

## Multifaceted Aspects of Women in William Faulkner's *Light in August*

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William Faulkner born in Mississippi, was an American novelist and short-story writer who was awarded the 1949 Nobel Prize for Literature. *Light in August* is probably Faulkner's most complex and difficult novel. Here he combined numerous themes on a large canvas where many aspects of life are vividly portrayed. The publication of this novel marked the end of Faulkner's greatest creative period — in four years he had published five substantial novels and numerous short stories. *Light in August* is the culmination of this creative period and is the novel in which Faulkner combines many of his previous themes with newer insights into human nature. William Faulkner's treatment of women characters depicts the women confronted with the gender identity crisis in myriad ways in American society. One of the critics of Faulkner's fictional works, Leslie A. Fiedler says that “Faulkner had respect only for women beyond menopause. His depiction of these elderly women has many dimensions. It seems that all the women characters in his fiction are of one of two destructive types either they are the fertile and alluring mindless daughters of peasants or the fleshless but sexually insatiable daughters of the aristocracy. Both of them, become lighter into the stereotype of the good and bad girl in Faulkner's matured fictions.” (Fiedler 27)

The novel *Light in August* may be interpreted on many levels. It suggests such themes as man's isolation in the modern world, man's responsibility to the community, the sacrifice of Christ, the search-for-a-father, man's inhumanity to man, and the theme of denial and flight as opposed to passive acceptance and resignation. Each of these can be adequately supported, but none seems to present the whole intent of the novel. Perhaps this is because the complexity of the novel yields to no single interpretation but seems to require a multiple approach. The complex theme of man's needs to live within himself while he recognizes his responsibility both to himself and to his fellow man will support such a multiple approach to *Light in August*. This paper analyses the intensive study of the women characters of William Faulkner which depicts complex women characters found in the dilemma of the traditional ideal womanhood and the progressive bold women who are ready to face the confronts the

traditionalist. They are the strong robust women, they are upright kind, dauntless women who serve the society and human existence. They dream of equal, spirited and responsible woman citizen who stand in all odds and even in the support of her men, during and after the crisis. The unique contribution of Faulkner in the delineation of the Negro problem and the racial question is that even though he was a White Southerner enjoying the comforts of life, yet he succeeded in literally entering the Negro psyche and portraying the problem of racism or racial discrimination from the victim's point of view. No wonder Faulkner's depiction of the racial problem is more realistic and more effective compared to other authors dealing with the same theme. In this context Irving Howe remarks: "All of the tensions in Faulkner's work reached an extreme in his presentment of Negro life and character. Problems of value which in his novels emerge as problems of perception become magnified and exacerbated when he writes about Negroes." (Howe 47)

The racial question is absorbed into Faulkner's heart and undergoes a logical and creative transformation. Complex and ambiguous responses to the Negroes are predictable and almost conventional among sensitive Southern writers; they stamp partly from an inheritance of guilt and uncertainty, and partly from a ripening of heart. However, in Faulkner's fiction, beneath its worried surface of attitude and idea, there is also a remarkable steadiness of feeling towards the Negroes and their sad predicament. During the course of his long fictional career, Faulkner's attitude and opinion towards the racial question undergoes minor changes, his early assurance melts away his affections and sympathies at large; but always there is a return to one central image, an image of memory and longing. In the words of Robert Penn Warren: "In Faulkner's work, we find, over and over again, this theme of the crime, the curse, for is clear that for him the Civil war merely transferred the crime against the Negro into a new set of terms." (Warren 257) Even in the work treating the post bellum period, the Negro remains a central figure- one is even tempted to say the central figure. William Faulkner is in the words of Geoffrey Moore: "The one indisputably great novelist that the United States has produced in the 20<sup>th</sup> century." (Moore 118)

*Light in August*, published in 1932, is a novel by Nobel Prize winning author William Faulkner that explores themes of race, religion, and identity in the American South. The plot follows three main characters: Lena Grove, a young pregnant woman searching for the father of her child; Joe Christmas, a biracial man who has been passing as white; and Gail

Hightower, a disgraced former preacher. Through these characters, Faulkner examines the destructive power of racism and the search for individual and communal identity. The novel is set in the American South in the 1930s, during the time of Prohibition and Jim Crow laws that legalized racial segregation in the South. It begins with the journey of Lena Grove, a young pregnant white woman from Doane's Mill, Alabama, who is trying to find Lucas Burch, the father of her unborn child. He has been fired from his job in Doane's Mill and moved to Mississippi, promising to send word to her when he has a new job. Not hearing from Burch and harassed by her older brother for her illegitimate pregnancy, Lena walks and hitchhikes to Jefferson, Mississippi, a town in Faulkner's fictional Yoknapatawpha County. When she arrives in Jefferson, Lucas is there, but he has changed his name to Joe Brown. Looking for Lucas, sweet, trusting Lena meets shy, mild-mannered Byron Bunch, who falls in love with Lena but feels honour-bound to help her find Joe Brown. Thoughtful and quietly religious, Byron is superior to Brown in every way, but his shyness prevents him from revealing his feelings to Lena.

The novel then switches to the second plot strand, the story of Lucas Burch/Joe Brown's partner Joe Christmas. He has a sexual relationship with Joanna Burden, an older woman who descended from a formerly powerful abolitionist family whom the town despises as carpetbaggers. Though their relationship is passionate at first, Joanna begins menopause and turns to religion, which frustrates and angers Christmas. At the end of her relationship with Christmas, Joanna tries to force him, at gunpoint, to kneel and pray. Joanna is murdered soon after: her throat is slit and she is nearly decapitated. The novel leaves readers uncertain whether Joe Christmas or Joe Brown is the murderer. Before Christmas' escape attempt, Hightower delivers Lena's child in the cabin where Brown and Christmas had been staying before the murder, and Byron arranges for Brown/Burch to come and see her. Brown deserts Lena once again, but Byron follows him and challenges him to a fight. Brown beats the braver, smaller Byron, then skilfully hops a moving train and disappears. At the end of the story, an anonymous man is talking to his wife about two strangers he picked up on a trip to Tennessee, recounting that the woman had a child and the man was not the father. This was Lena and Byron, who were conducting a half-hearted search for Brown, and they are eventually dropped off in Tennessee.

*Light in August* has received profuse critical attention. Anyone who goes to analyze *Light in August* critically will choose either Lena Grove or for Joe Christmas. Critics who make an attempt at Joanna Burden are content to dismiss her as an undeveloped counterpart of Lena Grove or just another fanatical instrument that precipitates the final destruction of Christmas. A few critical comments which deserve our attention may bring home to us the complexity of her character. There are critics who charge Faulkner as a misogynist. Leslie A. Fiedler, Albert J. Guerard, Irving Howe, Maxwell Geismar, and Samuel A Yorks regard Joanna Burden as sexually tempting and so morally destructive. Fiedler asserts: "Up to the very verge of her climacteric, woman seems to Faulkner capable of the most shameless concupiscence, like Miss Burden in *Light in August*, cowering naked in the garden of the decaying house waiting to be captured and possessed in an absence game of hide and seek. (Fiedler 321) Fiedler claims that "she reflects Faulkner's most misogynistic feelings by displaying the most shameless concupiscence that woman is capable of."

Others like Geismar, Judith Halden, D. Lind call her monstrous, a starved spinster, an aging nymphomaniac, and a vampire. Critical stances toward Joanna vary considerably, but racial guilt and sexual repression are commonly cited as the basis for Joanna's gradual corruption during her affair with Christmas. The title refers to the fire of the house that is at the centre of the story. The whole novel revolves around one event, the fire, which is visible for miles around, and happens in August. Some critics have speculated that the meaning of the title derives from a colloquial use of the word "light" to mean giving birth—typically used to describe when a cow will give birth and be "light" again—and connect this to Lena's pregnancy. Speaking of his choice of title, Faulkner denied this interpretation and stated, "... in August in Mississippi there's a few days somewhere about the middle of the month when suddenly there's a foretaste of fall, it's cool, there's a lambency, a soft, 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 and—from Greece, from Olympus in it somewhere. It lasts just for a day or two, then it's gone ... the title reminded me of that time, of a luminosity older than our Christian civilization." (Ruppersburg 03)

Joanna Burden is also confronting gender identity crisis. Her personal history, her past life haunts her. The problem of sex caused her to return to masculine role. Faulkner devotes two chapters to chronicling her history. Like Hightower, Joanna Burden is fettered to the past,

but it is a past she has little understanding of, a past in which she plays no direct role. From a vague and mysterious past, Joanna Burden inherits a religious and racial identity. The progenitor of her religious identity is her grandfather, Calvin Burden, a ruthless man who runs away from his own family at the age of twelve to search for and create his own identity. He preaches to his children from a Spanish Bible in a language they do not understand. What he communicates in English is a threatening message: " 'I'll learn you to hate two things,' or I'll frail the tar out of you. And those things are hell and slaveholders' " (LA, 212).

The children also learn from Burden that violence is an intrinsic and justified element of their religious heritage. His fanatical dedication to his religious and racial principles represents a frightening heritage for his descendants. He leaves his children with a religious and racial identity that is difficult for them to understand and impossible for them to escape. Nathaniel, the son of Calvin, follows the footprints of his father. He forces his daughter to play a substantial role in the family pattern; he passes on Calvin Burden's legacy of anger and despair. The racial and religious identity which he forces upon his daughter is so overwhelming that he inadvertently deals her a devastating psychological and sexual wound. When Joanna was only four years old, he repeats the curses of God without explaining their meaning. He states: " 'The curse of the black race is God's curse. But the curse of the white race is the black man who will be forever God's chosen own because He once cursed Him' "(LA, 222). Her new racial and religious identity is a haunting and terrifying responsibility for the young Joanna. What is even more perplexing is the warning that her quest in raising the status of the Negro will be inevitably futile. Her father explains: " 'You must struggle, rise. But in order to rise, you must raise the shadow with you. But you can never lift it to your level. I see that now, which I did not see until I came down here?' (LA, 222). He passed on the hereditary obligations to his daughter.

It is at this moment that Joanna Burden receives a psychological wound that directs the rest of her life. Joanna begins to measure her success as a Christian, an abolitionist, and a daughter by her ability to live up to her incomprehensible past. Like Gail Hightower, Joanna Burden dedicates her life to ghosts; she cannot secure a future, because she is never able to live in the present. Her loyalty to her family destroys her potential for developing her own identity. Even as a small child, she understands that her shadowy history may interfere with her ability to live successfully in the future. She relates to Christmas, 'What I wanted to tell

him [her father] was that I must escape, get away from under the shadow, or I would die' "(LA, 222). For Joanna, the black race becomes an abstraction. In one of the most pathetic and terrifying scenes in the novel, she explains her vision of the black race and her interpretation of her own future: "I thought of all the children coming forever and ever into the world, white, with the black shadow already falling upon them before they drew breath. And I seemed to see the black shadow in the shape of a cross. And it seemed like the white babies were struggling, even before they drew breath, to escape from the shadow, flung out like their arms were flung out, as if they were nailed to the cross" (LA, 221).

Joanna Burden remains a difficult and shadowy character in *Light in August*, but the ambiguity of her nature should emphasize the tragedy of her story. Joanna Burden suffers from the same destructive forces that cripple both Joe Christmas and Gail Hightower. Like them, she is searching for a way to discover a place for herself and a sense of importance as an individual. She is hindered by racial illusions similar to those of Christmas and by historical illusions similar to Hightower's. Additionally, she must contend with religious and social pressures. As C.W.B. Ficken points out, her confusion in choosing among the roles of: latter-day abolitionist, lover, would-be-mother, and believer in a just and man-cursing God combine to hold her that inevitable course. (Susan 371) Faulkner devotes so much space in the novel to chronicle her history does not reveal his misogyny, nor does it reveal a flaw in the organic unity of the work. Faulkner suggests here that a woman is just as susceptible to the destructive forces of the past as a man. He also shows that even a woman as warped by these forces as Joanna Burden can attain tragic stature through the courage and tenacity of her will to struggle against the dark forces that threaten her identity." (Brooks 57)

When William Faulkner tries to depict fully rounded, strong women characters, he could collect strength only in a muscular in terms. Several women are reduced to only a sexual figure as they have identifiable or discernible masculine features or outlooks. In his comment on defeminized women Fowler has observed that these women either strongly resemble or are identical to their male counterparts or reinforcing the equation of celebration of masculinity. All these women including Addie Bundren and even Joanna Burden, Drusilla Hawk and Charlotte Rittenmeyer are like Aunt Jenny DuPre and Miss Rosa Millard. They are elderly women who safely past the age of sexual desire and desirability. The example of such defeminized woman is character of Edward and in the novel *As I Lay Dying*. Addie is masculine

in many ways. Her elaborate, excessive display of the words which are meaningless entities empty shapes which the Mel used as a substitute for genuine experiences. In Audi we find the obsessive quality of a monologue her vain attempt to rely on words to justify her behavior and her need for a revenge. She remarks that it would take revenge which her male counterpart would never know. She measures things to get them even again and again.

All of her habits of mind and perception are symptomatic of muscular in ways of being which is prominently found in the darkness fiction. Another woman is Joanna Burden. Cleanth Brooks points out that in Joanna, feminine principle is badly distorted. He would rather place Joanna among Faulkner's several muscularized women characters. Joanna Burden initially, before her affair with Joe which expects an explosion of long repressed sexuality, presents to the watching world the attitude of a calm, cold faced, almost man like, almost middle-aged woman who had lived or had been living for twenty years alone without any feminine fears at all. Faulkner has described Joanna's masculinity in three different phases.

Faulkner's treatment of the women characters, is even additional meagerly seems to have attended by the New Critics. Even within the 90s, William Faulkner is ready to take care of his control owing to his problems with race, category and gender. As history materials of Joseph Blotner, Judith B. Wittenberg, and David Minter and the varied interviews is altered by James B. Meriwether, and archangel Millgate, Frederick L. Nell Gwynn and Joseph Blotner, Robert A. Jelliffe, Dr. Harry M. Campbell, Greek deity Grenier, and Jean Stein. Faulkner's essays, speeches, and public letters; and therefore, the recent interview given by Victoria Black, a stepchild of William Faulkner, provided the substantial base upon that numerous new interpretations can be mounted. Therefore, were the new theories of 60s, 70s and 80s that shaped the views of the New Critics to look at and analyze Faulkner's ladies.

In his essay "William Faulkner: Life and Art", Blotner discusses Faulkner's life, and makes an attempt to find a real-life models for a few of Faulkner's fictional women characters. He conjointly points to get into his history of William Faulkner's works as a novelist. However, Faulkner presents a range of physical and sexual experiences that embrace unionism, conception, constipation, evacuation, lesbianism, syphilis, and perversion. In a crucial essay, Faulkner's ladies, revealed in 1978, Jenny Lind comments on his inclusion of biological knowledge in his depiction of women. She writes that like Whitman he saw through the material whether or not allowed to or not, thereby acknowledging the total

disposition of lady, none the less but that of men. She examines Faulkner's ladies within the light-weight of Dr. Louis Berman's *The Glands of regulation temperament*, and Dr. Havelock Ellis's studies within the psychological science of sex.

Faulkner has depicted a range of such women characters. In the critical parlance while conducting an intensive study of these women, Kae Irene Park has categorized them using binary terms like feminine or defeminized. The women who have broken the circle and pushed themselves out of their proper orbit are called masculinized women. For example, the women characters like Drusilla Sartoris, Joanna Burden, Charlotte Wittenmyer, Linda Snopes, Allen Bobbie, Judith Sutpen, and Addie Bundren seems to have pushed out of their proper orbit. Hence, they are associated with certain personality traits which went into qualifying them to be masculinized. When Faulkner attempted to draw a fully rounded, strong female character, he could conceive of strength only in a masculine term. Several women are approachable as sexual figures because they have recognizably masculine features or outlooks. In his comment on defeminized women characters, Fowler has observed these women: “either strikingly resemble their male counterparts, thus reinforcing the equation of cerebration with masculinity.”

#### **Citation:**

Faulkner William. (1932) *Light in August*. New York, Modern Library College editions, 1959. (The novel is mentioned in the abbreviation form as LA)

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