

**CLIFFS NOTES on**

**\$2.95**

**FAULKNER'S LIGHT IN  
AUGUST**



**Cliffs**<sup>®</sup>  
**NOTES** INC.

YOUR KEY TO THE CLASSICS

# LIGHT IN AUGUST

## NOTES

*including*

- *Life and Background*
- *The Circular Structure*
- *List of Characters*
- *Analysis and Commentary*
- *"The Individual and the Community"*
- *Notes on Main Characters*
- *The Lena Grove—Joe Christmas Correlation*
- *Faulkner's Style*
- *Review Questions and Essay Topics*
- *Selected Bibliography*

*by*

*James L. Roberts, Ph.D.  
Department of English  
University of Nebraska*



---

---

Editor

*Gary Carey, M.A.*  
*University of Colorado*

Consulting Editor

*James L. Roberts, Ph.D.*  
*Department of English*  
*University of Nebraska*

---

REVISED EDITION  
ISBN 0-8220-0744-4  
© Copyright 1968, 1964  
by  
**C. K. Hillegass**  
All Rights Reserved  
Printed in U S A

# CONTENTS

LIFE AND BACKGROUND . . . . .	5
-------------------------------	---

THE CIRCULAR STRUCTURE . . . . .	7
----------------------------------	---

LIST OF CHARACTERS . . . . .	10
------------------------------	----

## ANALYSIS AND COMMENTARY

Chapter 1 . . . . .	13
---------------------	----

Chapter 2 . . . . .	14
---------------------	----

Chapter 3 . . . . .	16
---------------------	----

Chapter 4 . . . . .	17
---------------------	----

Chapter 5 . . . . .	18
---------------------	----

Chapter 6 . . . . .	20
---------------------	----

Chapter 7 . . . . .	22
---------------------	----

Chapter 8 . . . . .	23
---------------------	----

Chapter 9 . . . . .	24
---------------------	----

Chapter 10 . . . . .	25
----------------------	----

Chapter 11 . . . . .	26
----------------------	----

Chapter 12 . . . . .	26
----------------------	----

Chapter 13 . . . . .	28
----------------------	----

Chapter 14 . . . . .	29
----------------------	----

Chapters 15-16 . . . . .	31
--------------------------	----

Chapters 17-18 . . . . .	33
--------------------------	----

Chapter 19 . . . . .	34
----------------------	----

Chapters 20-21 . . . . .	36
--------------------------	----

"THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE COMMUNITY" . . . . .	38
--	----

## NOTES ON MAIN CHARACTERS

Joe Christmas . . . . .	54
-------------------------	----

Lena Grove . . . . .	55
----------------------	----

Gail Hightower . . . . .	56
Joanna Burden . . . . .	57
Byron Bunch. . . . .	58
<b>THE LENA GROVE—JOE CHRISTMAS CORRELATION .</b>	<b>60</b>
<b>FAULKNER'S STYLE. . . . .</b>	<b>62</b>
<b>REVIEW QUESTIONS AND ESSAY TOPICS . . . . .</b>	<b>64</b>
<b>SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .</b>	<b>66</b>

## Life and Background

Faulkner is considered one of the world's greatest novelists. In 1949, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, which is the highest prize that can be awarded to a writer. In his acceptance speech, he said that the writer must be concerned with the human heart in conflict with itself. Certainly, the struggles of Joe Christmas to understand himself could be classified as the human heart in conflict.

Faulkner came from a rather distinguished Mississippi family. His grandfather, Colonel William Culbert Falkner (the "u" was added to Faulkner's name by mistake when his first novel was published, and Faulkner retained this spelling), came to Mississippi from South Carolina during the first part of the nineteenth century. The colonel appears in many of Faulkner's novels under the name of Colonel John Sartoris. And we learn in *Light in August* that Joanna Burden's grandfather and half brother were killed by Colonel Sartoris.

While *Light in August* is not Faulkner's most difficult novel to read, it is generally considered to be his most difficult one to understand. Various interpretations of the novels have been made, and, therefore, this guide offers only one of many ways of viewing this complex masterpiece.

William Faulkner was born in New Albany, Mississippi, but his family soon moved to Oxford, Mississippi. Almost all of his novels take place in and around Oxford, which he renames Jefferson, Mississippi. In his next novel, *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner will include a map of this county and will show where many events in *Light in August* occurred.

Colonel William Falkner had a rather distinguished career as a soldier both in the Mexican War and in the Civil War. During the Civil War, Falkner's hot temper caused him to be

demoted from full colonel to lieutenant colonel. After the war, Falkner was heavily involved in the trials of the reconstruction period. He killed several men during this time and became a rather notorious figure. (Thus the narration of Joanna Burden's grandfather's death at the hands of Colonel Sartoris has the ring of historical accuracy.) Colonel Falkner also built a railroad, ran for public office, and he was finally killed by one of his rivals. During all of these involved activities, he took time to write one of the nation's best sellers, *The White Rose of Memphis*, which appeared in 1880. He also wrote two other books but only his first was an outstanding success. The intervening members of the Falkner family are not quite so distinguished as was the great-grandfather.

In *Sartoris*, Faulkner's third novel, he placed his works in a mythological county. Most of the rest of his novels take place in this county. Thus, characters like Gavin Stevens, the farmer Armstid, and the Burdens appear in other novels dealing with Jefferson, the fictional county seat. One of Faulkner's great achievements is the creation of this imaginary county. He worked out this plan so carefully that a minor character in one novel—such as Gavin Stevens in this novel—will become a central character in a later work.

In all of his work, Faulkner used new techniques to express his views of man's position in the modern world. In his early works, Faulkner viewed with despair man's position in the universe. He saw man as a weak creature incapable of rising above his selfish needs. Later, Faulkner's view changed. In his more recent works, he sees man as potentially great, or in Faulkner's own words, man shall "not only endure; he will prevail." But in almost all of his novels, Faulkner penetrated deeply into the psychological motivations for man's actions and investigated man's dilemma in the modern world. Of his achievements, *Light in August* is considered one of the greatest, and in the character of Joe Christmas, many critics think that we have our only tragic figure in twentieth-century literature.

## The Circular Structure

The structure of the novel is best seen in terms of a wheel or of a circular image. Actually, the central metaphor of the novel is also that of a circle.

Joe Christmas is the central character of the novel. His story is the hub or center of the novel, and the circular image is first applied to Joe as a cage which keeps him isolated from mankind. The earliest instance of his isolation is seen in his life in the orphanage. Later in life, he thinks of women, marriage, and children as additional ways to keep men caged in. He even cuts off all buttons—again the circular image—that women have sewed on his clothes. But the strongest symbol of his imprisonment in a cage is expressed through the conflicting white and black blood in his veins. Basically, the circular image is the principal image with Joe, as his life is presented in cyclic repetitions seen in the manner in which he constantly travels around the country until he finally arrives in Jefferson, Mississippi.

Although Joe has spent his entire life trying to break out of his circle, he finally realizes that he has lived only when he has remained within the circle. Thus, he attains peace through self-realization only when he reaches an acceptance of his life and no longer tries to flee from the responsibility of his actions. Joe, in other words comes finally to realize that his lifetime struggle was futile, since man can never escape from himself. The acceptance of this fact gives him the first peace of mind that he has ever had.

The circular image is used, therefore, to correlate the action with the structure. The central scene of the novel is Joanna Burden's house, and the cabin behind her house where Joe lives is described as the axle of a wheel where the numerous paths are like "wheel-spokes" caused by the Negro women "following paths which...radiated from the house." It is here at this place (the axle) where Joe murders Joanna Burden and it is also where Lena Grove later gives birth to her child.



The circular image, however, is first presented through Lena Grove. Her curving shape caused by her pregnancy suggests that she is "like something moving...without progress across an urn." The urn, then, is used symbolically in connection with Lena to suggest her enduring qualities. It is also one of the many symbols that connect life with death, since the urn is also used in burial rites.

Other images suggest the completeness with which Lena views life, and how she is fully immersed in a timeless world of natural surroundings. The final image of the first section is the circular column of smoke rising from Joanna Burden's house, which again connects Lena to Joe Christmas' actions. Lena, therefore, with her earthy nature, seems to represent those qualities which will endure forever; and the circular images connected with her (and with the action in general) suggests Ecclesiastes 1:4-6 "A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. The sun rises and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it rises. The wind blows to the south, and goes round to the north; round and round goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns." Likewise, *Light in August* opens and closes with sections about Lena Grove.

Structurally, therefore, the circular image is used to suggest connections between Joe and Lena, to bring out certain qualities for which Lena stands and to act as an encompassing frame for the whole novel. She is the outside frame for the whole novel and the outside frame of the wheel (circle) transversing all experience and centering on no particular or specific experience.

Thus Joe's actions form the central part of the novel and are seen as the hub of the actions, but Lena's actions are used to introduce the novel and close the novel. In between these two stands the figure of the Reverend Gail Hightower. Whereas we meet Lena before we meet Joe, we also meet Hightower before we meet Joe. He is introduced immediately following the Lena (and Byron Bunch) section, and his section immediately precedes the closing scene of the novel. If then, the center or hub of the novel is the Joe Christmas section, Hightower stands

between the center and the outside rim and connects the two. Thus, Hightower may be roughly compared to the spokes of the wheel, for through him the two strands of the novel are brought into a unity.

But then how does Hightower act as the spokes or connecting links between Lena and Joe? First the central metaphor connected with Hightower is that of the wheel. We see this image in the last part of the novel when Hightower begins to examine his life of isolation. As he reviews his life, his thinking "begins to slow" as though it were a "wheel beginning to run in sand." Hightower is then forced to re-examine all of his past life, which, for the first time, he is able to see objectively. As the wheel slowly frees itself from the sand, Hightower gradually realizes that life cannot be lived in isolation.

Hightower's involvement, however, was forced upon him. Byron Bunch involves him with Lena until finally it becomes his task to deliver Lena's child. Hightower then may be seen as the spokes, since he was forced to travel the same paths that Joe has traveled in order to help Lena with the birth of her child. Hightower returns from this place, which is Joe Christmas' house and the place where he had murdered Joanna Burden. And suddenly Joe Christmas escapes from the posse and flees for sanctuary into Hightower's house. Thus, Hightower comes from the birth of Lena's child only to be involved in the death of Joe Christmas.

Therefore, in terms of the total structure of the novel, Hightower is the spokes of the wheel connecting the actions of Lena and Joe, who never actually meet each other. Lena remains as the person transcending all experiences, and Joe is the character whose life is examined in depth in the center of the novel. The final structure then, may be summarized as follows: first, Lena (the rim of frame for the action); second, Hightower (the spokes of the wheel) and then Joe Christmas (the hub of the wheel). And the novel closes in exactly the same order—after we have completed the actions connected with Joe Christmas, the novel focuses again on Hightower and then closes with Lena. Thus briefly, the novel runs: Lena—Hightower—JOE CHRISTMAS—Hightower—Lena.

## List of Characters

### ***Joe Christmas***

The central character, who in southern terminology, is a “white Negro” because he possesses a small amount of Negro blood.

### ***Joanna Burden***

An advocate for the Negro race who has lived in Jefferson as an outcast all her life. She befriends Joe and later becomes his mistress.

### ***Lena Grove***

A young girl who has walked from Alabama searching for the father of her unborn child. She is in her ninth month of pregnancy.

### ***Byron Bunch***

An employee in the local planing mill who reveals the whereabouts of Lena’s seducer and then feels obliged to help her.

### ***Reverend Gail Hightower***

A minister who lives so far in the past that he can no longer enter into the stream of life in the modern world.

### ***Bobbie Allen***

A prostitute who befriends Joe when he is about eighteen even though she knew he was part Negro.

## ***Simon McEachern***

A righteous farmer who adopts Joe and then brutally beats him whenever Joe shows an independent spirit.

## ***Mrs. McEachern***

Joe's foster mother who tries to side with Joe, but is rejected by him.

## ***Euphues ("Uncle Doc") Hines***

Joe's maternal grandfather who places Joe in an orphanage and abandons him because he thinks Joe has some Negro blood. Later he demands Joe's death when he hears that Joe is captured.

## ***Joe Brown, alias Lucas Burch***

The man who fathered Lena's child and then left her. When he arrives in Jefferson, he changes his name from Lucas Burch to Joe Brown and lives in the cabin with Joe Christmas.

## ***Percy Grimm***

The brutal and self-righteous citizen who feels the need to mutilate Joe's body after he has already shot Joe.

## ***Gavin Stevens***

The District Attorney, who offers an explanation for Joe's behavior.

## ***The Dietitian***

The dietitian (Miss Atkins) is important because Joe's encounter with her affected his entire outlook on women.

***Armstid***

A farmer who takes Lena Grove home to stay overnight.

***Martha Armstid***

Armstid's self-reliant wife who donates her meager savings to help Lena Grove.

# Analysis and Commentary

## CHAPTER 1

During the course of the novel, Faulkner will investigate several varied themes connected with modern civilization. Some of the dominant ideas in the novel involve (1) man's isolation, (2) man's relationship to the community, and (3) man's inhumanity to man. Many of these ideas will appear to be negative or pessimistic when viewed from the standpoint of the main character, Joe Christmas. But by focusing on Lena Grove at the beginning, Faulkner is first giving us a brief positive view. While it is true that Lena is now isolated and alone on the road, she almost instinctively knows that people will help her even though, as with Mrs. Armstid, some of them don't approve of her. Also, she will evoke positive and favorable responses from the community and will receive help from many people. In contrast to the bitter harshness which Joe Christmas evokes, Lena inspires kindness and compassion.

Basically, Lena is presented as a simple and relatively uncomplicated person with apparently a great strength and determination. She never complains of her lot and never asks help from anyone even though she willingly accepts assistance. She possesses a simple and basic faith in life. Her responses to life are the fundamental reactions founded on the concept of charity and hope. She believes that she will be with the father of her child when it is born. She is always anxious to help those people who give her assistance, and she would always be obliged if others would share her meager meals with her. This will later be built into a contrast with Joe Christmas, who is unable to respond to people and who is seen to be constantly searching for food of some type. Likewise, the simplicity of Lena's approach to life will later be contrasted to Joe's complex approach to life.

The image of the circle is connected with Lena. First of all, there is her curving shape owing to her pregnancy. Second, the urn images connected with Lena suggest her enduring qualities, but the imagery is also used to connect Lena and Joe together by violent contrast. Because Joe saw urns as symbolic of the feminine, he rejected them as a type of death image. But in connection with Lena, the urn image suggests the endurance and eternity of life. This image will become clearer later as we examine it in connection with Joe Christmas.

Other circular images connected with Lena include various descriptions suggesting her eternal acceptance of life, the completeness with which she views life, and her complete immersion into her natural surroundings.

The last circular image is that of the column of smoke rising from Joanna Burden's house. This image again connects Lena with Joe Christmas. Lena is bringing life into the community at the same time that she sees the circular column of smoke which indicates that Joe Christmas has just murdered Joanna Burden. Lena, therefore, with her earthy nature and circular images seems to suggest qualities which will endure forever.

## CHAPTER 2

The reader should be aware of the time of this section. It is the day that Joanna Burden's house is burning down and therefore the thought of Christmas connected with Joanna Burden causes Byron to think about him; thus, the reader is introduced to Christmas long before actually meeting him.

Our first view of Joe Christmas is an objective one from Byron Bunch. He thinks that Christmas looks as though he belonged to no definite place in the world, no definite home or community. This description evokes the idea of the Christian symbolism connected with Joe Christmas. The reader should be aware of this aspect of the novel regardless of whether he

accepts it or not. For example, Christmas' name is a derivation of Christ's name. We find out that Christmas has no definite home and belongs to the entire world. Christmas' appearance in Jefferson causes surprise, as did the appearance of Christ. Christmas arrived in Jefferson on a Friday, a significant day in Christian religion, and he was thirty-three years old, the same age as Christ when He was crucified. And like Christ, who had twelve disciples, Christmas has at least one in the person of Joe Brown. More significant analogies will appear in later chapters.

The reader should not feel that Faulkner is trying to retell the Christ story. But rather, by these various analogies to the Christ figure, he deepens Joe Christmas' internal struggle by suggesting as an analogy the depth of Christ's struggle.

Faulkner delights in playing or punning on names. Note that Lena thinks *Bunch* is actually *Burch* until she meets Byron. And the Bunch-Grove-Burch relationship is a rather lusty pun on that relationship.

In the preceding chapter, we saw that Lena gladly accepts food and willingly offers to share her own meager food with strangers; now we hear that when Byron Bunch once offered Joe Christmas something to eat, Christmas brutally rejected his kindness telling him to keep his "muck." This reaction offers another basic contrast between Joe and Lena. We also learn that in contrast to Lena, who seems to blend in with her natural surroundings, Christmas emphasizes the difference between himself and the world he lives in. However, we see a relationship between Lena and Joe in that Joe Brown (Lucas Burch) is connected with both of them.

This second chapter mentions all the principal characters in the novel. And all of them seem to have an unusual relationship with the community. One of the motifs, or ideas, that will be developed is man's relationship to his community. And in this chapter, we see that all of the characters are in some way isolated



from their community. For example, we hear that Christmas has nothing to do with his fellow workers. Brown is new to the town and does not seem to fit in. Even though Byron Bunch has lived in Jefferson for several years, no one knows anything about him except the old Reverend Hightower, who is also an outcast from the town. We hear of Miss Joanna Burden, whom the town has rejected because she is friendly with the Negroes. And Lena has just arrived pregnant and unmarried. Thus, Christmas, Brown, Bunch, Lena Grove, Hightower, and Joanna Burden are all mentioned in this chapter, and all are in some ways isolated figures, or at least outside the normal flow of the community.

Essential to the development of the novel is the manner in which Byron reveals that Lena's lover is in the town. The occasion of the fire which coincided with Lena's arrival into Jefferson also prompted Byron to talk more verbosely than is usual, and through his harmless gossip, he inadvertently reveals the whereabouts of Lucas Burch (alias Joe Brown). The fact that he does reveal this information aligns him with Lena and he then feels partly responsible for her welfare. In later chapters, his feelings of involvement ultimately cause him to try to involve Hightower.

### CHAPTER 3

This chapter is concerned mainly with giving the background to Hightower's life. We hear these things not from Hightower but from the town. It will be the end of the novel before we hear Hightower's view of these events and then it will be only as he re-examines them in a search for the truth.

What is clear here is that Hightower is influenced by some event connected with his grandfather's being shot while riding a horse. This event makes him want to remain in Jefferson in spite of the indignations that he suffers. Furthermore, Hightower seems in some way partly responsible for his wife's death, but this full realization comes at the end of the novel.