

Joe Christmas's racial ambivalence dilemma in William Faulkner's *Light in August*

NAOUNOU

Amédée-Université Jean Lorougnon Guède- Daloa (CI)

Abstract :- William Faulkner intended Joe Christmas to be a tragic character who would constantly seek an identity. He combats any threat to his safety—be it physical, mental, or emotional safety—with violent reactions that generally manifest in outbursts toward women for threatening his conception of his sexuality by coercing him into an intimate relationship. At many points throughout the novel, Joe Christmas associates himself with the black race and endures all of the ridicule that comes with it just to believe that he knows a little bit about his personal history and allows his racial confusion to influence his construction of his sexual identity throughout his adolescent and adult life. His overpowering drive to define himself as a victim of the racial hostility leads to a tragic end—specifically, his castration and murder. Identity is not (and cannot be) something inherent in Joe Christmas's being—it is something he must actively construct through his experiences as a mixed-race child and the interruption of his personal development in the early stages of his life. Though a discussion of this character necessitates a discussion of his perception of race, his construction of sexuality is integral to understanding his construction of his racial identity and, on a larger scale, of his identity as a whole.

Keywords: *identity, sexuality, racial confusion, victim, racial hostility.*

Résumé :- William Faulkner présente Joe Christmas comme un personnage tragique perpétuellement en quête de son identité. Il combat avec violence tout ce qui menace sa sécurité – fut il physique, mentale, ou émotive – ce qui se traduit généralement par ses déchaînements contre les femmes qui, en le contraignant à avoir des rapports intimes avec lui, constituent une menace pour sa compréhension de la sexualité. Dans le roman, Joe Christmas s'identifie à la race noire et endure toutes les railleries qui en découlent juste pour se rassurer qu'il connaît un peu son histoire personnelle et permet à l'ambiguïté de sa race d'influencer la construction de son identité sexuelle au cours de son adolescence et sa vie d'adulte. Son excès de confiance en lui le pousse à croire qu'il est victime d'une hostilité raciale qui le mène vers sa fin tragique, spécifiquement à sa castration et à son meurtre. L'identité n'est pas (et ne peut être) quelque chose d'inhérent à la personnalité de Joe Christmas, c'est plutôt quelque chose qu'il doit construire à travers ses expériences entant que enfant métisse et l'interruption précoce des différents étapes de son développement personnel. Si une discussion de cette nature nécessite une discussion de sa perception de la race, son interprétation de la sexualité fait partie intégrante de la compréhension de la construction de son identité raciale et, d'une manière générale, de toute son identité.

Mots clés : *identité, sexualité, confusion raciale, victime, hostilité raciale.*

I. INTRODUCTION

William Faulkner pictured the American South in his fictional Yoknapatawpha County with such an artistic force that may be easily viewed as unique in the history of literature. He touches straight and clear issues. Among the important aspects that the author considers in his works, it is relevant to mention those that refer to problems of race, gender and class, which also represent a concern nowadays, thus proving their truthfulness and permanence in time. This paper intends to deal with one of the many interesting and debatable topics, namely, the theme of identity in his novel *Light in August* and, subsequently, the dilemma of one of his character's racial ambivalence. As an alienated, disconnected and displaced individual Joe Christmas, whose identity is uncertain, remains an isolated character in Faulkner's work. The choice of Joe Christmas to enlarge upon the problem of identity crisis is even more justifiable as unquestionably, permit to Faulkner to reveal his character's limits of existence.

I-Joe Christmas's identity uncertainty

In an interview at the University of Virginia in 1957, William Faulkner said of his character, Joe Christmas: He didn't know what he was, and so he was nothing. He deliberately evicted himself from the human race because he didn't know which [race] he was. That was his tragedy, that to me was the tragic central idea of the story—that he didn't know what he was, and there was no way possible in life for him to find out. Which to me is the most tragic condition a man could find himself in—not to know what he is and to know

that he will never know.(Rueckert 97)This quotation brings to the foreground of the conversation about Christmas's character the fact that he will continuously seek to find out what he is given the fact that he does not (and cannot) inherently know. Faulkner intended Christmas to be a character plagued both by questions of his own identity and by the overwhelming notion that he would never truly know who or what he was. To speak specifically of Christmas's situation, identity is not something intrinsic in his being. Lonely isolated and forever going round in circles searching for his authentic self, Joe Christmas is perhaps the most controversial character of William Faulkner's *Light in August* because his racial identity cannot be exactly determined with him and even his own name also helps him to be perceived as foreign. Subsequently Joe Christmas's name gives him the chance to pass unnoticed: "The strangeness of Christmas's name enables him a literal escape from the totalizing power of social abstraction, as he can be figured only as something foreign ... Christmas as a surname fails to register meaningfully within a system of representation in which 'a man's name is... just the sound for who he is'." (Bell 118) The concepts of foreignness or otherness are intimately linked to those of isolation and non-identity. The other represents a menacing presence, and on no account could he be welcomed into the same zone as those being the same. Thus, he is not granted identity, and the governing principles will reject him as intruder. Joe Christmas's situation resembles the one presented; we can easily see "Joe's intrusion as a figure of otherness into a social texture of white, masculine homogeneity." (Daileader 113) Joe Christmas does not fit in any society, as he is neither black nor white. Ungratefully, he is caught in-between, adhering to no race and religion. Profoundly divided, the character is permanently tormented, and most dangerously, he cannot escape his own interior tensions, which make him a prisoner until the very end. All these facts lead to give primacy and supremacy to him, as fickle individual to be revealed. Joe Christmas's non-identity begins with "... his social alienation in the orphanage in which he lives until he is five, and where he is introduced to the concept of being a nigger, the primary name by which the other children refer to him." (Bell 120) Evidently, his being partly black empowers the white people to use pejorative words when they address him, and naturally, he slowly retreats into his own world. Hence it is clear that Joe Christmas is viewed in the novel as a social being, prone to divide his own kind into superior and inferior individuals, according to racial criteria and ignoring other aspects, undoubtedly more important than origins or physical appearances. Unconsciously, his marginalization, negatively labeled, gradually leads to his death. Unfortunately Joe Christmas feeling of non-belonging creates a sense of inferiority, and he suffers not only from social alienation but also from inner hollowness where the other represents a menacing presence that leads to the character's self hatred. Joe Christmas is continually drawn to the primal scene of his inner conflict. The situation leads to a fight in which Mr McEarchen is hit over the head with a chair. The waitress ends up hating Joe Christmas, and herself, for treating him like a white man. He spends his life wandering "and from that night each street ran into one street and was fifteen years long." He always tells the women he sleeps with that he is a negro. If he appears to be honest, that is making himself black, he can hide the uncertainty of his identity, hide what he is really frightened of. Saying he is black is as much an untruth as saying he is white. A white man of course never has to say he is white. For a while he lives with a black woman but his whole being resists her blackness while he tries his very best to be black. Though he seeks a relationship it is a white woman who lives in a big house that he needs. The big house represents white society, in which he must live, or die, and his relation to it is seen in three distinct phases. First he is in the cold outside trying to get in; then he is inside in 'hot wild darkness'. Finally he feels himself in a psychological wilderness where he has no relation with anything. Because he has no identity, he has no place to stand, he is a disembodied man who cannot act from his own volition but merely react to the circumstance that he finds himself in. He cannot see that the big house is a phantasy, that it is an empty framework of thought and rules derived from a legacy of slavery and injustice. No final certainty, no final 'home' exists in reality, rather it is a figment of his longing, his need to belong. Having projected her sexual guilt onto him he becomes frightened and his anxiety is increased when Brown, who shares the cabin with him looks as though he will tell the community of his sexual improprieties. He now takes on the persona of the dietician in his phantasy; he feels feminine and panic-stricken. He rips off his clothes and wanders around in the night clutching a knife. His vulnerability is exposed; he is overwhelmed and knows he must transform himself through action. In the psychological wilderness of his mind, he wrestles with the devil - the promise of a life of ease, a place in the world, at the price of the betrayal of his manhood. A feeling Miss Burden has deepened in him. In the mirror of race and identity they are equals; both are outsiders and both endeavour to hide their authenticity. They are both religious mediums. God acts through her and Joe Christmas. They are twins each looking at their own fragmentation. He sees her whiteness, which in turn brings sexual submission revealing his feminine nature. She sees his blackness, which reveals her (male) sexuality. Each becomes their opposite. The white side of black comes to the fore in Joe Christmas while the black side of white comes to the fore in Miss Burden. During the day they reverse roles. It's the mirror itself, the confrontation with self that is excruciating. William Faulkner makes them speak the same words. Each of them feels bound to kill the other, which is themselves. In the face of Joe Christmas the inherent conflict of the white woman is exposed, the divided mind; and for him the white face reveals his own black/ white dilemma. Miss Burden, the white woman is upside down in her body

and her sexual desire is sublimated by food: She eats instead of saying anything meaningful. Desire for food overrides her authentic desire for sex. She thinks she is carrying the white man's burden but in fact she herself is the black man's burden. She projects her sexuality onto Joe Christmas who feels drawn in to her confusion. What he desires is not considered, he is an object in her world. For him to be a subject in the world is not permissible. In the novel, Joe Christmas appears to be an innocent who has no option but to be guilty. His struggle to claim his birthright is always thwarted as he always moves away and not towards the very thing he desires. He always moves towards whiteness seeking out his own brand of purity: this image having been absorbed into his memory at a tender age. This image is created through his fear as he enmeshes with his abuser. Miss Burden is however a racist since she cannot conceive of a change of view for herself, she alone can change him while remaining unchanged herself. Further, she is prepared to institutionalize him, make him stand, give him a place in the society but as a black not as a white. Equality is never an option. He must always be below her. Unfortunately this is what happens with all the outcast characters who are forced to live outside the community. Even if they turn to the inside to seek for self security, they only find that there is nothing there, except for loneliness and emptiness. However, Joe Christmas best embodies the notion of endless nothingness, for he does not find an actual meaning in earthy life and he cannot find resignation in himself or in heavenly spheres, like the female character, Joanna Burden. Whereas the latter attempts a religious attitude to change something that she may have understood as bad or evil, Joe Christmas refuses the belief in anything divine, in holy salvation: "She ought not to have started praying over me. ... He began to curse her. He stood beneath the dark window, cursing her with slow and calculated obscenity." (Faulkner 86) With no other resources, with no man or god to offer him support, Joe Christmas's redemption never comes.

II. JOE CHRISTMAS'S LIMITS OF EXISTENCE

As a little boy in the orphanage Joe Christmas is fond of making his way to the dietician's room where he likes to suck on her toothpaste. On one particular afternoon he has taken the toothpaste from the sink when he hears her returning to her room with the interne from the local hospital. For safety, he hides behind a cloth curtain and witnesses her making love. This scene marks the ground on which Joe Christmas forms a mental attachment to the white woman and to food. This story represents the limits of his existence from which he cannot escape; the story which is his life and to which he returns again and again unable to find the freedom he is looking for. He spends his life re-enacting his early trauma. Because of his early experience he always seeks safety in whiteness - a feminine whiteness that can cover up his blackness, his tainted blood. But in every move towards it he steps inevitably into insecurity; for he likes what he does not like and his partners have no interest in him as a person. He is a repository for their sexual guilt, lack of responsibility and identity. Joe Christmas is an innocent; he knows nothing about sex or toothpaste for that matter but he suddenly becomes the object of the dietician's intense fear. The young woman believes that this young boy will expose her secret lovemaking. She offers to bribe him with a dollar but he cannot understand what she is doing and he refuses, thus returning to her, her sexual guilt. In her panic at being found out by the authorities at the orphanage, the dietician went to the janitor who is in reality the father of Joe Christmas' unmarried mother so that the later could tell to Joe Christmas not to say words on what he has witnessed. Otherwise she will inform the matron on the real identity of Joe Christmas. Identity the janitor already knows "I know who set him there." (Faulkner 116) For the janitor the dietician's blackmail is useless as in his eyes Joe Christmas is literally the embodiment of evil, a sign and a damnation for bitchery; he has been sent by God to expose "woman sinning" - the hidden shameful sexuality of the white woman which he sees as the root cause of all the problems of civilization. And concerning the dietician hidden sexual relation he says: "I knowed he would be there to catch you when God's time came." (Faulkner 134) Even at a young age, the janitor attempts to kidnap Joe Christmas but is foiled by the police. He wants to keep the boy within his sights to await God's retribution. Joe Christmas is aware of his difference, aware that the old man is continually watching him. Finally Joe Christmas is adopted by a country couple called Mr and Mrs McEarchen who endeavor to give him a religious upbringing, a hard and punishing existence in their attempt to make him good. They are unaware of his mixed ancestry but seem to know that there is something wrong with him. Faulkner relates in chilling detail the punishment given to Joe Christmas as a teenager for failing to learn his catechism. He is sent to his room, and when Mrs McEarchen brings him a tray of food he throws it against the wall and eats like an animal off the floor. Their efforts are so oppressive that they teach him to hate them. But he has no choice but to accept the identity he has been given. He rejects the soft approach and kindness of the woman because it undermines his male identity in his passive resistance of Mr McEarchen. Food in his relation with the white woman becomes another manipulation of the bad white man. To confirm this identity he asserts his manhood by humiliating a black girl. He later takes up with a white waitress, a prostitute, whom he informs that he has negro blood. Once more food and sex are linked together. This idea continually comes in his mind and invades all his being to the point that he is sometimes alone. Joe Christmas is dispossessed and alienated from society, thinking always that it is his loneliness that he is trying to escape from, and not himself. His exclusion from society is further sustained by his self-excluding

character, and his isolation painfully extends from inside out. Joe Christmas's self hatred makes him unbearable to himself, and, not surprisingly, he lives "a life of perpetual dislocation." (Bell 121) He chooses to be basically isolated, even though he has relations to other men, inevitably interacting with them. His isolation is a form of defense, as much as a form of individual incapacity to get attached to places or people: "Able to live anywhere, Joe Christmas is also able to leave anywhere, attached to no home and no particular other." (Bell 121) His relation to women exemplifies his distorted nature in his necessity to be with the woman on the one hand, and his final act of getting rid of the woman on the other hand. His fears come to surface when he is faced with a situation of genuine interaction, his actions destroying and being self-destructive. He murders the woman, thus murdering the hope of being saved from himself: "The closer Joe gets to a female the more he experiences vulnerability and a deathly threat to his selfhood, yet the vulnerability is an expression of their earning for the female-perhaps as mother ..." (Kartiganer, Abadie 190) Joe Christmas may have experienced relief in disposing of a woman who attempts at intruding into his selfhood, no matter how self-destructive and sick that selfhood appears to be. Thus, the character declares his self-crucifixion. It is not an other who imprisons him for life within his own damaged soul, but it is himself, his most perilous enemy. One afternoon Joe Christmas arrives at a big house, outside a small town in which lives a middle-aged white woman called Miss Burden whom "the coloured folks look after" and he moves into the cabin on her land. He makes his way into her kitchen for the first time and discovers the "invisible food" and he recalls the toothpaste he has eaten as a boy. He remembers the taste, the smell and the taste of his tears as he revisits the trauma of his childhood, "If its food you want, you will find that," she says in a voice calm, a little deep, quite cold. Joe Christmas and Miss Burden's relationship develops into a sexual one and "it was as though he had fallen into a sewer, a sewer that ran by night." He feels himself sinking helplessly, surrendering to physical security as though he is the woman and she the man. He eats the food she prepares and they make love knowing all the time that this is not his life and that they do not belong together. He notices that she never invites him inside the house proper; the food is always left in the kitchen and when he enters the house at night, he oversteps her white boundaries and feels like he is committing a crime. Miss Burden exhibits no desire for food, and she separates his need for food from his desire for her, thus creating an unbearable tension. She literally makes food good and sex bad. Joe Christmas is transfixed, drawn in to a situation he cannot control. He knows it from the past and it has meaning for him. He watches Miss Burden conduct all her affairs by day with an icy coldness; while by night she turns into a blaspheming nymphomaniac as all her pent up sexual desires find opportunity with him. All the while he is drawn in to her confusion and he begins to feel corrupted by her. He is afraid, 'like a man being sucked down into a bottomless morass.' But some unknown quality holds him and he cannot leave and what he now saw by daylight 'was a phantom of someone the night sister had murdered.' She starts to talk about a child and has put on more than thirty pounds in weight, more than she has weighed in her life. She doesn't eat with her lover, but she slavishly ministers to his needs. Food and sex are also confused in her mind as she attempts to control her sexual desire by over-eating. 'She wants to be married,' he thinks, and he considers the ease and security that marriage would bring. On the night that Joe Christmas thinks he will suggest marriage she chides him for 'wasting his life' and suggests instead that he attend a black college and takes charge of her estate. He has taken a job at a wood yard; he also makes money selling bootleg whisky. She suggests that if he tells the authorities he is black, he will not have to pay for anything and that he will learn to appropriate money. He is dumbfounded by her suggestion and he refuses her offer, as when he was similarly silenced with money as a young boy. Joe Christmas gets angry and insults her by suggesting that she is too old for sex. In her mind there is no question of marriage. In her secret shameful night-time persona, his hidden blackness matches her own dark sexual appetite, but by day, and in public, she remains pure and white, and he carries all the shame. But the separation starts to break down. He is thinking of the respectability of marriage but she insists on continuing to project her shame onto him by maintaining her daytime role as educator and reformer of blacks. This is why he feels corrupted by her. With this sexual taunt Joe Christmas threatens her with the consequences of her own pure self-image. But in reality things have already gone too far for him to break off. He doesn't want to be the black man; he doesn't want to be categorised as such since this would deny to the world his whiteness. He wants to be accepted for what he is and no one will, or can do it. After receiving a note from her Joe Christmas returns to the bedroom to find her kneeling in prayer and she implores him to pray with her. She asks him three times to kneel. "It's not me who asks it" she says. When he refuses she begs him to stay while she prays for God's forgiveness. They face each other and she says "There's just one thing to do," (Faulkner 148) to which he responds 'there's just one other thing to do. He sees her arms unfold and notices that she is carrying a revolver. The white, religious reforming Miss Burden has entered the chamber of secrets, the bedroom of her shameful desire. She must now make him accept the responsibility and reform him or else kill him - and kill her shame. Joe Christmas must submit or be destroyed. There is no way out for either of them. Later we discover that he has slit her throat with his knife. He makes his way to town. On the way he meets a black woman and exchanges his shoes for her brogans as if to signify that he now has no white place to stand. He is seen and apprehended, although he wants to give himself up. He knows this is the end of the line for him. Finally Joe Christmas escapes and seeks sanctuary in

the kitchen of a preacher where he is discovered, shot, and castrated for making love to a white woman. The white man, Percy Grimm - Faulkner calls him 'the player' is doing his duty by God, thus reclaiming the white woman's sexual purity and innocence. It appears that even in death his sexual identity is threatening.

III. CONCLUSION

Early Joe Christmas struggles to form a coherent view of his interrupted self development and inability to form a bond with any woman who should have provided him with nourishment, comfort, and the ability to construct his sexuality to experience good relationships. Unfortunately for Joe Christmas this construction is continuously interrupted, causing him to regress and then reform his outlook on those with whom he may build a relationship (especially women). He is unable to relinquish his development completely, his actions throughout the novel display signs of thoughts fixation throughout his adolescent and adult life. The role that food, or lack of food, plays in Joe Christmas's development, and the ways in which his corresponding scars continue to resurface throughout his life explain his unconventional relationships with the dietician and Miss Burden. His violent nature grows out of his disrupted attempts at constructing identity as a defense mechanism intended to protect him from those who may threaten the safety of the identity he has created for himself. Joe Christmas is initially unable to lay claim to one side of his racial divide. Towards the end of his life he endures all of the ridicule and violence that comes with blackness just to believe that he knows a little bit about his personal history and allows his racial confusion.

Works Cited:

- [1] Bell, Kevin. *Ashes Taken for Fire. Aesthetic Modernism and the Critique of Identity*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007.
- [2] Clarke, Deborah. *Robbing the Mother, Women in Faulkner*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994.
- [3] Daileader, Celia R. *Racism, Misogyny, and the Othello Myth*. Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- [4] Faulkner, William, *Light in August*. New York: Random House, Inc., 1972 (1932).
- [5] Fowler, Doreen, Abadie, Ann J. *Faulkner and Religion*. Jackson and London: University Press of Mississippi, 1991.
- [6] Kartiganer, Donald M., Abadie, Ann J. *Faulkner and Psychology*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994.
- [7] Rueckert, William H. *Faulkner from Within Destructive and Generative Being in the Novels of William Faulkner*. West Lafayette, Indiana: Parlor Press, 2004.