

Modern Critical

INTERPRETATIONS

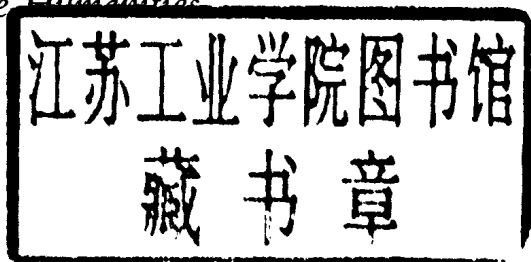
Edited and with an Introduction by HAROLD BLOOM

William Faulkner's
Light in August



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Edited and with an introduction by
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Chelsea House Publishers ◇ 1988

NEW YORK ◇ NEW HAVEN ◇ PHILADELPHIA

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Printed and bound in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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requirements of the American National Standard for Permanence
of Paper for Printed Library Materials, Z39.48-1984.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
William Faulkner's *Light in August*.

(Modern critical interpretations)

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. Faulkner, William, 1897-1962. *Light in August*.

I. Bloom, Harold. II. Series.

PS3511.A86L579 1988 813'.52 87-27655

ISBN 1-55546-047-X

Editor's Note

This book brings together a representative selection of the best critical interpretations of William Faulkner's novel *Light in August*. The critical essays are reprinted here in the chronological order of their original publication. I am grateful to Johann Pillai and Paul H. Barickman for their erudite aid in my editing of this volume.

My introduction centers upon the stately and loving figure of Lena Grove, the pastoral representation of what is positive in Faulkner's greatest novel, which I contextualize in its author's troubled sense of the genealogy of his own imagination.

Donald M. Kartiganer begins the chronological sequence of criticism with a discussion of Joe Christmas, who as a mulatto is "the Faulknerian" symbol of what is beyond comprehension or art." In a Lacanian reading that purports to be Freudian, André Bleikasten describes how the novel's outcasts—Joe, Joanna, even Hightower—relate to absent fathers and patrilineal culture.

Carolyn Porter concentrates on Hightower, whose detached and contemplative stance is defeated because he cannot redeem the past by dwelling upon the dead. Joe Christmas moves back to the center of concern in Eric J. Sundquist's analysis of how Joe embodies the duality of the color line that divides our nation.

James A. Snead argues that because Joe refuses "signification," both the residents of Jefferson and Faulkner's readers tend to combine in fixing the identity of "nigger" upon him. In this volume's final essay, John N. Duvall studies the variations in Joe's relationships with women, and meditates upon why the town of Jefferson calls Joe's crime a "murder" rather than a "killing."

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Introduction

I

No critic need invent William Faulkner's obsessions with what Nietzsche might have called the genealogy of the imagination. Recent critics of Faulkner, including David Minter, John T. Irwin, David M. Wyatt, and Richard H. King, have emphasized the novelist's profound need to believe himself to have been his own father in order to escape not only the Freudian family romance and literary anxieties of influence, but also the cultural dilemmas of what King terms "the Southern family romance." From *The Sound and the Fury* through the debacle of *A Fable*, Faulkner centers upon the sorrows of fathers and sons, to the disadvantage of mothers and daughters. No feminist critic ever will be happy with Faulkner. His brooding conviction that female sexuality is closely allied with death seems essential to all of his strongest fictions. It may even be that Faulkner's rhetorical economy, his wounded need to get his cosmos into a single sentence, is related to his fear that origin and end might prove to be one. Nietzsche prophetically had warned that origin and end were separate entities, and for the sake of life had to be kept apart, but Faulkner (strangely like Freud) seems to have known that the only Western trope participating neither in origin nor end is the image of the father.

By universal consent of critics and common readers, Faulkner now is recognized as the strongest American novelist of this century, clearly surpassing Hemingway and Fitzgerald, and standing as an equal in the sequence that includes Hawthorne, Melville, Mark Twain, and Henry James. Some critics might add Dreiser to this group; Faulkner himself curiously would have insisted upon Thomas Wolfe, a generous though dubious judgment. The American precursor for Faulkner was Sherwood Anderson, but perhaps only as an impetus; the true Ameri-

can forerunner is the poetry of T. S. Eliot, as Judith L. Sensibar demonstrates. But the truer precursor for Faulkner's fiction is Conrad, inescapable for the American novelists of Faulkner's generation, including Hemingway and Fitzgerald. Comparison to Conrad is dangerous for any novelist, and clearly Faulkner did not achieve a *Nostromo*. But his work of the decade 1929–39 does include four permanent books: *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*, *Light in August*, and *Absalom, Absalom!* If one adds *Sanctuary* and *The Wild Palms*, and *The Hamlet* and *Go Down, Moses* in the early forties, then the combined effect is extraordinary.

From Malcolm Cowley on, critics have explained this effect as the consequence of the force of mythmaking, at once personal and local. Cleanth Brooks, the rugged final champion of the New Criticism, essentially reads Faulkner as he does Eliot's *The Waste Land*, finding the hidden God of the normative Christian tradition to be the basis for Faulkner's attitude towards nature. Since Brooks calls Faulkner's stance Wordsworthian, and finds Wordsworthian nature a Christian vision also, the judgment involved necessarily has its problematical elements. Walter Pater, a critic in a very different tradition, portrayed a very different Wordsworth in terms that seem to me not inapplicable to Faulkner:

Religious sentiment, consecrating the affections and natural regrets of the human heart, above all, that pitiful awe and care for the perishing human clay, of which relic-worship is but the corruption, has always had much to do with localities, with the thoughts which attach themselves to actual scenes and places. Now what is true of it everywhere, is truest of it in those secluded valleys where one generation after another maintains the same abiding place; and it was on this side, that Wordsworth apprehended religion most strongly. Consisting, as it did so much, in the recognition of local sanctities, in the habit of connecting the stones and trees of a particular spot of earth with the great events of life, till the low walls, the green mounds, the half-obliterated epitaphs seemed full of voices, and a sort of natural oracles, the very religion of those people of the dales, appeared but as another link between them and the earth, and was literally a religion of nature.

A kind of stoic natural religion pervades this description, something close to the implicit faith of old Isaac McCaslin in *Go Down*,

Moses. It seems unhelpful to speak of “residual Christianity” in Faulkner, as Cleanth Brooks does. Hemingway and Fitzgerald, in their nostalgias, perhaps were closer to a Christian ethos than Faulkner was in his great phase. Against current critical judgment, I prefer *As I Lay Dying* and *Light in August* to *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!*, partly because the first two are more primordial in their vision, closer to the stoic intensities of their author’s kind of natural piety. There is an *otherness* in Lena Grove and the Bundrens that would have moved Wordsworth, that is, the Wordsworth of *The Tale of Margaret, Michael*, and *The Old Cumberland Beggar*. A curious movement that is also a stasis becomes Faulkner’s pervasive trope for Lena. Though he invokes the imagery of Keats’s urn, Faulkner seems to have had the harvest-girl of Keats’s *To Autumn* more in mind, or even the stately figures of the *Ode to Indolence*. We remember Lena Grove as stately, calm, a person yet a process, a serene and patient consciousness, full of wonder, too much a unitary being to need even her author’s variety of stoic courage.

The uncanniness of this representation is exceeded by the Bundrens, whose plangency testifies to Faulkner’s finest rhetorical achievement. *As I Lay Dying* may be the most original novel ever written by an American. Obviously it is not free of the deepest influence Faulkner knew as a novelist. The language is never Conradian, and yet the sense of the reality principle is. But there is nothing in Conrad like Darl Bundren, not even in *The Secret Agent*. *As I Lay Dying* is Faulkner’s strongest protest against the facticity of literary convention, against the force of the familial past, which tropes itself in fiction as the repetitive form of narrative imitating prior narrative. The book is a sustained nightmare, insofar as it is Darl’s book, which is to say, Faulkner’s book, or the book of his daemon.

II

Canonization is a process of enshrining creative misinterpretations, and no one need lament this. Still, one element that ensues from this process all too frequently is the not very creative misinterpretation in which the idiosyncratic is distorted into the normative. Churchwardenly critics who assimilate the Faulkner of the thirties to spiritual, social, and moral orthodoxy can and do assert Faulkner himself as their preceptor. But this is the Faulkner of the fifties, Nobel laureate, State Department envoy and author of *A Fable*, a book of a badness simply

astonishing for Faulkner. The best of the normative critics, Cleanth Brooks, reads even *As I Lay Dying* as a quest for community, an exaltation of the family, an affirmation of Christian values. The Bundrens manifestly constitute one of the most terrifying visions of the family romance in the history of literature. But their extremism is not eccentric in the 1929–39 world of Faulkner’s fiction. That world is founded upon a horror of families, a limbo of outcasts, an evasion of all values other than stoic endurance. It is a world in which what is silent in the other Bundrens speaks in Darl, what is veiled in the Compsons is uncovered in Quentin. So tangled are these returns of the repressed with what continues to be estranged that phrases like “the violation of the natural” and “the denial of the human” become quite meaningless when applied to Faulkner’s greater fictions. In that world, the natural is itself a violation and the human already a denial. Is the weird quest of the Bundrens a violation of the natural, or is it what Blake would have called a terrible triumph for the selfish virtues of the natural heart? Darl judges it to be the latter, but Darl luminously denies the sufficiency of the human, at the cost of what seems schizophrenia.

Marxist criticism of imaginative literature, if it had not regressed abominably in our country so that now it is a travesty of the dialectical suppleness of Adorno and Benjamin, would find a proper subject in the difficult relationship between the 1929 business panic and *As I Lay Dying*. Perhaps the self-destruction of our delusive political economy helped free Faulkner from whatever inhibitions, communal and personal, had kept him earlier from a saga like that of the Bundrens. Only an authentic seer can give permanent form to a prophecy like *As I Lay Dying*, which puts severely into question every received notion we have of the natural and the human. Darl asserts he has no mother, while taunting his enemy brother, Jewel, with the insistence that Jewel’s mother was a horse. Their little brother, Vardaman, says, “My mother is a fish.” The mother, dead and undead, is uncannier even than these children when she confesses the truth of her existence, her rejecting vision of her children:

I could just remember how my father used to say that the reason for living was to get ready to stay dead a long time. And when I would have to look at them day after day, each with his and her single and selfish thought, and blood strange to each other blood and strange to mine, and think that this seemed to be the only way I could get ready to stay dead, I

would hate my father for having ever planted me. I would look forward to the times when they faulted, so I could whip them. When the switch fell I could feel it upon my flesh; when it welted and ridged it was my blood that ran, and I would think with each blow of the switch: Now you are aware of me! Now I am something in your secret and selfish life, who have marked your blood with my own for ever and ever.

This veritable apocalypse of any sense of otherness is no mere "denial of community." Nor are the Bundrens any "mimesis of essential nature." They are a super-mimesis, an over-representation mocking nature while shadowing it. What matters in major Faulkner is that the people have gone back, not to nature but to some abyss before the Creation-Fall. Eliot insisted that Joyce's imagination was eminently orthodox. This can be doubted, but in Faulkner's case there is little sense in baptizing his imagination. One sees why he preferred reading the Old Testament to the New, remarking that the former was stories and the latter, ideas. The remark is inadequate except insofar as it opposes Hebraic to Hellenistic representation of character. There is little that is Homeric about the Bundrens, or Sophoclean about the Compsons. Faulkner's irony is neither classical nor romantic, neither Greek nor German. It does not say one thing while meaning another nor trade in contrasts between expectation and fulfillment. Instead, it juxtaposes incommensurable realities: of self and other, of parent and child, of past and future. When Gide maintained that Faulkner's people lacked souls, he simply failed to observe that Faulkner's ironies were biblical. To which an amendment must be added. In Faulkner, only the ironies are biblical. What Faulkner's people lack is the blessing; they cannot contend for a time without boundaries. Yahweh will make no covenant with them. Their agon therefore is neither the Greek one for the foremost place nor the Hebrew one for the blessing, which honors the father and the mother. Their agon is the hopeless one of waiting for their doom to lift.

III

There are exceptions to the ironic laws of tragic farce even in Faulkner, by which I mean major Faulkner, 1928–1942. The Faulkner of the later forties and the fifties, author of *A Fable* and other inade-

quate narratives, had been abandoned by the vision of the abyss that had given him *As I Lay Dying* and *Sanctuary*. But even in his fourteen years of nihilistic splendor, he had invented a few beings whose mythic sense of persistence conveys a sense of the biblical blessing. I have already remarked on Lena Grove's stately role as a version of the harvest-girl in Keats's *To Autumn*. Rather than discuss Joe Christmas or Joanna Burden or Hightower, I will center only upon Lena, a vision Wordsworthian and Keatsian, and more satisfying as such than anything akin to her since George Eliot and Thomas Hardy.

One way of seeing the particular strength of *Light in August* as against Faulkner's other major novels is to speculate as to which could contain Lena. Her massively persuasive innocence hardly could be introduced into *The Sound and the Fury* or *Absalom, Absalom!*, and would destroy utterly *As I Lay Dying* or *Sanctuary*. Natural sublimity, Wordsworthian and almost Tolstoyan, requires a large cosmos if it is to be sustained. *As I Lay Dying* is Faulkner's most original fiction and my own favorite among all modern American narratives, yet *Light in August* must be Faulkner's grandest achievement. The book's ability to hold Lena as well as Joe, Joanna, and Hightower, makes it the American novel of this century, fit heir of Melville, Hawthorne, Mark Twain. Difficult as it is to imagine Henry James getting through *Light in August* (after all, he had trouble with Dickens!), the book might have shown James again some possibilities that he had excluded.

Albert J. Guerard, perhaps too absorbed in tracing Faulkner's indubitable misogyny, assimilated Lena to "the softer menace of the fecund and the bovine," but offered as evidence only that "she is, at her best, a serenely comic creation." Fecund certainly, bovine certainly not, and to "serenely" add the further modifier "loving." Judith Bryant Wittenberg, in her feminist consideration of Faulkner, startles me by linking Lena Grove to Joe Christmas, because they "are both products of an exploited childhood now restlessly on the move and aggressive in different ways." Rather, Lena is never-resting, Joe is restless; Joe is aggressive, but Lena moves on, a natural force, innocent and direct but free of the death drive, which is incarnated in Joe, Joanna, and so many others in the novel.

John T. Irwin, keen seer of repetition and revenge in Faulkner, intimates that the association of Lena with Keats's Grecian Urn necessarily links her also to Faulkner's consciousness of his own mortality and to his acceptance of his own writing as a form of dying. Nevertheless, Lena is certainly one of the most benign visions of a reality

principle imaginable, and I return to my own Paterian conviction that she resembles the creations of Pater's Wordsworth more than the figures of Keats's tragic naturalism. Lena may be a projection of comic pastoral, but she seems to me more pastoral than comic, and an image of natural goodness invested by Faulkner's genius with considerable aesthetic dignity.

What would *Light in August* be like without her? The story of Joe Christmas and Joanna is almost unrelievedly bitter, though redeemed by its extraordinary social poignance. Hightower is a superb representation of Southern Romanticism destroying itself, while generating a great music from the destruction. What was strongest and clearest in Faulkner's narrative imagination prompted him to place Lena, who gives us a sense of time without boundaries, at the visionary center of the novel. She hardly unifies the book, but *Light in August* has an exuberant abundance that can dispense with an overt unity. Lena will be "light in August," when her child is born, but she is most of the light that the novel possesses throughout. Perhaps she is the answer, in Faulkner, to the poet's old prayer: "make my dark poem light."

The Meaning of Form in *Light in August*

Donald M. Kartiganer

Light in August is the strangest, the most difficult of Faulkner's novels, a succession of isolated, brilliantly etched characters and scenes that revolve around, finally blur into, an impenetrable center—the character Christmas. As remote from us and his author as he is from the society around him, Christmas withholds some ultimate knowledge of himself, some glimpse into the recesses of being which we feel necessary to understanding. Yet just as obvious as his distance is the fact that he epitomizes every character and movement in the book. Whatever is in *Light in August* is here archetypally in this figure whose very name begins his mystery: Joe Christmas. He is, as Alfred Kazin has observed, “compelling rather than believable,” a character who “remains as he is born, an abstraction” (in Hoffman and Vickery, eds.). Like an art image that has never had the privilege of being human, he is never to be merely “believed”; yet at the last he is to “rise soaring into their memories forever and ever. They are not to lose it.”

The mystery of Christmas, which doubtless for Faulkner begins, prior to the novel's turning it to account, with the opacity of the mulatto and an uneasiness concerning miscegenation, would appear at first to be the weakness of the novel. Yet this mystery is the meaning of *Light in August*, for the impenetrability of Christmas becomes the only way Faulkner can articulate a truly inhuman, or larger-than-human, wholeness of being of which the others—Lena, Hightower,

Byron, Joanna, Hines, Grimm—are the human shadows. For us, they are the recognizable figures for which we read novels; they explain Christmas in their freedom from his special agony of seeming not quite born. In reality it is he who explains them, these “characters” who solidify into crisp, static shapes only because they are less than he. Dimly aware of the pursuit of self that ensures Christmas’s isolation, they assume the roles that guarantee their place at least on the edge of society, and to those roles, as well, of the comprehensible figures of fiction. They are not only the visible, partial reflections of the wholeness which is Christmas’s suffering, but what Faulkner himself returns to at last: the people he must portray as the bright fragments of the mystery in his book that is necessarily beyond him.

Although *Light in August* is not told as a series of voices, its structure retains the fragmentariness of Faulkner’s earlier novels. Through a narrative that juxtaposes blocks of seemingly unrelated material, *Light in August* creates a quality of incoherent mosaic. Despite the fragmentation, however, *Light in August* moves toward a resolution of the problems of *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*: the broken form, the incompatibility of twin commitments to flux and design, process and product. *Light in August* is dominated by the imagery of dualism: whiteness and blackness; hardness and softness; the “cold hard air of white people” and “the fecundmellow voices of negro women”; “the far bright rampart of the town” and “the black pit . . . the original quarry, abyss itself”: all the patterns in which people confine their lives and the violence that threatens and finally breaks loose. This dualism, however, transforms itself into a dynamic in the figure of Joe Christmas.

At the center of *Light in August* is the mulatto—more important, the *imagined* mulatto. This is the role that Christmas, never being sure of what his origins are, has chosen. Able to “pass,” to choose a single identity, Christmas chooses instead his doubleness. The only identity that will satisfy him is the one which, in Faulkner’s South, is no identity at all, but rather an image of disorder. As a black worker at the orphanage to which Christmas is sent as a child says to him: “‘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.’”

Missing from Christmas is the kind of stable and consistent meaning that fictional characterization and the context of the novel insist on: a stability based, as we shall see, on repression and commitment to a fixed pattern. Being neither black nor white, Christmas is doomed to

indefiniteness. And yet he is more than blankness. On the one hand he is a life, a structure, a single character—difficult yet visible, lacking the clarity of Hightower and Lena and Joanna, yet capable of being summoned up in our minds by the words “Joe Christmas.” On the other hand, he is the disorder that lives always at or near the surface of *Light in August*, the chaos of mixed bloods that brings forth from the life of Jefferson an inevitable violence. The mulatto is the Faulknerian symbol of what is beyond comprehension or art; Joe Christmas is the expansion of that symbol into a precarious yet memorable design that both confronts, and is made of, its own disorder.

In other words, Faulkner begins to move toward a more complex idea of fictional meaning, of a way in which a human life and a fictional creation can unveil a vacancy that yet projects a signifying form, a form that is more than a vacancy. The fragmentariness of *The Sound and the Fury* is echoed in the uneven development of *Light in August*—the juxtaposed but incongruous incidents, the major characters (Lena and Joe) who never meet—but these fragments now begin to cohere in tragic dialogue, a modern form in which design emerges as the voice of a chaos that is signified by and subverts that design.

This modern form is epitomized for us in the figure of Christmas, in the process of his fictional existence. His possible black-white division suggests a reality of perpetual making: a reality of forces whose individual identity is problematic and whose projected meeting is an outrage. The stable dialectic of the rest of the novel encounters in Christmas a dynamic that it finds intolerable. The society of Jefferson and the novel *Light in August* are equally threatened by the meaning of Christmas, for the mode of his being and his characterization are equally destructive to society and to fiction. This opposition of town and text to their own center is an irony underlying the whole novel, for Christmas as a character is as inaccessible to the community of Jefferson as he is to *Light in August*, even as he generates the most profound meanings of both. “This face alone,” Hightower thinks, “is not clear.” He represents an interaction of forces that the novel and Jefferson can only compartmentalize. Black and white, and all they imply, are distinct sectors, carved in stone, except in the example of Christmas.

The book is about this difference between itself and Christmas, its failure to be equal to his story, to live its life in the same struggle between oppositions as he lives his. Failing to portray Christmas according to traditional criteria of characterization, Faulkner yet sug-

gests to us the struggle of which Christmas is made, and thus makes clear the inadequacy of the portrayal. We are given the general shape of Christmas's contradictory actions, but we are never provided full insight into his inner drama.

Faulkner compels his novel to revolve around a shadowy figure, in whom a strange union of forces represents the impossibility of his existence in verbal form. Yet the *fact* of that impossibility is alive in the novel as a palpable guilt: the awareness of a failure to grasp no more surely than society the truth of the man who becomes its victim; the failure to recognize who Joe Christmas really is.

This may sound more complex than it is, for in certain ways we are on familiar modern ground: the articulation in language of the difficulties of language, in this case the creation of a fictional being, the failure of whose portrayal is something like a strategy. The novelist implies the further range of meaning that both undermines the creation yet compounds the significance.

F. R. Leavis, dealing with Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (an author and work similar to the Faulkner I am trying to describe) and its attempt to suggest levels of horror beyond articulation, makes what is still a forceful argument against this sort of thing: "He is intent on making a virtue out of not knowing what he means. The vague and unrealizable, he asserts with a strained impressiveness, is the profoundly and tremendously significant" (*The Great Tradition*). The answer to such an argument can only be that an art form (the opposite of incoherence) can describe the struggle toward, and even the qualified failure of, art forms. In *Light in August* the failure of the writer to give his central figure a complete fictional life is mirrored by a situation in which society fails to include this figure in its own structure, yet is deeply marked by his life and death. The man who can have no part in the community, who is in fact cast out of it, finally has a most important part. So too, the figure who is never "realized" in the novel comes to dominate it, casting over its strikingly peopled surface an unearthly light that alters everything.

II

Christmas then is clearly the key: in one sense insufficiently developed as a character, he supplies the rest of the novel with significance. For most readers he is a victim who never frees himself from the circle of his crossed blood (real or imagined), and who is killed by a society