

THE VICARIOUS SUFFERINGS OF JOE CHRISTMAS IN FAULKNER'S *LIGHT IN AUGUST*

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The real is distinguishable from the ideal in that the latter contains nothing but what the mind has put there, and all its contents present themselves to the mind at once, whereas the former reveals to the observer an infinite number of aspects successively according as he alters his point of view. If a work of fiction leaves an impression upon the reader as if its imaginary world had been a real one, doesn't the impression derive itself from the peculiar ambiguity of the message the work delivers or its susceptibility of various interpretations? Faulkner's *Light in August* is one of those novels which allow the reader to be oblivious of their authors' presence behind them, and Joe Christmas is among those characters in fiction who appear to be "flesh-and-blood people that will stand up and cast a shadow."⁽¹⁾ This may allow his life to be seen in its various aspects, just as happenings in real life can be. In fact, there has been a number of different interpretations given to his tragic life, each of which is more or less convincing in its way, but I think it worth attempting to interpret it from another point of view.

"No man is himself, he's the sum of his past, and in a way, . . . of his future too,"⁽²⁾ said Faulkner, trying an explanation for the fact that "A Rose for Emily," one of his most famous stories, represents the struggle between the South and the North, which could have been a part of its author's background and experience without his knowing it, though he had written it with a single view to creating flesh-and-blood people, without intending to put any symbolism in it. We will first try to develop what seems to us the main points of this remark, to form a general conception of man to guide us in our consideration.

In the first place, if a man is a link in the chain of causation, he is totally determined by his past, and what he is in the present can be decided without any reference to his future. On the contrary, if he is to be defined as "the sum of his future," he must be free from the law of causality. Secondly, if a man is "the sum of his past," that is, if he is the historical product of all the acts he has done, he is modified by every act he commits, just as T. S. Eliot's tradition is modified by the introduction of a new work of art. Then it is absurd to assume the essence of his being; an entity which lies immovable behind his actions and dictates them;

(1) *Faulkner in the University*, p. 47.

(2) *Ibid.* p. 48.

an invariable nature given prior to his experience and essential to what he is. It is true that there are some conditions or limits common to mankind; for example, man is mortal. But there is no human nature which gives a positive definition of man. If a man were a being that could be defined in terms of its intrinsic nature, he would for ever be the same in essence, no matter what he might do; for instance, a man provided with such a nature as to make him a scoundrel could never cease to be a scoundrel in essence throughout his life; whatever good actions he might do, their goodness would be a mere appearance, and behind appearances would always lie the reality; in short, he would for ever be "himself," independently of his past and future. You may say that it is a matter of course and not worth mentioning that man has no nature in this sense. But sometimes he does act as if he believed in such essence. When one of the white residents of Yoknapatawpha County, finding a Negro making an attempt at suicide, said that "it was cocaine and not whisky, because no nigger would try to commit suicide unless he was full of cocaine, because a nigger full of cocaine wasn't a nigger any longer,"⁽³⁾ he was voicing his conviction which he shared with many others in Faulkner's fictitious county in the Deep South: the conviction that it is not the color of the skin or any other biological trait that defines a creature as "nigger," but his inherent nature, which usually manifests itself in the physical, and that he can never cease to be a "nigger" without losing his identity itself—without giving up being a man.

"No man is himself" means that, unlike a machine which is defined in terms of its predetermined function, a man re-defines himself by every act he commits. When Faulkner says, in answer to a question as to why he would use Christ for "such a bad man" as Joe Christmas, that "no man is good or bad either,"⁽⁴⁾ he is not denying moral values in general, but good and evil as nature inherent in a man and underlying his actions. After all, Faulkner's remark implies that man is, as Jean-Paul Sartre says,⁽⁵⁾ condemned to freedom. He has had no choice in being born, but once born into this world he is compelled to be free. As there is no nature inherent in him which would warrant him to be a such-and-such being in essence, nor is he determined by his past or environments, he must decide what he is at every moment: he must do by his own choice every act of his, which in its turn modifies his being as well as his environments. And nothing can supply him with an absolute principle to follow in his choice, for some sets of moral principles may be set forth, but the very choice among them is always left to him alone.

Hence a feeling of anxiety and forlornness; he feels that his existence is mean-

(3) "That Evening Sun," *Collected Stories*, p. 291.

(4) *Faulkner in the University*, p. 118.

(5) Cf. e.g. Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Existentialisme Est un Humanisme* (Editions Nagel, 1954), p. 37.

ingless and unwarranted. To feel an act meaningful, he must feel that it is at once an act of his own free choice and a necessity. Thus his search for the meaning of his existence becomes an attempt at the synthesis of freedom and necessity. Drusilla Hawk, for instance, says to her cousin Bayard in *The Unvanquished*:

There are worse things than killing men, Bayard. There are worse things than being killed. Sometimes I think the finest thing that can happen to a man is to love something . . . hard hard hard, then to die young because he believed what he could not help but believe and was what he could not (could not? would not) help but be.⁽⁶⁾

What she seeks after is the reconciliation of two modes of being which are contradictory to each other: to be what she freely chooses to be, and to be what she cannot help being. While she wishes to be what she cannot but be, she expects it to be what she "would not help" being, because she is conscious that it is impossible for her to be an entirely passive being—a being-in-itself, like a stone or a tree—and that, if possible, she would not be contented with it. Feeling herself amorphous, elusive, lightsome, unwarranted, she seeks to combine herself with some clear-cut, rocklike, heavy thing, on condition that her freedom should somehow be preserved.

In her case, the synthesis of freedom and necessity is sought after through her desperate actions for the Southern cause in and after the Civil War. Another person in a different situation will undertake it by means of actions of a different type. It should not be concluded, from what has been said of man's freedom, that a man may, like the young man of André Gide's *Les Caves du Vatican* for instance, push a stranger off a running car without any motive. For, though he is free, he is also "the sum of his past," and his free choice is conditioned, though not determined, by the situation in which he lives.

His freedom is to be realized in his body; it does not exist before it is realized. And the relation between body and mind should not be compared to that of a workman and his tools; it is not the relation between two substances which are absolutely distinguishable. The body has several phases, or rather it contains several structures to be integrated into a structure as his whole being. The body is, in a phase, a mass of chemical components; in another, an organism in its biological environments; and in still another, a subject of social conduct in a mass of people. Each of them is to be a structure which bears to its surroundings—physico-chemical, biological, or social—such a dialectic relation as a 'figure' bears to its 'ground' in Gestalt psychology. And they are all to be so integrated into a whole that each structure as the body in one of its phases will be the meaning of the body in a lower phase. And the structure as a human being never reaches completion; the

(6) *The Unvanquished*, p. 143.

integration is never entirely stopped as long as he lives; with a human being, the very continuation of a so-called 'state of mind' is not an effect of inertia, but the continuous reassumption of the 'state.' So it is always possible for some parts of the structure to claim their independence from the whole. It is the partial disintegration that appears as the duality of body and mind.

Since there is no absolute distinction between body and mind, it is useless to advocate that 'freedom of the will' which is alleged to be independent of the body and conditioned by nothing. To be free is to be compelled every moment to re-create the structure without, as it were, a prescription and to be in constant danger of its disintegration. Man's free choice is, far from motiveless, strictly conditioned by his situation (if we mean by "his situation" the whole of the physico-chemical, biological, and social environments in which he lives and the history of his acts which have been modifying both himself and the environments). Like the artist's choice among his materials to create the unity of a new—truly new—work of art which does not exist yet and never existed, man's free choice in his situation is an attempt to create, in the proper sense, an integrated structure which his own being is to be.

It is true that he is also free to make such a choice that the structure disintegrates. The disintegration, according to the phase of the body in which it is brought about, may appear as a physical disease or an abnormality in perception, ect. Or a mere biological existence may be maintained without any successful integration at a higher level. And when his personality finally breaks down, his acts become meaningless (but they will never be entirely so until the structure in the lowest phase breaks down, that is, until his death). But, as the artist's free choice is conditioned so long as he intends to create a work of art, man's freedom is conditioned so long as he intends to 'live' in the widest sense of the word, for on some occasions it may be rightly said that whosoever will lose his life shall find it.

And as it is also possible to contrive an apparent integration with hidden inconsistencies, man's freedom is open to self-deception. A man, for example, may behave as if he were in chains or as if he were compelled to do and be as prescribed by something or somebody, though he is fundamentally free.

And in some situation it seems comparatively easy to attempt an authentic integration, that is, truly to live with oneself, while there are others which seem to make almost impossible the very attempt at the realization of even a self-deceptive integration.

As for Joe Christmas, a remark from the author suggests that what motivates him to live a tragic life will be found, not in his biological inheritance, but in the attitudes of the people which, together with other factors, constitute his situation.

His only salvation in order to live with himself was to repudiate mankind, to live outside

the human race. And he tried to do that, but nobody would let him, the human race itself wouldn't let him.⁽⁷⁾

1

It may seem to some readers, however, that Joe's tragedy is due to his blood. In fact, Gavin Stevens—a lawyer who sometimes appears to be a mouthpiece for the author in some of his novels and stories—tries to explain his life in terms of “the white blood” and “the black blood,” but what he means may not be anything biological; he may be using the word merely figuratively; besides, it is quite doubtful whether he is intended to be the author's mouthpiece.

To us it seems very significant that, as Cleanth Brooks shrewdly points out,⁽⁸⁾ there is no reliable evidence given in the novel that he is really part Negro. It may be argued that his grandfather Hines has, for one, obtained some evidence, but this insane old man cannot or will not tell facts from his own fabrications or delusions. In any case, we have no ground for believing that he is part Negro; no inhabitant of the fictitious county, perhaps except Hines, does not know for certain what Joe's father is; the color of his skin only makes a prostitute say, “I thought maybe you were just another wop or something.”⁽⁹⁾ All this is meaningful, because it suggests that Joe's tragedy has nothing to do with the truth about the blood in his veins. If the biological fact is of no real importance, how is it then that he leads his life as if it were his vital concern to know whether he had Negro blood? To answer this question, we have to ask what the “nigger” is.

There may be no denying that the Negroes characterized by certain biological traits really exist, but the “niggers” as a sort of ‘untouchables’ associated with humiliation and violence cannot be defined biologically. There is no evidence that the Negroes are naturally inferior to the whites. It can be easily presumed that the “nigger” is a social product, and the whites are responsible for the existence of “niggers.”

Here is a man named Percy Grimm. He is quite a mediocrity and, as the author himself says,⁽¹⁰⁾ one of those people who exist everywhere. As a child, Percy did not show any ability in school, and was known only as “lazy, recalcitrant, without ambition.”⁽¹¹⁾ He thinks that it is a matter of deep regret that he should have been born too late to go to the front in World War I, though it was not until 1921 or '22

(7) *Faulkner in the University*, p. 118.

(8) *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country*, p. 49.

(9) *Light in August*, p. 212.

(10) *Faulkner in the University*, p. 41.

(11) *Light in August*, p. 426.

that he realized that he would never forgive his parents for that fact."⁽¹²⁾ One day, when "the hysteria" after the war had past away and "the ones who had been loudest in the hysteria" were "beginning to look at one another a little askance," he happened to fight with "an exsoldier who made some remark to the effect that if he had to do it again, he would fight this time on the German against France." After the fight, he found that "suddenly his life opened definite and clear."

He was like a man who had been for a long time in a swamp, in the dark. It was as though he not only could see no path ahead of him, he knew that there was none.⁽¹³⁾ What has happened in him? Through his fight with the ex-soldier, he has been suddenly confirmed in his "belief that the white race is superior to any and all other races and that the American is superior to all other white races and that the American uniform is superior to all men."⁽¹³⁾

First of all we must see that "the American race" and "the American uniform" mentioned above are a little but significantly different from what we understand by the same words. In spite of the fact that Grimm is neither a soldier in active service nor a member of American Legion, he says "we, the soldiers in Jefferson . . ."⁽¹⁴⁾ without a sense of irrelevance. And he says, "We must let the law take its course,"⁽¹⁴⁾ when he is going to lynch in contravention of the law actually enacted. (Not that the idea about the law is peculiar to Grimm; the point is that he has adopted it for his own use.) The truth is that what he calls "America" is not the nation which actually exists, but the "true America," so to speak, which lies hidden behind the nation in actuality. He belongs to the army of this "true America," and his law is that of the "true America." In the end, what he means by "America" is something irrational and magical; its superiority, which itself is not susceptible of proof, warrants that of its members. And if a man is a member of it, it is not because he was born and has been living there, nor is it because he has done something worthy of it, but because he is in essence an "American." He may murder, but this is a murder by an "American" and it *must* be in order to "let the law take its course." An "American" will be an "American," do what he will, while a man who is not an "American" will never be an "American," whatever he may do. If a man only belongs to this aristocracy ranked over "any and all other races," he can enjoy his superiority with a sense of security. Since he is given an irrevocable superiority over other races, it is hardly worth considering whether he is high or low in position within this communion. This explains why Grimm will take little account of what position he will take in the platoon which he proposes to form in order to lynch Joe Chirtmas. This is a very

(12) *Ibid.*, p. 425.

(13) *Ibid.*, p. 436.

(14) *Ibid.*, p. 427.

convenient invention for a mediocrity who can show no ability to distinguish himself and who lives in the society where the majority of the people are oppressed and cannot find their way out. It is also convenient for the minority who oppress them.

This conception of "America" implies a dualism of good and evil, a sort of Manichaeism. As the "America" does not exist explicitly, Grimm is not contented with the matter as it is. There are many others who are not contented with it. Communists, for example, are not contented, either. But there is a great difference between Grimm and a communist. On the one hand, the ideal that communists attempt to realize is in the future; the social organization they wish for is something which does not in any sense exist yet and never existed and, therefore, must be *created*. On the other hand, the "America" is an eternal essence; if it is not explicit now, it is merely because there is something preventing it from coming out. It is not difficult to see that, for a man cherishing such a belief, the state of things which represents his ideal lies in the past behind him; Grimm's ideal state of things is that of World War I. On any occasion, good and evil cannot be more successfully attributed to one part and the other respectively than they can to the friends and the foes in war. This is the very thing he wishes for: that he can keep the good for himself and attribute the evil to someone else. As Grimm's "America" or good is an eternal essence, he need not create it; if he only takes the evil away, the good will reveal itself and "the law" will take its course of itself. All that he should do is the destruction of the evil. Only his world will be "barren," because creation is precluded from it.

He can "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."⁽¹⁵⁾ He can conceal from himself his sense of inferiority and his anxiety and despair, even in the world where it seems to some people that man is "conceived by accident" and every breath of his is "a fresh cast with dice already loaded against him,"⁽¹⁶⁾ for he has convinced himself of a world of 'truth' underlying the actual one, and nothing unexpected happens in that ideal world. The trouble is that the ideal, without its correlative in the real world, betrays its unreality by its complete lack of the opaqueness to consciousness which characterizes the real—by the very fact that nothing unexpected happens. And the awareness of an illusion as such must inevitably deprive the illusion of all its effectuality. Hence a little device is needed.

The passion for destruction is anger. In fact, Grimm falls into this passion not infrequently, but it cannot be said that there is something in the world which causes his anger. The exact reverse is the case; his anger produces its object, and

(15) *Ibid.*, p. 426.

(16) *The Sound and the Fury*, p. 196.

he needs this passion to maintain his self-deception, just as the passion of love and its object were required for the illusions of our youth. He has assumed the passion, and cheated himself into the belief that the passion is real. That has not been very difficult for him, because generally it is almost impossible for us to decide on an emotion in ourselves whether it is assumed or real. It is known that if you give an electric stimulus to a certain part in the interbrain of a cat, the animal will show all the symptoms of the emotion called rage, look for an object, and jump at it. Like the cat, Grimm looks about for the object to let loose his rage on. Negroes are the most suitable object available for him. They have been more or less estranged from the community through the historical processes. To his convenience, they generally bear a mark of their race. It will be easy to make a scapegoat out of them which he can vent his rage on with a view to the confirmation of his belief and without danger of being alienated himself in the real world. The essential condition of the scapegoat is its complete estrangement, because the people who want someone else to suffer in their place are cautious in their selection of the victim lest their turn should come or they should be compelled to accept the truth that there is no real difference between their victim and themselves. They are in fear, though they have "a sublime and implicit faith in physical courage."⁽¹⁷⁾ While he insists on "niggers" being killed for the realization of his "America," Grimm does not want to annihilate the "niggers," because he is conscious that they are indispensable to him. He lets alone those "niggers" who are keeping to their sphere. If only such a "nigger" as Joe Christmas comes out at times so that he may satisfy or rather rake up his sadism, it will be sufficient. Then, pursuing his enemy-evil, he can feel himself "indefatigable, not flesh and blood, as if the Player who moved him for pawn likewise found him breath."⁽¹⁸⁾ The Player's pawn—that is the very thing he wishes to be.

Now we can see that the two concepts of "nigger" and "American" are the Siamese twins conceived by the whites which, being contrary, are so joined to each other that either of them needs the other to maintain its existence in the ideal world fabricated by the whites; they are the opposite poles of Grimm's world with an absolute break between them. And this break corresponds to the fissure in Joe's consciousness, which we will see later.

Percy Grimms are everywhere, but may not be "prevalent,"⁽¹⁹⁾ as Faulkner says. There are many people of another type who also exist everywhere. They may be different from Grimm in that they have no "belief," but they will not think or decide for themselves, just as Grimm has not had to ever since that fight with an

(17) *Light in August*, p. 426.

(18) *Ibid.*, p. 437.

(19) *Faulkner in the University*, p. 41.

ex-soldier. They also like to slip among a crowd of people and, without much real danger, feel themselves superior to someone else. Those are the men who come together in response to Grimm's appeal and amuse themselves by playing cards while waiting to lynch a "nigger." They have no faith nor do they think for themselves; in short, they are a mere nothing, yet they are also responsible for the existence of "niggers" and for their sufferings and death, for Grimm would be entirely ineffective in the real world if he was left to himself alone.

2

We have seen that Percy Grimm's actions are entirely motivated by his desire for the justification of his own existence at the expense of the people whom he calls "nigger." Then, what is it that motivates the eccentricities of Doc Hines? The old man, in a silent rage, watches his grandson playing in the garden of an orphanage, with a curious mixture of fear and expectation that the child will in time reveal his real nature—"the Lord God's abomination."⁽²⁰⁾ What is the meaning of his strange gaze fixed on Joe Christmas?

Projection in the sense of psychoanalysts is a well-known conception; it is the 'unconscious' process of the attributing, to other people, of feelings or thoughts which our superego does not approve. The motive underlying this process is our desire to justify ourselves in our own eyes without eradicating the unapproved feelings or thoughts. Projection is an attempt to satisfy some forbidden desires of ours on someone else's responsibility.

By the way, the 'unconscious' process above should not be regarded as a mechanical, automatic process, having nothing to do with consciousness. Consciousness is, as it were, translucent to itself; nothing can happen in our consciousness which we are not in any sense conscious of; 'unconsciousness' is one of the aspects of consciousness. Therefore, the 'unconsciousness' of the process, which enables us to make an attempt at self-deception, does not really give us an alibi for repudiating our responsibility.

Since the superego, which forbids us to satisfy our desires frankly, is supposed to have been formed, through our parents and others, by the community in which we were born and have been brought up, a condition of projection is that there is a sort of taboo in the community. And it can be presumed that the taboo has its origin in the the fear, lurking in the hearts of its conservative members, of change and destruction. Because change and destruction tend to unveil their freedom and forlornness, and remind them that it is as though they were "in a swamp, in the dark." (The one exception is the destruction of 'evil,' for the double negation

⁽²⁰⁾ *Light in August*, p. 360.

assumes an appearance of affirmation, but of course creation is precluded from this seeming affirmation, as we have seen before.)

The most conservative community, however, cannot really forbid all destruction, because there is some involved in life and creation, and to stop all destruction is to die. Yet their fear is so great that they wish every change would appear to be a phase of a cycle; they wish for the eternal recurrence of everything, even of suffering. "You cannot bear to think that someday it will no longer hurt you,"⁽²¹⁾ as Quentin's father says in *The Sound and the Fury*; and a man will "cling to trouble he's used to before he'll risk a change,"⁽²²⁾ as Byron Bunch thinks. They wish everything that will happen would be like what has once happened; that everything would be what they can foresee. From this point of view, the ideal of a conservative community may be represented by the pattern of the world as it appeared to Lena Grove who "was simply going to follow the conventional laws of the time in which she was."⁽²³⁾

Behind her the four weeks, the evocation of *far*, is a peaceful corridor paved with unflagging and tranquil faith and peopled with kind and nameless faces and voices...; back-rolling now behind her a long monotonous succession of peaceful and undeviating changes from day to dark and dark to day again, through which she advanced in identical and anonymous and deliberate wagons as though through a succession of creakwheeled and limpeared avatars, like something moving forever and without progress across an urn.⁽²⁴⁾

It [the vehicle] seems to hang suspended in the middle distance forever and forever, so infinitesimal is its progress, like a shabby bead upon the mild red string of road. So much is this so that in the watching of it the eye loses it as sight and sense drowsily merge and blend, like the road itself, with all the peaceful and monotonous changes between darkness and day, like already measured thread being rewound onto a spool.⁽²⁵⁾

For the same reason, they insist that everything suggestive of destruction should be concealed from their eyes. A clean home where there are no traces left of the destruction in every-day life is regarded as a model. The excrements which are the products of destruction in the interior of the body must be hidden, and the parts suggestive of the function must be separated from the rest and must be covered. That is to divide a living body into parts and attribute the destruction to the humble parts, so that one may feel oneself having no connection with destruction—filth. D. H. Lawrence makes out the implications of such taboo and its results which make life and love impossible, when he writes as follows:

The mind's terror of the body has probably driven more men mad than ever could be counted. The insanity of a great mind like Swift's is at least partly traceable to this cause. In the poem to his mistress Celia, which has the maddened refrain "But—Celia, Celia,

(21) *The Sound and the Fury*, p. 196.

(22) *Light in August*, p. 69.

(23) *Faulkner in the University*, p. 199.

(24) *Light in August*, pp. 4 f.

(25) *Ibid.*, pp. 5 f.

Celia s***s," (the word rhymes with spits), we see what can happen to a great mind when it falls into panic. A great wit like Swift could not see how ridiculous he made himself. Of course Celia s***s! Who doesn't? And how much worse if she didn't. It is hopeless. And then think of poor Celia, made to feel iniquitous about her proper natural function, by her 'lover.' It is monstrous. And it comes from having taboo words, and from not keeping the mind sufficiently developed in physical and sexual consciousness.⁽²⁶⁾

And here too, in the taboo about the physical function, we can recognize the dualism of good and evil; an attempt to invent a bearer of evil to which we may attribute the function regarded as filthy (evil) in ourselves; the same motive as that of projection.

In the same way, the respectable people should not feel any destructive impulse. If it is indispensable, they should attribute it to the people estranged from the community, just as in the medieval ages the Christians assigned financial business to Jews. A man can try more or less successfully to be the judge of himself by criticizing himself most severely, and paradoxically conceal from his own eyes his responsibility for what he is doing. If they can find someone else to attribute their own evil to, it will be more convenient for them. They will watch their scapegoat relentlessly, trying to find an evidence that he is the bearer of evil. It is nothing but the relentlessness of their watching that keeps the distinction between their victim and themselves from disappearing. Once their gaze has lost its relentlessness, the good on their part and the evil on the other will soon blend into one, because there is in reality no life without destruction or no human freedom without any possibility of doing evil. If they want to prevent the truth unveiling their anxiety, they must not pity their victim, "since to pity him would be to admit selfdoubt and to hope for and need pity themselves,"⁽²⁷⁾ as Reverend Hightower meditates. Now we can make out the meaning of the gaze of Doc Hines. His gaze should be the more pitiless because Joe is connected with him by blood. It must be remembered that many of Faulkner's Southerners feel themselves even more deeply connected with their blood relations than people are usually expected to do in provincial communities. Joe seems to Hines to be a part of his own self, just as Caddy does to Quentin in *The Sound and the Fury*. So, on the one hand, it is his terror that makes him fix his gaze upon his grandson; by making himself the inspector of his grandson, he tries to tear himself away from the child, to convince himself of his immunity from evil. It may be said that Joe Christmas as "nigger" is the part of Doc Hines's self which he has thrown out of his own ego. And on the other, through the same process, Hines seeks to have his existence warranted and get rid of his forlornness. Just as the "nigger" is necessary for Grimm to maintain his "belief"

(26) D. H. Lawrence, *Sex, Literature and Censorship* (William Heinemann, 1955), p. 230.

(27) *Light in August*, p. 348.

that he is a pawn moved by the "Player," "the Lord God's abomination" is indispensable for Hines to make himself "the instrument of His will."⁽²⁸⁾ At any rate, that gaze of Hines's makes a "nigger" out of a child.

3

Now, with Joe Christmas, if his tragedy is that he does not know what he is, as the author says,⁽²⁹⁾ it does not mean merely that he does not know who his parents are or whether he has Negro blood in his veins. It is a tragic result of the fact that he never had a single person who filled a certain role, which is generally assumed by parents. Knowing is one of the two aspects of consciousness. Consciousness is always that of something other than itself as long as it exists, while at the same time it is conscious of its own existence; but it cannot be conscious of itself in the same way that it is conscious of an object, for it may try to objectify itself in reflection, but then the subject of the objectification remains impalpable behind the objectified self; that is, it is possible for a 'consciousness' to know an object directly, but impossible to know itself, except through the medium of another 'consciousness.' Without the medium of other people, it is impossible for a man to know what he is, though he always experiences it—lives it, so to speak. He learns to know himself by observing the images of himself, as it were, reflected in the eyes of other people. 'What I am' is what I am supposed to be in so far as I consent to assume it. As for Joe Christmas, nobody sent back to him any image that he could accept as his own.

Joe is five years old. He goes along a deserted corridor in an orphanage and enters a room, "quiet as a shadow." It is the dietitian's room. He has been doing this for a year or so. He does not know anything outside this orphanage "enclosed by a tenfoot steel-and-wire fence like a penitentiary or a zoo."⁽³⁰⁾ He has never seen his father or mother, nor does he know who or what they are. At first the dietitian was "nothing to him yet, save a mechanical adjunct to eating, food." She, however, made "his mouth think of something sweet and sticky to eat, and also pinkcolored and surreptitious."⁽³¹⁾ By and by he became convinced that she must possess something of that nature. So, one day he stole into her room and found a tube of toothpaste on the washstand. Now, as usual, he takes up the tube. He is "watching the pink worm coil smooth and cool and slow onto his parchmentcolored finger,"⁽³¹⁾ when he hears footsteps in the corridor and then voices just outside the door. With

(28) *Ibid.*, p. 360.

(29) *Faulkner in the University*, p. 118.

(30) *Light in August*, p. 111.

(31) *Ibid.*, p. 112.

the tube in his hand, he crosses the room and slips behind the cloth curtain. Thus he comes to eavesdrop the dietitian's private affairs with a young interne; what is worse, behind the curtain he eats too much of the toothpaste and ends in vomiting it.

When the curtain fled back he did not look up. When hands dragged him violently out of his vomit he did not resist. He hung from the hands, limp, looking with slack-jawed and glassy idiocy into a face no longer smooth pink-and-white, surrounded now by wild and dishevelled hair whose smooth bands once made him think of candy. "You little rat!" the thin, furious voice hissed; "you little rat! Spying on me! You little nigger bastard!"⁽³²⁾

It is evident that Joe has been trying to find a surrogate mother in the dietitian.

In his earliest days a child does not know anything of himself; of his own body and even of his own desires. He identifies himself with his parents, or rather he has not yet differentiated himself from them. He learns about himself by observing himself through their eyes, from their point of view, talking of himself as if he were a third person. Because he has learned so little about himself and about the world, he feels uneasy at the necessity of separating himself from his parents. It is said that a child takes the death of his parents for a sort of punishment. Imagine the anxiety of a child who has no parents, and who knows neither where he has come from nor where he will go, and who has to learn everything by himself. We see how Joe is watching himself eating of the toothpaste behind the curtain.

Even at five, he knew that he must not take more than that. Perhaps it was the animal warning him that more would make him sick; perhaps the human being warning him that if he took more than that, she would miss it. This was the first time he had taken more. By now, hiding and waiting, he had taken a good deal more. By feel he could see the diminishing tube. He began to sweat. Then he found that he had been sweating for some time, that for some time now he had been doing nothing else but sweating... He seemed to be turned in upon himself, watching himself sweating, watching himself smear another worm of paste into his mouth which his stomach did not want. Sure enough, it refused to go down. Motionless now, utterly contemplative, he seemed to stoop above himself like a chemist in his laboratory, waiting... In the rife, pinkwomansmelling obscurity behind the curtain he squatted, pinkfoamed, listening to his insides, waiting with astonished fatalism for what was about to happen to him.⁽³³⁾

If he fails to find a surrogate parent, he is to spend his life watching himself in such an awkward way; he will "stoop above himself" and wait for what will happen to him, instead of trying to carve out his own future.

Joe is "like a shadow." He does not know what he is; yet he has some vague impression that he has been found guilty of what he does not know, because he is an orphan. Besides, he is always conscious of a mysterious gaze fixed upon him. It is "that small, dirty old man sitting in a splint chair in a sootgrimed doorway."⁽³⁴⁾

⁽³²⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

⁽³³⁾ *Ibid.*, pp. 113 f.

⁽³⁴⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

He cannot make out the meaning of the gaze yet. Perhaps he has taken no notice of it. Yet he is conscious of it, and it becomes associated with the feelings of guiltiness in him.

He tries to be freed from this anxiety, by having that "something sweet and sticky to eat," like a baby at its mother's breast. Through this act, he expects, he will be able to go into the dietitian, and identify himself with her. But somehow he fails to do so, he vomits the toothpaste, and then he is frightened at "the face no longer smooth pink-and-white."

Now he is waiting only to be punished. His sin will be redeemed through punishment. But everything goes wrong with him. The very dietitian who was to punish him seems to be terrified at him or, through him, at something else. She even tries to bribe him, though he does not make out what she intends to bribe him to do.

It often happens that a child gets bewildered to find in his parent a capricious and mysterious stranger, but usually his bewilderment does not last long enough. He soon succeeds again in the identification with his parents and continues to learn about himself and about the outer world under their protection, until at last he can free himself from them without feeling too much anxiety. Joe has been driven away once for all. In this great shock, he realizes that the sweet thing which at first seemed able to shelter him is really something helpless in itself, and, instead of protecting him, tries to bird-lime him and exploit him in order to protect itself. At the same time, he becomes convinced that the absolute with its *raison d'être* in itself and with the power to warrant his existence is that terrible gaze, which is always menacing him as well as the dietitian. Joe will concentrate his attention upon the gaze of that old man, and learn to make out its meaning.

The old man—Euphues Hines, who left his grandson at the gate of the orphanage on a Christmas Eve because of his belief that the baby was part Negro, and then himself has become the janitor of the institution—is always watching Joe, fearing or expecting that the essence of "nigger" will come out in his behavior. The "nigger" is, as we have seen, a monster which "Americans" have invented so that they may allay their own anxiety. They have mutilated life. They have divided freedom which really involves both the possibility of good and that of evil, and which is the very necessity of choosing between them. And they try to project the destructive part and the possibility of evil upon the people estranged from the white community, while they keep the good for themselves. So the essence of "nigger" is the liberty to do evil without the possibility of doing good; in short, the Devil. Joe realizes that he is expected by that gaze to reveal the essence in his own being. And the gaze is what he has found to be the one absolute in the world; there is nothing in the world which may justify his existence, except that terrible gaze.

He will try to answer this expectation.

But how can one be willing to answer such an expectation? Do we want to become an object of contempt and hatred because other people want us to be so? We should take into consideration the difference between Joe's situation and ours. If I am estranged from a group of people, I shall be able to find another to form an alliance with. If I am expected to be a butt of derision, it is not by all the community, nor have I been expected to be so ever since I was a little child. Anyway we have already obtained some favorable image of ourselves; that is, we know ourselves in a sense. Joe has not seen any image of himself except the one mirrored in that gaze which rejects him as evil itself.

The author of *Le Deuxième Sexe* turns our attention to the fact that some disgusting and nauseating things fascinate young girls at times; a young girl, for instance, finding a worm in the salad she is eating, may munch it on purpose and swallow it. According to the author, these girls are symbolically protesting against their inescapable fate forced upon them by the community.⁽³⁵⁾ In fact, when we have taken a disgusting worm into our mouth before we know it, we cannot choose but munch it resolutely to get over the disgust, since the worm is already in our mouth. Man sometimes takes his inescapable fate resolutely upon himself as if by his own choice, so that he may say to himself, "This is the very thing I have wanted." He claims his freedom even in the face of unbearable sufferings, disgust and pains. That reminds us of Heathcliff of *Wuthering Heights* who says: "I have no pity!... It is a moral teething; and I grind with greater energy, in proportion to the increase of pain."⁽³⁶⁾ Thus it sometimes happens that a man wants to make himself into what he has been forced to be, in spite of his disgust and pains.

Joe intends to realize the essence of "nigger," to meet the old man's expectation. But he will never be able to succeed in doing so, because the essence is what one cannot realize as one's own; for the "nigger" is a monster which "Americans" have forged, consulting their own convenience alone.

From now on, Joe will suffer the deep fissure between his two selves; one is his image as a "nigger" mirrored in the attitudes of other people toward him, which he cannot help feeling quite unconnected with himself; the other is his subjectivity, which he can never cease to be conscious of, and yet he can never know in the way in which he knows someone else. First he tried to know the latter through that sweet thing, and failed. Then he found the former, and he is now trying to make it his own self, though this is for him to inflict insufferable pain and disgust upon himself. Later, living as a man and wife with a Negro woman who resembles

(35) Cf. Simone de Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe*, Vol. II. (Gallimard, 1949), p. 110.

(36) Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* (Penguin Books), p. 137.

“an ebony carving,” he will even try to breathe her essence into himself through his nostrils.

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.⁽³⁷⁾

He will fail in doing so, because it is impossible, and because there is really no such thing as “the dark and inscrutable thinking and being of negroes.” He will repeat the same pattern of movements in two directions until he finds his way out, perhaps in death. Joe is like a man who has been attacked suddenly with panic in a room with only two ways out, both of which he will find locked from the outside. He rushes for one door and then the other. He rushes back to the door which he has already learned that he cannot open. Thus he goes back and forth between the two doors with an increasing despair. He cannot stop that, so great is his uneasiness.

4

After his wandering for fifteen years, preceded by his murder of his father-in-law McEachern, he comes back to Jefferson, and looks for a night's lodging. Thus the county seat of Yoknapatawpha comes to be the scene of his last attempt and failure.

On the outskirts of the town, where there are several negro cabins scattered, there is “a big house set in a grove of trees.” In this decaying mansion, Miss Joana Burden has been living alone, unmarried. She is now above forty. Her grandfather and brother, who came from the North, were killed by Colonel Sartoris on account of their abolitionism.⁽³⁸⁾ She herself is an abolitionist, and, isolated from the people of the town in the Deep South, has been devoting herself to her cause.

To Joe, as Richard Chase points out,⁽³⁹⁾ women appear as givers of food. Though he at first, and in a sense later on, steals it from her, Miss Burden is also a woman who gives him food, like the dietitian, Mrs. McEachern, and the waitress Bobbie. (By the way, food represents to him both the promise of his salvation and something sticky he must beware of, and so his attitude toward it is always ambivalent. Besides, he hates the idea of being offered. In this respect, among others, he is the antithesis of Lena Grove. Being an orphan, he is not entitled to anything; all

⁽³⁷⁾ *Light in August*, p. 212.

⁽³⁸⁾ Cf. *Sartoris*, p. 22, and “Skirmish at Sartoris,” *The Unvanquished*.

⁽³⁹⁾ Richard Chase, “The Stone and the Crucifixion,” *William Faulkner: Two Decades of Criticism*, p. 210.

that he has is what has been offered to him by someone else. And since he cannot afford to refuse it, the relation between the parties is entirely dependent on the freedom on the part of the offerer. His theft is, therefore, an acceptance in disguise—a way of claiming his freedom in this unequal relation.) But Miss Burden is different from the other three or any other woman he has known before. The next day after he had sexual intercourse with her for the first time, he says to himself with surprise, "My God. How little I know about women, when I thought I knew so much."

Looking at her, being spoken to by her, it was as though what memory of less than twelve hours knew to be true could never have happened, thinking *Under her clothes she cant* (can't) *even be made so that it could have happened* ... 'My God,' he thought, 'it was like I was the woman and she was the man.' But that was not right, either. Because she had resisted to the very last. But that was not woman resistance ...⁽⁴⁰⁾

In the evening, having waited until he sees the light out in her kitchen, he comes to the house again, "in a quiet rage." This time he thinks, "At least I have made a woman of her at last." Even a year afterwards, however, when he enters her bedroom, he always feels that it is "as though he entered by stealth to despoil her virginity each time anew."

It was as though each turn of dark saw him faced again with the necessity to despoil again that which he had already despoiled—or never had and never would.⁽⁴¹⁾

Soon he becomes aware that he has been watched by her "with that perspicuous and still contempt."⁽⁴²⁾

To Joe, Miss Burden is at once a woman and a man: the dietitian-Bobbie and Hines-McEachern; the sweet thing and the terrible gaze; the helpless that tries to cajole him, and the absolute that rejects him; the woman who is destined to be under the gaze, and the man who watches. At last the movement in two directions of Joe's life comes to take place in relation to one woman. And the failure in his last attempt at his salvation corresponds to the final breakdown, on her part, of the abolitionism based on the abstract principles of humanism.

She has been able to stand firm for Negroes, owing to her belief in the abolitionism. It can be said, however, that her belief has been founded upon that kind of innocence:

...which believed that the ingredients of morality were like the ingredients of pie or cake and once you had measured them and balanced them and mixed them and put them into the oven it was all finished and nothing but pie or cake could come out.⁽⁴³⁾

Because it has prevented her from grasping the whole situation in which Negroes

⁽⁴⁰⁾ *Light in August*, p. 222.

⁽⁴¹⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

⁽⁴²⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

⁽⁴³⁾ *Absalom, Absalom!*, p. 263.

are, she has not been discouraged by the difficulty in removing the barriers between the whites and the Negroes. In the same way, if she has been able to stand firm like a man, with apparant immunity from the general condition under which most women of the community are, it is due to her innocence, which has kept her unaware of the physical in herself as well as the passing of time. Even as she becomes more conscious of her flesh and blood through her relations with Joe, she still tries to ignore her own physical responses. Thus her personality becomes dual. She is in a dilemma; if she would accept the physical, the dissociation would disappear, but at the same time she would have to repudiate her past life, her cause and ancestors; she must choose between the two possibilities. She finally decides to deny her flesh so as to save her life of the past forty years and her abolitionism. When she begins to pray at the last stage of her affairs with Joe, the prayer represents her desperate struggle to recover the communion with her family in the past.

At first Miss Burden's dual personality attracted Joe by awakening a hope of salvation in his mind, for his dilemma was that he had been rejected by all that seemed to him to have the power to warrant his existence, while he had been disgusted by all the people who were willing to accept him. The fact is that there has been no possibility of his salvation in his relations with Miss Burden. If she had accepted the physical, he might have been assured of his acceptance through her flesh, but then he would have found her nothing more than a helpless woman under the constant menace of other people's eyes. Now that she has decided to neglect her own flesh, she seems to him to have been finally transformed into that terrible gaze. When she advises him to be good and prays for him, he recognizes in her his father-in-law McEachern, who also prayed for him and severely punished him for his bad conduct, but, as he was aware, with a secret expectation that he would reveal his real nature as "the Lord God's abomination." He kills Miss Burden for the same reason that he killed McEachern, and sets fire to the house with her body in it. This is a symbolic act of the man who has been driven to the corner, still seeking for a way out; for fire makes the cold warm, and changes the hard into the soft, easier to get into.

But the symbolic act brings no real effect. He flees from the community into the forest, thinking that all he wants is "peace," but he cannot find any peace wherever he may go.

The dark was filled with the voices, myriad, out of all time that he had known, as though all the past was a flat pattern. And going on: tomorrow night, all the tomorrows, to be a part of the flat pattern, going on. He thought of that with quiet astonishment: going on, myriad, familiar, since all that had ever been was the same as all that was to be, since tomorrow to-be and had-been would be the same.⁽⁴⁴⁾

(44) *Light in August*, p. 266.

It is an irony that the pattern of the world which appears to him resembles the pattern of Lena's world, only they are differently lighted. The voices by which he is obsessed are the voices of the community. Its morals, including the racial prejudice, have intruded into his inner life. By rejecting him, the community paradoxically imposed its morals upon him in childhood. He is at heart a man of strict moral principles, and his moral principles are a duplicate of those of the community. He accuses himself sincerely on the same principles. He cannot repudiate the community, just as Miss Emily cannot repudiate her father who has repressed her and sacrificed her youth for his selfishness, and, when he has died, refuses to bury his body because he is still living for her. It can be said that Joe loves the community, though this apparently cold but passionate love is hardly distinguishable from hatred. He does not want to be accepted by the people who themselves are rejected and accused by the community; they simply make him sick, just as respectable people are disgusted at them, and he at himself. Now that he has killed Miss Burden, he realizes that he will never be able to get outside that "circle"—his dilemma.

Looking, he can see the smoke [of Miss Burden's house still smoldering] low on the sky, beyond an imperceptible corner; he is entering it again, the street which ran for thirty years. . . . It had made a circle and he is still inside of it. . . . 'And yet I have been further 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.'⁽⁴⁵⁾

Wherever he may flee, he cannot rid himself of the community which condemns him, because it is inside him, as is the case with some psychotics. He comes back to town to be killed and castrated by Percy Grimm.

But the man on the floor had not moved. He just lay there, with his eyes open and empty of everything save consciousness, and with something, a shadow, about his mouth. 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 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 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 unbelievable crescendo, passing out of the realm of hearing.⁽⁴⁶⁾

This is a history of horror, but we may properly apply to it the same remark that was originally made on the madness of the heroine of "A Rose for Emily":

⁽⁴⁵⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 321.

⁽⁴⁶⁾ *Ibid.*, pp. 439 f.

“It involves issues which in themselves are really important and have to do with the world of conscious moral choice.”⁽⁴⁷⁾ Joe’s life, which Richard Chase calls “the holism of death,” as contrasted with Lena’s “holism of life,”⁽⁴⁸⁾ is the life of a man who has lived through the situation where no one can restore his unity except in death. It helps us to make out the implications of our own condition. Hence the man who is dying, defeated and castrated by the people who have sacrificed him since early childhood, in the interest of their own security, seems “to rise soaring into their memories forever and ever.”

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⁽⁴⁷⁾ *Understanding Fiction*, p. 354.

⁽⁴⁸⁾ Richard Chase, *op. cit.*, p. 207.