

ANALYSIS

Light in August (1932)

William Faulkner

(1897-1962)

“The book might be considered as an allegory based upon Mr. Faulkner’s usual theme, with the clergyman, Hightower, standing for the Formalized Tradition. The simple-hearted Byron Bunch corresponds with the naïve traditionalist, Anse Bundren; Christmas, the mulatto, is a Snopes character, as is his partner, Lucas Burch, the seducer of Lena Grove. And the pregnant Lena might represent, vaguely, life itself, which Byron and Hightower are futilely attempting to protect from Lucas Burch and Christmas and their kind. But the book is not so transparently allegorical as *Sanctuary*; indeed, it is a confused allegory in which realism is present as well...” [confused critic]

George Marion O’Donnell
“Faulkner’s Mythology”
The Kenyon Review 1.3 (1939)

“Joe Christmas is the son of Milly Hines and a traveling circus man, who is murdered by Milly’s father, Eupheus Hines is fanatically convinced of the man’s Negro blood. When Milly dies in childbirth, Hines leaves the infant on the steps of a white orphanage on Christmas night (the source of Joe’s surname) and takes a job there to watch, with mingled hatred and religious fervor, the working out of God’s will. When he is five, Joe innocently surprises Miss Atkins, the dietician, and an intern making love, and, convinced that Joe will tell on her, she informs the matron that he is a black. Accordingly he is sent away to be adopted by Simon McEachern, a puritanical farmer who believes only in hard work and austere religion. Stoically enduring McEachern’s whippings, Joe does not rebel until he is 18 and has his first romantic experience with a waitress, but when they are pursued by the suspicious McEachern, Joe strikes and perhaps kills him. The girl refuses to go away with him, and with her employers she leaves him robbed, beaten, and deeply embittered.

Joe embarks on 15 years of compulsive wandering along the nightmare-like ‘empty street’ of restless experience, sometimes passing for a while, sometimes living as a black among black people, hating both by turns and often flaunting his mixed blood. At 33 he takes work in the Jefferson planing mill, and lives in a cabin near the house of Joanna Burden, a reclusive white woman of New England descent who is liberal toward blacks, believing them ‘forever and ever a part of the white race’s doom and curse for its sins.’ They become lovers, she giving way to a primitive passion, and he persisting in his bitter detachment. Joe drifts into bootlegging with a white man who calls himself Joe Brown but who is really named Lucas Burch and has fled to Jefferson from Alabama to escape a country girl, Lena Grove, whom he has seduced. Busy with his new life, Joe neglects Joanna, who becomes intensely religious. Her efforts to convert him make him to enraged that he cuts her throat and sets her house afire. Brown is seen drunk in the blazing house, where the body is discovered, and has to hide.

Meanwhile the pregnant Lena arrives in Jefferson to search for Lucas Burch, and because of the similarity of surnames, is led to meet Byron Bunch, another millworker and a choir leader. He not only realizes that the man called Brown is really Burch but he also falls in love with Lena. As her time is near, Bunch finds her a place to stay and creates in the disgraced minister Gail Hightower a compassionate interest in her situation. When Brown hears that \$1,000 is offered for the capture of Miss Burden’s killer, he returns to accuse Joe, and when he himself is suspected, tells the sheriff of Joe’s guilt. After Hightower delivers Lena’s child, Byron contrives to have Brown confronted with her and the baby, and Brown gives up the reward to flee once more.

Joe is caught, and Hines, his grandfather, who still thinks himself an avenging angel of the white race, comes to Jefferson to stir up a lynch mob, from which Joe escapes to take refuge in Hightower’s house. There he is found by Percy Grimm, a racist who shoots and castrates him. The district attorney, Gavin

Stevens, sends Joe's body to his grandmother, who has dazedly confused Lena's baby with the infant 'Joey' of 36 years before, and Byron accompanies Lena, still serenely self-sufficient, as she travels on toward the 'destiny' Hightower sees for her: 'peopling in tranquil obedience to it the good earth.'

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83) 429-30

"There could hardly be a more characteristically American novel than *Light in August*—with its realism; its loose structure; its few characters who though vividly presented are never quite convincingly related to each other; its tendency to become a romance by taking on a legendary quality and by alternating violent melodramatic actions with comic interludes and scenes of pastoral idyll; its concern with the isolated self; its awareness of contradictions, racial and other; its symbolism of light and dark.... In *Light in August* things are perceived in space rather than temporally as they are in *The Sound and the Fury*. Except for the Reverend Hightower, one of Faulkner's characters who are ruined by time, no one is particularly aware of time, and the surviving, enduring character, Lena Grove, lives in a timeless realm which seems to be at once eternity and the present moment.

The Mississippi landscape spreads out before us and the faculty of vision becomes very important as we are shown the town of Jefferson, the houses of Hightower and Miss Burden, or the smoke on the horizon as Miss Burden's house burns. There is much use of the painter's art (even the sculptor's, as when Faulkner makes a wagon slowly passing through the countryside look like part of a frieze, or a seated person—Lena Grove or Hightower—resemble a statue). The art style is not cubist or otherwise modernist as it sometimes is in Faulkner's writing (*Pylon*, for example); it is serene, harmonious, and always aware, even in the midst of dark and violent actions, of a luminousness and spatial harmony that suggest an eternal order.... There are...three separate strands of narrative in *Light in August*, each having its central character. The book makes a kind of triptych.

Lena Grove is one of those intensely female females we meet in Faulkner's books, like Eula Varner in *The Hamlet*. A somewhat bovine earth mother, she has all those womanly qualities which, as Faulkner likes to point out, baffle, fascinate, outrage, and finally defeat men.... The bovine woman brings to Faulkner's mind echoes of ancient myth and ritual (hence the name, Lena Grove—cf. Hilma Tree in *The Octopus*) and he treats her alternately with gravity and with a measure of humorously grandiose fantasy and mockery. Lena's placidity is not only that of the cow but unmistakably that of the gods in their eternity. Hence Faulkner has given her a ritual office by associating her with the religious procession depicted in Keats' 'Ode on a Grecian Urn,' a favorite poem of Faulkner of which there are several echoes in *Light in August*. In Lena's unvarying inner harmony...all opposites and disparates are reconciled or perhaps rendered meaningless. In the words of Keats's poem, beauty is truth and truth beauty. By implying that Lena Grove somehow symbolizes this ideal unity Faulkner suggests no metaphysical reconciliation. He merely praises again the quiet enduring stoicism and wisdom of the heart which he finds among the poor whites, Negroes, and other socially marginal types.

The first thing to be said about Joe Christmas is that he is not a villain, as is sometimes thought. Nor, except in a distantly symbolic way, is he a tragic hero or a 'Christ-figure.' He has many of the qualities Faulkner admires. He suffers, he is a divided man, he is marginal and bereaved; he is 'outraged.' He asks merely to live, to share the human experience, and to be an individual. Like the slave in 'Red Leaves,' he 'runs well'—he has in other words some power of giving his doomed life meaning by insisting as long as he can on his right to be human. All this outbalances his being a criminal. It even outbalances his being a murderer.... The main difference between Joe Christmas and Oedipus (or any other tragic hero in the full classic sense) is that Christmas really *is* a victim; he never had a chance, and a chance, or at least the illusion of a chance, a tragic hero must have.... [Faulkner] takes a rather darkly naturalistic view of things but finds a saving grace in the simplest sentiments of men. Joe Christmas...is a character conceived not in the manner of the tragedian but of the naturalistic novelist....

Christmas's life is given its definitive bias by his encounter with the dietician.... Hidden in a closet and eating toothpaste, he has seen the dietician making illicit love. When she discovers this, Christmas expects,

and *desires*, to be whipped.... What the boy wants is recognition, acceptance as a human being, if only through physical punishment. A whipping would establish the passionate, human contact. Instead he is given a silver dollar, and he sees his doom in its adamant, abstract, circular form. He has now been given an irresistible compulsion to destroy every human relationship that he gets involved in. And this compulsion includes the suicidal desire to destroy himself. Joe Christmas thus joins the long procession of isolated, doomed heroes that begin to appear in the American novel with Brockden Brown, Hawthorne, and Melville.... But if Christmas has his American ancestors, Faulkner has also made some attempt at modernizing him by making him in effect a Conradian or postromantic, Existentialist hero....

The Reverend Hightower is one of Faulkner's best characters. He appeals to us in many ways—first and most importantly in the sad everyday conditions of his life: the decaying house with the weather-beaten sign in front saying 'Art Lessons Christmas Cards Photographs Developed'; the swivel chair in which he sits before the desk with the green shaded reading lamp as he gazes fixedly out the window; his moving soliloquies with Byron Bunch, who, though his companion, is so different from him in heritage and intellect... Like Quentin Compson and Horace Benbow...Hightower is one of Faulkner's intellectuals—he is fastidious, genteel, frightened by life. Haunted by the glory and crime of the past, he is incapable of living in the present. Like Quentin Compson he tries willfully to impose a kind of order on the irrational flow of time and nature. His view of things, however, is not metaphysical or theological like Quentin's; it is purely mythic and aesthetic, the product of a mind immersed in Keats and Tennyson....

Before he dies [Hightower] sees the truth about himself—'I have not been clay'—which is merely a way of admitting finally that neither truth nor beauty can be perceived by the mind that remains inverted and solipsistic and denies man's common fate in nature and time. This is the truth that finally comes to Hightower; and it is what allows him to see for the first time, and pathetically for the last, the full beauty of the myth he has lived by.... The progression of his views has thus taken him beyond Christianity and his pure aestheticism to a full, profound, perhaps tragic naturalism....

Three circles should be kept in mind; they are associated with the three main characters. Remembering the theme of solitude vs. society, alienation vs. community that we noticed in *As I Lay Dying*, we remember also that Faulkner spoke of Addie Bundren's aloneness as a circle that had to be violated in order to be made whole. Although this is a literary idea that Faulkner might have absorbed from many sources, among them Yeats, the symbol of the circle of selfhood may be taken as an archetype of the modern imagination, and especially wherever Puritanism has made itself felt. Lena Grove's circle, then, since she is a kind of earth goddess, is simply that of the death and renewal of nature. She is also associated with the urn of Keats's ode and the ritual procession of its encircling frieze. In the circle of her being truth and beauty are perpetually absorbed into each other. In Lena selfhood is whole; it is congruous with experience, with nature and with time.

The circle associated with Joe Christmas is the fatalistic, repetitive pattern of his life; in actual symbolization it varies from the silver dollar the dietician gives him to the pattern of his flight from the sheriff and his dogs. He wants, of course, to break out of his circle—'to define himself as human,' in the words of Robert Penn Warren. Yet whenever this becomes possible, usually in relation to a woman he has become involved with, he succumbs to the irresistible compulsion to preserve his isolation. Finally, virtual suicide is the only solution. One might add that his circle is also racial; he is doomed to oscillate helplessly between the white world and the black.

If Christmas's imprisoning circle is imposed on him by circumstance, the Reverend Hightower's is imposed by himself, forged by his own intellect and neurotic fantasy. Only at the end when for a moment he is released from the isolation and stagnation of his life does the wheel that is a part of his obsessive fantasy finally spin free: 'The wheel whirls on. It is going fast and smooth now, because it is freed now of burden, of vehicle, axle, all....' Despite the religious overtones of the language, this ultimate vision of Hightower seems to be a purely naturalistic intuition of his own solidarity with the other people he has known. It is this intuition that finally frees him.

The symbolism we have been noticing runs fairly deep, but it remains of the natural order, as, on the whole, does similar symbolism having to do with the self and its isolation in the writings of Hawthorne,

Melville, and James. The specifically Christian symbolism in *Light in August* is not made deeply significant. It seems impossible to be much impressed with the fact that Faulkner calls one of his characters 'Joe Christmas,' and that he is thirty-three years old, has his feet votively bathed, and is in a manner crucified. The symbolism of the circle would certainly, if we had here a specifically Christian novel, include the traditional symbolism of death and the newborn spiritual life. But the central mystery of Christianity is not present. And *Light in August* reminds us that Faulkner's imagination is not characteristically stirred by incarnation, catharsis, and harmony, but rather by separation, alienation, and contradiction. If *Light in August* were a Christian novel it might use the symbolism of the book as it stands—the circle, the opposition of light and dark, and so on. But in some way it would have to employ the idea that life comes about *through* death, that is some way a new spiritual life had come to the community of Jefferson through the death of Joe Christmas. But this does not happen; there is no new life, no transfiguration anywhere that would not have occurred without Joe Christmas. There is no new religious consciousness or knowledge. In Joe Christmas we do not celebrate the death and rebirth of the hero.

Light and dark, good and evil, life and death, Eros and Thanatos are postulated in *Light in August* as eternal and autonomous contradictions. There is no possibility of absorbing and reconciling these contradictions in a whole view of life that is in any specific sense religious, or, for that matter, tragic. There are only two courses open: (1) to commit some transcendent act of horror or violence or suicide, (2) to find reattachment to the simple concrete conditions of life, through love, stoic patience, or humor, for in this way one may, as it were, temporarily step aside from the eternal contradictions in which humanity is involved and give the world the appearance of harmony."

Richard Chase
The American Novel and Its Tradition
(Doubleday/Anchor 1957) 210-19

"He may have heard of determinism, but does not believe in it; in the face of those joyous theories of self-exculpation formulated by present-day psychology and sociology which presumably give the individual the right to scream 'It's not my fault! It's not my fault!' his preference is much nearer the dreadful freedom of the existentialist: since existence is prior to essence, the individual is totally free, and totally accountable for his own view of things, for with total freedom comes total responsibility.

In the case of Joe Christma, Faulkner takes pains to make this freedom absolute. Here we must be blunt: previous critical opinion almost never to have been aware of that freedom. Partly because, one supposes, the term 'conditioning' is now a household word, it was decided that Christmas is the helpless victim of his own conditioning. But surely it is obvious that the wellspring of all his actions is his refusal to surrender to that conditioning. The conditioning is well documented, but in the first mention of him his significant quality is his rootlessness, his freedom from the customary restraints of job, property, wife, children, and taxes. Straw hat on head and razor in pocket, he is ready for a journey of one mile or a thousand. One of Faulkner's clearest strokes of genius is in leaving the question of Christmas's possible Negro blood unanswered.... If he does not have it, the percentage is very small, which not only adds to the irony, but leaves him free to 'pass' if he chooses...he is adopted and brought up as a white child by the McEacherns. ('He dont look no more like a nigger than I do,' says a white character.) This is probably the most critical point in the book: Christmas is free to choose what he will be. Precisely as Oedipus, he must find out who and what he is....

All his life people attempt to force him to be what they insist he must be: McEachern's beating him to inculcate worship of the Moloch-Jehovah; Mrs. McEachern's sickening attempts to make him as cringing as herself; Joanna Burden's final insistence that he 'become a nigger.' His method is active. In the fifteen years of wandering he tries life as a black man, living with Negroes, and as a white man attempting to live with whites. But ultimately he chooses to be neither—he will simply be himself. Until the very end, the community cannot decide for sure what he is; their deep distrust grows from his refusal to declare himself one way or the other in a social pattern where this is the most important distinction of all. He will insist on his right to simply be; he has defined himself and has fought hard for the definition. The murder of Joanna Burden and his own death are the fruit of that insistence....

Part of the difficulty in understanding Christmas again lies in the form and structure of the novel. The sequence of telling is such that he is first seen as the utterly sinister alien, and is revealed early in the book as a brutal murderer. It is only as the flashbacks begin to unfold and we see him as a child and youth that we are made aware of his simple humanity. Presented for the most part at a distance, his inmost thoughts and feelings are not often enough open to us, but at rare intervals a momentary flash of insight will give a total revelation. We see the denial of love and belonging in the orphanage and the beatings by McEachern, and the effect of these is of course cumulative, but one of the revealing flashes comes when he hears that his name will be changed....

Rejected, feared, hated, he has sought and been proud of that rejection and fear; but pushed too far he has gone too far, and unable to reconcile conflicting responsibility, he has committed a brutal murder. Now he must accept responsibility for the freedom of choice he exercised in his actions and pay the price of that freedom. But, because he is truly tragic, he will not practice a mere lethargic passivity, and wait for the men with the dogs to come up and shoot him. He will actively seek his human reconciliation; his problem is how to begin to get back inside the human community. It is not easy; he has been isolated for too many years.... Free to the end, Christmas has held onto his life until the proper moment has come to give it, the moment most filled with meaning. As Gavin Stevens says, no one will ever know what Christmas hoped for from Hightower, but that it was the conflict in his blood that let him run but would not let him escape; that made him snatch up the pistol but would not let him kill Grimm with it....

Few scenes in modern literature have the speed and inevitable onward sweep of the chapter in which Percy Grimm pursues Christmas and kills him. Taken merely as the realistic evocation of a scene, the writing is superb: the shots, the shouting; the blind rushes and clotted confusion of the mob; the added detail of the fire siren, a characteristic sound of our time, screaming the rise and fall of its meaningless message; the early resolution of the pursuit into a personal contest between Christmas and Grimm. The rendition of Grimm as a type is as merciless as anything of the sort ever done. He is Faulkner's equivalent of the classic Nemesis or the Furies; machine-like, unerring, impersonal, mindless.... Christmas runs into Hightower's house still holding the pistol he has snatched up on the way. He could kill Grimm easily, but with nothing more to lose by an additional killing, he does not; this is his final gesture of human reconciliation....

We feel with Joe Christmas because he is the modern Everyman. In a cosmos where the only constants are absurdity and instability, we have the right to expect anything except rationality. Any one of us could become the victim. His suffering far transcends the time and place and means Faulkner has used, and comes to stand for, everything that is grave and constant in the human condition....it gives us a moment of true insight into ourselves. Part of this insight is perfectly symbolized in *Light in August* when the injured Hightower, in a scene that might have come straight out of Dostoevsky, is working himself toward complete self-knowledge. As the wheel of his memory turns on and on, he comes to realize that his own cold selfishness, his absorption in the Confederate grandfather, has caused his wife's disgrace and death. As the crowd of faces in his memory struggle to come into focus, one of them becomes the dead face of Christmas, but the focus is not clear; another face is struggling with that face, struggling to become clear and be recognized. Suddenly it emerges: it is the face of Percy Grimm; gunman, mutilator, avenging fury, lyncher extraordinary.... We are all related; we are all involved. We are all responsible because we are all a part of mankind... Once we achieve this awareness, the acceptance of the tragic human situation, with all its absurdity and irrationality, becomes possible...

It is just this area of playing upon our deep, instinctual fears and misgivings that Faulkner has succeeded in achieving favorable comparison with classic tragedy. It was impossible to put the Furies believably on the stage, but Faulkner found the perfect equivalent in the lynch mob, which in one way or another elicits a strong emotion in all of us."

John L. Longley, Jr.
"Joe Christmas: The Hero in the Modern World"
Virginia Quarterly Review (Spring 1957)

"*Light in August* (1932) opens as a country girl, Lena Grove, comes to Jefferson on foot seeking Lucas Burch, the father of the child she is about to bear. When she reaches the town, however, her destiny

becomes involved with that of Joe Christmas, a young sawmill worker with a touch of Negro blood. Christmas, an orphan, has been raised to manhood by a dour Scotch farmer; a bitter experience with a small-town harlot has made him antisocial and brooding. His wanderings throughout the South have at last led him to Jefferson, where he becomes the protégé of a mysterious spinster named Burden, daughter of carpetbaggers who settled in the town after the Civil War. He lives in a cabin on Miss Burden's land and eventually becomes her lover. When Lucas Burch, fleeing Lena, arrives in town Christmas utilizes him as a partner in his secret bootlegging enterprises, which involve highjacking liquor from trucks and selling it to the town loafers by the bottle.

All this is background; the key action of the novel takes place on the day Lena arrives in town. On the morning of this day Miss Burden, brooding over her imminent old age, attempts to kill Christmas and herself with an obsolete Confederate pistol; the weapon misfires, and Christmas, emotionally overwrought, kills her with a razor. Burch, drunk, sets fire to the house, is caught, and arrested for the murder; he escapes by putting the blame on Christmas. When Lena gives birth to her child the sheriff forces Burch into a reconciliation with her, but he flees on first opportunity. Lena, too dim-witted to waste much time in regret, goes blithely on to Memphis to take up a new life. In the meantime Christmas has been captured in a nearby town and brought back to the Jefferson jail. When he escapes he is tracked to the house of the Rev. Hightower, a disgraced minister, and brutally slain by Percy Grimm, a conceited young national guardsman. *Light in August* is structurally similar to Joyce's *Ulysses*: it focuses on the events of a single day and describes the reactions of various characters to these events."

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 214-15

"*Light in August* begins unforgettably with a pregnant young woman from Alabama sitting beside the road in Mississippi, her feet in a ditch, her shoes in her hand, watching a wagon that is mounting a hill toward her with a noise that carries for a half mile 'across the hot still pine-winey silence of the August afternoon'.... For it is this intense sense of the earth, this superb registering of country sights and sounds as the stillness is broken by the creaking and lumbering wagon coming up the hill, that is the secret of Southern writing.... Faulkner's sense of local color must be especially moving. But after all, it is this sense of place that is the great thing about American writing.... And it is a simple fact that the opening of *Light in August* is so beautiful that nothing after quite comes up to it....

It is the contrast of Lena Grove and Joe Christmas, of the country girl and the American wanderer, who is a stranger even to himself, the ultimate personification of modern loneliness, that frames the book—literally so, since Lena Grove begins and ends it, while Joe Christmas's agony and crucifixion are enacted as within a circle round which he runs in an effort to catch up with himself. When he finds that he cannot run out of this circle and stands still at last in order to die, the book comes back to Lena Grove and ends on her ritualistic procession up the road with her baby and Byron Bunch—Faulkner's version of the Holy Family.... As Irving Howe has noted, the arrangement of the book 'resembles an early Renaissance painting—in the foreground a bleeding martyr, far to the rear a scene of bucolic peacefulness, with women quietly working in the fields. Despite its violence, *Light in August* is one of the few American novels that remind one of the humanized and tranquil landscape in European novels. Its stillness is rooted in the peaceful and timeless world which Lena Grove personifies and in which she has her being. It is the stillness of the personal darkness inside which Joe Christmas lives....

Joe Christmas...is really 'man' trying to discover the particular kind of man he is. He is an abstraction created by the racist mania of his grandfather, a former preacher whose tormented life is spent insisting that Negroes' are guilty in the eyes of God and must serve white men. When his daughter ran away with a 'Mexican' circus hand, Doc Hines not only killed the man, and after his daughter died in childbirth on Christmas Eve, left the baby on the steps of an orphanage, but later took a job as a janitor in the orphanage in order to make sure that his 'nigger' grandson would never be allowed to contaminate anyone. This obsession about race goes hand in hand with a Calvinist obsession of the elect and of the hopeless sinfulness of others, an obsession which is found in both Joe Christmas's rigidly doctrinaire foster-father, Calvin McEachern, and in his future mistress, Joanna Burden a descendant of New Hampshire Puritans who remains in the South though she is the sworn enemy of its ways. All these obsessions about purity and

guilt are, Faulkner indicates, the remnants of an inhuman religion that has added bigotry and arrogance to the curse of slavery....

The obsessions are all summed up in the fate of Joe Christmas, who is trying to become *someone*, a human being, to find the integrity that is so ripely present in Lena Grove. Lena does not have to try; her symbol is the wheel on the road. Joe Christmas's is flight: flight on the same road, but flight toward himself, which he cannot reach, and away from hatred of himself, which he cannot escape. Only his pursuers catch up with him, to murder and to castrate him. Joe Christmas is an abstraction trying to become a human being. In the race-mad South, many a Negro—and Mexican and Jew—is turned into an abstraction. But this man is *born* an abstraction and is seeking to become a person.

He is an orphan, brought up in a foundling home, who in earliest childhood is watched by his own grandfather as if he were a caged beast. He is then bribed by the dietitian, whom he has heard making love with the interne, as if he knew enough to betray her. He is adopted by a farmer who renames him, lectures him, starves him, beats him for not learning the catechism. He is robbed and beaten by the pimp of the prostitute with whom he has fallen in love. He is constantly treated by his Negrophile mistress, Joanna Burden, as if his own personality were of no account and is beseeched in her sexual transports as 'Negro.' And finally, after being starved, betrayed, flogged, beaten, pursued by bloodhounds, he is castrated.... Everyone wants to play God to the orphan Joe Christmas....

Joe Christmas is the most solitary character in American fiction, the most extreme phase of American loneliness. He is never seen full face, but always as a silhouette, a dark shadow haunting others, a shadow upon the road he constantly runs—a foreshadowing of his crucifixion, which, so terrible and concentrated is his suffering, already haunts the lives of others like a black shadow.... He becomes the 'Negro,' or the thought of, the obsession with, Negroes in the minds of those who, looking at Joe Christmas, can think of nothing else. And Joanna Burden, whose abolitionist grandfather was murdered in the South, whose whole life has been an obstinate carrying on, deep inside Mississippi, of her family's coldly abstract espousal of Negroes, shows us how much of an abstraction Joe Christmas is when she makes love crying to him 'Negro! Negro!' Whether the 'Negro' represents the white man's guilt or the white man's fear, he is always a thought in the white's mind, and—in the South—an obsession.... His final ignominy comes when his mistress, Joanna Burden, regarding him...as a Negro charge to be 'brought up,' tells him that she wants him to go to school so that he can become a lawyer. And it is at this point that he breaks....

The triumph of the book is Faulkner's ability to keep the leading character a shadow, and yet to make us feel all his suffering. Compare Joe Christmas with the types of the Northerner, the city man, the 'stranger' in Southern writing, to say nothing of the Negro, and you realize that where so many neo-orthodox Southern literary critics are hysterically fearful of the 'stranger,' Faulkner, by a tremendous and moving act of imagination, has found in Joe Christmas the incarnation of 'man'—that is, of modern man, reduced entirely to his unsupported and inexplicable human feelings.... He is not, like the Christ of *A Fable*, a man who gives new meaning to life; like Benjy in *The Sound and the Fury*, he is an incarnation of human suffering, unable to speak—except in the tremendous action near the end of the book when he stops running from his pursuers and waits for them, and attains in this first moment of selfhood the martyrdom that ends it.

We see Joe Christmas always from a distance. This distance from ourselves to him seems to me the key to the book, for it explains why Joe exists for us principally as a man who is described, not seen. He is so far away that we cannot see him: he is reported to us. And this distance is filled with the stillness of a continuous meditation. *Light in August* tells a story of violence, but the book itself is curiously soundless, for it is full of people thinking to themselves about events past. As soon as Lena Grove arrives in Jefferson, at the end of the first chapter, the story of Joe Christmas comes to us... Almost everything we learn about Joe Christmas comes to us in the form of hearsay, accusations, the tortured memories of others; even his death is told as an incident in the life of his murderer, Percy Grimm. All these reports about the stranger sufficiently suggest his alienation. But in themselves they also create that stillness, that depth of meditation into which all the characters are plunged.... The stillness is interrupted by shooting, burning, beating, the barking of bloodhounds, and Percy Grimm's mutilation of Joe Christmas, which interrupts the pervading stillness like the sound which nails must make when they are driven into wood through human flesh. Yet,

just behind this obvious figure of the Roman soldier torturing Christ, there is a pastoral world [of Lena Grove]....

Hightower is both a surrogate figure for Faulkner's meditations and a kind of scapegoat on whom Faulkner can discharge his exasperation with Southern nostalgia and the endless searching in the labyrinths of the past for the explanation of the Southern defeat and of the hold it keeps on the descendants of the Confederate aristocracy.... Faulkner has signified in Hightower that wholly retrospective, watchful concern, not with the past but with their bondage to the past that seems to be the essence of what Faulkner's characters are always thinking about. Joe Christmas, Joanna Burden, Gail Hightower—each of these is the prisoner of his own history, and is trying to come to terms with this servitude in his own mind. None of them can ever lift themselves out of the labyrinth by taking thought....

Hightower is guilty because his sickly, foolish nostalgia for his grandfather's one day of glory made him unavailable to his own wife, who committed suicide; Joanna Burden feels so guilty that she has remained an alien in the Southern town in which she was born, accepting her isolation as the price of her identification both with her Abolitionist forebears, who were shot down in the South, and with the Negroes, on whom a curse must have been laid. Even Doc Hines and Percy Grimm murder in order to 'clean' life of the stain that Negroes have put on it, for as the Negroes were cursed by God, so they have cursed life, and the manic 'saviors' of Southern racial purity have to save their hallowed country from contagion.... Guilt, not history, is the nightmare from which all of Faulkner's deepest characters are trying to escape. The guilt arises from man's endless complicity in his own history.... Like T. S. Eliot, Faulkner is a favorite today because he takes his stand on human guilt; this is the side of ourselves that we can recognize... Hightower finally frees himself, in the one profoundly unselfish act of his life, by delivering Lena's baby. In the freshness of the early morning, after Lena has given birth, Hightower feels that he is in touch with the earth again—the symbol throughout the book of rightness, authenticity, peace....

By the time we have finished *Light in August*, we have come to feel that the real greatness of Faulkner in this book (and indeed of his extraordinary compassion) lies in the amazing depth which he brings to this contrast of which American writers—particularly in the South—are so fond: between the natural and the urban, between Lena Grove's simplicity and the world in which Joe Christmas walks all city pavements with the same isolation and indifference, eats at the oddly smooth wooden counter, and is murdered. Faulkner even leads up to a strange and tortured fantasy of Joe Christmas as Lena Grove's still unnamed son. There is virtually an annunciation to Lena, in the moving last phase of the book when Lena, delivered of her child just as Joe Christmas is running for his life, hears Mrs. Hines, Christmas's grandmother, calling the baby 'Joey'—and he who is a 'nigger' murderer, and whom Lena has never seen. The reader comes to this with a shock, only because Faulkner's...desperate eagerness to wrest all the implications from his material, to think it out interminably, since there is no end to all one's possible meditations round and round the human cycle."

Alfred Kazin
"The Stillness of *Light in August*"
Twelve Original Essays on Great American Novels
ed. Charles Shapiro
(Wayne State 1958) 257-83

"Joe Christmas as well as the Reverend Hightower and Joanna Burden are both self-crucified and crucified by others, both villain and victim. The interplay of these polar aspects of the human being produces much of the dramatic tension and the grotesque quality in the novel.... The nature of the private world and its relation to others is indicated by a threefold pattern of interlocking imagery—the circle, the shadow, and the mirror. All the main characters in *Light in August* are strangers to Jefferson and they remain strangers no matter how long their stay or how deep their roots. Their isolation is suggested by the image of the circle which achieves its clearest expression and greatest significance in the episode of Joe Christmas' flight and his sudden realization: 'It had been a paved street, where going should be fast. It had made a circle and he is still inside of it.... I have never got outside that circle'....

JEFFERSON

In the midst of that jostling, noisy intercourse which is society and to which all men contribute, each is alone, unable to break through the circumference of his own circle or to admit anyone into it. Because of the solipsistic quality of the private world, each individual sees others and is himself seen as a shadow, ghostlike and unreal.... Collectively, Jefferson is Southern, White, and Elect, qualities which have meaning only within a context which recognizes something or someone as Northern or Black or Damned. This antithesis is periodically affirmed through the sacrifice of a scapegoat who represents, in fact or popular conviction, those qualities which must be rejected if Jefferson is to maintain its self-defined character. Miss Burden, Hightower, and Christmas serve as such scapegoats and serve willingly, almost eagerly, since they too have accepted the absolute necessity and validity of the dichotomies in whose name they are destroyed.... Accordingly, Christmas has a dual function in the novel. As an individual, he explores his own relation to the myth of the Negro, while as a part of society, he is identified with the myth.... He is obsessed with the idea that he must choose, yet his every action emphasizes his inability to do so. In the world of Jefferson, however, after Brown's accusation has taken root, he is treated as if he were in actual fact a Negro....

The basis of this pattern is Jefferson's conviction that the individual can only become a member of society by permitting himself to be classified according to race, color, geographic origin, and so on.... What starts as a verbal pattern of classification thus becomes a social order not to be challenged or changed. And what starts as a category becomes a myth, for certainly the word 'Negro' is a compressed myth just as the stock response to that word is a compressed ritual. The result is that men like Joe Christmas or Velery Bon, who can neither fit nor be fitted into these categories, are either sacrificed to or driven out of the society whose cherished beliefs they threaten....

JOE CHRISTMAS

The irony of Joe's position is that what seems to be a choice is in reality a delusion: Negro or white—to choose one is to affirm the existence of the other. His awareness of this dichotomy makes him take up the role of antagonist in all situations. In the presence of whites he becomes Negro; among Negroes he feels himself to be white. The result is that series of tensions and conflicts for which he himself is at least partly responsible. The Joe Christmas who is finally lynched as 'Negro' is the joint creation of his private world and of the larger public universe....

The identification of Joe with Negroes receives additional and unexpected support from the dietician. Surprised in the midst of her clandestine love affair, she lashes out at Joe calling him a 'little rat' and a 'little nigger bastard'.... Though she had never considered Joe to be a Negro, 'she believed that she had, had known it all the while, because it seemed so right: he would not only be removed; he would be punished for having given her terror and worry.' At cross purposes, each speaking a strange, private language, and each motivated by personal reasons, the dietician and Hines...combine to extend and intensify Joe's awareness of himself as a different kind of being and to force the matron to act on the assumption that he is indeed a Negro....

McEachern's religious discipline is accepted eagerly by Joe because it makes his life completely predictable, relieving him of the necessity for self-judgment and responsibility. Accordingly, he rejects Mrs. McEachern's awkward and uncertain attempts to establish a more purely human relationship with him. Ultimately, however, he seeks and finds such a relationship in his love for Bobbie, the waitress. It is this love which prompts him to rebel against McEachern's Calvinistic ritual of confession and penance and to resist the customary punishment which McEachern seeks to inflict on him at the dance. But this achievement is short-lived, for Bobbie's later shrieks of rage signal the destruction of the last of Joe's natural, spontaneous emotions. Her betrayal, which impels him into the long, lonely street of his life, is not only sexual but religious and racial, for all three are involved in the idea of miscegenation into which their affair is suddenly transformed.

So long as their affair proves satisfactory and trouble free, Bobbie simply ignores Joe's confession that 'I think I got some nigger blood in me.' In a moment of crisis, however, and in order to save herself, she,

like the dietician, finds it convenient not only to believe but to act upon that belief. All blame, all possible punishment is shifted to Joe as 'Negro' who significantly enough has himself provided the material for this accusation. Suddenly conscious of her white blood, Bobbie has no compunction about abandoning a 'nigger' whom she had naively mistaken for a white man nor about watching that 'nigger' beaten senseless by her friends.... He beats the prostitute who refuses to be horrified by his Negro blood, thus forcing her to initiate that ritual of violence which he expects....

During his relationship with Joanna Burden, Joe's preoccupation with such [racial] categories becomes especially acute since he recognizes the same obsession in her. In fact, her concern with racial, geographic, and religious myths serves as a complement and antithesis to his own. Not even their frenzied and insatiable love-making can destroy their ingrained awareness of what each believes the other to represent. While her body surrenders completely to his, Joanna still mutters 'Negro! Negro! Negro!' And Joe, on his way to her bedroom, still pauses to smash the dishes of food prepared by the white woman and left for him in the kitchen. Thus, even miscegenation is powerless to erase their concern with racial differences and indeed serves only to intensify it....

For what he visualizes is a return to the natural world where the only meaningful categories are male and female and the only meaningful relationship is sexual. But Joanna, her physical need for him exhausted, demands of him that choice which he has spent his whole life evading. She insists that he ignore his uncertainty and accept once and for all the role of Negro as modified by the North [that is, as defined by her] together with that of repentant sinner. The violence between them is inevitable, but significantly it is both impersonal and unimpassioned. Joanna's act of raising the pistol and Joe's use of the razor are both projected as shadows against the wall—phantom weapons directed at phantom opponents. For each sees embodied in the other that racial myth which has dominated their lives and which they must destroy if they are to be free....

Yet in the very act of gaining his freedom, Joe loses it. The act of murder leaves him vulnerable to society's judgments and actions. The fire at Miss Burden's and her decapitated body generate a tension in the milling crowd which needs only the proper spark to explode into violence. That spark is provided by Brown, a man whose parentage is as obscure as Joe's own. The pattern made familiar by Hines, the dietician, and Bobbie is repeated as the cry of 'Negro' and the suggestion of miscegenation channel the restless and undirected energy of the observers away from the accuser. Three times Brown repeats 'Accuse the white man and let the nigger go free' until the crowd grasps the significance of that contrast and prepares itself for action. Once he pronounced the word 'Negro,' the actual guilt of Joe Christmas, the circumstances, and the motivation, all become irrelevant, for the connection between 'Negro' and 'murder' is part of the public myth. At the same time Joanna Burden loses all individuality, becoming simply a white woman and hence an innocent victim who must be avenged....

Even the cosmopolitan Gavin Stevens, with his Harvard and Heidelberg studies behind him, is not able to see Joe Christmas except through a filter of preconceptions. Though he recognizes that Hines is quite mad, he, nevertheless, accepts his contention that Joe's father was actually a Negro. More important: despite his disinterested rationalism and objectivity, he assigns definite though arbitrary moral values to black and white blood, claiming that it was the former which made Joe strike Hightower and the latter which enabled him to die heroically....

[Joe pauses] in a Negro church. Standing in the pulpit and cursing God, he assumes, possibly in his own mind and certainly in the minds of the congregation, the terrifying form of anti-Christ. But the body's need for food and rest erases all the illusions that the mind creates and perpetuates. The stage beyond, where even food becomes unnecessary, gives to Christmas the human dignity all his violence could not seize. For the first time, he sees his life not in terms of 'black' and 'white' but simply of the human race. Inevitably his new found awareness of himself as man causes him to be rejected by both the Negroes and the whites. Negro fear is balanced by white outrage at the fact that 'He never acted like either a nigger or a white man. That was it. That was what made the folks sol mad.'

Ironically, as Christmas transcends the categories of black and white and of good and evil, thus resolving his own personal dilemma, he is once more forced to exemplify them in the sequence of flight

and pursuit, capture and death, begun by his own act of murder but given shape by Brown's accusation of 'nigger'.... As Christmas recognizes the inevitability of this pattern and of his own part in it, he visualizes himself sinking 'at last into the black abyss which had been waiting, trying, for thirty years to drown him and into which now and at last he had actually entered, bearing now upon his ankles the definite and ineradicable gauge of its upward moving.' Significantly, he becomes aware of the borrowed shoes as a symbol of his acceptance of 'the black abyss' only when he is in the wagon on his way to Mottstown to give himself up and thus to assume the role of Negro which Jefferson has prepared for him. It is, then, as 'Negro' that Christmas is lynched in a scene that echoes and intensifies all the earlier acts of his life....

Through Percy Grimm, the 'young priest' of the occasion, the elect and white of Jefferson castrate and slay the Negro according to ancient custom, but instead of purification, they are left with a sense of their own guilt and self-doubt. Through his castration, Christmas finally does escape society's categories.... It is no longer the Negro murderer or even Joe Christmas but simply 'the man' who rises 'soaring into their memories forever and ever'.... In the process of unfolding this interaction the chronological sequence has shown the gradual identification of the individual, Joe Christmas, with this public myth. Through Joanna Burden and Gail Hightower that identification is given historical perspective, not only because they themselves are conscious of the historical origins of the particular myths which dominate Joe Christmas and themselves alike, but because they have virtually stopped living in the public world where their beliefs might be modified by further interaction. At the same time they represent the two remaining categories, one geographical and the other religious, in terms of which the South establishes its identity. The Negro, the Yankee, the Apostate—these are the key figures in a society which defines itself by exclusion....

JOANNA BURDEN

Eventually, these acts and beliefs involving the 'Negro' are transformed into a kind of religion, a distorted version of Calvinism in which black and white replace or are identified with evil and good. Each holding this extreme view, Joanna Burden, the scion of New England, is scarcely distinguishable from McEachern or even Hines. Joanna's increasing awareness of this myth parallels Joe's, though without his tormenting uncertainty as to his own relationship to it.... She is made aware of "Negro" not 'as a people, but as a thing, a shadow in which [she] lived, we lived, all white people, all other people.' The shadow becomes a 'black cross' to which she is a martyr, a phantom priestess immolating herself on a phantom altar. Consequently, her whole life is devoted to perpetuating and giving substance to a metaphor: 'You must struggle, rise. But in order to rise, you must raise the shadow with you.' To this belief in her martyrdom, Joanna Burden sacrifices all her natural impulses, thereby creating a bifurcated individual. Thus, Joe sees her as 'a dual personality'...

The sex-starved body conquers for a time 'the mantrained habit of thinking' and expresses itself in a desperate and imperious need to experience every possible sensation and every possible emotion that physical love can suggest. Acting out of a world of fantasies, she quickly passes 'through every avatar of a woman in love': the lover's pursuit, secret trysts, baseless accusations and jealousy, seduction, and even rape. Yet even in the midst of these exaggerated manifestations of her long suppressed desires, she is not entirely free of her intellectual heritage. She can only seek to postpone its mastery over her: 'Don't make me have to pray yet. Dear God, let me be damned a little longer, a little while.' The implicit identification of sex with sin prepares the way for the corruption of her relationship with Joe.... In this last phase, she is not having intercourse with a man but with an image of her own creation, with the idea of 'Negro' for which she has given up her life. Accordingly, she emerges from the affair with her instincts once more subdued and with her obsessions once more crystallized and intensified. No longer driven by her desire to sin, Joanna is left free to brood over the fact that she has sinned.... And the result is a reaffirmation of Calvinism and rededication of herself to the black cross....

Nor can she leave Christmas alone, for he is the Negro, the symbol of her responsibility, her sin and damnation, and most important, her salvation. Her pleading, bribes, and threats are her attempt to make him translate into living flesh and act her concept of the Negro. He is to ignore his own uncertainty, admit his black blood, his sinfulness, and his dependence for salvation on her and her God. Joe's refusal to submit himself to that formula threatens that myth for the sake of which she has continued to draw breath.

She reacts to his recalcitrance, as the mob does later, by resorting to violence. Ironically, the transformation of Joe Christmas into a Negro which she does not accomplish in her life is affected through her death....

GAIL HIGHTOWER

Gail Hightower is, of course, rejected by Jefferson because he has proved himself unworthy of directing its religious, spiritual life. Like Joe Christmas and Joanna Burden, he is an impure element of which society must purge itself; and like them, he too mirrors yet another aspect of the South: its preoccupation with the legends of its own past.... What destroys Hightower is not the fact that he has a dream, but that for the sake of the dream, he becomes insensitive and indifferent to the quality of his actual experience. Thus, he ignores his wife and her needs.... As if recognizing that he has no place in Jefferson, that indeed his dream-world is threatened by it, Hightower deliberately provokes the violence which will ensure his isolation.... Each of his actions becomes a defiance, a calculated incentive to public outrage and retribution. Thus he, like Christmas, is at least partially responsible for his own isolation and for the violence he suffers. In his self-chosen role of antagonist, he experiences a fierce exultation, momentarily revealed by his demonic grin hidden by the prayer book. As passive victim, he suffers the threats and beating by the KKK 'with that patient and voluptuous ego of the martyr,' since it merely confirms his contemptuous judgment of society....

Reversing his former opinion of Lena, he sees her as a symbol of life and a new paradise.... Byron's plea that he at least attempt to save Joe Christmas is much more difficult to deal with. For though Hightower is willing to accept the natural world, he is not prepared to re-enter the social world.... He, Joe Christmas, and Joanna Burden have all been self-created martyrs to an idea and to that idea they have sacrificed others beyond themselves. Society, no less deluded, attacks and sacrifices them in the name of the same ideas. Their personal histories, like the history of Jefferson, consist of a perpetual denial of life, for the sake of empty rituals, each of which enshrines some abstraction. Hightower has the intelligence to attain this bitter self-knowledge and to realize that the responsibility rests with the individual, but he does not have the strength to live with it. As his head falls to the window sill, he hears once again the thunderous cavalry charge peopling Jefferson with the old insubstantial phantoms.

LENA GROVE

Compared with the embattled lives and specter-haunted thoughts of Hightower, Christmas, and Miss Burden, the calm journey of Lena Grove with a willing Byron Bunch in her wake seems almost an impertinence. Yet it is through her presence that we achieve a final perspective on the action. Into the schematic world of Jefferson she introduces, by virtue of her own intellectual limitations and her pregnancy, the world of nature with its total indifference to both moral and social categories. This provides a significant contrast to Joe Christmas' painful initiation and absorption into society. Both are strangers to Jefferson; but while Joe comes bearing death for himself and others, Lena comes bearing life. The ritual in which she involves others is the natural one of pregnancy and birth. Thus, while the one crystallizes the obsessions of society, the other dispels them. The same almost anonymous figures who attach the label of Negro to Christmas in order to lynch him also forget the social stigma of Lena's pregnancy in order to help her....

For Mrs. Armstid she is the fallen woman; for the men at the store, a foolish virgin to be treated with mingled pity and scorn; and for Byron, who loves her, she is the innocent victim of a scoundrel. Each of these images, grounded in a concern with Lena's unmarried state, conveys more information about the observers and their society than they do about her, for unlike Christmas, she does not mirror or share the preconceptions of the community. From the moment we see her delicately licking the sardine oil from her fingers, she is wholly absorbed in the new sensations with which her leisurely travels provide her. Even her search for a father for her child is more a matter of instinct than of morality. What she is looking for is security not respectability. Once Byron assumes this responsibility, she shows no great haste to marry and so to remove the social stigma from herself and her child.

LENA AND JOE

Though Lena is judged harshly, she is consistently treated with kindness. The reason is that she offends against the mores of society without challenging its very foundations as Joe Christmas does. In a sense, the community's convictions and actions operate independently. Mrs. Armstid or the men who offer Lena a ride preserve the myth of virginity in which they share by revealing their contempt for the unmarried Lena, but at the same time they respond to her needs as a woman about to give birth to a child. Here the pressing demands of nature take precedence over social convention.... Lena refuses or rather is incapable of acting in the light of society's preconception of her. Accordingly, where Joe Christmas intensifies, she destroys the barriers between herself and others; where he forever threatens life with extinction, she becomes the means of its renewal and continuance.

This difference is made explicit by the incidents involving food. Lena herself is indifferent to the spirit in which it is offered so long as it sustains her and her child. And her acceptance of it invariably fosters a more personal, human relationship with the giver. Christmas, on the other hand, is forever rejecting the food offered him because of his abnormal sensitivity to the thoughts and attitudes of the giver. He is able to share food with Bobbie, believing that she loves him, but he consistently rejects meals offered by Mrs. McEachern, Byron Bunch, or Miss Burden. The food which sustains Lena in her world of physical experience proves poisonous to Christmas, who lives largely in a world of obsessive ideas which he projects, rightly or wrongly, into every situation. Joe and Lena thus present two contrasting attitudes to experience and to society, and these in turn evoke sharply different responses from society....

BYRON BUNCH

Though Byron is still sustained by illusions, he is no longer blindly ruled by them. Instead he endeavors through them to establish his kinship with other men. Though he continues to believe in Lena's chastity, Hightower's wisdom, and Joe's black blood, nevertheless, he arranges for the confinement, argues for the first time with Hightower, and does what little he can to help Joe. His illusions are thus more nearly centered on humanity and grounded in the immediacy of living experience. It is man's nature to dream and dreams by their very essence are both distortions of reality and desires for a new shape to experience. Certainly, the real Lena, more than slightly stupid and more than slightly selfish, and the real Confederate Hightower, who found an inglorious death in a chicken coop, are both unworthy of the dreams and the devotion they inspire. The responsibility, however, lies not with them but with the Byron Bunches and Gail Hightowers who can be moved."

Olga W. Vickery
The Novels of William Faulkner: A Critical Interpretation
(Louisiana State 1959, 1964) 66-83

"*Light in August* reiterates Faulkner's concern with the southern—as well as national—society which classifies men according to race, creed, and origin. Joe Christmas, the central character, appears to be white but is purported to be a Negro; he has an affair with Joanna Burden, a spinster whom the townsfolk of Jefferson regard with suspicion because of her New England background. Joe eventually kills her and sets fire to her house; he is captured, castrated, and killed by the outraged townspeople, to whom his victim has become a symbol of the innocent white woman attacked and killed by a Negro. Others of the novel's main characters exemplify the southern preoccupation with and glorification of the past: notably Gail Hightower, the unfrocked minister, who ignores his wife and loses his church because of his fanatic devotion to the memory of his grandfather, killed during the Civil War twenty years before Hightower was born. Interwoven with the story of Joe Christmas is the contrasting, placid story of Lena Grove, who comes to Jefferson far advanced in pregnancy, expecting to find the lover who has deserted her."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962) 624

“In *Light in August* Faulkner again reached the top of his bent, writing a novel with a major action and richly varied characters. Nowhere in his fiction is his sense of suffering humanity better realized. The dire effect of Calvinist-Presbyterian rigidity had affected the lives of certain earlier characters, notably Quentin Compson and Addie Bundren. Now Faulkner imagined a central figure, Joe Christmas, who suffers for thirty-three years because he does not know who he is, or where he belongs. Joe is an orphan who never learns who his father was or whether he is white or Negro. He has no past. He searches for ‘a little peace.’ And he finds that peace neither in the North nor the South, only in castration and death. The force that drives him restlessly along his corridors and streets, in a circle, for fifteen years, is the same that tormented Huckleberry Finn, a decayed Calvinism, here fermenting in the breasts of three people and breaking out into violence. Faulkner thus intends Joe Christmas to stand for ‘Poor man, poor mankind,’ suffering from the stigma of race and from the violence engendered in the South by August heat, self-doubt, and a religion that drives its adherents to ‘crucifixion of themselves and one another.’

The unrelieved bewilderment and suffering of Christmas are set against two other plot lines involving pathos and humor. At the end of the novel the Reverend Hightower, an unfrocked minister, almost totally withdrawn from the life of the community, recommits himself to the present and asserts, too late, that Christmas had been with him the night of the murder that Joe has committed. The element of humor appears in the novel when Byron Bunch, an inconspicuous but honest and truly God-fearing mill-worker, falls in love with Lena Grove, the pregnant unmarried girl who has walked to Jefferson from Alabama to find the father of her unborn child. The humor is real and deep: Lena Grove, a natural yet knowing country girl, draws the uncommitted bachelor, Byron, like a magnet. Her bastard child, it is clear, will have both a devoted mother and a true Christian father, and will therefore never have to undergo the fate of Joe Christmas. But the relation between the three sets of characters is established less by action than by motifs and themes: the southern myth of racial difference, the search for a father and for a place in society, the burden of Calvinism.”

William M. Gibson & George Arms, eds.
Twelve American Writers
(Macmillan 1962) 727-28

“In *Light in August* Faulkner moves closer to the naturalistic novel, with its accumulation of social detail, its sense of human frailty, and its readiness to face the grimness of modern existence....a novel which shows some signs of the social concerns of the 1930’s, plunges directly into the life of modern Yoknapatawpha, as this life is shaped by hatred, alienation, martyrdom, isolation, and social division. Full of brilliant scenes and sharply evoked characters, *Light in August* renders not only Faulkner’s immediate sense of the injustice so often at the heart of twentieth-century life, but also, and more ‘timelessly,’ his sense of the crushing weight of all human experience.

The book is organized into about three major figures: Joe Christmas, who believes he has mixed blood, cannot bear the guilt or pain that being categorized as white or Negro would cause him, and after vainly seeking some mode of personal independence climaxes his life as a martyr to both the vindictiveness of society and his own buried striving toward human dignity; the Reverend Hightower, a sensitive man lost to delusional memories of the past and therefore unable to help, even as he sympathizes with, Joe Christmas; and Lena Grove, pregnant and serene, who breezes through the turmoil of the book as if she represented the very principle of life survival. Between the fate of Joe Christmas and the fate of Lena Grove—he all anxious striving, she benign passivity—there is a discrepancy so radical that nothing can justify it; as Faulkner would say, this discrepancy reflects the very outrage of existence.

The arrangement of the book thus comes to resemble an early Renaissance painting: in the foreground a bleeding martyr, far to the rear a scene of bucolic peacefulness, with women working quietly in the fields. *Light in August* is a book which touches on a theme profoundly significant for the American imagination: the theme of human lostness and loneliness.”

Irving Howe
Major Writers of America II
(Harcourt 1962) 838, 832

“The book is focused on a series of confrontations: Lena-Burch, Lena-Bunch, Lena-Christmas, and then another series: Bunch-Hightower, Christmas-Hightower, Grimm-Christmas. These meetings, most between strangers and some of them mere suggestions of possibility, for the spinal column of the book.... *Light in August* moves on two levels of time: the dramatic present, shaped almost entirely into terse and powerful scenes, and the recalled past, worked up through discursive summaries and flashbacks. In the main, those sections of the novel set in the present command greater vividness and authority than those falling back into the past.... The novel proposes a triad of actions: Christmas carries the burden of the book, Lena is a subplot idyllic in itself but significantly ironic in regard to Christmas, and Hightower, as participant and observer, has a dual function. He must provide a reflective consciousness upon which the conduct of the surrounding characters, most notably Lena and Christmas, can register. Necessarily, these actions involve a complex shifting in point of view....

Beyond a doubt Lena is the most harmoniously conceived and drawn figure in the book, reflecting one of Faulkner's most benign moods: a relaxed whimsical affection for simple life and a readiness to grant major virtues to passivity as a moral style. In writing about Lena, Faulkner never strains, as with Hightower, or becomes feverishly troubled, as with Christmas. Yet she is decidedly less interesting than Hightower or Christmas, and one should resist the desire of certain complex critics to romanticize her simplicity, for then she would be less interesting still. She is surely not to be compared, as one Christian-minded critic has, to the primitive saints, if only because she has never known the life of trouble, the ordeal of surmounting, which is usually taken as a prerequisite for sainthood. She may indeed possess, as another critic writes, a 'holistic' consciousness which shields her from the suffering of the other characters, but it necessarily remains a very limited sort of consciousness....

Those who see in Lena a triumph of healthy traditionalism and in Christmas the self-destructiveness of 'modernism'—who see this and nothing else—do not really grant Faulkner's mind its due. They take an important step with him, but fail to follow his later turnings. It is true enough in a way that Lena is healthy (it is the health of pre-consciousness) and Christmas sick, but surely Faulkner has not written so troubled and complex a book merely to tell us that. Is he not rather suggesting that Christmas and Hightower are destroyed because each, in his own inadequate way, does try to accept the challenge of his humanity, the first by seeking selfhood and the second by a deluded immersion in history, while Lena, the good unruffled vegetable Lena, survives them all in her impervious detachment?

Lena's story frames the agonies of the book, at the beginning as she walks, blithe and pregnant, toward Jefferson, and at the end as she and Byron Bunch go off, watching her child and seemingly unscarred by all that has happened. There is something utterly outrageous and infuriating in her capacity to move through and past this accumulation of miseries—so outrageous and infuriating that one must acknowledge the final effect of the novel to be perversely comic: a comedy that underscores the tragic incommensurability between the fates of Joe Christmas and herself. That, Faulkner seems to be saying, is the way things are: the Joe Christmases get lynched, the Lena Groves get husbands, and anyone who would seek moralities of reconciliation in all this must be a bit of a fool.

That the Lena I have been sketching should so completely triumph is something we do not find easy to accept, for it hardly assuages our self-esteem as cultivated persons; and so there is naturally an inclination to elevate her into a kind of moral heroine or earth goddess or even a putative saint. But for the sake of the novel, we should decline this temptation. The point and the power of it all rests on the fact that Lena is just a good healthy mindless country-girl, and to conclude anything else is not only to dissolve the tensions of the book, but to transform Faulkner into the simple-minded moralist which in his inferior books he is. The reading I have suggested here not only allows the novel a well-earned complication of irony, it also invokes an observable truth: the price of consciousness often is self-destruction, and equally often the reward for animal calm is safety. One may be fond of Lena, but one identifies with Hightower or, in a somewhat different way, with Christmas. To regard Lena as an agent of morality and let it go at that, is to graze the notion that goodness is contingent upon a noble paucity of intelligence....

To register the full meaning of Christmas's tragedy Hightower must command an active mind and fresh sensibility. Yet, insofar as he is an actor in the story rather than its somewhat detached observer, he must fail Christmas, and fail him because of his fear of human involvement and his need for protective routine.

Here Hightower becomes what Sherwood Anderson called a 'grotesque,' the shell of a once ardent man, reminiscent of the twisted creatures who wander through *Winesburg, Ohio*. This mustiness of character, though persuasive enough in its own right, seriously qualifies Hightower's usefulness as the moral 'reverberator' of the novel. Fully to absorb the significance of all he sees, fully to grasp the meaning of Christmas's death, Hightower would have to be less delusional than in fact he is; and if less delusional he might more actively have tried to prevent Christmas's death. Yet the theme and working out of the novel require that Christmas die and no one be able to prevent it.... Between Faulkner and Hightower, as between Faulkner and most of his reflective figures, there is insufficient distance....too close, particularly, in his fantasizing about the Southern past...

It is this abundance of representation, this copiousness of postures observed and manners poetically evoked, that makes *Light in August* so splendid a novel. The picture, not the deliberate symbol, is the source of this excellence.... Partly, too, the power of the novel derives from Faulkner's awareness of the recalcitrance of the social world. *Light in August* is the most socially inflected of Faulkner's novels, sensitive to the limitations and distortions society imposes on human conduct.... In none of his other books is there such a full rendering of the force of dead institutions and dead matter as they exact their tyranny upon men. That men are not free to choose their world and their selves, that past and present conspire to defeat the eager will, is a common notion in Faulkner's books, usually explained by references to a flaw in character or an arbitrary blow of fate. In *Light in August*, however, the limits of freedom are defined primarily through social co-ordinates, Christmas, in one important sense, being simply a function of his society, and Hightower a relic of his. The entire experience of Christmas is that of dashing himself blindly against a series of walls which contain his movements and frustrate his desires. He has no abstract conception of society whatever, but he learns through the more bitter of lessons that it confines and breaks the will...

Chapter twelve of the novel, in which the affair between Christmas and Joanna Burden reaches its climax, is surely one of the most powerful pieces of writing ever done by an American: a narrative which leaves one not so much with the sense of having witnessed an ordeal as having participated in it. All of the straining and heaving of Faulkner's prose, the reaching out after improbably tropes, the magnification of rhetorical effects, is justified here by the fury with which Faulkner sets out to subject the reader to the full weight of a human experience, driving further and further, relentlessly, to its very marrow.... But it is in Faulkner's gift for rendering selective incident, for the isolation of that critical moment in experience which, once seen, lights up the wastes behind and the darkness ahead, that *Light in August* strikes its full power. Though Faulkner may be wasteful in disposing of incidents, most of them are constructed internally with a firm economy.

I have remarked on the frequency of confrontations in *Light in August*, and it is the confrontation which, in this book as in others, is a major resource in the composition of scenes. There is the rending moment Byron Bunch asks Hightower to save Christmas, and the two men stand face to face, aware that an irrevocable choice has to be made. There is the meeting between Christmas and the 'leatherhard woman'—is it not between Christmas and the entire alien world?—when he asks, 'Can you tell me what day this is?' There is the dialogue, nervous and amusing, between Armstid and his wife after she decides to give her egg money to Lena—a page of incomparable prose. There is the brush between Burch and the old Negro woman who is to send his message to the sheriff for 'a dollar cash.' And others: moments of climax, two human beings revealed in urgency....

Finally, there is one other source of the novel's power: In *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying* everything is subordinated to the voices of the characters—the voices are the characters. But in *Light in August* a new voice is heard, partly Faulkner's own and partly, as it were, an over-voice speaking for the memories and conscience of a people. Sounding again and again a characteristic note of anguish, lingering over the spectacle of heroism and failure, this voice records the entire Yoknapatawpha story. It will be heard again, in Faulkner's later books."

Irving Howe
William Faulkner: A Critical Study
(Random House/Vintage 1962) 201-02, 204-14

"*Light in August* caused a sharper division of opinion than had previously been seen. The period of puzzled admiration was over. Faulkner had now produced a number of books; and the novel itself was not 'experimental' in any obvious sense. The expression of outrage was vehement and outspoken. Faulkner provides intense depictions of horror together with vague hints of meaning, said Geoffrey Stone (*The Bookman*, November, 1932); in his preoccupation with horrors he flees reality. Other objections were to Faulkner's refusal directly to give information, his 'roundaboutness' in developing his narrative; this often as a result of bad planning, a needless and reckless luxuriance of style. Such reviewers as J. Donald Adams saw in *Light in August* a 'turn toward the better' (*New York Times*, October 9, 1932): the work of a man who has been 'desperately hurt, a man whom life had at some point badly cheated,' but who gives signs of recovering his balance. Sponsors of Faulkner found the novel equally stimulating as proof of a maturing genius: the preoccupation with evil seemed to them more clearly justified and more exactly defined, the intricacy of form as significant as that of *The Sound and the Fury* and more profoundly relevant....

There is much to be said for suggesting Christmas as a modern version of the tragic hero, quite aside from the suggestions of parallels with the Christ story. There is an intensity in the characterization, a penetration within the person that, while it made the external figure of Christmas almost unreal at times, challenged comparisons with other major heroes of isolation. V. S. Pritchett (*Books in General*, 1953) thought the French enthusiasm for Faulkner natural enough, because his novels 'exploit "the absurd," the cruel meaninglessness of existence, and they hope, by making every instant of any character's consciousness a life and death matter, to collect at the end a small alluvial deposit of humanism. Most recent criticism has stressed the strange isolation of Joe Christmas, and of other characters in *Light in August*, as especially relevant to existentialist and other world pictures....

The best consideration of this problem appeared in John L. Longley's study of Joe Christmas as a modern tragic figure (*Virginia Quarterly Review*, Spring, 1957), which brings Faulkner's novel within range of the intent and scope of Greek tragedy, in the respect that 'In some highly symbolic fashion, the modern hero must typify the major myths and problems of our century.' Joe Christmas is quite unlike Greek tragic figures, but he resembles them in reflecting and acting out the peculiar dilemmas and tensions of his time; and his failure, 'to define himself in relation to [the modern cosmos],' is a failure not unlike the classic tragic experience."

Frederick J. Hoffman, Introduction
William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism
eds. Hoffman and Olga W. Vickery
(Harcourt/Harbinger 1963) 19-20, 46-47

"The longest and least experimental of Faulkner's major novels, *Light in August* is circular in content, beginning and ending with the journey of Lena Grove in search of her lover, and focusing in the midsection of the book on the circular road traveled for thirty years by Joe Christmas in search of his identity. For ten days the orbits of their lives overlap, and, though they never meet, their actions—Lena's giving birth and Joe's death—draw others into crucial involvement with both of them....

CHARACTERS

Joe Christmas, *aged about 36*
Gail Hightower, *a former minister, aged about 50*
Joanna Burden, *a spinster, aged about 44*
Lena Grove, *aged 20*
Byron Bunch, *aged about 35*
Lucas Burch [*alias Joe Brown*]
Mr. and Mrs. McEachern, *foster parents of Joe Christmas*
Eupheus [Doc] Hines, *Joe's grandfather*
Mrs. Hines, *Joe's grandmother*
Percy Grimm

PLOT

Lena Grove, far advanced in pregnancy, has set out from her home in Alabama in search of her lover, Lucas Burch, who left her some months back with the promise that he would soon send for her. She has been on the road nearly four weeks, and has been told Lucas is working in a planing mill in Jefferson. She arrives on Saturday, the day that Joanna Burden's house burns down and Joanna herself is found murdered. At the mill, Lena finds Byron Bunch, who unwittingly reveals that her lover is using the name of Joe Brown and is a former employee of the mill.

After leaving Lena safe at his boarding house, Byron goes to see Hightower, an unfrocked minister who has been living in isolation for twenty-five years. He tells him of Lena's predicament and of the day's events: the sheriff having given notice that a one-thousand-dollar reward was offered for the capture of Joanna's killer, Brown has come forward with the information that Joe Christmas had been having an affair with Joanna for three years, that he had killed her, and that he had Negro blood.

Chapters 5-12 are devoted to Joe Christmas: his childhood, young manhood, and finally the last three years he lived with Joanna, ending with the night of her death. Raised in an orphanage until he was five, he had no knowledge of his parents or their backgrounds, but through the suggestions of the janitor (later revealed to be Doc Hines, his grandfather), came to believe that he had Negro blood. Hiding in the dietician's room one day he overheard, without understanding, the dietician making love with an interne. The woman discovered him and, frightened that he would tell on her, told the matron that the child was a Negro. Rather than have him placed in a Negro orphanage, the matron arranged to have him adopted, and Joe went to live with the McEacherns.

A harsh disciplinarian and a rigid Calvinist, Mr. McEachern tried to teach Joe to 'fear God and abhor idleness and vanity. Mrs. McEachern, a soft, weak woman, tried to gain Joe's affection through kindness, which Joe resented and distrusted. When he was seventeen he began sneaking out at night to see Bobbie Allen, a waitress and prostitute. McEachern found them at a dance and called Bobbie a harlot, whereupon Joe bludgeoned him with a chair and, having possibly killed him, ran away from home.

After nearly fifteen years of drifting, Joe found himself in Jefferson, where he encountered Joanna Burden, a forty-year-old spinster and a descendant of New Hampshire abolitionists. During the three years of his affair with her he lived in a cabin on her property, being joined during the last year by Lucas Burch (alias Joe Brown), who helped him distribute bootleg whiskey. Finally Joanna began to think she was pregnant, and then realized that she had reached the menopause. She then tried to change Joe, who she believed to be a Negro, from a sexual partner into a 'respectable' Negro, and wanted to send him to a Negro college to be a lawyer. Joe refused, and finally killed her when—after she had insisted that he pray with her—she drew a pistol with the intent of killing them both. Joe fled, and Brown, apparently drunk, discovered the body the next morning and set fire to the house, possibly in an ill-considered attempt to destroy the evidence of the killing.

During the week that follows the murder, Byron—having told Lena that Brown is 'away on business for the sheriff"—takes her out to live in Brown's cabin to await the birth of her baby. Christmas, having eluded pursuit for nearly a week, turns up on Friday in nearby Mottstown, where he walks the streets until someone recognizes him and calls the sheriff. Attracted by the crowd that gathers and by the sound of Christmas' name being called, Doc Hines, a religious fanatic and racist, breaks through the crowd and confronts Christmas, whom he strikes until he is pulled away. Over thirty years before, Hines, Christmas' grandfather, had caught his daughter running away with a Mexican circus-hand; he killed the man, who he believed to be part Negro, and later, when his daughter was giving birth, refused to let a doctor attend her. The girl died, and some months later Hines took the child to the Memphis orphanage, where he worked as a janitor. Now, at Christmas' capture, Hines is convinced that God's will is working itself out and that 'Satan's spawn' will be destroyed. Mrs. Hines, wanting to see her grandson again, takes Hines with her to Jefferson, where they are taken by Brown to see Hightower. After Mrs. Hines tells her story, Byron pleads with Hightower to give Christmas an alibi by saying that Christmas was with him on the night of Joanna's death. Hightower refuses violently.

The next day, Monday, Lena's child is born, delivered by Hightower since Byron could not get a doctor in time. Byron arranges for Lucas Burch to be brought out to the cabin, but Lucas, unexpectedly confronted with Lena and her child, flees. Byron encounters Lucas at the railroad grade, fights him, and is badly beaten. Lucas hops a train and disappears, and Byron, walking back into town, learns that Christmas has been killed by a mob. As reconstructed by Gavin Stevens, the district attorney, Mrs. Hines had somehow persuaded Christmas to make a break for it, and to seek refuge at Hightower's house. Christmas was pursued by a group of men led by Percy Grimm, a fanatical young deputy, who cornered him in Hightower's kitchen. Hightower tried to stop Grimm, desperately claiming that Christmas was with him the night of the murder, but Grimm pushed Hightower aside, ran into the kitchen and shot and castrated Christmas. The book closes, as it opens, with the travels of Lena Grove. With Byron, whom she allows to accompany her but whom she placidly keeps at a respectable distance, she continues on her serene search for the vanished Lucas....

LENA AND JOE

The contextual integrity of the book is maintained by the short space of time in which the present action occurs and by the tight drawing-in of all the characters to the active center provided by Lena and Joe. Besides functioning as the means by which Byron, and, through him, Hightower, are precipitated into the circle of Joe's life, Lena serves as a contrast to Joe, lightening the grimness of the novel with her placid and sometimes almost comic acceptance of herself and her situation, almost literally shedding light and peace in a town darkened by murder and violence. She is a symbol of life and animal fecundity set against the destructiveness and barrenness of Joe and those in his background. This juxtaposition of light and dark, animal innocence and tormented consciousness, placidity and outrage, forms the thematic core of the novel and is reiterated constantly, not only between the two opposing characters but within individual characters themselves, and is echoed in the style and imagery of the book.

JOE CHRISTMAS

Joe's entire life is seen in terms of splitting, rejection, and separation; from his earliest childhood, guided by Hines, he learns to feel himself different, set apart. But he can never know whether he is Negro or not, and he is unable to accept the opposing aspects of life, here symbolized as black and white and living in him. From his experience with the dietician, who tries to bribe him when he expects punishment, he learns to fear women for their unpredictability. Related to this, and more important, he hates the female in her close relation to nature; thus, when the adolescent Joe learns of menstruation, he is repulsed and horrified, and sacrifices a sheep in an obscure attempt to come to terms with this hated knowledge. Paradoxically, the bloody sacrifice of the animal is a recognition of—perhaps an attempt to placate—the irrational, chthonic forces of life, circular and doomed to failure, for his every act of self-definition carries with it a complementary rejection of part of himself and part of life.

He is compelled to assert himself as a white man—he taunts other whites into calling him 'nigger' so that he can fight them—but he is unable to escape his belief that he is Negro. Similarly, he rejects his white blood for a time and lives entirely among Negroes, 'trying to expel from himself the white blood and the white thinking and being' while at the same time his whole being is writhing and straining 'with physical outrage and spiritual denial.' It is not only that society demands that he be either Negro or white, and act accordingly; Joe himself is unable to accept himself as both, and he becomes the antagonist in both the Negro and white worlds.

Hopelessly in conflict with himself, both searching for and trying to escape from himself, Joe demands an order and fixity in his environment that can give some balance to his inner strife. Thus he finds in the authoritarian, rigidly delineated Calvinism of McEachern a kind of security, and uses it as a framework for his own existence; with the stern implacability of McEachern himself young Joe refuses to learn his catechism, thereby asserting himself as an individual against his fosterfather. It is not only ironic that Joe uses the spiritual rigidity of Calvinism to successfully reject religion, and that in refusing to learn his catechism he wears the rapt expression of a monk or resembles a Catholic choirboy. By this conjunction of opposing images Faulkner again reiterates the dual nature of all experience, the equal possibility of separating a given aspect of life from its opposite, or ever wholly reconciling the two. Joe, as the symbolic embodiment of this polarity of experience, swings from extreme to extreme, from whiteness to Negrohood,

from rigid impassivity to raging violence. The boy who asserts himself by accepting his whippings with a beatific expression on his face is also the man who attempts to destroy the normal order of the external world through compulsive, seemingly capricious acts of violence—as if hoping, by this destruction, to force the world to recognize him for what he chooses to be.

Joe is seen most clearly in his confrontation with Joanna Burden, to whom he is both a contrast and a complement. As Joe is self-exiled from humanity because of his inability to accept himself, Joanna is isolated from the community because of her family background and her belief that she is burdened by God with guilt toward the black race. In their strange, almost perverted relationship Joe is a white man by day, a Negro by night; Joanna is alternately a Puritan philanthropically engaged in Negro uplift and education and a completely corrupted nymphomaniac reveling in the excesses of the flesh. In this expression of the contradictory sides of their personalities, each seems to find some relative stability. However, when Joanna, reaching the menopause, begins to channel her sexuality back into more normally acceptable areas, the conflict begins again.

No longer desiring Joe as a lover, she tried to change him from a Negro embodiment of brutal, animal sexuality and raise him to her white woman's level by educating him and making him a respectable Negro. To her, Joe is not an individual, a man, but an object, a means by which she can expiate part of her guilt toward the black race. Paradoxically, she must incur a concrete sexual guilt in order to be able to expiate the purely abstract guilt she has inherited. Thus, her response to Joe is not to a person, but to an abstraction, to the idea of Negro which for her Joe represents. It is the Negro, not Joe, who must be lifted up, who must repent and be saved. In one sense, her relationship with Joe is a ritualistic acting-out of her obsessions both with the Negro and with history. When she realizes that Joe will not commit himself to Negrohood and to her Puritanism—when he refuses what she must view as the means of salvation for both of them—she plans to kill both him and herself. Significantly, her weapon is an old Civil War pistol, a relic, as she herself is a relic, of her family's past.

A gradual process of transformation is forced upon Joe from without, first from Joanna and then, after her death, from the townsfolk. Asserting by violence his right to make himself what he chooses to be, he forces an awareness of himself on the community, which, like Joanna, reacts to him not as a person but as a Negro. Once Brown, frightened and greedy, has revealed that Joe is part Negro, the town forgets all considerations of Joe's possible innocence, of Brown's own dubious reputation, even of the obvious fact that Joe looks like a white man and that the town has only Brown's word to the contrary. In the popular imagination, Joe becomes an embodiment of all the evil, brutality, and fearsomeness that the idea of Negro evokes in the Southern white mind, while his victim, Joanna, the despised Northerner and 'nigger-lover,' is elevated to the familiar role of Southern Womanhood raped and murdered by The Negro.

Automatic and long inbred social responses have taken over, relieving the community of the need to think and to take individual responsibility for their actions. The wheels have been put in motion and will not stop until the 'nigger murderer' has been ritually pursued, captured, and crucified. Ironically, it is during the week following the murder, when Joe is hiding in the woods and almost completely out of contact with humanity, losing track even of the day of the week, that he first feels any tie with humanity. Now that his appearance evokes fear in both whites and Negroes, he feels drawn toward them. He politely thanks the frightened woman of whom he asked the day of the week, and thinks with a kind of chagrin of the Negro family who fed him.... Reduced to the barest essentials of life, with little food and no shelter, he comes for the first time to some sort of realization of what he has done and to a passive acceptance of its consequences....

GAIL HIGHTOWER

Joe's murder of Joanna and his death are the active agents that force Hightower out of his isolation and contribute to his climactic realization of his failure and responsibility. Like Joe's, Hightower's search for identity was directed away from humanity; but whereas Joe used violence against the world in order to assert his existence, Hightower escaped from the world into the phantom past, identifying himself with the strong, lusty image of his grandfather, dead twenty years before Hightower's birth. Believing that the shame of losing his church and being nearly driven from town were the price of his immunity from the present and from involvement with the living, he had retired from the world to be a ghost among ghosts for

twenty-five years. When Byron comes to tell him about Lena and her search for her lover, Hightower senses Byron's incipient involvement with her, and he fears that this will draw him, unwilling, into the living present of the events born of Joe's murder of Joanna. Learning that Christmas is part Negro, Hightower realizes the tragic enormity of what is about to happen.

Later, when he hears from the grocer that Christmas' trail has been found, he is almost overcome. Feeling the whirlwind of circumstances growing larger and sucking him toward its center, and knowing the inevitable result, he cries in anguish: 'I wont. I wont. I have bought my immunity.... I *will not!*' He will not accept the necessity of his involvement, he will not enter the world and abjure his ghosthood. Yet, though unwilling, he is drawn to the edge of the abyss, on the further side of which is life... Alarmed to find himself participating emotionally in the lives of others, Hightower violently, almost hysterically, refuses to try to save Christmas by giving him an alibi for the night of the murder....

But the following morning, dragged out of sleep by Byron, he goes to Lena and delivers her baby. As he helps to bring life into the world, so he himself emerges into life, into an awareness and appreciation of the world of nature which Lena represents. Yet this is only half of what he must undertake if he is to be reborn into an awareness of himself, to give meaning to an otherwise meaningless life. The remaining act which will signify his commitment to the living is the confrontation with death. The final link in the chain of circumstances that force Hightower into life is completed, with the fatality and inevitability of some intricate design, when Joe, pursued by Percy Grimm, tries to hide in Hightower's house. Though struck down by Joe, Hightower makes a desperate and fruitless attempt to save him crying to the men: 'Listen to me. He was here that night. He was with me the night of the murder. I swear to God—'

Hightower's final reverie, a mixture of memory and the terror of realization, is a superb drama of consciousness reaching a climax of awareness that is almost unbearably intense, followed by a release equal in its dramatic reality to the purgation of pity and terror in the resolution of tragic action.... The price of his ghosthood was not only his own life, but his wife's as well. He realizes that he had come to Jefferson not to serve God but to idolize the memory of his grandfather, that in so doing he had betrayed his responsibility to his parishioners and that he had resigned his pulpit and accepted the town's persecution not for a martyr's reasons, but to ensure his escape from the world. He sees now that he had been the instrument of his wife's despair and death.... Although there is no assurance that Hightower will now actively seek involvement with the living, or that he will no longer wait for the ghost-visited moments at twilight, his recognition of what he has been is a triumphantly positive achievement in which he gains stature as a kind of tragic figure rising from the shadows of an empty life.

BYRON BUNCH

Byron is in many senses a comic version of Hightower; like the elder man, Byron shuns real contact with life, existing so inconspicuously that few know of his existence, living so that 'the chance to be hurt could not [find] him.' Through Lena, Byron becomes actively involved in the life of another, and comically, almost ludicrously, commits himself to her. In the process, he loses his quiet ineffectualness and learns to act, to walk with pride, and to accept the possibility of being hurt. Most important, he emerges from a shadowy world of vague reality into a realization of ultimate actuality.... In short, he begins to be alive. As a comic figure, his realization is properly less dramatic than Hightower's, and in the end (as should the hero of any comedy) he gets his girl—or, at least, he gets permission to follow her. The account of their travels, as retailed by the furniture dealer, provides an almost bawdy comic relief after Joe's immolation and Hightower's tragic apotheosis.

LENA GROVE

Light in August posits two radically different ways of living, of dealing with experience: the pagan, primitive outlook of Lena Grove, and the basically Calvinist world view of the civilized community. Essentially, it is a contrast between the extremes of animal unawareness of sin and human consciousness of man's fallen estate. Lena is possessed of a prelapsarian innocence; she obviously does not consider herself a fallen woman in any sense of the word, nor can she imagine others doing so; naïve and trusting, she has as little guile as she has awareness of sin. In contrast to her tranquility is the atmosphere of Calvinism

brooding over the center of the novel. Masculine, authoritarian, and rigid, it is based on the concept of an implacable God of wrath, of man's inherent sinfulness, of guilt and of the inevitability of punishment. Justice in this Calvinistic world is without pity or compassion; in it Christ appears rarely, if at all, as a merciful mediator between man and a just and terrible God.

Lena is an embodiment of a far older type of religion—that of the mother goddess of early Greek culture. That Faulkner intended this implied comparison between ancient pagan and modern Christian religion is apparent from his comments on the meaning of the title: '...In August in Mississippi there's a few days...when...there's a lambence, a luminous quality to the light, as though it came not from just today but from back in the old classic times. It might have fauns and satyrs and the gods...from Olympus in it somewhere...it [the title] reminded me of that time, of a luminosity older than our Christian civilization. Maybe the connection was with Lena Grove, who had something of that pagan quality of being able to assume everything...' Thus Lena (whose name is a diminutive of the Greek name Helena, meaning a torch or a light one), reflecting the radiance of an older time, moves placidly through the novel, while the somber shadows of the present accompany the figure of Joe Christmas.

CHRIST-EVOKING FIGURE

Much has been made of Joe as a negative Christ-figure, an impotent savior who can only suffer but not redeem. Certainly there is a tendency on the part of critics to find suspicious symbolism in the fact that Joe does not know of his parentage, that he was left on the orphanage doorstep on Christmas Eve, and that he was betrayed by a friend for money. There is a difference, however, between direct symbolism and a parallelism of symbolism and fact. Joe is not so much a symbol of an impotent Christ as he is a fictional character whose experience is made more dramatic, more emotionally charged for the reader, by being associated—even negatively—with Christian symbolism. Joe never assumes purely religious symbology, but reacts—and is reacted to—within a broader context in which the forms of religious belief and expression have become sternly regulated.... The Calvinistic characters—McEachern, Hines, Grimm, and Joanna Burden—all, in their fanatic vision, see life solely in terms of black and white, good and evil, God and Satan; by basing their actions on this rigid structure they are spared both the necessity of choice and the possibility of responding to others as human beings.

ISOLATION

Common to many of Faulkner's novels is the theme of human isolation, of the difficulty or impossibility of establishing anything but superficial contact between individuals. This is usually seen as the result of a failure to apprehend reality except in terms of formulated phrases, such as those of a religion, or some other pattern to which, like the occupants of Procrustes' bed, reality is made to fit. In *Light in August* this dual theme—the failure of contact and the forcing of life into a preestablished pattern—is given additional depth by the literal, physical isolation of the main characters from the community, which in turn redefines itself in terms of its exclusion of them. In asserting itself to be white, Southern, and Protestant, Jefferson puts itself in opposition to Joe, the Negro, to Joanna, the Northerner, and to Hightower, the apostate.

COMMUNITY AND INDIVIDUAL

Thus, in a negative sense the community and the isolated individual are still interdependent. Moreover, both the individual and the community see life in terms of patterned responses and suffer from a rigidity of outlook and a corresponding failure to act either ethically or responsibly. Both the community and the individual are guilty—the community of living by and reacting to dead formulas, the individual of attempting to separate himself from the community, which in the final analysis is equivalent to a rejection of humanity. As Hightower comes to realize, no man is able to destroy himself without, even unintentionally, destroying others; and no act is free of reverberations in the lives of others. The community—or humanity—and the individual are inextricably linked."

Dorothy Tuck
Crowell's Handbook of Faulkner
(Crowell 1964) 46-55

"*Light in August*, Faulkner's seventh novel, is the first in which he deals directly with the racial problem.... By it, individuals are transformed into a robot-like lynch mob.... Like the Christian Passion Play, every statement and action in the lynch drama is familiar and inevitable.... Faulkner's rendering of abstract idea transformed into a palpable force greater than any individual is a superb achievement.... In structure, *Light in August* is very complicated, containing several distinct stories whose thematic relationship is not immediately apparent; but stylistically, it is relatively easy reading. The sentence structure is generally free of the spastic, breathless quality of the sentences to be found in *Absalom, Absalom!*, and the shifts from the present to the past pose little difficulty.... The novel's theme [is] the destructive consequences of resistance to life, the inability to accept the pleasure and pain that is the sum of human life....

LENA GROVE

Lena Grove, nine months pregnant by Lucas Burch, has hitch-hiked from Alabama to Jefferson, Mississippi. A simple soul with a simple faith, Lena is certain that she will find Lucas and that he will provide for her and her child. Her assurance stems not from a knowledge of Lucas's character or his whereabouts but from an unquestioning belief that the Lord will care for her. With her 'inwardlighted quality of tranquil and calm unreason,' her swollen belly and faded blue dress, she is a composite image of a pagan fertility goddess and a Christian madonna. Lena is all heart and body—simplicity and trust. She is troubled neither by logic nor worry about the future, abstract ideas nor traditions. And her 'calm unreason' is her power and her protection. She comes directly to the town to which Lucas has fled. All the people whom she meets on the road are kind to her. Even a Martha Armstid, who would usually be vigorous in her denunciation of an unwed mother, treats her with kindness and generosity. The earth goddess is attuned to 'the very immutable laws which earth must obey....

Lena accepts life; the others resist it. Their personalities are twisted by childhood scars, by enforced submission to concepts and beliefs; they seek death, not life.... Except for Lena and Byron, the major characters in *Light in August* resist life's experiences; all, in varying ways, are self-destructive.... As the character who accepts life, who is responsive to the earth, Lena symbolizes the timelessness evoked by Keats's ode ["On a Grecian Urn"]....

BYRON BUNCH

In responding to her, Byron Bunch leaves the social world governed by taboos and traditions and enters the natural world she inhabits. When we last see Byron, he has quit his job and is on the road with Lena.... In a harmless fashion, Byron escapes from life. But he avoids the fate of his contemporaries in Jefferson and the South, as Faulkner here depicts them, by responding to the affirmative life-force of Lena so completely that he is freed from his preconceptions: he can ignore her pregnancy, her unvirgin state, and fall in love with her.... Byron Bunch, friend of Gail Hightower and in love with Lena, is the link between the natural, bright, mindless, life-oriented natural world of Lena Grove and the taboo-ridden, dark, violent, death-oriented social world of Hightower, Joe Christmas, and Joanna Burden. Byron is everyman, potentially capable of living in either world, free...from a psychologically binding past. Byron can choose....

GAIL HIGHTOWER

Gail Hightower, more obviously than the others, is an evader of life. He becomes a minister, gets appointed to Jefferson, and encourages his ostracism from the community so that he can relive each day in that moment between light and dark his grandfather's Civil War death charge on a chicken coop.... Like so many of Faulkner's young men, Gail Hightower develops into an abstracted idealist, and he identifies his idealism with the story of his grandfather's heroism.... The politics of the seminary and then his marriage intensify his need to escape.... By the time he arrives in Jefferson, his retreat from reality is nearly complete. All he requires is the physical isolation to match that of his spirit. Only after the death of Christmas does Hightower face the truth about his life and acknowledge that he betrayed his ministry and his wife because he would not establish contact with his parishioners and his wife on a human, personal level: he 'did not see them'....

After his wife's death, he invited and welcomed the persecution that would seal him into a death-in-life. He refused to give up his church and forced his parishioners to boycott his wild, mad sermons. On his final

Sunday as a minister, he left the church with his face covered by a book. One photographer, however, caught the mad expression of satanic glee that Hightower thought was hidden from view. He welcomed, too, the accusations and the beating that completed his immurement within his psychic tower, high above the real terrors of ordinary existence.... He admits that in his own attempt to escape from his fears, he created for others much pain and terror. The wheel image, which Faulkner uses in this presentation of Hightower's thought-flow, not only serves to capture the minister's reluctant acceptance of truth (as the wheel of thought grinds through sand), but also the cyclical pattern of victim becoming crucifier which the novel dramatizes and which is exemplified in Hightower's life....

The minister's relationship to Byron, perhaps the only human relationship he has ever experienced, makes him vulnerable.... Hightower struggles to protect himself and his friend by trying to persuade Byron to run away, free himself from the girl and the commitment to life she represents. Hightower's anguish is that he welcomes as much as he fears the violation of his isolation. Byron, apparently, senses this ambivalence and confidently brings the grandparents of Joe Christmas to the minister to ask him not only to save their grandson from the lynch mob but to present himself to society as a homosexual by swearing that Christmas was with him on the night of the murder....

Confrontation of truth does not, cannot, bring Hightower peace, because the peace which comes of accepting life as it is, with all its vicissitudes, cannot be achieved through thought. Through such an intellectual confrontation as Hightower experiences, the mind always moves to insoluble ultimates.... Hightower does not die nor does he achieve salvation, as a number of commentators have argued. Recognizing that Hightower escapes into his dream is essential to an understanding of the novel. Had Hightower achieved salvation and peace, it would have been through intellect, a possibility, as novel after novel shows, foreign to Faulkner's vision. Intellect in Faulkner's world prevents acceptance; it seeks answers to the unanswerable. Lena Grove and the other characters in Faulkner's novels who represent affirmation are essentially mindless, an almost alien breed from the typically sensitive, intellectual, and idealistic protagonist. The unbridgeable gap between the affirmative non-thinkers and the negative thinkers is dramatically apparent in the metamorphosis Byron Bunch undergoes. The Byron of the final chapter bears little resemblance to the sensitive, intelligent companion of Hightower. Before he can become a fit lover for the earth goddess, he must be transformed into a fool.... *Light in August* deals with extremes—resistance and acceptance, it does not bridge the two....

JOE CHRISTMAS

Like Hightower, Joe Christmas and Joanna Burden are victims of their childhood. Two absolutist concepts mold and destroy both Joanna and Joe: in the case of the former, a Calvinistic division of men into the damned and the elect; in Joe's case, a racial division of men into black and white. Joe Christmas's life-long anguish is that he must but cannot identify himself as Negro or white. He cannot accept race as incidental to his individuality, to his humanity. He must know what he can never know, and his life is a process of self-crucifixion. Joe thinks as he does because of the absolutism of his grandfather and his foster-father.... Hines fanaticism serves him as the vision of galloping horses serves Hightower: it makes him a ghost....

The five-year-old Joe, already adapted to the discipline of the institution, anxiously awaits the release of being punished for wrongdoing. But the dietician, imputing to the child an adult awareness, is certain he delays exposing her sin to extend her torture.... Joe is shocked and confused by her offer of money. It denies him the security of the sin-and-punishment ritual which absolves and releases him from guilt. The insecurity and confusion he knows as the furious woman curses him will be connected for the rest of his life with woman. He comes to prefer the certainty of McEachern's whippings to the faltering kindness of his foster-mother. His violent disposal of the food offered him by Mrs. McEachern and later Joanna Burden are probably related to this original fusion of sickening toothpaste, woman, and anxiety....

Though Faulkner does not emphasize the fact, Joe is being raised in the South as a white Southerner. He is therefore inheritor of the concept of racial division and of white supremacy. In the Southern world, as Faulkner shows again and again, actual relationships between Negro and white transcend racial barriers. But the concept exists apart from the reality of human relationships. And as soon as the issue is raised or

challenged, the concept automatically takes precedence. This absolutist concept is part of Joe's inheritance.... The fanatics who mold him make him an absolutist, and he must therefore fit himself into a category to establish his identity. In contrast to Lena Grove, who is attuned to the natural, Joe is alienated from nature.... Lena accepts; Joe resists. Joe can respond to experience only in terms of the abstractions imposed upon him. Molded by a fanatical victim of a religious concept, McEachern, Joe Christmas learns to oppose his foster-father's fanaticism with an equal fanaticism....

In resisting McEachern, Joe becomes as extreme and rigid as the man he hates.... Under McEachern's tutelage, Joe has little chance of learning to respond to life naturally, of accepting life as he finds it. When he strikes down McEachern in the dance hall, for instance, he rides off on the horse exultant; like Faust, he has sold his soul to the devil, which means to Joe that now he is unequivocally among the damned. He has been trained, in other words, to think in terms of absolutes, mutually exclusive categories—the damned and the elect, black and white—into which he must but can never place himself.

Another aspect of his absolutism is revealed in his initial encounter with sex. Though it is very difficult to reconcile the adult Joe Christmas with the young boy portrayed in these scenes, the innocent Christmas is, apparently, a sensitive idealist, very similar to Quentin Compson and Horace Benbow, who envision woman as inviolable perfection and beauty. Joe's reaction to hearing about the menses is so violent that he is impelled to kill an animal and dip his hands into the blood. Years later, the first time he is alone with Bobbie Allen, the waitress, she tells him that she is sick. She has to explain to her naïve and innocent companion what she means. When Joe finally understands, he runs from her and seeks refuge in the dark woods....

Bobbie's violent rejection of Joe for exposing her to McEachern's denunciation of her as a harlot results in her taking refuge, like the dietician, behind the shibboleth and denouncing Joe to her companions as a Negro. The episode provides a violent finale to Joe's education and his youth. Though he strikes down McEachern, he can never be free from the fanatical absolutism that he hated. His refuge is motion. He enters a road that extends for fifteen years, a road of self-flagellation and of flight from himself. He torments himself, for instance, by living with a black-skinned woman.... During his years on the road, Joe combines lechery and confession that he is a Negro as if he were trying to achieve the security of being both damned and inferior. The two dreaded categories are fused in his mind.... Just as he can never escape from himself, he cannot leave Joanna, who mirrors the polarities between which he is stretched....

JOANNA BURDEN

For Joanna, too, race and religion are inextricably linked. Like Hightower and Christmas, she is a victim of her predecessors. At twelve, her grandfather, Calvin Burden, ran away from the New England of his minister-father. But he fled too late. Already he was stamped by the absolutism of his father's religion.... Joanna assumes the burden imposed upon her, but since that day in the grove, she cannot see the Negroes 'as people, but as a thing, a shadow.' They are the cross she must carry. She works with Negroes for their benefit, but she cannot associate with them on a human level....

As does she, Joe identifies her desire to submit with her femininity, her moral resistance with her masculinity. Her fierce sexual struggle reflects the polarities of her character. Her duality, which mirrors his own character, enrages Joe, and the night following his first encounter with her, he rapes her. His attack ends their sexual relationship for six months. Joe does not re-enter the road; instead he works at the planing mill and sleeps in a cabin on Joanna's land. Though he thinks of leaving, Joe cannot, apparently because he recognizes in Joanna a spiritual counterpart, a being like himself spreadeagled between extremes....

When her own six-month battle has ended, Joanna plunges herself into sex—evil and damnation—with a need as intense as that which drove Joe to live with an ebony-skinned woman. For neither one is there a middle ground. Joe must be black or white, Joanna evil or good, one of the damned or one of the elect. Joanna's nymphomania is a reaction to her years of denial and devotion, but it is so extreme that it is masochistic.... She must have the man with whom she has sinned achieve salvation with her by assuming the identity of a Negro and share her work to raise the black race. She asks him to do what he tried but

could not do: identify himself once and for all as a Negro. For Joe, Negro and damnation are identical; for Joanna, Negro and salvation are fused. Both are volitionless victims of their absolutism, and violence is inevitable. Joe is repelled by Joanna's praying, which reminds him of McEachern's. He is also repelled by her continued insistence that he declare himself a Negro, as well as by her loss of sexuality.... Joe and Joanna become for each other alter-egos. Joanna prepares two bullets. The self-crucifixion which has been their lives thus reaches its climax: death is the physical and ultimate expression of the self-immolation of their existence. The denial of life which Hightower hears in the Protestant music and which their lives dramatize reaches its symbolic conclusion in their violent ends.

CONCLUSION

Joe's actions after he slashes Joanna's throat are not those of a man trying to escape. He invites chase and capture by appearing in the Negro church, where he utters his final violent repudiation of the concepts—religion and race—that molded and destroyed him. Joe's body retains its hold upon life longer than his spirit, but he finally goes passively to the boon he sought so long.... Throughout the novel, many details evoke the story of Jesus.... Faulkner's story dramatizes the excessive emphasis in the Southern brand of Protestantism upon suffering and death as the road to salvation.... The parallels with the New Testament are ironic. Not salvation, but a continuation and strengthening of the fanaticism that produced it, result from the execution of Christmas. Death brings Joe the personal release he sought, but it in no way suggests the salvation inherent in the Christian crucifixion....

Light in August is not a realistic study of Protestantism and racism; its subject is the crippling clutch of abstract concepts upon the mind and soul of the human being.... *Light in August* encompasses extremes. It is like an altar triptych with a large central canvas of the crucifixion, dark, somber, and violent. The small sidepieces, hinged to the major canvas, are bright, joyous, placid scenes of the mother and child and of the holy family. One of the remarkable achievements of the novel is the consistency with which Faulkner creates these opposing canvases. The stories of Hightower, and Joe Christmas, and Joanna Burden are narrated with images of darkness, pain, crucifixion, and death. The Lena Grove story is bathed in warm sunlight and filled with images of timelessness and affirmation. The title, which is resonant with meaning, seems most appropriately associated with the warm life-glow that haloes Lena. With its brilliant portraits of a variety of grotesques, victims of their past and their society who in their turn create victims, *Light in August* is unquestionably one of Faulkner's greatest novels."

Edmond L. Volpe
A Reader's Guide to William Faulkner
(Farrar, Straus/Noonday 1964) 151-74

"The events in *Light in August* (1932), though still sufficiently terrible in the lynching of one of the main characters, are in part at least mitigated by other aspects. The two main characters of the story, Lena Grove and Joe Christmas, never meet. Both are homeless, deserted, alienated creatures, strangers on a lonely quest, materially and personally in a difficult situation. But their attitude towards their respective fates is totally different. Joe Christmas, a foundling, brought up by a hardhearted, narrow-minded foster-father, is a man with a deep-rooted hatred for his surroundings and continually worried by the idea of having Negro blood. In his restless search for his own identity he becomes attached to an eccentric woman whom he finally kills.

At the same time, Lena Grove, a quiet and stoical young woman, seeking the father of her still unborn child, discovers that he is a good-for-nothing and is willing to accept the protection of a well-meaning young workman. The other characters, too, are largely isolated creatures such as Joe's mistress, who is considered a 'nigger lover' and thus estranges herself from the conventions of her southern community, the clergyman, a tragic failure in his parish, the fascist whose racial hatred makes him the predestined leader of a lynching mob. The theme of the whole is evidently that of the uncertain quest which according to the attitude of the individual will either lead to violence and a catastrophe or, rather unpredictably, to some sort of contentment."

Heinrich Straumann
University of Zurich
American Literature in the Twentieth Century

(Harper Torchbooks 1965) 89-90

“The plot of *Light in August* was the most complicated he had devised up to that point. In simple terms, it consisted of two plots. One was the story of a country girl, Lena Grove, on foot and pregnant, searching patiently for the man who had seduced her. In the course of her wandering she reaches Jefferson and finds companionship in the person of Byron Bunch, a planing-mill worker there. The other was the story of Joe Christmas, a social outcast of uncertain parentage and race, who becomes the lover and eventually the murderer of a spinster who years before had come South with her abolitionist father to educate the former slaves. Lena and Joe are among Faulkner’s most memorable creations: Lena, the supreme embodiment of innocence and charity, and Joe, evil in his dispossession, forever lost in a world that has no category for him. The link between the two plots is the almost equally memorable Gail Hightower, onetime Presbyterian minister, now a recluse reveling in dreams of Civil War heroism.

When Christmas is being sought for the spinster’s murder, Bunch tries in vain to persuade Hightower to provide an alibi for the man, but he does succeed in getting him to deliver Lena’s child. By this one act, Hightower manages to regain something of his lost self-respect. Joe Christmas, doomed in any case, is lynched by a fanatical racist, Percy Grimm, and Lena, Byron and the child continue their wandering as a family. More than any of the previous novels, *Light in August* transcends the southern setting that gives it substance and becomes a symbol of the universal human situation, redeemable only by the human capacity for compassion and endurance.”

J. A. Bryant, Jr.
Twentieth-Century Southern Literature
(U Kentucky 1997) 83

Michael Hollister (2015)