, becoming one with loneliness and quiet that has never known fury or despair. 'That was all I wanted,' he thinks" (289). He seems to know there is no life left for him, which he can spend in peace.

When he gives up his radical self, Christmas has to go out of his life; he gradually loses track of time and space. Moreover, he no longer feels hunger or even necessity to eat; he does not feel the urge for the food, which should preserve his vital being. The vigor of life is gone, while "peace and unhaste and quiet" come in (295). The quiescence, however, is equivalent to the stillness of death. He has not found the solution to his problematic life, but escape from its responsibility.<sup>19</sup> Coming out of the flight across his native earth, he is calmly aware that he is headed for self-destruction in his role-playing as the sacrificial "Negro":

... he is entering it again, the street which ran for thirty years. It had been a paved street, where going should be fast. It had made a circle and he is still inside of it. Though during the last seven days he has had no paved street, yet he has travelled farther than in all the thirty years before. And yet he is still inside the circle. "And yet I have been farther in these seven days than in all the thirty years," he thinks. "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," he thinks quietly, sitting on the seat, with planted on the dashboard before him the shoes, the black shoes



smelling of Negro: that mark on his ankles the gauge definite and ineradicable of the black tide creeping up his legs, moving from his feet upward as death moves. (297)

The townfolks report Christmas's capture on a Mottstown street and that "[h]e never acted like either a nigger or a white man" (306). While he has assumed the role of the "Negro," it may be said that he has given up the race-conscious self altogether, to be an immolation for the community. The social behavioral pattern designated by the racial codes have become irrelevant to him.

Christmas is put in Jefferson prison to receive a fair trial for the murder. However, the ritual of immolation demands a different procedure. He breaks away with a pistol and runs to Gail Hightower's house; he strikes the ex-minister down and hides in the kitchen. There is a work of some power beyond human beings, which directs the enactment of the immolation: "the Player" moves Grimm as pawn to execute it. Grimm becomes "a young priest" to carry out the ritual; without any hesitation, he shoots and castrates the scapegoat.

Christmas does not surrender nor resist: "[i]t was as though he had set out and made his plans to passively commit suicide" (388). He finally meets release from all the troubles and agonies of life. The dying Christmas is represented in an exalting tone:

For a long moment he looked up at them with peaceful and unfathomable and unbearable eyes. 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 mirror-ing faces of whatever children they will contemplate old disasters and newer hopes. It will be there, musing, quiet, steadfast, not fading and not particularly threatful, but of itself alone serene, of itself alone triumphant. Again from the town, deadened a little by the walls, the scream of the siren mounted toward its unbeliev-able crescendo, passing out of the realm of hearing. (407)

The image of his upward movement into eternity leaves canonizing echoes. Amidst the catastrophe, people perceive the new hope which generates itself as well as the terror of the destruction.

Faulkner represents Christmas as a social martyr. The principle for which Christmas's life is sacrificed is articulated in the passage where Joanna tells Christmas the reason why Nathaniel did not take revenge upon Sartoris, who killed her grandfather and brother over a question of "Negro" voting:

. . . "It was all over then. The killing in uniform and with flags, and the killing without uniforms and flags. And none of it doing or did any good. None of it. . . . And he was French, half of him. Enough French to respect anybody's love for the land where he and his people were born and to understand that a man would have to act as the land where he was born had trained him to act."  
(223)

His life is yielded in martyrdom to stop killing; as Collins says, "In a soci-ety where inhumanity is doctrine, he finds it is better to be a victim than a master."<sup>20</sup>

In martyrdom, Christmas is recognized as an individual being by the

people present at his death; moreover, he will be remembered in glory and triumph. He could not find an answer to the problem of his personal identity in life; but in the act of sacrifice, he paradoxically wins identity as an individual human being beyond racial category to be recognized by others.

*Light in August* gives little hope to readers who seek the solution to the question of personal identity in the twentieth century human condition. Though Faulkner presents Christmas's final ascension with exuberant expression, Christmas is unable to establish the integrity of being in his life. He cannot "endure"—which is the test of human beings Faulkner pronounces in his Nobel Prize speech.<sup>21</sup> We are obliged to admit that the general community is unaffected by Christmas's death. In order to look for Faulkner's faith in humanity, we must turn to Gail Hightower and Lena Grove. Hightower, another of the book's alienated men, is restored to life and faith in God through his involvement with Byron Bunch, Lena Grove, and indirectly with Christmas; and he recognizes the common identity of human beings in his vision of the turning wheel, where he sees the faces of Christmas and Grimm as one. Lena, with whom the book begins and ends, delivers a new life on the day of Christmas's death, and continues to travel further, to endure; however, she is never conscious of the complexity of the modern human condition. *Light in August* is a rich book not for its ability to provide an answer to but for its exploration into the problem of our century. Christmas's struggle is for his personal identity as an individual human being, to be free of destructive and inhuman restrictions imposed by the society.

## Notes

1. Cleanth Brooks regards Christmas as one of the representative twentieth century protagonists: "Joe Christmas is Faulkner's version of the completely alienated man, and the problem of alienation is one of the dominant themes of our century. . . . *Light in August*, then, is not merely a study of racial prejudice in the Southern states. In the story of Joe Christmas, that local and provincial theme has been elevated to, and fused with, one of the great international themes of our epoch." (Cleanth Brooks, *William Faulkner: First Encounters* [New Haven and London: Yale University Press, c1983], p. 175.) Also see David L. Minter (ed.), *Twentieth Century Interpretations of "Light in August"* [Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, c1969], p. 7; Alfred Kazin, "The Stillness of *Light in August*," in Frederick J. Hoffman and Olga Vickery (eds.), *William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism* (n. p.: Michigan State University Press, 1960), p. 248.
2. Charles H. Nilon, *Faulkner and the Negro* (New York: Citadel, c1965), p. 76.
3. William Faulkner, *Light in August* (1932; rpt. New York: Random House, 1950), p. 28, 27. Hereafter all page references to the book will be given in parentheses within the text.
4. Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blother (eds.), *Faulkner in the University* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1959), p. 72.  
It must be made clear that Christmas's problem is that of personal identity as an individual human being and not the conflict of mixed blood in a "tragic Mulatto." See Thadious M. Davis, *Faulkner's "Negro"* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), p. 169, 179; Lee Jenkins, *Faulkner and Black-White Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), p. 67. On the other hand, Robert D. Jacobs falsely accepts Gavin Stevens's theory about the conflict of the mixed blood in Christmas. (Robert D. Jacobs, "Faulkner's Tragedy of Isolation," in Louis D. Rubin Jr. and Robert D. Jacobs [eds.], *Southern Renaissance* [Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1953], p. 181.) Likewise, Irene C. Edmonds believes that Christmas is brooding over the "taint" of his Negro blood. (Irene C. Edmonds, "Faulkner and the Black Shadow," in Rubin, p. 195.)
5. See Jenkins, p. 95; Kazin, in Hoffman, p. 252.
6. Jenkins, p. 46.

7. See Jenkins, p. 62.
8. Olga Vickery, "The Shadow and the Mirror: *Light in August*" in Minter, p. 33.
9. Jenkins, pp. 54-55.
10. See Davis, p. 26.
11. See Davis, p. 61.
12. See Jenkins, pp. 74-75.
13. R. G. Collins analyzes how Christmas objects to womanhood as well as to the "Negro" because it is associated with Sex and thus Life which Christmas hates. (R. G. Collins, "*Light in August: Faulkner's Stained Glass Triptych*," *Mosaic*, VII, No. 1 [Fall 1973], 106.) Also see Jenkins, pp. 53-54; Nilon, pp. 81-82.
14. Nilon, p. 83
15. Vickery in Minter, p. 35.
16. Davis, p. 148.
17. Vickery, in Minter, p. 31.
18. Davis, p. 168.
19. Collins says that "the peace of death is not *answer* but *release*." (Collins, p. 130.)
20. Collins, p. 130.
21. Saxe Commins (ed.), *The Faulkner Reader* (New York: Random House, 1954), p. 4.