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Final Essay

A Fatal Society

Characters in *Light in August*, such as Joe Christmas and Joanna Burden, are often resigned to the traumatic events that occur in their lives. Neither attempt to struggle while being physically abused—Christmas is beaten by his adopted father and Burden is brutally raped by Christmas himself—nor do they take any preventative measures, such as embracing the help Christmas’ adopted mother offers or locking Joanna’s door against Christmas’ advances. The characters’ passive endurance of trauma suggests something more significant at work in their fate than divine purpose. The racial and gender constraints of society cause a pattern of rape and victimization between Christmas and Burden, the roles of which alternate throughout their relationship and are eventually purified by the blood expelled during their deaths.

The constraints of society, as opposed to divine purpose, control the fates of Christmas and Burden. In “Masculinity, Menace, and American Mythologies of Race in Faulkner’s Anti-Heroes,” Lisa K. Nelson argues that although Joe Christmas parallels Jesus Christ throughout *Light in August*, such as their initials, their date of birth, their age of death, and their crucifixion, “Faulkner use[s] the biblical allegory...as both a structure and an analogy for...the subject of the text— the fatality of sexo-racializing narratives taking shape and making shape of men” (55). Jesus was fated to die by God for the salvation of man, but gender and racial roles in society, not the divine, shape the fates of Christmas and Burden. If the characters’ fates were a matter of divine purpose, fate would contrive against their attempts to prevent or avoid what ultimately

cannot be changed, but neither Christmas nor Burden make any attempt to change the fate they are spiraling towards. They react to situations throughout the novel as if no other alternate course of action exists because social constraints imposed upon them limit their view of the world, their options, and themselves.

The inherent racial and gender dualities Christmas and Burden possess conflict with society. Christmas suspects that his father is black and his mother is white. His “mixed blood” and society’s prejudice and stereotypes against African Americans have a major impact on how people react towards Christmas throughout his entire life. As a child he lives in a white orphanage, but after he catches the dietitian having sex with a coworker, she conspires with Mr. Hines to “send him to the nigger orphanage” (129). Even though Christmas is unsure about what he witnesses and has no intentions of telling anyone, his mixed race is used as a means of punishment. As Christmas matures, he tells his lovers that he thinks he may have black blood to test their reactions. Bobbie’s reaction suggests he should ignore his race; a prostitute’s reaction is indifference, and Burden’s reaction is to embrace his race. The prostitute’s indifference and Burden’s suggestion to embrace his race cause Christmas to turn violent, but he is also unable to ignore the “black blood” inside him, as Bobbie suggests.

When Christmas’ adopted father barges into a dance to separate Christmas and Bobbie, Christmas strikes him over the head with a chair and steals money from his adopted mother’s private stash. He returns to run away with Bobbie only to realize that she is angry at him for dragging her into a potentially bad situation with the police. She screams at him, turning the argument racial when she says, “He told me himself he was a nigger! The son of a bitch! Me fucking a nigger for nothing a nigger son of a bitch that would get me in a jam with the clodhopper police. At a clodhopper dance” (218). The men who witness the argument beat

Christmas unconscious after they realize that he is black. Bobbie prefers that Christmas ignore the black blood inside him, but she turns race against him when she feels threatened. Despite the other instances that Christmas wrongs Bobbie—beating her for having her period, beating and degrading her when he discovers that she is a prostitute, not paying her properly for sex—Christmas once again receives punishment because of a crime society considers worse than beating and degrading and raping: the crime of having black blood.

As an adult, society assumes that Christmas rapes and kills Burden based solely on his black blood. The sheriff suspects Joe Brown of Burden's murder because he tries to prevent her body from being discovered and runs from the scene of the crime, but during the interrogation, Brown accuses Christmas of being black. The revelation of Christmas' mixed heritage distracts the sheriff's attention away from Brown, just as Brown knew it would. The sheriff responds to Brown's news of Christmas' race by saying, "You better be careful what you are saying if it is a white man you are talking about. . . . I don[']t care if he is a murderer or not" (98). The sheriff reacts as if accusing a white man of being black is a worse crime than murder, which implies that being black is a worse sin in the eyes of society than being a murderer. Society accepts Christmas as the murderer without any more proof than a racial accusation from a suspect because of the deep, unshakable stereotypes society has toward race. These stereotypes define Christmas' identity in society despite his potential innocence or guilt. Society inflicts the most harsh, most permanent punishment on Christmas and accepts his maiming and death as proper justice with only the conviction of stereotypes to tip the scale.

Christmas cannot form his own personal identity independent from how society views him because he is exposed to stereotypes throughout his entire life, beginning at an early age while at the orphanage. Christmas' belief in racial stereotypes is only strengthened by the

constant reinforcement from his lovers and society's violent reaction to his black blood. In "Menstrual Blood and 'Nigger' Blood: Joe Christmas and the Ideology of Sex and Race," Joseph R. Ungo writes that society's rejection prevents Christmas from being able to find any type of self-identification, and "because he has no inherent sense of identity, Christmas is at the complete mercy of his culture to provide one for him" (399). Christmas cannot create a self-identity that accepts the duality of his heritage because society has taught him through violence and rejection that having mixed blood is wrong and deserves punishment. Christmas is constrained to the identity society has given him through stereotypes, and he therefore believes that he must act out those stereotypes to his ultimate demise.

Society provides Christmas with a personal identity because stereotypes are the only view of culture he is exposed to. No one teaches him an African American culture outside of the stereotypes society provides, so the only culture he knows—pure stereotypes—forces him to act out particular racial roles expected by society. Nelson discusses Christmas' acted roles in society by differentiating between Christmas' actions and his physical appearance as betraying his race. Other characters in the book cannot determine Christmas' heritage from his parchment-colored skin, but they do blame the "black blood" for his sexual brutality against Joanna Burden. Christmas' actions betray his race as opposed to physical characteristics; therefore, Nelson comes to the conclusion that, "one *is not* black or white, but one *acts* black or white, for race is not a biological fact but a social performance" (56). Christmas' identity and subsequently his actions are based on society's expectations as if those expectations were the only course of action; for him, no other course exists. Stereotypes are the basis of Christmas' being, but his white and black bloods have two very different stereotypes, which conflict with society and therefore conflict with Christmas' own personal identity.

The extent to which the mixed blood effects Christmas' actions is evident through Gavin Stevens' account of Christmas after he breaks free from the officers and attempts one last desperate escape before his death. Even during that last run, the stereotypes keep pace with him:

The black blood drove him first to the negro cabin. And then the white blood drove him out of there, as it was the black blood that snatched up the pistol and the white blood that would not let him fire it. And it was the white blood that sent him to the minister....And then the black blood failed him again, as it must have in crises all his life. He did not kiss the minister....He crouched behind that overturned table and let them shoot him to death, with that loaded and unfired pistol in his hand. (449)

Grimm's personal account of Christmas' actions may be swayed by racial bias, prejudice, and stereotypes, but an unbiased and tolerant third party may form the same account. Although Percy Grimm's account is fundamentally based on stereotypes and therefore should be false on an individual level, Christmas identifies himself through society's racial stereotypes, thereby demonstrating the false truth of the stereotypes. Grimm literally kills Christmas, but Christmas' inner conflict between his two heritages causes his death. From childhood to adolescence, and through his adulthood into death, Christmas struggles with the dual natures within him, but Joanna Burden, who struggles with dual natures of her own, intrudes on the very stereotypes that Christmas identifies with personally.

Joanna Burden is represented throughout *Light in August* as having both feminine and masculine attributes. The reader receives Burden's struggle with her sexuality through Christmas' point of view. Christmas describes Burden as having, "a dual personality: the one the woman at first sight of whom in the lifted candle...there had opened before him...a horizon of

physical security and adultery if not pleasure; the other the mantrained muscles and the mantrained habit of thinking born of heritage and environment with which he had to fight up to the final instant” (235). Christmas sees Burden as both a female sex object and a masculine force of will. When he gazes at Burden and thinks of the feminine characteristics she has to offer, Christmas is exposed to her female side, and when Christmas tries to rape Burden and when he is confronted by her political views, future plans, and stubborn will, he is exposed to her male side. The duality of female and male attributes conflicts with the specific gender roles society imposes on women, such as abstinence before marriage, submissiveness, and domesticity; Burden struggles with all three of these gender roles through her unmarried, sexually dominant relationship with Christmas and her role as a political activist against racism in the education system. She frustrates, victimizes, and eventually corrupts Christmas with her dualities. As Burden comes to grips with who she is and plans for the future, she imposes on Christmas’ identity until he feels compelled to purify her from the gender dualities, as well as himself from her corruption.

In “A Very American Power Struggle: The Color of Rape in *Light in August*,” Laura L. Bush describes how Christmas is frustrated by Burden’s dual gender nature and the masculine role she assumes in their sexual relationship. In accordance with gender stereotypes, Christmas believes that “a woman should yield with feigned feminine resistance to a man. Instead, Joanna angers Joe by giving up her long-held purity with masculine stoicism. She disrupts his sexual script....[and] robs Joe of his masculine power” (5). Stereotypically, women should be submissive to men’s sexual advances, but they should also instinctively protect their virginity. Burden’s masculine half of her dual nature, however, allows her to endure Christmas’ rape without the maidenly protests that Christmas expects. He feels personally affronted by Burden’s

ability to unflinchingly face such sexual brutality; her masculinity forces Christmas to confront the conflict of society's stereotypes and consequently, a conflict to his own identity.

As Christmas and Burden's relationship progresses, she corrupts him sexually by forcing him to act as a black rapist while having sex. Burden actually begins making demands on where, when, and how they have sex, transforming from the submissively stoic receiver of Christmas' rape, which clashes with Christmas' identity to begin with, to the dominantly enthusiastic controller of their sexual relationship. Bush recalls Christmas' reaction to Burden's sexual advances. Christmas claims that Burden prefers rape fantasies as opposed to real sex, but "performing rape appears to frighten Joe as much as he wanted to frighten her with 'real' rape" (Bush 6). Burden uses rape fantasies with Christmas in an attempt to purge her dual gender nature and create an identity for herself through society's stereotypes. Although Christmas' role as a black rapist for Burden, a white woman, coincides with Christmas' stereotypical identity, it forces Christmas to confront that Burden wants to be raped, that she desires the black act that he performs for society. Burden further unravels Christmas' identity because her desire for the stereotype actually conflicts with the stereotype.

Burden deepens the corruption by suggesting that Christmas use his race to receive a scholarship to attend a black college. When she realizes that what she thought was a pregnancy scare is actually menopause, both Christmas and Burden become suddenly aware of her age. Although Christmas thinks that Burden is "worn out" and "not any good anymore," Burden becomes concerned about her financial and political affairs in the event of her death (278). She wants Christmas to further his education, so he may take over her work when she passes. Nelson notes that, "Christmas is horrified by the idea....It is not just that he go to college and become a lawyer, but it must be a black college and it must be a black lawyer....Joanna is demanding of

Christmas not only that he perform black masculinity, but that he do so in a Booker T. Washington-like narrative uplift” (64). The concern for her financial and political affairs displays the masculine half of her dual nature. A more feminine reaction may have been concern for her dwindling relationship with Christmas. Her conflicting actions against gender stereotypes in society once again conflict with Christmas’ stereotype-based identity. By forcing Christmas to embrace his black blood instead of society’s stereotypes of black blood, Burden attempts to rape Christmas of his identity.

In retaliation to Burden’s attempted rape, Christmas uses blood to purify Burden and himself of the dualities that conflict with society’s stereotypes. He associates Burden’s attempted rape with her lack of menstruation because her demands to further his education at a black college occur in conjunction with menopause. Urgo writes about how deeply women’s menstruation cycle affects Christmas. Although Christmas initially denies that menstruation even exists, he eventually rationalizes that “the victims of menstruation are also the beneficiaries of what Joe understands to be a *purifying* ordeal, a monthly purging of ‘filth’ from the body, a periodic evacuation of the stuff of the body’s cultural definition, blood” (394). Christmas is moved by the concept of menstruation because he is unable to purge blood the way women can. His masculinity prevents him from cleansing his body of the duality of white and black blood that he struggles with throughout the entire novel. Once Burden becomes menopausal, she can no longer purge the filth of her dual nature either.

Urgo compares Burden’s menopause to Christmas’ masculinity. Burden no longer “menstruate[s]; she is, like him, trapped with her blood, caged into her cultural identity— ‘spinster,’ ‘nigger lover’— provided her by her society. To Joe, the stoppage of her blood condemns her because it reminds him of his own secret, pent-up filth” (400). Christmas believes

that he purifies Burden by cutting her throat, finally releasing her blood after she goes through menopause, but her dualities conflict with society's gender constraints before she becomes menopausal. Instead of Christmas' purifying Burden by cutting her throat, Burden attempts to purify herself from her dual sexuality by allowing Christmas to rape her, thereby purging her virginal blood and creating a personal identity based on stereotype.

Christmas is the only character who witnesses the stereotypical identity that Burden creates. The rest of society views Burden as a spinster and a political advocate, which demonstrates the masculine half of her dual nature. In "Patterns of Victimization in *Light in August*," Caryl K. Sills discusses Christmas and Burden's dual victimization. He writes that both Christmas and Burden negotiate their own deaths, but Joanna, "reassumes the role of victim whose murder reconciles the paradox of her life. During her life, the townspeople denied Joanna respect as an individual because of her northern roots and her support for the Negro education. However, in death they defend her as representative of white women" (164). Christmas rapes Burden of her established social identity to prevent her from altering his identity. From Christmas' point of view, he frees himself from the obligation to embrace his black blood, and he frees Burden from her gender duality. Society views Burden as the stereotypical white woman, victim to a black man, but from Burden's point of view, her murder erases her previous identity from society. Her life work as a political advocate for racial equality in the education system ultimately fails because Christmas perpetuates the stereotype. Although she wants him to act the stereotype sexually, she wants him to reject the stereotype socially. Christmas cannot provide either for her because both scenarios cast him as victim by conflicting with his identity.

Once Christmas frees Burden from her gender duality, he fully embraces the stereotypical fate that Burden wants him to go to college to avoid. Grimm catches Christmas in Hightower's house, shoots him, and castrates him. In the last few moments before Christmas dies,

the pent black blood seemed to rush like a released breath. It seemed to rush out of his pale body like the rush of sparks from a released rocket; upon that black blast the man seemed to rise soaring into their memories forever and ever . . . It will be there, musing, quiet, steadfast, not fading and not particularly threatening, but of itself alone serene, alone itself triumphant. (465)

Christmas does not struggle or attempt to protect himself because he finally receives what he has been craving his entire life, a means of removing his masculinity and finally purging the black blood from his body. The relief that purging his blood gives Christmas demonstrates the power society has over even his feelings. A normal, unaffected person outside Christmas' conceptions of society and self who endures a death such as Christmas endures would be written in terms of panic and fear and struggle. Christmas, on the other hand, endures his death in terms of steadfastness and serenity and triumph. Society demands an individual to punish for the racial hate crime against a white woman, and Christmas sacrifices himself by enacting the stereotypes of society to purify the racial dualities within him.

Christmas' death may also be considered a sacrifice for society. Jesus' fate was caused by divine purpose to selflessly purify society's sins, but Christmas died to purify himself. His fate was caused by society to protect the illusion of truth in stereotypes. In "Faulkner's *Light in August: A View of Tragedy*," Ray B. West writes that "the tragedy of Joe is the tragedy of mankind—or society" (10). Christmas is a product of his society. He acts the role that society casts him in life, and his fate, decreed by stereotypes, comes to fruition. Society may sit back,

content to know that human nature acts as expected because Christmas demonstrates that racial stereotypes are true, but the reader witnesses the inner turmoil that the clash of his mixed heritage and society's expectations causes within Christmas. His sacrifice protects society from the horror of their actions; they slit Burden's throat just as surely as Christmas did because society has the power to determine Christmas and Burden's fate.

West discusses the difference between the Greek and Faulknerian tragic hero. Unlike Greek tragic heroes, whose fates are determined by the divine, Faulkner's are "born in innocence, but already bearing the cross of society's violation of that innocence—its violation of nature" (11). The conflicts of race and gender in society are Christmas and Burden's crosses, but if society did not have stereotypes for Christmas and Burden to bear, their race and gender alone would not damn them to their gruesome fates. Nature condemns neither interracial relationships nor independent, masculine women, but people do. Society's expectations and stereotypes go against the natural world. Christmas and Burden die in the name of stereotypes, so Faulkner's society can continue undisturbed and the reader's society cannot.

Faulkner demonstrates through Christmas and Burden's tragic and unavoidable fates the power society has over the life of the individual. Christmas is born with white and black blood. Burden is born with masculine and feminine attributes. Neither duality conflicts with the fundamental laws of nature, yet both characters suffer greatly for those dualities because they conflict with the laws of society. The characters' initial innocence cannot be salvaged in the society Faulkner places them in, but perhaps by showing the individual ramifications of an unchanging, unmoving, stereotypical society, the reader will be changed and moved and better fortified to accept people for who they are instead of what they should be for society.

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