



The Primacy of Generational Experience in Light in August

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The Primacy of Generational Experience in *Light in August*

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Critics are in almost unanimous agreement that *Light in August* is fundamentally concerned with the major characters' relationship with the community of Jefferson. Cleanth Brooks, of course, has been most influential in forming this critical unanimity (1963: chapter 4). On the other hand, John N. Duvall has waged an almost solitary battle against this critical consensus (chapters 1 and 2). In this paper, I will attempt to supplement Duvall's contention, and, going beyond it, to argue that *Light in August* is essentially about the primacy of generational experience.¹

By "generational experience" I mean the experience of all matters that are related to generational continuity based on the natural cycle of birth, procreation, and death. This includes, for example, such matters as one's sense of being an immediate descendant of somebody, one's sense of being someone's sibling, sexual love, parenting, and aging.

When we re-examine the dominant view of the principal characters' relationship with the community of Jefferson, we notice two major false assumptions. Before going into this, however, it may be helpful to point out the need to be more careful about which characters are residents of Jefferson and which are not. Brooks believes that the people of Jefferson kindly accepted Lena Grove and tried to protect her. He says:

Even the women who look upon her swollen body with evident disapproval press their small store of coins upon her, and the community in general rallies to help her. (1963: 55)

Actually, there is only one woman described in the novel who gave money to Lena. The woman, Mrs. Armstid, did not press her small store of coins upon Lena. She had her husband give the money to Lena, choosing not even to say good-bye to Lena herself. In any case, she is not a resident of Jefferson; she lives in Frenchman's Bend, an area located in the southeastern section of Yoknapatawpha County. Concerning the furniture repairer and dealer who, appearing in the final chapter of the novel, tells us about the journey of Lena, her child, and Byron, Brooks says:

[The reader] should have little difficulty in hearing and recognizing the voice of the community once more in the furniture dealer's narration. (1963: 73)

There is a slippage here. All through the chapter from which this comment is excerpted, Brooks emphasizes Jefferson as a closely-knit community. The phrase "the community" in the quotation, therefore, seems to refer to Jefferson, and yet the furniture repairer and dealer is not even a resident of Yoknapatawpha County, let alone Jefferson. Donald M. Kartiganer makes the following comment:

Significantly enough, Jefferson is able to accommodate even its outcasts—the Hightowers, the Joanna Burdens, the Hineses—allowing all of them (with the important exception of Christmas) to remain within the community, even if on the outskirts. (34)

It should be remembered, however, that Mr. and Mrs. Hines lived not in Jefferson, but in Mottstown, a town situated outside of Yoknapatawpha County.

Most people would feel that these are mere quibbles, but a variety of dubious conclusions based upon the following two major false

assumptions are of great seriousness. In the first place, most critics assume, or at least tend to forget, when they talk about Jefferson, that it is not a homogeneous European-American community. It has a large African-American population. In fact, it is most likely that the African-Americans make up a majority.² In any case, it is more accurate to assume that there are two separate communities in Jefferson, although they partially overlap each other. Brooks, quite forgetting the presence of the African-American community in Jefferson, believes that Joanna Burden “is lonely, cut off from her kind, shunned by the community...” (1963: 57). He asserts that she “lives in, but is not of, the Jefferson community” (1983: 177). She was indeed shunned by the European-American community in Jefferson, but she had been a valued and integral part of the African-American community. When Christmas saw the Burden house for the first time in 1929 and learned that a woman lived there alone, he wondered if she would not be frightened. A local black boy responded to Christmas by saying, “Who going to harm her, right here at town? Colored folks around here looks after her” (250). The narrator says that Christmas later imagined Joanna, and I believe accurately, “talking, listening, to the negro women who came to the house from both directions up and down the road, following paths which had been years in the wearing and which radiated from the house like wheelspokes” (282). Obviously Joanna, regardless of her questionable motive, played an important role in helping the members of the African-American community in Jefferson. We should realize that Brooks’s comment that Joanna did not have “any real part in the living community about her” (1983: 164) is not only inaccurate but also possibly racist.

Michael Millgate, another influential critic, makes an astonishing claim about Joanna in a similar vein. He says that Joanna, toward the end of her relationship with Christmas, attempted to “pursue vicariously through Joe the life of social action so largely denied her as a woman...”

(1987: 46). What actually happens in the novel is that Joanna, for reasons unspecified, tried to “turn over all the business” (303) to Christmas. What was her “business”? Christmas had earlier found out about this:

[Christmas learned that what Joanna] sent were replies—advice, business, financial and religious, to the presidents and faculties and trustees, and advice personal and practical to young girl students and even alumnae, of a dozen negro schools and colleges through the south. Now and then she would be absent from home three and four days at a time...[and] he learned that in these absences she visited the schools in person and talked to the teachers and the students. (256-257)

To claim, as Millgate does, then, that Joanna was denied a life of social action because she was a woman is inaccurate, and perhaps even racist and sexist.

Concerning the interaction between the major characters and the people of Jefferson, Millgate makes another strange observation:

[I]t is certainly clear that in *Light in August* [Faulkner] is concerned not merely to tell the stories of Joe Christmas, Lena Grove and Gail Hightower but also, and perhaps primarily, to show the impact of these stories upon the people of Jefferson. (1966:126)

This is a strange observation because, in the novel, the people of Jefferson in general learn very little, of what really mattered in understanding them, about Joe Christmas, Lena Grove, and Gail Hightower. One clear example is that they knew, and could have known, nothing about Christmas’s past described in the long flashback from the begin-

ning of chapter 6 to near the end of chapter 12. These unfounded critical assertions relate to the second major false assumption about what happens in *Light in August*.

Nearly all critics erroneously assume that *Light in August* is fundamentally structured around the relationship between the principal characters and the people of Jefferson. André Bleikasten, a noted Faulkner scholar, for example, says:

In *Sartoris* as well as in *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*, Faulkner dramatized conflicts within a single family; in *Light in August* he seems to have been much more concerned with individuals in their relationship to society at large, and it is quite significant that in this novel all the major characters are at once aliens to the community of Jefferson and solitary figures.... (1988: 50)

As has often been pointed out, none of the main characters of *Light in August* belongs to the community of Jefferson. They are all outsiders, if not outcasts, living in isolation.... (1987: 81)

The relationship of the major characters to the community, as it is understood by these critics, might be shown in the following diagram.

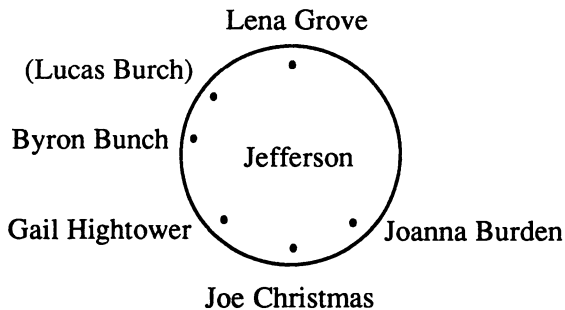


Diagram 1

It is true that none of the major characters belongs to the white community of Jefferson (possibly with the exception of Byron), but they are not exactly “solitary figures” “living in isolation.” The novel is not essentially concerned with “[isolated] individuals in their relationship to society at large” but with what Duvall calls “alternative communities” in opposition to what he calls “the hegemonic community” (4) and with people’s reaction to these alternative communities.³

In Duvall’s analysis, the two most significant alternative communities are formed by the two couples, Christmas and Joanna, and Lena and Byron. Making use of Duvall’s view, one might illustrate the relationships among the major characters in the novel in the following diagram.⁴

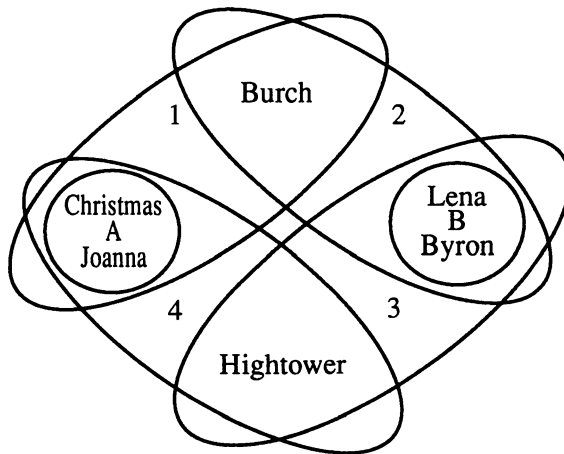


Diagram 2

To claim that what matters in the novel are the relationships of individual characters with the community of Jefferson is to overlook what actually happens in the novel. For example, as stated earlier, Brooks believes that the people of Jefferson kindly accepted Lena and tried to protect her. But what sort of evidence do we have? There is very little description of the way the people of Jefferson directly reacted to

Lena. What is mainly described is the way Byron, whom Brooks regards as one of the isolated characters in the novel, reacted to her.

Like many of Faulkner's comments given in interviews, the oft-quoted one that "[Christmas] deliberately evicted himself from the human race..." (Gwynn and Blotner 72) is contradictory to what really happens in the text. Most critics, however, seem to have accepted Faulkner's over-simplified statement about Christmas as factual. Phyllis Hirshleifer, for example, says that "[Christmas] deliberately isolates himself in every way" (3) and that "Christmas systematically refuses every form of personal tie" (13). Actually Christmas did try to establish meaningful human ties in spite of all the odds against him. Even after Christmas discovered that Bobbie Allen, his first love, was a prostitute, he was prepared until the end to marry her. In a short but extremely significant passage in chapter 10, we learn that Christmas, while roaming around the country, tried one time desperately to inhale "blackness" into him and eject "whiteness" out of him, in a sincere attempt to create an alliance on equal terms with an African-American woman.

After he began to live in Jefferson, Christmas established a business association with Burch, with whom he chose to share his small cabin. (See group one in Diagram 2.) What is crucial in their relation is that Christmas saw fit to reveal to Burch the possibility of his black ancestry (113). Christmas's confession is an index to his willingness to establish a special personal tie with Burch, based upon honesty and candidness. Of course, the alternative community that Christmas formed in Jefferson with Joanna is far more important in refuting the false notion that Christmas deliberately isolated himself, refusing every form of personal tie. Their relationship was short-lived, but I believe that it is one of the most intense relationships to be found in American literature. It is noteworthy that just as it was Byron, who tried to help Lena, it was

Joanna, herself rejected by the hegemonic white community, who accepted Christmas.

Because Christmas is generally believed to have rejected personal ties, his relationship with Joanna has not been properly assessed. The narrator of the novel makes several inconsistent and conflicting remarks, and it is not appropriate to highlight an element in the narration when an element of an entirely opposite nature exists in the same narration. For example, Brooks says that Christmas and Joanna “talked together very little, even after they had become lovers...” (1983: 176). It is true that the narrator makes a comment to the same effect (255). It is impossible, however, not to realize the crucial importance of the extended 16-page intimate conversation in chapter 11 between Christmas and Joanna (265-280). In this talk, Joanna related her family history, disclosing her inner-most feelings about ideas of racial difference. One can readily assume that this was the first time that Joanna had talked about these feelings. From this conversation, we also know that Christmas had already revealed to Joanna the possibility of his having a parent of African-American descent (279). Christmas and Joanna, then, on separate occasions, told each other their most private secrets.⁵

Consider also the following passage:

“Come on,” [Christmas] said [to Joanna]. “If you have something to tell me. We always talk better afterward. It wont hurt the kid, if that’s what you have been afraid of.” (294)

A few pages later, the narrator says:

[Christmas thought] how [he and Joanna] would both laugh over it [their temporary estrangement] tonight, later, afterward, when the

time for quiet talking and quiet laughing came: at the whole thing, at one another, at themselves. (299)

Brooks points out Christmas's "revulsion" (1963: 58) against Joanna, but we should not forget that he was fatally attracted to her even during the second phase of their relationship. In spite of Christmas's fear of Joanna's so-called "nymphomania" (285), he evidently enjoyed relaxed conversation with Joanna after love-making.

At one time, Christmas did not see Joanna for several months, mentally voicing his determination to leave her any day but subconsciously looking forward to their reunion. The narrator tells us:

Then one evening in February [Christmas] returned home and found a note from [Joanna] on his cot....When he changed his clothes, he shaved also. He prepared himself like a bridegroom, unaware of it. (293)

Christmas received another note from Joanna a few months later. At this point, the narrator says:

Then one evening [Christmas] opened the door and found the note on the cot....He saw... himself once again on the verge of *promise* and *delight*. (298-299, emphasis added)

A careful reader would note that the narrator repeats the word "promise" again and the word "delight(s)" on two subsequent occasions, in a similar context (305, 307). Judging from these remarks of the narrator, there seems to be no doubt that Christmas enjoyed not just their quiet talking after love-making but also the love-making itself.

As Duvall points out, "Joe's repeated decisions to leave, which he

never carries through, evidence the vitality of this alternative community” (31). Unlike Burch, who immediately left Lena when she told him about her pregnancy, Christmas stayed on even when Joanna told him that she became pregnant. As the phrase, “unaware of it,” in the last but one quotation from the text typically suggests, we should not take the wording of Christmas’s inner thoughts in the text at face value. What is important here is not that he often made up his mind to leave Joanna, but that he never acted on his decisions.

Brooks says that Christmas “is cut off from ties of any sort” (1963: 56) and that he is “Faulkner’s version of the completely alienated man...” (1983: 175). The truth of the matter, however, is that Christmas’s involvement with Joanna was, as I said earlier, as intense as almost any relationship to be found in American literature. Both Christmas and Joanna were fully committed to each other emotionally. The fact that their relationship ended tragically because of obsessions arising from their past experiences does not change its essential nature.

The alternative community that Christmas and Joanna formed was subversive indeed. It was a union formed in a rural town in northern Mississippi from 1929 to 1932 between a European-American woman and a man, both sharing the belief that he was possibly part black. It does not matter whether Christmas actually was mix-blooded or not. What is significant is that there is no doubt that they were willing to form knowingly an interracial union.

How did the hegemonic European-American community of Jefferson view this union? They refused to face the fact that Joanna and Christmas formed a counter-hegemonic community and turned the whole affair into a rape and murder case. Percy Grimm realized too well, however, that Joanna was a willing sexual partner of Christmas. Notice his remark to Hightower: “Has every preacher and old maid in Jefferson taken their pants down to the yellowbellied son of a bitch?” (512)

It should be clear by now that what we should concern ourselves with is not the relationship between Christmas as an isolated individual and the hegemonic community or that between Joanna as an isolated individual and the hegemonic community, but the way the alternative community was formed, maintained, and broken up and how the hegemonic community reacted to this particular alternative community.

As Duvall cogently points out, another important alternative community is formed by Byron and Lena (33). As I noted earlier, what is really described in the novel is not how the people of Jefferson reacted to Lena, but how Byron, a somewhat marginal citizen, reacted to her and how the hegemonic European-American community reacted to the alternative community that these two characters formed.

The importance of Byron in the novel is rarely understood by critics. There is an interesting passage in chapter 17 about Byron's tortured realization of the role that he had been unwittingly playing in the Burch-Lena-Byron triangle (436-444). To the best of my knowledge, no critic has made even a cursory reference to this passage, let alone accorded it extended discussion.

Too many critical comments made about Byron are superficial and sometimes widely off the mark. It is generally understood that Byron worked at the planing mill alone on Saturday afternoons because he believed that "the chance to do harm could not have found him" there (84; see also 60, 330). The narrator says, however, that "[Byron] had believed that out there at the mill on a Saturday afternoon, alone, the chance to be hurt could not have found him" (460). The narrator suggests in chapter 2 that Byron was once in love (51). Although Brooks confidently says that "[Byron] has suffered no traumatic experience in his youth..." (1963: 66), it seems to be more appropriate to assume that Byron had been rejected at least once by a young woman and had become cowardly in love. (This is another instance when we should not

take what characters say either to themselves or to others as reflecting their true emotions or thoughts.)

Then, quite suddenly and contrary to his expectation, Byron fell in love. Brooks believes that Byron “takes pity on Lena Grove” and “selflessly comes to Lena Grove’s rescue” (1987: 128, 104). This sort of reading deflects us from the true nature of Byron’s involvement with Lena. Byron did what he did because he was irresistibly in love with Lena, not because he took pity on her. When he aided Lena, he did so not selflessly but as any man would aid the woman he loves. The narrator tells us that Byron fell in love “contrary to all the tradition of his austere and jealous country raising which demands in the object physical inviolability” (53). His mentor, Hightower, also counseled him to leave Jefferson (338) and marry a virgin (347).⁶ Continuing to consort with Lena, Byron defied this generally accepted patriarchal idea which denies the premarital female sexuality. Byron’s story is that of a man’s overcoming of the patriarchal mandate that he should choose a virgin. Byron’s case was indeed more complex, because when he asked Lena to marry him on the day he had her move to the cabin (454), it was not just that Lena was not a virgin, but that she was about to become an unwed mother. It is surprising that practically no critic other than Duvall pays due attention to the way Byron struggled with the internalized patriarchal assumption. The account of Byron’s inner turmoil is at least as compelling as Hightower’s meditation in chapter 20, if not more so.

It is seldom that the significance of Lena in the novel is accurately grasped by critics. Carl Benson, for example, says that she cannot “break out of communal patterns of behavior...” (29). We should, however, realize that Lena represented a threat to patriarchy, defying the accepted communal patterns of behavior. It is noteworthy that Lena herself initially accepted the patriarchal view of her state. She told Mrs. Armstid:

“It worried me a little at first, after he[Burch] left, because my name wasn’t Burch yet....But after a while I reckon I just got too busy getting this chap up to his time to worry about what my name was or what folks thought.” (21-22)

What was the reaction of the white community of Jefferson in general to Lena? When Brooks says that “the community in general rallies to help [Lena]” (1963: 55), we get the impression that a large number of people in Jefferson got directly involved with her in an attempt to aid her. But as stated earlier, we do not see this happening in the novel. Mrs Beard, the proprietor of the boarding house where Byron had a room, was one of the few residents of Jefferson who came in direct contact with Lena. What was her attitude toward Lena? When Byron told Hightower that he was planning to have Lena move to the cabin, Hightower said, “Is Mrs. Beard the only reason why she is going to move?” (329). Hightower’s question clearly indicates that Byron had earlier told him that Mrs. Beard did not want to continue to have Lena in her boarding house. On the topic of the attitude of the white women toward Lena in general, Byron said to Hightower:

“And I’ll ask you what will she be getting from the white women in Jefferson about the time that baby is due....How much help will she be getting from the white ladies about that time?” (345)

Byron said this in justification of his having had Lena move to the cabin on the Burden place, so that his comment might not accurately reflect the reaction of the female members of the white community, but at the same time, there is no reason to doubt the fundamental validity of his fear. While frantically in search of a doctor who would attend Lena, Byron felt that he could not tell the truth about the situation. He knew

that he had to find a doctor who would believe “the lies” that he had to tell (436). Obviously, there did not exist what Brooks calls “[Lena]’s rapport with the community” (1963: 72).

As I noted earlier, on the day when Byron brought Lena out to the cabin, he proposed to her. He apparently did not want her to become a single mother. But at the same time, he did not really believe that the woman he fell irresistibly in love with was not a virgin. He did not really believe that Lena was pregnant. Byron later thought:

It was like it was not until Mrs Hines called me [because Lena began to feel labor pains] and I heard [Lena] and saw her face and knew that Byron Bunch was nothing in this world to her right then, that I found out that she is not a virgin (443)

[I have not arranged for a doctor because] I have never believed that I would need one. (442)

Yes. It aint until now that I ever believed that [the man I know as Joe Brown] is Lucas Burch[, the father of her baby about to be born.] That there ever was a Lucas Burch (444)

His desperate refusal to see the reality, his mad confusion, and his final realization of the truth constitute an engaging story. As Byron went in search of a doctor, he felt that “there lurked in his mind... something which was about to spring full clawed upon him” (436). At last, Byron had to admit to himself that he must tell Burch about Lena and the baby.

After the birth of Lena’s baby, Byron imagined that people were laughing at him, thinking,

Byron Bunch, that weeded another man's laidby crop without any halvers. The fellow that took care of another man's whore while the other fellow was busy making a thousand dollars. And got nothing for it. Byron Bunch that protected her good name when the woman that owned the good name and the man she had given it to had both thrown it away, that got the other fellow's bastard born in peace and quiet and at Byron Bunch's expense, and heard a baby cry once for his pay. Got nothing for it except permission to fetch the other fellow back to her soon as he got done collecting the thousand dollars and Byron wasn't needed any more. Byron Bunch (459)

Byron did not just become a laughingstock. The narrator tells us that as a result of his anti-patriarchal behavior, Byron “wellnigh [became] a public outrage and affront” (464). We should take notice that Mrs. Beard, without consulting Byron, lent to somebody else the room where Byron had stayed for seven years, pretending that she honestly believed that he was not coming back, at least for quite a while (461). As Duvall asserts, Byron became a social outcast (14), contrary to Brooks’s observation that Byron, after his involvement with Lena, “is brought back into the community” (1963: 69). He thus decided to leave Jefferson alone, after seeing to it that Burch should be brought to Lena and their child in the cabin. As we learn in the final chapter of the novel, Byron and Lena with her child were united again, but it is significant that their reunion was realized outside Jefferson.

As I have so far demonstrated, as far as the idea of the alternative communities in opposition to the larger community is concerned, Duvall is essentially right. When we adopt Duvall’s thesis about the alternative communities, we should be able to avoid making a false observation like the one James A. Snead does: “...Lena’s final triumph

over conventions of male-female relationships is just a happier way of dealing with the same problems that Christmas fails to solve" (125). Lena's final triumph was possible because Byron was willing to maintain their alternative community, and Christmas's final failure was largely due to Joanna's resolve to break up theirs.

The major weakness of Duvall's thesis ironically arises from his stance as a critic with an avowed "feminist" awareness (xii), which has led him to produce an insightful new reading of *Light in August*. He says that "...Byron and Lena's relation forms a more radical critique of the hegemonic community's patriarchal values than that of Joe and Joanna..." (35). As I have indicated, however, the alliance of Joe and Joanna is not meant to be a critique of the hegemonic community's patriarchal values, but of its racist ideology, which they share to a considerable extent.

If so, is the novel rent into two disunified parts? I would argue that the concept of the primacy of generational experience thematically unites the stories of the two alternative communities. Christmas and Joanna tried to overcome the hegemonic community's racist ideology by creating an alternative community based on "interracial" love and sexuality. On the other hand, Lena chose to ignore the hegemonic community's attempt to control her premarital sexuality and its condemnation of her, while Byron defied patriarchy by establishing and maintaining an alternative community with Lena. It is significant that Byron at the end of the novel was ready to create a new kind of family, accepting the role of father to Lena and Burch's child. Byron is, in a way, a truly heroic person in the novel.

But does this theme of the primacy of generational experience run throughout the novel? It certainly does. Before elaborating on this crucial aspect of the novel, let me point out that Duvall's analysis, and, accordingly Diagram 2, concern themselves essentially with the events

in Jefferson alone. His analysis, then, leaves many important events, particularly those connected with Christmas's history prior to his arrival in Jefferson, unexplained.⁷

Actually, the story of Christmas is that of a man who is basically deprived of generational experience. He was not even allowed to know who his parents were. To our horror, we learn in chapter 16 that none other than his maternal grandfather, Eupheus Hines, shot his father to death shortly after his mother, Milly, conceived him. Eupheus, for some reason, had come to believe that Christmas's father had African-American ancestry.⁸ Furthermore, Eupheus, refusing to obtain aid from a doctor, let Milly bleed to death when she gave birth to Christmas. It is not too much to say that Christmas came into this world at the cost of the lives of his parents. Subsequently, while still an infant, he was left at the door of an orphanage in Memphis by his grandfather, who believed him to be "the devil's walking seed" (422). He stayed at the orphanage for five years without experiencing parental love, constantly watched with hatred by his grandfather, who was working as the janitor there. He was then adopted into a family controlled by a ruthless, sadistic man, Simon McEachern.⁹ It would be unnecessary to review here in detail the way McEachern treated his adopted son. Christmas, as is widely known, grew up to be a young man who could rarely respond to the world around him except in a sadomasochistic manner.

Christmas's first love affair at the age of eighteen with Bobbie Allen turned out to be a catastrophic failure. He arrived at Jefferson at the age of thirty-three, without having had any satisfying social relationship during the intervening fifteen years. That is why the countercultural union with Joanna was extremely significant for him. It is certain that it not only constituted his longest sexual alliance with a woman but also the most meaningful tie with another human being in his entire life. It is ironical and fitting that in spite of his repeated sexual intercourse with

women, Christmas never became a father. Brooks makes an issue of Christmas as one of Faulkner's motherless children (1987: 74-77), but we should not forget that he is also one of Faulkner's childless men. It is generally believed that Christmas did not want a child. Brooks, for example, says, "The last thing that Joe Christmas wants is a child" (1983: 178). We realize, however, that the opposite might be the case if we would take a careful look at the following oft-quoted accusation that Christmas made of Joanna:

"You haven't got any baby....You never had one. There is not anything the matter with you except being old. You just got old and it happened to you and now you are not any good anymore. That's all that's wrong with you." (304-305)

I would argue that, in spite of his protestations, and unlike Burch, Christmas longed for a child. At least, he longed for one, "unaware of it." Otherwise, how could we explain the logic behind the bitter accusation quoted above? If Christmas did not want a child, he should have been relieved to learn that Joanna's was a case of false pregnancy. Or, Christmas would have and should have immediately run away, like Burch did, at the news of Joanna's pregnancy. As I have noted earlier, however, he stayed on, at one time suggesting to Joanna that they make love as "it wont hurt the kid." The accusation is filled with bitterness, because he was deeply disappointed. One realizes that, in terms of the plot action of his story, it is in a ghastly way fitting that Christmas was finally castrated.

Those who are familiar with R. W. B. Lewis's concept of "the American Adam" will immediately notice that Christmas was in an ideal state.¹⁰ He was totally liberated from the past. He was not constrained by heritage, familial or otherwise. He could be whatever he would

choose to be. This is all because he was completely outside the generational cycles. According to the paradigm suggested by Lewis, we, and Christmas as well, should celebrate the state in which he found himself. In Faulkner's paradigm, however, a man like Christmas is a truly tragic person, and we should feel compassion for him as such. In Faulkner's paradigm, our happiness is measured not by freedom from the generational cycles and human involvement but by the quality of our generational experience, by our relationality. Desperately in search of his identity, Christmas kept roaming both in the South and North for fifteen years. (There is dramatic irony in the fact that Christmas even visited Mexico, as his mother had claimed that his father was a Mexican.) Unlike an American Adam figure, Christmas was not happy in "space as spaciousness" as it was not to him an area of "total possibility." Instead, he was completely lost in unbounded space. What he wanted was a place that he could feel securely tied to. Without having read Lewis's passage that I have quoted in note 10—he could not have read it since it was published in 1955—Faulkner was obviously refuting the idea presented in it when he conceived of Christmas as a central character. Christmas is indeed an inverted version of the American Adam.

As Duvall astutely points out and as I have already mentioned earlier, Hightower functions as a third party to the two alternative communities (34-35). It is my contention, though, that Hightower is also related to the main theme of the centrality of generational experience. Like Christmas, Hightower was deprived of genuine parental love. Again like Christmas, he did not have any siblings. Just as in the case of Christmas, no aunts or uncles or cousins of Hightower are mentioned in the novel, if he had any. It is true that Hightower's grandfather had a strong presence in his mind, but his grandfather had been dead for twenty years when Hightower was born in 1882. As he

realizes in chapter 20, Hightower became fixated on the image of his grandfather on a charge during the Civil War to the extent that his identity merged with that of his grandfather:

‘So it’s no wonder,’ he thinks, ‘that I skipped a generation. It’s no wonder that I had no father and that I had already died one night twenty years before I saw light. And that my only salvation must be to return to the place to die where my life had already ceased before it began.’ (527)

It was thus that Hightower, unlike Christmas, deliberately chose to be sterile. He drove his wife to despair and suicide because of his inadequate attitude to sexuality.

When he was asked about his purpose in placing the chapter of Hightower’s early life at the end of the novel, Faulkner answered:

It seemed to me that was the most effective place to put that, to underline the tragedy of Christmas’s story by the tragedy of his antithesis, a man who—Hightower was a man who wanted to be better than he was afraid he would. (Gwynn and Blotner 45)

It is somewhat puzzling why critics, who normally jump at whatever Faulkner said about his characters, do not generally refer to this revealing statement of his about the antithesis between Christmas and Hightower. I suspect that one of the reasons is that they fail to see a clear antithesis between these two characters. I myself would argue that the contrast is clearly to be seen in that Hightower as an adult positively removed himself from generational cycles, while Christmas was not allowed, in spite of his willingness, to place himself in generational cycles. As Faulkner often did, he provided all the mitigating circum-

stances when he described Hightower, but the whole thrust of the story of Hightower makes it clear that Faulkner regarded him as a person who failed because of his irrational commitment to the illusory past.

As critics do not see the centrality of generational experience, they have had difficulty in perceiving the unity of the novel, thematic and structural. Accordingly, astounding observations have been made sometimes. Kartiganer, for example, says "There is a kind of irrelevance in Lena. The world of *Light in August* is not her world" (31). Quite a number of critics have had difficulty with the final chapter, in which the viability of the alternative community formed by Lena and Byron, and this time also by Lena's baby, is affirmed. Faulkner skillfully framed the narrative of the journey of Lena and Byron with the baby by having a young furniture repairer and dealer relate it to his wife, while he was in bed with her shortly after their love-making. The chapter in its entirety obviously celebrates the primacy of generational experience. Yet, Alexander Welsh says;

It is with a last triumph of Hightower's consciousness, then, that *Light in August* essentially closes....After this crescendo...the light-hearted coda that accompanies Lena Grove and Byron Bunch out of town counts for little that touches Faulkner or his readers personally. (132)

The final chapter is sometimes ignored altogether. François Pitavy says, for example, "Throughout this novel, copulation and brutality are inseparable" (193). The framing of the narrative in the final chapter, however, evidently suggests that copulation and brutality are *not* inseparable.

Noticing a peculiar characteristic of the novel, Judith Bryant Wittenberg says:

Light in August contains, for a Faulkner novel—and perhaps for any novel written by a man in the early twentieth century—an unusual number of references to physiological processes such as menstruation, childbirth, and menopause....(119)

Actually, the novel is filled with references to biological, not just physiological, processes. These processes, in turn, are subsumed under generational experience.¹¹

Christmas's maternal grandfather is usually considered to be a fanatic racist and a misogynist. He was, to be sure, a fanatic racist, but was he really a misogynist? A careful analysis of his brutal attitude to his daughter and of the context of his pronouncements such as "...God's abomination of womanflesh!" (412) reveals that he was specifically reacting to premarital female sexuality, rather than to female sexuality in general. The distinction is important because it relates to the issue involved in the alternative community formed by Lena and Byron. Faulkner has Eupheus years later vehemently condemn another woman, the dietitian at the orphanage, but significantly, she was also engaged in premarital sexual activity.

Byron was moved when he heard the tragic story about Milly, who bled to death, because her father, who could not accept the fact that she was about to become an unwed mother, refused to call in a doctor. Byron was obviously critical of the way Eupheus reacted to the premarital female sexuality of her daughter, because he himself was in the process of overcoming the internalized patriarchal code which denounced premarital female sexuality. It stands to reason that Byron was also critical of Eupheus, who rejected his kinship with his grandson on the basis of racist ideology. Though Byron earlier shared a racist attitude toward African-Americans with the rest of the members of the Euro-

pean-American community in Jefferson,¹² he was now ready to place more importance on generational experience than racial distinction. His intervention for the sake of Christmas's grandmother clearly indicates Byron's readiness to accept "interracial" sexuality. Byron did not know for certain that Christmas's father was partly of African-American descent, but it does not matter, because when Byron decided to intervene, he was quite aware of the possibility that he was. Byron later asked Hightower to give false testimony that Christmas was with him on the night Joanna was killed. In a roundabout way, Byron's request is an index to his acceptance of the alternative "interracial" community formed by Christmas and Joanna.

Thus, I conclude that the issue of the interracial alliance and that of the anti-patriarchal alliance of the two alternative communities are both subsumed under the primacy of generational experience, the various episodes of the novel being ramifications of this major premise.

Notes

1 In 1980 I participated in the American culture section of the Kyoto American Studies Summer Seminar and had the privilege of listening to a series of lectures titled "The Anti-Generational Logic of Anglo-American Culture" given by David W. Noble, a noted Americanist at the University of Minnesota. Subsequently, I had an opportunity to attend his classes, both undergraduate and graduate, at the University of Minnesota, for one quarter in 1984 and for two quarters in 1985. While attending his classes, I was particularly struck by the following two of his assertions: "Generational experience is the most sacred experience" and "there is no such thing as an individual." I was struck because I had not expected from such a distinguished American scholar as Noble those

two assertions which flatly deny the concept of individualism, a core American faith. Nevertheless, I realized that I was more than ready to agree with him. I, then, began to reassess various literary works from a new angle, finding myself radically changing my views of such texts as James Fenimore Cooper's "Leather-stocking Tales" and Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*. The present essay represents a portion of my effort in that direction.

2 As Stephen Meats notes, Joe Christmas killed Joanna Burden and Lena Grove gave birth to her child in the summer of 1932 (Pitavy, 234, note 2). The sites of these two events are indicated on the map of Yoknapatawpha county published with *Absalom, Absalom!* in 1936. Faulkner did not specify the year of the map, but we can safely conclude that it reflects Jefferson in 1936. (No sites of events with which Faulkner was to deal after *Absalom, Absalom!* are mentioned on the map.) Now, according to the information that Faulkner gave on the map, the African-American population of the Yoknapatawpha county in 1936 was 9,313, while the European-American population was 6,298. It is reasonable to assume, then, that the African-Americans constituted a majority in the county in 1932, too. It is also reasonable to assume that they also constituted a majority in Jefferson, the county seat, in 1932.

3 When he uses the term "the hegemonic community" to refer to Jefferson, Duvall, like most other critics, seems to posit a homogeneous community. It would be more accurate to assume that the African-American community constituted a hegemonic community of its own. The responses of the African-American community to the alternative communities are, however, not dealt with extensively in the novel. For the sake of making the argument simpler, therefore, I myself will occasionally use the term "the hegemonic community" to refer to the European-American community in Jefferson.

4 It is interesting to notice that both Lucas Burch and Gail Hightower

respectively got involved in the two alternative communities, thus forming four triangular groups. Burch, upon learning about the relationship between Christmas and Joanna, suggested that he would be willing to sleep with Joanna by saying that "If Christmas wanted him to, he would take it week about with him paying the house rent." (103) Furthermore, there are two passages that can be construed to mean that Burch and Christmas had a homosexual relationship (107, 119) and another one that suggests that the sheriff believed that they had (353). That Burch formed a triangular relationship with Lena and Byron is obvious. Hightower publicly made a false claim that he had been sexually involved with Christmas. Hightower was secretly visited by Byron, "two or three nights a week" (52), who believed that people in Jefferson would misunderstand their relationship to be a homosexual one (79).

5 We do not know exactly when Christmas told Joanna about the possibility of his black ancestry. On the day after he sexually assaulted Joanna, he planned to depart, but instead he went to her house. When he entered the kitchen and found the food prepared for him, he mused: "*Set out for the nigger. For the nigger.*" (261) One can assume, then, that Christmas had already told Joanna that he might be part black. I concede, therefore, that it is possible that Christmas told her about his possible mixed ancestry at the time of his assault in an attempt to make it more humiliating, and not in the spirit of furthering mutual understanding.

6 It is generally believed that Hightower, shortly after he successfully assisted in the birth of Lena's child, reconciled himself with Byron's involvement with her. This belief, however, does not square with the text. It is true that at one point he mused about Lena having children fathered by Byron in the future (448). Soon after this musing, however, when he met Lena again in the cabin, he told her to send Byron

away (454), and he felt immensely relieved to learn that Lena believed that she was not to see Byron again. On his way home, Hightower visited the planing mill in “exultation” (456) to confirm the information that Byron was going to leave Jefferson. We are told that Hightower was looking with “a kind of exultant interest” (457) at the interior of the mill when the foreman informed him that Byron had quit his job there. In other words, Hightower did not discard his patriarchal assumption as readily as critics widely assume.

7 It goes without saying that the general consensus that I mentioned at the beginning of the paper, and, accordingly, Diagram I, leave as much unexplained.

8 One would assume that Milly was a willing sexual partner with Christmas’s father, just as Joanna later was with Christmas, excepting their initial violent encounter. One could argue, then, that Eupheus, unable to accept the fact of premarital sexuality of his own daughter, created a fiction that an African-American man had seduced her. By associating African-American males with uncontrolled sexuality, Eupheus was able to rationalize his daughter’s action. She would be, then, a victim. In his mind, therefore, Christmas’s father had to be an African-American and, to fulfill this fiction, Christmas had to turn out to be a mixed-blooded rapist.

9 Millgate says that Christmas learned “[the] ritual of crime and punishment” at the hands of his foster father (1987: 38). We should note, however, that the pattern of crime and punishment had been already initiated at the orphanage. How else do we appreciate Christmas’s episode with the dietitian, in which he willingly presented himself to her to be punished for a transgression? The narrator specifically says that Christmas had become accustomed to the “punishment and injustice” before he was adopted by the McEacherns (185), that is, at the orphanage. The ritual of crime and punishment was certainly intensified at the

McEachern household, but it did not begin there.

10 In *The American Adam* Lewis states: The new habits to be engendered on the new American scene were suggested by the image of a radically new personality, the hero of the new adventure: an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources. [This new hero was commonly identified with Adam before the Fall.]...I call such a figure [as Natty Bumppo] the hero in space, in two senses of the word. First, the hero seems to take his start outside time, or on the very outer edges of it, so that his location is essentially in space alone; and, second, his initial habitat is space as spaciousness, as the unbounded, the area of total possibility. (5, 91)

11 One should not forget, however, that Faulkner clearly endorsed Byron's decision to be the father to Lena and Burch's child. In other words, a biological link is finally secondary in a father-son relationship. Similarly, Simon McEachern failed not because he was a foster father to Christmas but because he was not only brutal and loveless but perverse. Just as his grandfather only lived to see the day when Christmas would at last fit his image of Christmas as "the devil's walking seed," his foster father showed satisfaction whenever he caught Christmas making what he perceived to be moral transgressions. Notice the following passage: "Ah," McEachern said. He sighed; it was a sound almost luxurious, of satisfaction and victory. "...You have revealed every other sin of which you are capable: sloth, and ingratitude, and irreverence and blasphemy. And now I have taken you in the remaining two: lying and lechery." (180-181)

12 Notice Byron's comment about Joanna in his talk with Lena when they first met at the planing mill: "She is a Yankee. Her folks come down

here in the Reconstruction, to stir up the niggers. Two of them got killed doing it. They say she is still mixed up with niggers. Visits them when they are sick, like they was white....Folks say she claims that niggers are the same as white folks" (57).

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