LIGHT
IN AUGUST
WILLIAM
FAULKNER
One of Light in August's central characters, the Reverend Gail Hightower, is haunted by memories of his grandfather, who died fighting in the Confederate cavalry. William Faulkner's great-grandfather, William Clark Falkner, was a Civil War veteran, too. Known as the "old colonel," he later wrote several books, including a popular romance, The White Rose of Memphis (1882). When still a boy, William Faulkner heard many inspiring tales about this family patriarch. One day he told his teacher, "I want to be a writer like my great-granddaddy."

In 1841, at the age of 16, W. C. Falkner left home. For reasons that are still the subject of historians' speculations, he walked from his native Tennessee to Ripley, Mississippi. (It is a similar trip, in the opposite direction, that 20-year-old Lena Grove takes in Light in August.) Falkner served in the Mexican War as well as in the Civil War. After the Confederacy's defeat, Colonel Falkner returned to Ripley for successful careers as a railroad magnate and a lawyer. In 1889 he was elected to the state legislature, but an opponent shot him dead on the town's main street. In previous brushes with violence, Falkner had stabbed one man to death and shot another, and his eldest son had been shot to death in a love triangle. This volatile great-grandfather became the model for Colonel John Sartoris, a major character in one of Faulkner's first novels. Colonel Sartoris also appears in Light in August as the man who shoots Joanna Burden's grandfather and brother.

After the "old colonel's" death, his son, John Wesley Thompson Falkner, known as the "young colonel," took over the family railroad and became a political power in northern Mississippi. But his son--William Faulkner's father, Murry--led a less colorful life. He too worked on the railroad, but only as a fireman, engineer, and conductor. Murry married Maud Butler, of Oxford, Mississippi, the Lafayette County seat. And on September 25, 1897, their first son, William Cuthbert, was born in New Albany, where Murry was working as passenger agent. Just before William's fifth birthday, the family moved back to Oxford, where Murry eventually became secretary and business manager of the nearby University of Mississippi.

Oxford (and perhaps Ripley as well) are the models for the fictional city of Jefferson, while Lafayette County became Yoknapatawpha County. When Faulkner was growing up, many Civil War veterans were still alive. Several sections of Light in August are written as stories told by one character to another in much the same way that those veterans told grand tales about the more exciting times of their youth. And from these old veterans Faulkner absorbed what has been called "the Southern myth."

According to this set of beliefs, the South was a homeland that had heroically fought the Civil War for self-determination. The odds had been impossible, the storytellers said, but in fighting so valiantly the South had won a moral victory. Nonetheless, in this white Southern interpretation of history, the result of defeat had been destruction at the hands of the conquerors and demoralization among the descendants of the defeated. So in Light in August, the city of Jefferson shuns Joanna Burden because, almost seven decades after the end of the Civil War, the town sees her as one of the hated invaders.

Though the Southern myth influenced Faulkner, his awareness of the position of blacks in the South helped make him critical of the legend too. When Faulkner wrote Light in August, Southern laws and Southern custom still prevented blacks from voting, kept them separate from whites in public facilities, and set rules for their behavior in the presence of whites. The United States Supreme Court had declared racial segregation constitutional in 1896, and the court also sanctioned the practice of defining anyone with any black ancestry as black. In the years between that decision and the writing of Light in August, Southern states continued to enact new racial restrictions. Blacks who seemed defiant were subject to lynchings--vigilante murders often accompanied by mutilations, like the one that befalls Joe Christmas at the end of Light in August.

But his Southern environment wasn't the only influence on the young Faulkner. He started writing in eighth grade. When he was at Oxford High School, an older friend named Phil Stone introduced him to French literature and encouraged his budding talent. Phil Stone became a model for Gavin Stephens, the lawyer who appears briefly near the end of Light in August. Though he was reading widely, Faulkner disliked school. He dropped out permanently in 1915 and went to work at his grandfather's bank early the next year. Then for a short time in 1918 he roomed with Stone in New Haven and worked as a clerk at a small-arms company.
The United States had entered World War I the year before, and Faulkner tried to enlist for flight training but was rejected as too short. He then applied to the Canadian Royal Air Force. To help him get accepted, he invented a British background and added the letter "u" to his last name to make it sound more British. The Canadians took him, but the war ended before Faulkner got to fly a single mission. Perhaps this experience helped Faulkner create the frustrated, would-be soldier Percy Grimm, who kills Joe Christmas in Light in August.

In 1924, with the financial help of Phil Stone, Faulkner published a book of poems, The Marble Faun. Both the critics and the public ignored it. But on an extended visit to New Orleans, Faulkner became friends with the writer Sherwood Anderson, who encouraged him to concentrate on fiction. From New Orleans, Faulkner went to Paris, where he spent the last few months of 1925. In 1926 his first novel was published. It was Soldiers' Pay, a story about postwar disillusionment. Returning to Oxford, Faulkner finished his second novel, Mosquitoes (1927), a satire on New Orleans literary life.

Faulkner then turned to his native Mississippi for the subject that was to preoccupy him henceforth. In January 1929, Sartoris, Faulkner's first Yoknapatawpha novel, was published. In June of that same year Faulkner married his high school sweetheart, Estelle Oldham Franklin, after her divorce. And 1929 was a turning point in yet a third respect. It marked the publication of The Sound and the Fury. Told from four different points of view, this story of a doomed family was the first novel in which Faulkner combined his Mississippi subject matter with experimental literary techniques that had been influenced by modern authors such as T. S. Eliot and James Joyce.

Despite that achievement, Faulkner still could not earn enough to support his family. While working at manual labor, he wrote As I Lay Dying (1930), the tale of a burial journey from a rural farm to a Jefferson cemetery. Told by fifteen different narrators, it is now regarded as a masterpiece, but it was no more commercially successful than Faulkner's previous novels.

Faulkner then began work on a story designed to be so gruesome that its shock value would make it popular. Published in February 1931, Sanctuary was indeed Faulkner's first financial success. It tells of the horrifying fate of a young Mississippi college student, Temple Drake. Sanctuary caught the attention of Hollywood producers, who made it into a movie, The Story of Temple Drake (1933).

Light in August, published in 1932, integrates Faulkner's technical innovations into a more conventional and more objective narrative than that of The Sound and the Fury or As I Lay Dying. All its major characters are comparative outsiders in Jefferson, and for the first time, one of Faulkner's central interests is his characters' relationship to the community at large.

Meanwhile Faulkner had experienced the first of several personal tragedies when his infant daughter Alabama died in 1931. In 1932 he made his initial journey to Hollywood, where he worked as a screenwriter. Screenwriting became an important source of income for Faulkner; he proved himself an expert at revising other people's screenplays and was soon a favorite writer for the famous director Howard Hawks. But Faulkner disliked these trips to California, and the separations from his family strained his marriage. Both Faulkner and his wife developed heavy drinking problems, and, in Hollywood, Faulkner had several long-term love affairs. Faulkner's personal and financial problems both became worse when, in 1935, his youngest brother, Dean, was killed flying a plane Faulkner had given him. Faulkner blamed himself for his brother's death and took financial responsibility for Dean's family.

Despite his problems, Faulkner continued to write, publishing some important books in the years immediately after Light in August. Absalom, Absalom! (1936) is the story of a man who destroys himself and his family by refusing to recognize a part-black son. The Hamlet (1940) and Go Down, Moses (1942) are both collections of related short stories. The former tells about the triumph of avarice, the latter about changing relations between blacks and whites.

Faulkner bought a farm in 1938, and sometimes liked to call himself "just a farmer." And in 1948 that "farmer" finally achieved broader popular renown and financial security when he published Intruder in the Dust and sold the screen rights to MGM.

Though most readers agree that Faulkner wrote his best work before 1945, his greatest fame came in the last years of his life. He received the 1949 Nobel Prize for Literature, and his optimistic acceptance speech surprised those who had wrongly thought his outlook to be one of despair and hopelessness. In 1951 he won a prestigious National Book Award for his Collected Stories, and in 1955 he won a second National Book Award and a Pulitzer Prize for A Fable.
(1954), a modern version of the life of Christ.

In the 1950s Faulkner also became more of a public figure. Speaking out on political issues, he tried to define himself as a Southern moderate who supported racial equality but wanted the South to achieve this goal at its own pace. His remarks often aroused hostility both from Northern progressives and from Southern conservatives.

Faulkner's last novel, a semiautobiographical reminiscence of youth called The Reivers, was published in June 1962. That same month, Faulkner was thrown by a horse and the fall aggravated an old back injury. The prescribed medication debilitated him and Faulkner was taken to a small Mississippi hospital, where, on July 6, he died of a heart attack. By the time of his passing, he was renowned around the world for his ability to evoke both the raucous comedy and the profound tragedy of the human condition, for his creation of a wide variety of vivid characters, for his complex literary structures and stylistic innovation, and for his success in making what he called his "own little postage stamp of native soil" universally relevant.

LIGHT IN AUGUST: THE PLOT

Light in August tells three major stories—the stories of Lena Grove, Joe Christmas, and Reverend Gail Hightower. Though the novel weaves the tales together, this section describes them separately to make them easier for you to follow. For the same reason, this section presents events within each story chronologically even when the novel uses flashbacks.

Twenty-year-old Lena Grove has been searching for her unborn child's runaway father for four weeks. She has been walking the Deep South's country roads and depending upon the kindness of strangers. Lena feels confident that the Lord will reunite her "family." She has heard that her unborn child's father, Lucas Burch, is working at the lumber mill in Jefferson, Mississippi. But when she gets there, she finds sober, industrious Byron Bunch instead.

Lena's arrival changes Byron's hitherto solitary life. As soon as he sees Lena, he falls in love with her. Byron is upset when he realizes that the man Lena seeks is a disreputable bootlegger known in Jefferson as Joe Brown. Taking responsibility for Lena's welfare, Byron finds her a place to stay in a cabin on the outskirts of town. And to better care for Lena, Byron leaves his rented room and moves to a tent next to Lena's cabin. When Lena is about to give birth, Byron goes for a doctor. But he first sends his one friend, Reverend Gail Hightower, to help deliver the baby if the doctor is late. The doctor is indeed late, and Hightower successfully delivers a healthy baby boy.

Lena is the center of Byron's life, but she has refused his offer of marriage. Nevertheless, Byron selflessly arranges for the sheriff to bring Lena's runaway lover (Lucas Burch, alias Joe Brown) to her cabin. When Burch/Brown flees by the back door, Lena has to start her search again. This time, though, Byron is accompanying her. He hopes that she'll marry him some day after all.
Doc Hines suspects that his daughter Milly's lover is part black. So he kills the lover and deliberately lets Milly die in childbirth. On Christmas day Hines leaves Milly's child on the steps of an orphanage. The orphanage staff names the child Joe Christmas.

At the age of five Joe sneaks into the dietitian's room to eat some of her sweet-tasting toothpaste. The dietitian finds him hiding there and thinks that he has been spying on her lovemaking. Afraid of little Joe, she informs the orphanage matron that Christmas may be part black. The other children have been calling him "nigger." The matron arranges for Christmas to be adopted by a sternly religious farmer and his wife.

Three years later, Joe Christmas begins to rebel against that farmer, Simon McEachern. Despite repeated beatings, the child refuses to learn his catechism. The cycle of defiance and punishment continues until Joe's life with the McEacherns ends in a violent confrontation over Joe's first love affair. His girlfriend, Bobbie Allen, is a prostitute and a waitress at a seedy diner in town. When Joe sneaks out one night, his self-righteous father searches for him and finds him with Bobbie at a dance. After McEachern hits Joe, Joe strikes McEachern with a chair.

Believing he has killed McEachern, Joe wants to run away with Bobbie. But when he arrives at the diner, she is hysterically afraid and angry. She calls him a "nigger," then watches as her friends beat Joe up. Bobbie and her friends leave Joe lying semiconscious on the floor.

After these unhappy experiences, Joe spends fifteen years wandering from city to city. Wherever he goes, he struggles with his uncertain racial identity. When he arrives in Jefferson, he meets Joanna Burden, the only remaining member of a family of abolitionists, people who fought to end slavery. Joanna lets him stay in an old slave cabin on her property and leaves food for him in the kitchen of her own house. One night he enters her bedroom and forces himself on her. He does the same the next night, but then for six months thereafter the two ignore each other entirely.

Suddenly Joanna's attitude to Joe changes. She becomes sexually passionate about him, to a degree that frightens Joe. But almost two years later, a third phase of their relationship gradually begins. Joanna loses interest in sex. Discovering that she is entering menopause, Joanna turns to religion, as if trying to atone for her wildness. She asks Joe to declare himself a black and to work in a black law firm. The idea revolts him. When Joanna asks him to kneel and pray, he refuses. She points a gun at him, but he kills her first.

The town of Jefferson knows nothing of Christmas's upbringing nor of his relationship with Joanna. To the townspeople he has been a mysterious stranger. Then Joanna's body is found, and based on the accusations of Christmas's companion, Joe Brown (Lena's Lucas Burch), the people now regard Christmas as a "nigger murderer." They send a posse to chase him through the woods. He eludes the posse but decides to let himself be captured. Doc Hines and his wife hear of the arrest and travel to Jefferson. Doc is eager to have Christmas lynched, but his wife tries just as hard to save Joe.

Meanwhile, Christmas escapes from custody. Pursued by a National Guardsman named Percy Grimm, Joe runs to Hightower's house, where he beats Hightower and barricades himself in a room. When Grimm arrives, Hightower tries to provide Joe with an alibi for the night of the murder. Ignoring Hightower, Grimm shoots, then castrates Christmas.
Gail Hightower was once a minister in Jefferson, but his sermons focused more on the gallant death of his Confederate grandfather than on God. The townspeople found him strange, and, when his wife died in scandalous circumstances, his congregation forced Hightower from his church. For years now, he has lived in isolation.

Hightower's one friend in town, Byron Bunch, keeps him informed about both Lena Grove and Joe Christmas. When Byron meets Mrs. Hines, Joe's grandmother, he brings her to Hightower. They ask Hightower to give Christmas an alibi by saying that Christmas was with him on the night of the murder, but Hightower refuses. Later, though, he complies with Byron's request to help Lena Grove when she is in labor. By successfully delivering her baby, Hightower finally breaks out of his isolation. When the fugitive Christmas barricades himself in Hightower's house, Hightower offers the alibi he had refused before. His effort has come too late, however, and Christmas is killed.

Hightower thinks back on his life and on his obsession with his Confederate grandfather's violent death. He at last realizes that, as a result of that obsession, he had withdrawn from his wife. He recognizes his responsibility for his wife's death. But now he feels that he too is dying.

---

Joe Christmas is a cold and hostile drifter of uncertain racial identity. One of the most isolated characters in American literature, he has been viewed as an extreme example of modern urban alienation. He is almost constantly in conflict—with society, with the few individuals he becomes close to, and with himself. Christmas's dress—white shirt with black pants—suggests his internal division. And this divided character may even symbolize the racial conflict of the South as a whole.

But Faulkner's detailed account of Christmas's infancy, childhood, and adolescence shows that Joe wasn't born with the inner turmoil and anti-social attitudes of his adulthood. Three factors are especially strong influences on him as he grows up: his encounters with women and sex, his abuse at the hands of religious fanatics, and his confused racial background.

Faulkner shows Christmas changing from a trusting young child, to an angry and withdrawn adolescent still capable of some love, and finally to an adult at war with everyone. But the relation of his youth to his adult personality remains open to varying interpretations. For example, Christmas rebels against his harsh religious upbringing. Yet he also absorbs many of the traits of his Calvinist adoptive father, Simon McEachern, and even of his more fanatical grandfather, Eupheus Hines. Like them, he is violent, and from Simon's beatings and Eupheus's berating he seems to have acquired a taste for punishment. His suspicion of sex and women may have some of its roots in McEachern's and Hines's more open hostility to women. And his hatred for his possible "black blood" could certainly be a seed planted by the racism of Hines's religious rhetoric.

Christmas is a remarkably controversial character. For some readers Joe is, above all, a victim—of Hines, of the orphanage dietitian, of McEachern, and of the waitress-prostitute Bobbie Allen. According to these readers, Joe also falls victim to Joanna Burden, who responds to him not as a distinct individual, but as a member of a category, the Negro race. And finally and most importantly, Joe is a victim of racist mythology. In order to keep blacks in an inferior state, many white Southerners convinced themselves that blacks were a threat to white women. Consequently, once Jefferson hears that Christmas is part black, the townspeople assume that he is guilty. He becomes a scapegoat whose "guilt" reaffirms the community's racial stereotype.

Readers who see Christmas as above all a victim point to his statement that all he wanted was peace. But they tend to disregard his other statement, that he made himself what he chose to be. Some readers, though, don't believe either remark. For them Joe is primarily a victim of his own obsessions, rather than of other people. Unaware of his own motivations, he lurches from one confrontation to another and finally to his own destruction, which is the logical conclusion to the self-destructive pattern of his whole life.

A third group of readers take quite seriously Christmas's claim that he made himself what he chose to be. For them, he is the novel's only hero. They find his refusal to belong to either of society's racial categories an act of rebellion against an order that no one else in the novel questions. But it's difficult to square such an interpretation with
Christmas's own racism and hatred of blacks. Does he refuse to accept the two racial categories, or does he just zigzag back and forth between them? What is your opinion? Are all three interpretations necessarily mutually exclusive?

However you see Christmas, you will want to consider whether he changes at the end of his life and comes to some new understanding. You might argue that his allowing himself to be captured suggests such a change. But you could also argue that this action represents a final defeat or even that it simply repeats his usual self-destructive pattern.

Christmas's name and several of the events in his life suggest analogies to Jesus. Some readers contend that Christmas's life, like Christ's, is one of suffering, sacrifice, and perhaps even redemption. Others suggest that the novel's Christ symbolism links Joe Christmas to a broader mythology of which the Christ story is only part. According to this view, Christmas, like Jesus, is one of many mythic heroes who dies a sacrificial death, but his story does not validate a specifically Christian view of the world.

Yet still other readers can't attribute either of these meanings to the life of such a tormented and tormenting man. Some of this group see the Christian symbolism as an ironic way of pointing out the emptiness of Joe's "sacrifice"; others see it as an equally ironic way of indicting the Christian fanatics who crucify scapegoats; and still others see it as an empty and arbitrary analogy that the novel doesn't need.

LIGHT IN AUGUST: LENA GROVE

Lena Grove is a simple country girl who brings out the best in people. She never meets Joe Christmas. In fact, the principal connection between her story and his is that she happens to give birth on Joanna Burden's property shortly after Joe commits murder there. However, if Joe's story takes up most of the novel, Lena's opens and closes it. The two characters illuminate each other by their completely different attitudes to life.

There are parallels between Lena and Joe. Like Joe, Lena is an orphan. Like Joe, she clashes with a sternly religious family member—in her case, her older brother. Like Joe, she flees through a window, and like Joe, she is perpetually traveling.

But there the resemblance ends. Lena Grove's last name suggests nature at its most peaceful. And indeed, Faulkner makes her almost a part of nature, at peace with herself, the world around her, and the natural processes of reproduction. Whereas Joe Christmas provokes fights wherever he goes, Lena brings out the generosity of the people she encounters. Whereas he takes a life, she brings forth a new one.

In interviews, Faulkner associated Lena with the "light" of the book's title, a quality of light that he said occurs in Mississippi in August and that he felt harked back to an older, pagan time. Much of the imagery Faulkner uses in connection with Lena further associates her with the art and myths of classical antiquity, though some of his other imagery associates her with the Virgin Mary. For some readers Joe Christmas represents the rootlessness of modern man, and Lena the supposed harmony of an earlier era.

Though less complicated than Joe Christmas, Lena nonetheless provokes some difficult questions. Is she as simple and naive as she seems? Does her ability to get everything she wants from anyone she meets suggest that she knows how to use her vulnerability to manipulate people? More importantly, you should consider whether Lena Grove is a sufficiently realized character or just a vehicle to offset Joe Christmas. Is she just a stereotype or is she a compelling individual?

Lena is the spark that makes other people, especially Byron Bunch and Gail Hightower, change their lives. But does she herself change at all? Most readers emphasize her constancy. In the last chapter of the novel, however, Faulkner hints that this woman, who was once chasing her runaway lover, is now traveling primarily to enjoy her freedom.

Finally, you may want to question to what degree Lena represents the novel's ideal. The central contrast between her peacefulness and Joe Christmas's violence has led most readers to view her as Light in August's most appealing character. But if Lena lives in such harmony with the world around her, why does she pursue the worthless Lucas Burch? And would a character who acts so much out of instinct alone represent the ideal of a writer as reflective and thoughtful as Faulkner? Some readers think that, even if Faulkner uses Lena and her baby to show his optimism about humanity's prospects, he was nonetheless more attracted to the hopeless struggles of male characters like Gail
Hightower or even Joe Christmas.

Having lost his church and his wife, the Reverend Gail Hightower lives in the past. Though his story is significant in its own right, Hightower also plays an important, if fleeting, role in the lives of both Christmas and Grove. And his sympathetic reflections about what is happening to the other characters help put these others in perspective.

Hightower lives alone, and his only contact with the rest of the town is his frequent visitor, Byron Bunch. The name "Hightower" suggests this withdrawal. From his figurative tower (and quite literally from the window of his study), Hightower looks out at the people around him, thinking about them, commenting on them, but not directly engaging himself with them. To some readers, his first name, Gail, suggests the stormy gales of human emotion, from which he hopes his "high tower" will shelter him.

There is disagreement about the reasons for his isolation. Hightower himself often seems to attribute it to persecution. But at other times, he suggests that he is glad to be left alone, free of social obligations. It has been suggested that Hightower is one of Jefferson's scapegoats, a victim of the town's insistence on excommunicating those who don't live up to proper standards of righteousness. And no doubt the townspeople were vindictive toward him, especially in trying to force him out of his church, as well as out of the town itself. But both his refusal to meet the community's needs when he was still an active minister and his initial reluctance to help Byron Bunch are strong evidence that Hightower's isolation is his own choice.

Hightower is obsessed with his dead grandfather, who was killed during a Confederate raid behind Union lines (a raid that Faulkner based on one of many such Civil War raids in northern Mississippi). Readers agree that this obsession is harmful to Hightower. But some think that the dead grandfather is not entirely a source of weakness. They point to his bravery and to his ability to take decisive action. And they suggest that if Reverend Hightower had lived like his grandfather instead of just thinking about him, Hightower's life would have been more meaningful. Other readers, however, point out that the grandfather met his death while trying to steal chickens. They see nothing of value in Hightower's obsession with this man. Note that Hightower ignores the memory of his father, whose useful life might have made a good model for him.

More clearly than either Joe Christmas or Lena Grove, Gail Hightower changes toward the end of the novel. Under the influence of Byron Bunch, he helps Lena and belatedly tries to help Joe as well. He breaks out of his isolation and seems a stronger man as a result. But readers disagree about how complete his change is. His final reverie is crucial here. You could argue that it signals a new self-awareness, though perhaps not one that will translate into action. But you could also take Hightower's final return to the memory of his grandfather's galloping horse as an indication that he has slipped back into the obsession.

Hightower's friend, Byron Bunch, is a simple man who works six days a week at the planing mill and spends Sundays leading the choir at a country church. Though his life hasn't even the slightest taint of scandal (until Lena comes along), though he gets along well with his fellow workers, and though he isn't mired in obsession like Hightower, nonetheless Byron has much in common with Hightower. Like Hightower, he wants to stay out of trouble, the trouble that comes from involvement with other human beings. Perhaps in your own life you know people whose hard work gives them an excuse to isolate themselves from emotional entanglements. Byron Bunch is such a person.

Byron's sudden love for Lena draws him out of his routine. As a result, when Christmas needs help, Byron is ready to get involved with Joe's problems too. But why is Byron so susceptible to Lena in the first place? Faulkner doesn't tell, but one possible reason is that Byron's three years of observing the loner Joe Christmas has made him more aware of the perils of isolation.

Because Byron is the one character who changes so clearly and so thoroughly, some readers see him as Light in August's real hero. But he lacks the grandeur of a Hightower or even a Christmas. Many readers see him as too simple, too pathetic, or even too comic to be the center of the novel. They bolster their case by pointing to the undignified way Byron suffers Lena's rejection at the novel's end. Yet might not Byron's persistence in the face of
such rejections be one of the moral strengths that lifts him above the other characters? What is your opinion?

Like the other major characters, Byron Bunch has a suggestive name. His last name links him with the general mass of common people, the anonymous crowd or "bunch." His first name is almost a joke. The nineteenth-century Romantic poet Byron led a dashing life of love and adventure. Byron Bunch could hardly be more different from the poet, but, with love on his mind, he is something of a romantic in his own way.

LIGHT IN AUGUST: JOANNA BURDEN

Like Gail Hightower, Joanna Burden lives in isolation on Jefferson's outskirts. And as with Hightower, you must try to decide whether Burden is a victim of the town of Jefferson or only of her own delusions. Some readers think that as a woman of Northern origins and as someone sympathetic to blacks, Joanna Burden becomes a scapegoat for Jefferson's need to confirm its own "whiteness" and "Southernness." They point to the townspeople's hostile statements about her and to the murder of her grandfather and half-brother.

But others think that Joanna has effectively isolated herself not only from Jefferson but from all human life. These readers point to her failure to establish even one personal relationship in the town she lives in. You may also want to question whether Joanna Burden is indeed a Northerner. Her ancestors came from New England, but she has lived in Jefferson all her life, and in her own way, she shares its racism. Some even compare her to Doc Hines, the other character known to his neighbors as "crazy" on the subject of blacks. These readers note that, despite her desire to help blacks, she sees them, in her own words, "not as people, but as a thing." She accepts her father's view that blacks are a "curse" upon the white race, and she seems to accept his pessimism about ever being able to lift them to her own "level."

As the other major female character in the novel, Joanna Burden stands in obvious contrast to Lena Grove. For example, Lena is fertile enough to get pregnant from her few brief nights with Lucas Burch, while Joanna is barren even after her two-year relationship with Joe Christmas. Faulkner may intend this contrast to symbolize the spiritual differences between the two characters as well.

But when you look at Lena Grove and Joanna Burden together, you may want to conclude that Faulkner didn't give any of his female characters the same capacity for struggle and change that he gives his strongest male characters. Moreover, he describes the alternately oversexed and frigid Burden as being "masculine," while the more womanly and supposedly more natural Lena is fertile and maternal but not especially sexual at all. You may not share Faulkner's sense of what qualities are either most natural or most appropriately feminine.

Joanna appears in the novel primarily in the context of her relationship with Joe Christmas. At first she keeps her distance from him; then they engage in a wildly sexual affair. Finally, she repudiates the sexual relationship and turns to the stern religion of her forefathers. Is she ever genuinely attracted to Christmas or does she see him only as a member of a category, as a black? Note that, despite their being at odds throughout their relationship, Joanna has much in common with Joe. Both are the products of two generations of violent religious fanatics; both are obsessed with race and racial categories; both are solitary figures living in isolation; both decide that their relationship can only end in bloodshed; and both are ultimately murdered and mutilated.

Joanna's first name suggests her similarities to Joe, and her last name suggests the several burdens under which she labors: her family history, her Calvinist religious heritage, and, most of all, her sense that lifting up the black race is a burden white people must bear.

LIGHT IN AUGUST: EUPHEUS AND MRS. HINES

Eupheus Hines, also known as Doc, is the most fanatical of Light in August's several religious extremists. He believes that the Lord talks to him directly and makes him the instrument of His will. Hines sees blacks as inferior and women as evil temptresses. Some readers have surmised that Hines's religious views derive from a pre-Civil-War branch of Southern Presbyterianism that found divine sanction for slavery. Prone to violence, Hines is consumed by his anger over Joe Christmas, the illegitimate grandson whom he believes to be part black.

Mrs. Hines shares none of her husband's manias. Like most of the marriages glimpsed in this novel, their union seems deeply unhappy. A decent human being, Mrs. Hines sees her husband's fanaticism as the work of the devil
rather than of God. For three decades she suffers passively over the loss of both her daughter and her grandson. When Christmas's arrest makes her aware that the grandson is still alive, her love for Joe moves her to try to save his life.

LIGHT IN AUGUST: SIMON AND MRS. MCEACHERN

Stern, self-righteous, and punitive, Joe Christmas's adoptive father, Simon McEachern, is another practitioner of a loveless religion. But, unlike the maniacal Doc Hines, who lives in idleness and poverty, he is a frugal farmer who is as devoted to his work as he is to his beliefs. McEachern is not an explicit bigot. He voices no antagonism to blacks and is not as hostile to women as Doc Hines. But he sees sin everywhere, uses violence against his adoptive son, mistrusts pleasure, and never doubts that God is behind him.

The McEachern marriage seems as loveless as the Hines union. Mrs. McEachern stands in her tyrannical husband's shadow. She desperately wants to establish some bond with her adopted son but can't think of any way other than offering him little favors, which he rejects as if they were bribes (which they may well be).

LIGHT IN AUGUST: MISS ATKINS

The dietitian at Joe's orphanage, Miss Atkins is another character in the grip of an obsession, albeit a temporary one. She lives in fear that five-year-old Joe will tell about her sexual activity. And she projects onto the child a sexual sophistication and a punitive attitude that he doesn't have. After Doc Hines himself, she is the second of many people who form Joe Christmas's character.

LIGHT IN AUGUST: BOBBIE ALLEN

A prostitute who also serves food at the seedy diner downstairs from her brothel, Bobbie Allen is Joe Christmas's first love. She's rather pathetic, but Joe is too naive to notice. Bobbie finds Joe's innocent gallantry appealing, and she is willing to defy her employers, Max Confrey and Mame, by going out with him. But Bobbie is troubled by the possibility that Joe may be part black. And she is too realistic to share his romantic fantasies. Bobbie's betrayal of Joe is the final shock that sends him on the fifteen-year journey that ends with Joanna Burden's murder.

LIGHT IN AUGUST: PERCY GRIMM

The man who pursues, murders, and castrates Joe Christmas, Percy Grimm (a reference, perhaps, to the Grim Reaper) appears in Hightower's final vision as Joe's twin. Though Grimm fancies himself the patriotic guardian of the Constitution and of public order, his underlying racism reveals itself when he mutilates his victim. Many readers think it significant that Christmas is murdered not by a mob that might be representative of the Jefferson community, but rather by a fellow loner and outsider. Some also maintain that Grimm's patriotism is another form of religious fanaticism.

LIGHT IN AUGUST: LUCAS BURCH/JOE BROWN

Handsome Lucas Burch is a shiftless, irresponsible coward. Like most of the significant characters in Light in August, Burch is a newcomer to Jefferson and a loner. Like several other men in the novel, he avoids sustained relationships with women. But probably no other character in Light in August has as little integrity as Burch. He deceives and jilts Lena Grove, then plays Judas to Joe Christmas by betraying him for a thousand dollars. While Faulkner usually lets you hear several different perspectives on his characters, all but one of the characters in Light in August hold Burch in contempt. The one exception is Lena Grove. Why does she persist in pursuing him?

LIGHT IN AUGUST: GAIL HIGHTOWER'S FAMILY

Hightower's grandfather, also named Gail, was a hard-drinking, hard-fighting Southerner, whose legend was kept before Hightower by the family's slave turned servant, Cinthy. One of the novel's ironies may be that Hightower's obsession with this grandfather turns him into a dried-out shell quite unlike the man he worshiped. You could argue that Hightower is foolish to ignore the model of his father, a minister who took no slaves, served in the Confederate army only as a chaplain, and after the War learned to serve humanity as a doctor. Though Faulkner seems to criticize Hightower for living in the past, both of Hightower's ancestors are much more vital than Hightower himself.
The important people in Joanna Burden's past are her father and grandfather. As youths, like Joe Christmas and Lena Grove, both men rebelled by running away from home. Both practiced an unorthodox brand of Protestantism; both were prone to violence, and both were abolitionists. Despite their New England origins, Calvin and Nathaniel Burden passed on to Joanna a preoccupation with race and an angry religion that resembles those of the novel's other, purely Southern, characters. Does Faulkner condemn the influence of Calvin and Nathaniel? Or does he see them as grander and more vital figures than their lonely offspring, Joanna? What evidence can you offer in support of your opinion? The name Calvin comes from John Calvin, the founder of the school of Protestantism from which the religion of the Burdens, Hines, and McEacherns all seem to derive.

Gavin Stephens is Jefferson's Harvard-educated district attorney. Though he plays a larger role in some of Faulkner's other novels, he appears in Light in August only to explain Joe's actions during his brief escape from custody. Do you accept Stephens's explanation of Joe?

Most of Light in August is set in the towns, villages, and countryside of the early 1930s Deep South. It is a land of racial prejudice and stern religion. Community ties are still strong: an outsider is really identifiable, and people gossip about their neighbors. In this part of the country, the past lives on, even physically. For example, the cabin in which Joe Christmas stays and in which Lena Grove gives birth is a slave cabin dating back to before the Civil War. And finally the South of this epoch is still close to nature. Right outside the town are the woods. All these aspects of the setting lend themselves especially well to Faulkner's favorite themes, for example, the relationships between the community and the individual and between the present and the past.

But Faulkner's setting is quite specific. Faulkner modeled his fictional Yoknapatawpha County on Lafayette County, Mississippi, and the city of Jefferson on his hometown, Oxford, and perhaps on neighboring Ripley as well. He describes his region's smells, sights, and sounds in loving detail: its chirping insects, its summer heat, its unique light. Some of Jefferson is a quite accurate rendering of Oxford--for example, the hilltop over which Lena first sees Jefferson in the distance, the ditch in which Joe Christmas briefly hides when pursued by Percy Grimm, almost all of the route Joe Christmas walks from the town barbershop through Freedman Town and back, and even the schedule of the Jefferson train that the Hineses take. (Note that the farther Faulkner gets from Jefferson the less detailed his descriptions of setting often become.)

Still, Faulkner felt free to modify his sources whenever it suited his fictional purposes. He removed Oxford's intellectual center, the University of Mississippi. And Presbyterians are a larger percentage of fictional Jefferson than of real-world northern Mississippi. This change helps Faulkner explore his interest in Calvinist and Puritan forms of Christianity. Of course, you must also remember that Mississippi in 1932 was quite different from what it is today. At that time racial segregation was enshrined in law; blacks were not permitted to vote, and many brutal lynchings occurred.

Specific residences are almost always Faulkner's fictional creations. The Jefferson of Light in August has four main centers: the town, the planing mill, the Burden estate, and Hightower's home. These latter two settings on Jefferson's physical outskirts reflect their occupants' psychological distance from the larger human community. And Joe's residence in a slave cabin on the Burden estate suggests the lack of equality in his relationship with Joanna, while Lena's stay in that same cabin suggests a symbolic connection between Joe's death and the birth of her child.

Even where setting doesn't symbolize character traits, it can help you understand a character. For example, Faulkner's description of the tiny hamlet of Doane's Mill sheds light on Lena Grove, especially when you realize that Doane's Mill was the biggest town this simple country girl had seen before she began her journey to Jefferson.

The following are themes of Light in August.
1. RACISM

The Southern concern with racial identity is one of Light in August's central themes. When people think that Joe Christmas has even a trace of black ancestry, they treat him completely differently from the way they treat white people. Many of the characters in Light in August seem twisted by their preoccupation with race. Joe Christmas, Joanna Burden, Nathaniel Burden, Doc Hines, and, ultimately, Percy Grimm are among these. But even many of the characters who don't share this mania assume that treating blacks inhumanly is acceptable. The Jefferson sheriff, Watt Kennedy, seems a decent man, yet he whips a randomly chosen black in an interrogation that was unnecessary in the first place.

2. THE SOUTHERN PAST

Two of Light in August's five major characters live in the shadow of their dead ancestors. But you could interpret their relation to these forebears in different ways. On the one hand, you could point to a pattern of decline and say that the present doesn't live up to the heroic days of yesteryear. On the other hand, you could say that the problems of the present come from a failure to shake off the burdensome grip of the past. Here is how you could argue each point of view.

a. The Heroic Past

Gail Hightower's grandfather was a robust lover of life, and his father was a helper of his fellow human beings. But Hightower fails both his wife and his congregation and spends the rest of his life cut off from other people.

Though Joanna Burden's forefathers were not originally from the South, their emigration to Jefferson makes them part of the South's history too. And like Gail Hightower, Joanna compares badly to both her father and grandfather. They were rebellious wanderers and vigorous family men. She spends most of her time in her house, feels homesick whenever she leaves Jefferson, and never marries or has children.

b. The Burdensome Past

Gail Hightower's problems stem from his obsession with his grandfather, who was not even worth this worship. After all, he died stealing chickens. Likewise, Joanna Burden is the victim of the stern religion and patronizing racism that her father taught her and that he learned from his father before him. Interestingly, the freest character in the novel may be Lena Grove, who seems to live entirely in the present.

3. CHRISTIANITY

Light in August seems to indict a harsh and punitive strain in Christianity, from the orthodox Calvinism of Simon McEachern to the ravings of Doc Hines and the unusual religious amalgam preached by Calvin Burden. In much of Light in August, the Christian religion is self-righteous and vindictive, and even racist and misogynist (antiwoman). Do you yourself know people whose religious views become an excuse for their personal prejudices?

But you could argue that Faulkner counterposes these distorted forms of religion to a more genuine religiosity. Gail Hightower's minister father refuses to own slaves and works as a doctor after the Civil War. Is Byron Bunch's Sunday choir an indication of his underlying piety or only one of his empty routines? Does the Reverend Gail Hightower retain any religious faith and, if so, is this faith responsible for whatever compassion he still shows?

Light in August also features much Christian symbolism. Does this symbolism suggest that Faulkner wants the Joe Christmas story to convey a Christian message? Or, on the other hand, is this juxtaposition of Christian symbolism with the life of a violent man meant to be one additional way of criticizing Christianity? Most readers think that the Christian symbolism emphasizes Joe's suffering and sacrifice without necessarily conveying a specifically religious message.

4. COMMUNITY

a. Community as Conformity

One way of interpreting characters like Joe Christmas, Joanna Burden, and Gail Hightower is as scapegoats. You
could argue that the town of Jefferson punishes them for not conforming. Joe Christmas obeys neither the accepted code of behavior for whites nor the one for blacks. Joanna Burden acts like a Northerner by associating with and trying to help blacks. And Gail Hightower is unable to restrain his wife from behaving sinfully. Consequently the community has to punish them in order to reconfirm its own self-image as properly white, Southern, and Protestant.

b. Community vs. Isolation

But you could also argue that Faulkner is showing the perils of isolation from the community. All three of these characters seem warped. None tries to integrate into the community, so is their exclusion the community's fault? Moreover, Jefferson ultimately accepts Hightower; it never does anything worse to Joanna than ignore her; and it accepts Joe Christmas until he kills someone. And Joe Christmas's ultimate executioner is another outsider.

When you think about this theme, consider whether you yourself have ever felt torn between the perils of isolation and the danger of submerging your individuality in a group.

5. MALE-FEMALE RELATIONS

Joe Christmas is hostile to women. Lucas Burch flees women. Until Lena's arrival, Byron Bunch lives alone and tries to organize his life in such a way that he will continue living alone. Gail Hightower drives his wife to suicide. Joanna Burden never marries. But Faulkner doesn't contrast the solitary lives of these troubled characters with any happy, "normal" love relationships until his last chapter. Certainly the Hines and McEachern marriages are miserable, and the Armstids hardly seem loving. Even when Byron Bunch finally goes off with Lena Grove in what might have been a happy, romantic ending, she doesn't let him into her bed. Nonetheless, the relationship of the anonymous furniture dealer and his wife seems to suggest the possibility of happier love matches.

6. IDENTITY

Joe Christmas doesn't know who he is. His uncertain racial identity affects every aspect of his life. Sometimes he claims to be white, sometimes black, but he rebels against both categories. Christmas roams the North and the South, the cities and the countryside, without ever settling into a fixed abode or a long-lasting human relationship. By contrast, Lena Grove never doubts her identity. Even when wandering alone among strangers, she is confident of her purpose, her destination, and even of her relationship with the shiftless Lucas Burch. She reveals a moment of doubt only when old Mrs. Hines confuses Lena's baby with Joe Christmas. She seems to suggest the possibility of happier love matches.

7. OTHER THEMES

Light in August has a number of subsidiary themes. Faulkner contrasts the characters' different attitudes to time: Hightower's life is frozen in the past, while Lena lives only in the present. Nature is an issue in the novel: the planing mills are gradually destroying the natural world of forests around them, and different individuals are defined by their differing attitudes to nature. For example, Lena Grove is the character most in touch with the natural. Fate seems to play a role in the lives of characters like Percy Grimm and Joe Christmas. Do any of the characters control their own destinies? Certainly Byron Bunch seems to take charge of his own life. Light in August touches on the problem of evil. The novel portrays widespread bigotry and violence. But Faulkner shows compassion for many of his evil-doing characters and counterposes them to good people like Byron Bunch. Martyrdom is another theme. Among the novel's martyrs are Joe Christmas, Gail Hightower, Joanna Burden, and possibly even Byron Bunch (who suffers and sacrifices for Lena Grove). And, finally, Light in August is concerned with the difficulty of establishing communication between people. Joe Christmas, for example, misunderstands the feelings of both Bobbie Allen and Joanna Burden and is surprised when they turn against him.

^^^^^^^^^^^^^^LIGHT IN AUGUST: STYLE

Knows remembers believes a corridor in a big long garbled cold echoing building of dark red brick sootbleakened
by more chimneys than its own, set in a grassless cinderstrewnpacked compound surrounded by smoking factory purlieus and enclosed by a ten foot steel-and-wire fence like a penitentiary or a zoo, where in random erratic surges, with sparrowlike childtrebling, orphans in identical and uniform blue denim in and out of remembering but in knowing constant as the bleak walls, the bleak windows where in rain soot from the yearly adjacenting chimneys streaked like blacktears.

(Chapter 6, opening paragraph)

Faulkner's style may give you trouble at first because of (1) his use of long, convoluted, and sometimes ungrammatical sentences, such as the one just quoted; (2) his repetitiveness (for example, the word "bleak" in the sentence just quoted); and (3) his use of oxymorons, that is, combinations of contradictory or incongruous words (for example, "frictionsmooth," "slow and ponderous gallop," "cheerful, testy voice"). People who dislike Faulkner see this style as careless. Yet Faulkner rewrote and revised Light in August many times to get the final book exactly the way he wanted it. His style is a product of thoughtful deliberation, not of haste. Editors sometimes misunderstood Faulkner's intentions and made what they thought were minor changes. Recently scholars have prepared an edition of Light in August that restores the author's original text as exactly as possible. This Book Note is based on that Library of America edition (1985), edited by Noel Polk and Joseph Blotner.

In some of his more difficult passages, Faulkner is using the technique called "stream-of-consciousness." Pioneered by the Irish writer James Joyce, the most extreme versions of this device give the reader direct access to the full contents of the characters' minds, however confused, fragmented, and even contradictory those contents may be.

But Faulkner develops his own, more structured variety of stream of consciousness. In his densest paragraphs, he often lets his characters fall into reveries in which they perceive more deeply than their conscious minds possibly could. His characters connect past and present and reflect on the meaning of events and on the relationships between them in a manner that sounds more like Faulkner himself than like the characters in their usual states of mind.

For example, in the Chapter 6 opening just quoted, Joe Christmas is entering the long retreat into memory from which he only emerges after he has killed Joanna Burden. He is just beginning to sort things out, and the free-flowing, emotionally charged jumble of images suggests the workings of his unconscious mind. But Faulkner also uses words and makes observations more sophisticated than you would usually expect from Joe Christmas. This combination is part of what makes his style unique.

Of course, for characters' conscious thoughts, Faulkner uses the style they would use when speaking. And in such passages he puts the thought inside single quotation marks or in italics. For example, in the novel's opening paragraph, "Lena thinks, 'I have come from Alabama: a fur piece. All the way from Alabama a-walking. A fur piece.'" The single quotes seem to indicate thoughts formulated in words. Italics, as in the passage that follows the sentences just quoted, often seem to suggest thoughts not quite so explicitly verbalized. Note also Faulkner's ability to use brief passages of dialogue to make a large variety of Southern characters come to life as individuals. See, for example, Chapter 1's conversation between Armstid and Winterbottom.

Some readers have suggested additional reasons for Faulkner's style. He may use a grand style to elevate characters that are themselves either quite humble (for example, Lena Grove), quite brutal (Joe Christmas), or almost pathetic (at times Gail Hightower and Byron Bunch). Others say that Faulkner likes to force readers to absorb many contradictory feelings all at once. He wants you to see the meaningful connections between a large variety of human experiences. Faulkner himself once said that he wanted to put the entire "world" on a "pinhead." Looked at this way, his all-encompassing sentences create a style appropriate for a novel with three different plots and a host of seemingly unrelated characters. And Faulkner's use of oxymorons may create a tension that mirrors his characters' and his region's often unresolved conflicts.

Certain images recur especially often in Light in August. Ghosts, phantoms, and shadows sometimes suggest the past that still seems to haunt several of the characters. At other times these same phantoms reinforce our sense that many of the characters are not fully alive. Images of circles abound, for example, the wheel of Hightower's final vision, the circle that Christmas thinks his life forms, the circle of the urn that Faulkner associates with Lena Grove. Faulkner often uses the image of the mirror to suggest the ways the different characters reflect each other. Finally, you might note the particular attention Faulkner pays to descriptions of motion and of sound.
Most of Light in August's story is told by a third-person narrator. In some third-person novels the narrator is omniscient (all-knowing) and objective. In others he takes the point of view of the central character. In Light in August the narrator is often objective, as, for example, when reporting dialogue. But what is unusual about this novel is the way in which the narrator's point of view shifts frequently from one character to another. And even when reporting from the point of view of one character alone, the narrator sometimes stays on the surface of that character's speech and thoughts, while at other times he has access to memories so deep the character himself may not be consciously aware of them.

The difference between this shifting point of view and the point of view of an omniscient narrator is important. For example, you first hear of Joe Christmas from Byron's point of view. Byron seems a sympathetic character, so you tend to accept what he says. Later you see Joe Christmas from his own point of view but without access to his deepest thoughts and feelings. When (in Chapter 6) the narrator finally dives into Joe's buried memories, you get a completely different picture of him. But in Chapter 19 you see his final escape and murder from the point of view of Percy Grimm. One of Faulkner's purposes in this approach is to contrast public images with private realities. The Joe Christmas that the town of Jefferson knows is different from the Joe Christmas seen from within, and Faulkner's shifting point of view keeps you aware of that and other such contrasts.

Occasionally one of Light in August's characters tells his story in the first person, for example, the furniture dealer in Chapter 21. But in this novel first-person narration is always addressed to one of the other characters and never directly to the reader. In evaluating whatever material a character presents this way, you must consider not only the speaker but also his audience. For example, the furniture dealer's approach to Byron and Lena is colored by his telling about them in the midst of love play with his wife.

Light in August juxtaposes three different stories. The story of Lena Grove begins and ends the novel. The story of Joe Christmas begins in the second chapter and ends in the third-to-last. The story of Gail Hightower begins in the third chapter and ends in the next-to-last. None of these stories proceeds chronologically. For example, one of the novel's climactic events, the murder of Joanna Burden, has already occurred before Lena Grove arrives in Jefferson at the end of Chapter 1, but we don't see Joe Christmas enter Joanna Burden's bedroom to kill her until the end of Chapter 12.

The primary problem posed by Light in August's structure is whether these three stories fuse into one unified novel. Remember that, except for the accident of all three characters being in Jefferson for the few days between Burden's murder and Christmas's death, their tales are indeed separate and distinct. Who is the central character? The middle third and by far the largest section of the novel is about Christmas. But Lena opens and closes the novel. And Hightower is the character who ties the three stories together by officiating at the birth of Lena's baby and by trying to intervene against the killing of Joe.

These three characters contrast with each other in illuminating ways. But a kaleidoscope of comparisons may not be enough to make a unified structure. Some readers have felt that the novel's unity comes from elements other than the structure, for example, from the imagery or from the themes. Others say that Faulkner unified the novel by making Lena's story encompass Christmas's. They point out that she opens and closes Light in August as a way of placing Joe Christmas's individual tragedy in the broad context of ordinary and reasonably happy people like Lena Grove and Byron Bunch. And still others argue that Faulkner deliberately left his novel loose and open as a way of presenting a truer picture of the stream of life than if he had encased his characters in a more classically "artistic" form.

Chapter 1 introduces you to Lena Grove, a simple country girl who is searching for Lucas Burch, the father of her unborn child. In this chapter Lena gets a ride into Jefferson, where she has heard that Lucas is working.

Lena comes from the tiny hamlet of Doane's Mill, Alabama. And even though Doane's Mill only appears in this one brief reference to Lena's past, Faulkner's mention of it introduces one of his major themes. The lumber mill, he says,
employs all the men in this hamlet of five families. Faulkner looks ahead seven years and describes what will happen when all the trees have been cut down. Most of the machinery and men will be shipped away. But some machinery will be left rusting, and the few heirs of the original villagers will tear down the buildings for firewood.

Notice how Faulkner uses a very small village to build a vivid image of decline and fall. Although nothing about this striking description explicitly links the fall of Doane's Mill to the Civil War, the feeling of a land in decline is part of the Southern myth about its own post-Civil War history. You could argue that in this one paragraph Faulkner is giving you his sense of the fate of the South as a whole. He is also suggesting his view of nature. The village's destruction of nature is linked to the decline of the village itself and of the people in it.

NOTE: This paragraph is also a good example of Faulkner's attempt to encompass a large expanse of experience in one thought. He uses one long sentence to picture the deterioration of the hamlet from the day the mill closes until some indeterminate point in the far future.

But the main subject of this first chapter is Lena Grove herself. She had lived with her brother and his family since she was twelve years old and her parents died. When she was close to twenty, she started sneaking out at night to meet handsome Lucas Burch. But when she told him that she was pregnant, he left town saying that he would send for her when he was settled. Six months later, Lena climbed out the window and started walking the country roads looking for Lucas. As the novel opens, she has been traveling for four weeks and is now in Mississippi. She is resting by the side of the road as a wagon approaches.

Look carefully at Lena's behavior. She first notices the wagon when it is stopped by the side of the road, glances at it only briefly, and then pauses to rest shortly thereafter. Lena seems quite naive and innocent, especially in her high expectations for her reunion with Lucas Burch. The timing of her rest stop, though, suggests that she is also someone who knows how to use her vulnerability to get what she wants, in this case, a ride. Why is Lena always so successful in receiving the kindness she expects? Have you ever known people whose presence seems to bring out the best in others? What qualities does a person like this have?

NOTE: FROZEN MOTION Faulkner compares the wagons in which Lena has ridden to figures carved on an urn (or vase). He is probably referring to "Ode on a Grecian Urn," a famous poem written in 1819 by the English Romantic poet John Keats. Describing the ancient carvings, Keats notes a paradox: the artist has captured the figures in motion, but the very nature of art is to freeze that motion for us to contemplate. Keats points out that, unlike real people, the carved figures will never attain their goals; but, on the other hand, their beauty, also unlike ours, will be eternal. Faulkner is fond of metaphors of frozen motion, and two paragraphs later he talks of the approaching wagon "suspended" in the distance. But readers disagree about how to interpret these metaphors. You could argue that Faulkner is expressing a fatalistic view, suggesting that his characters' destinies are as certain and their goals as unattainable as those of the carved figures. But you could also argue that the metaphor reflects Faulkner's interest in the different ways his characters cope with both the chaotic motion of life and the obstacles that often create paralysis. Note that in his own art Faulkner also freezes chaotic and violent events for his readers to contemplate from many points of view.

The wagon that picks Lena up belongs to a farmer named Armstid. Though he's a bit worried about his wife's reaction, Armstid offers Lena a place to stay for the night. When they reach Armstid's farm, Mrs. Armstid questions Lena about her relationship with Burch. Mrs. Armstid is sarcastic about Lena's optimistic expectations for a happy family reunion with her runaway lover.

That night Mrs. Armstid seems in an angry mood, but she breaks open her piggy bank and hands her husband the money with instructions to give it all to Lena. Note how Mrs. Armstid's behavior seems to contradict her husband's view that a "good" woman won't be kind to another woman in trouble. You can now see that Armstid's view of women does not necessarily represent Faulkner's.

The next morning Armstid gives Lena the money and takes her to Varner's store, from where he knows she can find a ride to Jefferson. She has heard that a man named Burch is working at the Jefferson mill. Armstid wants to warn Lena that that man is really named Byron Bunch, but he knows that she will refuse to hear anything that would shake her optimism. And while the men at the store assume that Lena is worrying about whether she will find Burch, she is really concerned only about whether to splurge on some sardines.
Lena gets a ride into Jefferson. As her wagon arrives, the man driving it points to a house burning just outside the opposite end of town.

Chapter 2 introduces Byron Bunch, Joe Christmas, Gail Hightower, and Lucas Burch/Joe Brown. Byron is working at the mill and thinking about Joe Christmas's arrival in Jefferson three years ago. At the end of the chapter, his thoughts are interrupted by the arrival of Lena Grove, with whom he falls in love.

Byron Bunch is remembering what he knows of Joe Christmas and Joe Brown.

NOTE: POINT OF VIEW Who is narrating the first section of this chapter? Are we listening to the objective authorial voice of an all-knowing narrator? Or are we eavesdropping on the thoughts of one character, Byron Bunch? In this chapter, Faulkner frequently refers to Byron's "knowing" or "remembering" the events being related. And indeed all the events are ones that Byron could have observed himself or heard about through other workers at the mill. On the other hand, the chapter's language and insights are beyond what we could expect from a character as unsophisticated as Bunch reveals himself to be. Doesn't some of the description of Christmas's arrival seem too eloquent for Bunch? Some readers argue that in such passages Faulkner is using a character's "heightened voice." We are listening not only to the character's explicit perceptions, thoughts, and feelings but also to those of which he is not aware and for which he would not be capable of finding words.

In Byron's reverie it is three years ago. Christmas appears at the Jefferson lumber mill where Byron works. The boss gives him a job shoveling sawdust. Wearing city clothes and looking contemptuous, Christmas talks to no one. And though he has no lunch, he refuses the food Byron offers him.

NOTE: CHRISTMAS AND CHRIST Byron thinks of Christmas's name as a warning of what to expect from the man. Both Christmas's last name and his initials suggest a comparison to Jesus Christ. As you will see later in the novel, these parallels between Christmas and Jesus are only the first of many. But how do you interpret them? You could argue that Faulkner is underlining some fundamental similarities between Christmas and Jesus. But you could also argue that the parables are ironic and that they are meant to contrast the two figures rather than to identify them. Try to resolve this issue after you learn more about Christmas's character.

Two and a half years later, another stranger appears. Joe Brown becomes as instantaneously unpopular as Christmas but for different reasons. He strikes everyone as completely unreliable, all bluff and bluster. Whereas Christmas is sullenly quiet, Brown talks too much. The boss assigns Brown to the sawdust pile with Christmas. The two become companions. Then one day Christmas quits, and Brown does likewise shortly thereafter. Byron finds out what the other men have known all along, that Brown and Christmas are living together in a cabin on the property of Joanna Burden and that they are working together as bootleggers.

Back in the novel's present time, Byron is working alone at the mill one Saturday afternoon as usual. (On Sundays he leads the choir of a country church thirty miles away. But the only person who knows that he does so is his friend Gail Hightower, who was once the minister at the town's main church but who long ago left that position in disgrace.)

You have now met, however briefly, Light in August's five major characters and one of the more important minor characters (Brown). Notice that they have one thing in common: they are all loners. Lena is a homeless wanderer on the country roads. Hightower is an outcast, and so is Joanna Burden, whom the town perceives as a Yankee and a friend to blacks. Brown is an unwelcome newcomer, and Christmas is a stranger who keeps to himself. But even straightforward, reliable Byron Bunch is a solitary man. He has been in Jefferson for only seven years and he keeps aloof from everyone except his fellow outsider, Hightower.

Though the characters are different in many respects, this underlying similarity highlights Faulkner's interest in the theme of isolation. As you read further, try to see where isolation from the community helps a character become more autonomous (freer), or where that isolation simply deadens the character. Try to decide if the characters are isolated by their own choice or by the community's. And finally, look to see whether the community perceives these outsiders accurately. The community thinks that Byron works overtime for the money, but Byron says he does the extra work to stay out of mischief. Light in August has many such discrepancies. While Byron undoubtedly knows
himself better than the town does, you may want to question his rationale for his isolation as well.

While at the mill, Byron sees the Burden house burning in the distance. Notice that even that sight doesn't provoke him to leave work. Then Lena Grove arrives, hoping to find Lucas Burch. Byron takes a break and tells her about the two "Joes" Christmas and Brown. Surprisingly, the steady and reliable Byron falls in love with Lena immediately. And he feels bad when he realizes that Brown must be the Lucas for whom Lena has been searching. Through Byron's talk, however, Lena has figured out Lucas's identity too.

Chapter 3 presents Gail Hightower's background. It describes his arrival in Jefferson, the scandalous death of his wife, his own persecution by the townspeople, and his current isolation.

It is just before dusk. Gail Hightower is sitting by his study window and looking out at the street. He sits in the same spot every day at this time and waits for night.

When Byron Bunch first came to Jefferson, he asked people about this strange man. Here is the story he heard. Hightower came to Jefferson straight from the seminary. He bragged in an unseemly way about how he had pulled strings to get assigned to a church in Jefferson. And when he preached, he talked more about the Civil War and about his cavalryman grandfather's death in that war than about God. Neighbors often heard his young wife crying at night. People rarely saw her with her husband, and they knew that she left town at times. Then one day the newspapers reported that she had been killed in a fall from a Memphis hotel window. She had been sharing the room with a man.

Hightower tried to preach that Sunday as usual, but reporters were milling outside the church. The congregation, outraged by the scandal, walked out. When Hightower himself left, he tried to hide his face behind a hymnal. But a photographer was able to snap his picture anyhow. He appeared to be smiling. The smile suggests that he may have been glad for the opportunity to retreat even further from the social obligations of a minister.

Remember that you are hearing Hightower's story from the viewpoint of the scandalized community, which gave this account to Byron. Because the relationship of the individual and the community is one of Faulkner's themes, you will have to evaluate the community's behavior along with Hightower's. The first mention of the scandal comes from an anonymous townsman who explains the incident by simply saying that Hightower's wife went bad. When you hear the story in more detail, does the community seem any more sympathetic to the wife than this first townsman was? They appear to blame Hightower for her fate and say that if he had been more dependable she would have been all right. But the only time the townspeople call on Mrs. Hightower is when she plays the role of a proper minister's wife, and then they only call on her to tell her how to run the parsonage. If Hightower has failed his wife by ignoring her, you might say that the community that condemns him committed the same offense.

If so, the town of Jefferson showed no such awareness or remorse. They tried to get Hightower to resign. He refused but they finally forced him out. They were upset when, instead of leaving town, he bought a house in Jefferson. Rumors about him spread. One was that he was having an affair with his black cook. She was forced to resign, and the Ku Klux Klan beat Hightower. But eventually the town learned to accept Hightower's continued presence, and now, about twenty-five years after the scandal, he lives in Jefferson peacefully.

You don't yet know enough about Hightower to form a firm opinion about him. But note that he is the second character in the novel who seems to avoid his responsibilities to a woman. (The other one is Lucas Burch.)

Byron remembers one more incident concerning Hightower. Four years ago, in an emergency, Hightower delivered a black woman's child, but the child was born dead. The town treated Hightower's actions as another scandal. Byron, who visits Hightower each weekday evening, remembers that Hightower didn't condemn the town. Instead he expressed as his highest hope the wish to "live quietly among his fellows."

What attracts Byron to Hightower? Are the men similar in any ways? Note that both Byron and Hightower remain aloof from the life of the town. You could argue that this trait is good given what you have already learned of the town's unforgiving gossip. But you may also wonder whether the two men pay a price for their lack of involvement.
It's dark now, and Hightower is still sitting at his study window. He looks out and is surprised to see Byron coming to visit him on a Sunday evening.

**NOTE: HORSES** Hightower is obsessed with his cavalryman grandfather. As Byron approaches, Hightower has been thinking of "phantom hooves," and he compares Byron unfavorably to a horse. The latter, he thinks, is a symbol of warriors and kings. Faulkner uses references to horses at several points in Light in August. The meaning of this imagery develops more fully later. But you should question whether Faulkner supports Hightower here. Though Faulkner was himself an avid horseman, horses in Light in August are often associated with unnatural relationships, like Hightower's obsession with his grandfather.

**LIGHT IN AUGUST: CHAPTER 4**

In Chapter 4 Byron tells Hightower about Lena's arrival and about the murder of Joanna Burden. He explains that Burch has accused Christmas of the murder and has revealed that Christmas is part black.

Byron and Hightower are talking in Hightower's study. Byron tells about Lena's arrival and about the fire at the Burden house. Hightower doesn't understand why Byron is so upset. He doesn't see the connection between Byron's worry about Lena and the events at the Burden house. Byron explains that the events at the Burden house are about Brown and Christmas. Byron explains about Brown and Christmas living in the cabin there and about their running a bootlegging business together. He has heard that once, when Brown was talking too freely to the townspeople, Christmas came over and slapped him in the face. Byron explains that he accidentally told Lena that Brown, the bootlegger, is her Lucas Burch. Then Byron adds that he kept Lena from going to the cabin and took her to his rooming house instead. All the while he tried to shield her from some bad news that the whole town was talking about. Byron is being evasive, and Hightower is aware of Byron's hesitation in getting to the point.

You could argue that Byron is a weak, almost pathetic figure. He seems excessively worried about hurting Hightower by bringing bad news about someone else, so worried that he can't even get to the point. And while he is devoting so much energy to protecting Lena, he still feels guilty about hurting Lena with news that is no fault of his own. But you may also find that this same behavior makes Byron quite sympathetic. The two interpretations are not necessarily contradictory.

Notice that Hightower seems as afraid of what Byron is about to say as Byron is afraid of saying it. But Byron continues.

**NOTE: HIGHTOWER AS BUDDHA** Faulkner says that Hightower resembles an "eastern idol." This reference is only one of several that compares Hightower to a Buddha. Buddhism is one of the major Asian religions. Just as Western religious art frequently represents Christ on a cross, so Eastern sculpture often depicts the Buddha sitting in peaceful contemplation. The historical Buddha was a prince who attained a state of enlightenment in which he learned to detach himself from worldly goods and passions. Those of his followers who also attain such a saintly state are often referred to as Buddhas too. Compare Faulkner's comparisons of Hightower and Buddha with his more frequent comparisons of Joe Christmas and Christ. Once more, you will have to decide whether Faulkner is pointing to a fundamental similarity or whether he is using a superficial similarity to underline a fundamental difference.

According to Byron, a countryman passing by went to investigate the Burden fire. Brown tried to stop him from going upstairs, but he went anyhow and found Joanna Burden almost decapitated. Brown disappeared but then showed up at the sheriff's office. He accused Joe Christmas.

**NOTE: STORYTELLING** As in many other places in Light in August, you are hearing a story second-hand or third-hand. In this case, Byron is telling about things that the countryman and Brown told the sheriff. The reader doesn't know whom Byron heard the story from or even whom the person who told the story to Byron heard it from. And much of what Brown is reported as saying is only what he in turn heard from Christmas. Why does Faulkner use this method? One possible reason is that this storytelling takes some of your attention away from the often gruesome events and makes you think more about the various characters who are speaking. This method also contrasts public perceptions of events with a truer picture that Faulkner may not reveal until later.

Byron continues to narrate Brown's conversation with the sheriff. Brown told the sheriff about having discovered
that Christmas was sleeping with Joanna Burden. Brown also said that Christmas had hinted that he had killed Joanna. But the sheriff implied that Brown himself might be the culprit. Then Brown said that Christmas had admitted to being part black.

Even without any proof, this accusation seems to change everyone's attitude. People seem to regard having falsely passed for white as a more serious offense than murder. This example of Jefferson's attitude to blacks is at least the third you've read so far. The mill workers were glad to see Joanna Burden's house burning because they hated her for being friendly to blacks. And for hiring black servants Hightower aroused the wrath of the town and the K.K.K.

Byron relates that the sheriff locked Brown up anyhow. Hightower worries about what the people will do with Christmas when they catch him. And Byron, who still hasn't told Lena about any of these happenings, worries about having to tell her.

^~~~~~~~LIGHT IN AUGUST: CHAPTER 5

Faulkner now moves to Christmas's point of view. The chapter portrays Christmas readying himself for his violent confrontation with Joanna Burden.

It's late Thursday night, almost three days before Byron's unexpected Sunday evening visit to Hightower. Christmas is lying awake in bed as Brown walks into the cabin they share. Brown is drunk and noisy. Christmas tells him to shut up. When Brown falls on the floor and laughs loudly, Christmas repeatedly hits him in the face. Brown calls Christmas a nigger, but Christmas continues slapping and choking him until Brown finally agrees to be quiet. He falls asleep.

In the last chapter Byron reported having heard about an incident in which Christmas slapped Brown's face. Now Christmas is hitting Brown again. Look for other incidents of violence to the face or head in Light in August, especially in connection with Christmas.

So far, Christmas seems cold, ruthless, and violent, hardly Christ-like. But in this chapter you will get some hints about Christmas's motivations and your first brief glimpses of his thoughts and feelings. Christmas thinks that something is going to happen to him and that he is going to do something. These two thoughts, the first of his you've had access to, could suggest two opposite interpretations of Christmas's behavior. The first is that Christmas is the victim of forces beyond his control, and the second is that he controls his own actions. Some readers see Christmas as a passive pawn of society or fate. Others see him as the novel's only character who consciously takes charge of his own destiny. As you read further, consider which approach to Christmas's life you agree with more. Neither extreme is necessarily true.

NOTE: THE CHORUS OF SOUNDS Christmas thinks he hears what Faulkner refers to as "myriad sounds." A similar expression appeared in Chapter 4, when Byron was taking Lena to town and again when Hightower and Byron were talking. In the first instance it described the townspeople abuzz with the rumors of Burden's murder. In the second it described the insects chirping outside Hightower's house. Here the reference is less specific. Many kinds of sound seem to be emerging from Christmas's memory, and indeed the next seven chapters will take you into that memory. Why does Faulkner include this chorus of sounds humming in the background? Perhaps this image of "myriad sounds" connects his characters to something larger than themselves. However, the image, while powerful, is open to other interpretations.

Christmas cannot sleep. He suddenly says, "It's because she started praying over me," and he repeats this insight several times throughout the night. You don't know yet what he is referring to. But this exclamation is the first hint that religion is an issue in Christmas's life.

As Christmas thinks about his relationship with Joanna Burden, he tears the last remaining button off the underclothes he is wearing. He thinks about a time when a woman used to sew on his missing buttons, and he would deliberately thwart her by cutting them off again. Here is another insight into Christmas's character. He seems to feel hostile to women's kindness, perhaps even to feel that such kindness confines him, buttons him in. Note that Christmas is becoming the third character in Light in August to avoid sustained relationships with women. Note also that the button is one of many circular images to appear in Light in August.
Christmas walks outside nude. He yells, “White bastards!” at a passing car. Then he goes to sleep in the stable with the horses. (Here is another character who seems fonder of horses than people.) Less than two hours later, Christmas wakes. It is dawn, Friday morning. He returns to the cabin, dresses, gets his shaving things, and walks to a nearby valley. He spends the day there, thinking the same thoughts over and over, thinking that he is going to do something and that she, Burden, shouldn't have started praying.

That night Christmas goes into town. Walking aimlessly, he finds himself in Freedman Town, the black section of Jefferson. He panics and runs away. What provokes Christmas's fear? Note that in this passage Christmas associates blacks with women and both of them with softness and warmth. When he gets back to the white section, the air feels cold and hard. He sees some blacks and curses them, just as he cursed the whites the night before. He seems hostile to both races.

Christmas lies awake until midnight. His mind is empty as he gets up and walks to Joanna Burden's house.

In this chapter we flash back to Joe Christmas's earliest memories of life in an orphanage. Faulkner describes a childhood incident that led to the discovery of Joe's possible black ancestry and to his adoption by Simon McEachern.

NOTE: KNOWING AND REMEMBERING The words that begin this chapter (“Memory believes before knowing remembers”) recall those that introduced Chapter 2 (“Byron Bunch knows this”). Such expressions seem to be cues indicating that Faulkner is starting to use the “heightened voice” of a character's deeper perceptions and feelings. Faulkner may be suggesting that he will go deeper into Christmas's inner mind than he did into Byron's in Chapter 2, beyond mere "knowing" into "memory." Christmas, Faulkner seems to be saying, does not necessarily even know that he has these memories, but they are part of him nonetheless.

Christmas's memories take him back to a corridor, the first of many long, narrow passageways you'll see him in. He is five years old. The corridor is in an orphanage. As he has already done many times before, Christmas is sneaking into the dietitian's room to sample some of her toothpaste. He likes the feminine colors and smells of the room. In fact they remind him of the sweet, sticky, pink toothpaste he enjoys.

But the dietitian comes back to her room before Christmas has finished eating. A young intern is with her. He talks her into making love, though she is afraid. The child doesn't know what the couple is doing and isn't even curious about them. But he knows that he must stay hidden among the dietitian's soft clothes in order to avoid being caught with the toothpaste. So, as the couple makes love, he eats more and more until he starts to feel sick. He sweats profusely, and then, after realizing that something is about to happen to him, he vomits. The dietitian hears him and wrongly accuses him of spying on her. She calls him a nigger.

This innocent child doesn't yet resemble the adult Christmas you've been introduced to. But Christmas's memories may have turned to the first event that helped produce the man who is about to commit murder. In Christmas's flight from Freedman Town, you have seen his revulsion from the soft, warm, and feminine. And now his memory has taken him back to an experience that combines all three of those qualities.

It's also an experience in which he waits passively for something to happen to him. Perhaps his memory has selected this experience because he's having that same fatalistic feeling as he walks toward Joanna Burden's house thirty-one years later.

The memories continue. The dietitian is desperately worried that the boy will tell on her. She doesn't realize that the innocent boy has nothing to tell. The only reason that he follows her around is that he expects her to punish him for eating the toothpaste and he wants to get the punishment over with. But by now the dietitian is almost insane with fear and anger.

She goes to the janitor, a mysterious man who arrived at the orphanage one month after Christmas had been left on the door step. Day after day, whenever the children are playing, the janitor sits staring at Christmas. The dietitian asks him if he knows Christmas's origins. She has noticed that the other children call Joe "nigger." The janitor sounds crazy. He calls Christmas a sign given by the Lord to condemn sin and fornication, and he rants against
women, but he implies that Christmas is indeed black.

That night the janitor goes to the dietitian's room. Calling her "Jezebel" and "womanfilth," he asks what will happen when she tells the matron that Christmas is black. He is afraid that Christmas will be sent to the black orphanage.

NOTE: In the Old Testament, Jezebel was a woman who urged the Israelites to turn to the idol-worshipping religion of Baal. Elijah prophesied that she would be killed, and his prophecy came true. By extension the term has come to refer to any shameless, impudent, or sexually unrestrained woman.

That night Christmas feels himself being carried away. He knows that the man carrying him is someone with whom he has a special bond, but he doesn't understand what that bond is. The man takes him to another orphanage, but three days later the police come to take Christmas back. Once more he seems to be passively experiencing a fate beyond his control.

By the time Christmas is returned to the original orphanage, the dietitian has told the matron about his mixed racial identity. The matron decides not to reveal this news and immediately seeks out someone to adopt Christmas. The man she finds is full of severe talk about hard work and the fear of God. He calls the name Christmas sacrilegious and insists that Christmas take his name, McEachern.

Along with the janitor, Simon McEachern is the second person in Christmas's life with a harsh religious outlook. Could there be any connection between Christmas's experiences with these two men and his complaint that Joanna shouldn't have prayed over him? You won't know for sure until later.

This chapter describes two crucial incidents in Joe's life with the McEacherns. In the first, he defies his foster father and endures the punishment. In the second, he is about to have his first sexual experience but resorts to violence instead.

Joe Christmas remembers the day when, he believes, he became a man....

He is eight years old. Simon McEachern is standing over him and accusing him of not even trying to learn his catechism (lessons in religious doctrine). McEachern says that he will give Joe a second hour. Exactly on the dot of the hour, he asks again if Joe has learned the lesson. When Joe say's he hasn't, McEachern takes him to the stable to beat him. Joe puts the book he has been studying on the ground. McEachern scolds Joe for believing that a stable floor is a proper place for the word of God. What do you think of this remark? Faulkner may be making an ironic comment about McEachern's attitude to religion, since, of course, Jesus was born in a manger.

McEachern beats Joe again after the third hour. After the fourth hour, Joe collapses and in the late afternoon, awakens in his bedroom. McEachern orders Joe to kneel with him in prayer. Then he gives Joe the book yet one more time.

You will want to remember this incident when you read of Christmas's relationship with Joanna Burden. You already know that she made the mistake of praying over him. But even before you learn more about Joanna, you can ask yourself whether Christmas is right in believing that this day was the moment he became a man. You could argue that standing up to McEachern is Joe's first act of self-assertion, and a dramatic change from the passivity of his childhood. But you could also argue that the change is not as great as it first seems. Joe's self-assertion has a passive and fatalistic quality. He defies McEachern by accepting a punishment that both of them regard as inevitable. Perhaps Joe's interaction with McEachern forms him into the man he is to be henceforth. But is that a manhood he should be proud of? Note that Joe seems to be developing the same hard, stubborn personality as that of the adoptive father he is defying.

Lying in bed after McEachern leaves, Joe realizes that he has not eaten all day. You might expect him to be glad when Mrs. McEachern brings food. But he just smashes the dishes on the floor. Only after the old woman has left, does he get down on the floor and gobble up the remains.

Christmas's hostility to women's attempts at kindness has begun. This incident with Mrs. McEachern might also remind you of Christmas's angry refusal of Byron Bunch's kind offer of lunch when the two first met. Because Light
in August makes many of its points by comparing and contrasting different characters, compare Christmas's rejection of generosity to Lena's ready acceptance of Armstid's offer of a place to stay, food, and even money.

Christmas is now fourteen years old. He and four friends are taking turns having sex with a black girl. But when his turn comes, he doesn't approach her sexually. He feels revolted, as he did when he ate the toothpaste, and he kicks and beats her. Then the fight turns into a free-for-all between him and his friends. When he gets home, he knows he will be beaten, not because he has done anything, but because McEachern always beats him regardless of what he's done.

NOTE: You have already noticed the possible religious significance of Christmas’s name. In this chapter Faulkner uses a variety of religious terms to describe Christmas. He describes him as being like a monk, like a Catholic choir boy, and like a hermit. Faulkner seems to be underlining the calm pleasure the boy takes in suffering. Is he giving Christmas a certain grandeur with these comparisons? Or is he instead subtly criticizing some aspects of religion? Christmas seems to experience the exalted suffering of monks and hermits without their higher purpose.

Christmas is now eighteen years old. McEachern notices that a cow he had given Christmas is missing. Joe admits to having sold the cow. McEachern asks if he has given the money to his adoptive mother for safekeeping. Saying yes, Joe tells McEachern what appears to be his first lie. McEachern confronts Joe with a suit that Joe has bought with the money from the cow. Then he punches Joe in the face. Remember that you have already seen the grown-up Christmas hitting people in the face. Did he learn this habit from the upright Christian, McEachern?

The chapter ends by further exploring Joe's relationship with his adoptive mother. Lying in bed, he remembers that when he first arrived, she wanted to carry him into the house but he wouldn't let her. He enjoyed it when she washed his feet and put him to bed, but he also felt uncomfortable because he kept waiting for the punishment that he expected. He prefers what he calls the "hard" justice of men to the "soft kindness" of women. The latter, he thinks, is aimed at trying to get him to cry.

Joe seems to be feeling some sympathy for his adoptive mother. He is not yet as "hard" as he will come to be. Some see his rejection of Mrs. McEachern as a necessary assertion of autonomy (independence), whereas others see it as a denial of basic human feelings of love. Perhaps Christmas faces a tragic choice in which he can only achieve autonomy from his mother by denying himself her love. You may have felt a similar confusion about your own parents at one time or another.

Chapter 8 describes Joe's first romantic relationship. He is involved with a prostitute named Bobbie Allen, and he seems to love her genuinely.

Joe sneaks out his bedroom window, then puts on the suit he has hidden in the attic. He walks up the road to wait for someone and wishes that McEachern would come after him. Why does Joe want McEachern to follow him? At this point in Joe's development, he has some but not all of the characteristics he will have as an adult. Here he seems to want to provoke confrontation and punishment. Perhaps this wish is just the idle dare of a feisty youth. But you could also argue that Joe is showing the first signs of a compulsive desire for such confrontation and punishment, a desire that will eventually lead to his death. Think back on this moment when you are trying to interpret Joe's actions during the last days of his life.

NOTE: HOUSES Writing from Joe's point of view, Faulkner describes the McEachern house as "treacherous," "threatful," and "deceptive." Later in this chapter, Joe hesitates to make love indoors. Joe seems to have good reasons for fearing the McEachern's house. But houses usually suggest shelter and security. Perhaps Joe feels that he can only achieve freedom by denying any need for shelter and security.

Standing by the side of the road, Joe thinks about the woman he is waiting for. He first saw her one Saturday afternoon when he was in town with McEachern. McEachern had finished his business late and had taken Joe to a diner. They ate quickly, but Joe had noticed the waitress. Some months later, McEachern gave Joe a dime to spend while McEachern conducted business with his lawyer. Joe went straight to the diner, where he ordered pie and coffee. The dime wasn't enough to pay for the coffee, and he left in embarrassment. Weeks later he returned to try to pay the extra nickel for the cup of coffee. The proprietor and his wife made fun of him, but the waitress, Bobbie
Allen, seemed touched by his naive honesty.

When Joe was younger, one of his friends had told him about menstruation. He was upset that women experienced such a process. Two weeks later he killed a sheep in order to immerse his hands in its blood. On his first date with Bobbie, this memory came back to him. She told him that she was sick and could not make love. At first he didn't understand, but when she explained about this regular monthly "sickness," Joe was outraged once more. He hit Bobbie and ran away into the woods, where he vomited. Remember that he also vomited when he overheard the dietitian making love.

NOTE: Again Faulkner uses the image of the urn. Here Faulkner puts this image to a somewhat different purpose than in his earlier metaphor of frozen motion. Then he associated the urn with Lena. Here the urn represents the physical perfection Joe had imagined in women. But he finds that the urn is cracked and is leaking a foul liquid. Of course, the physical process that Joe is rejecting here is one that is necessary for fertility and reproduction. By wanting living women to have the "perfection" of urns, Joe seems to be at odds with the natural processes of life.

But Joe is not yet the Joe Christmas who murders Joanna Burden. Note how in his relationship with Bobbie, he seems to be overcoming his fear of women. Perhaps you can sympathize with Joe if you think of times you have had to struggle with fears and doubts in order to pursue a romantic relationship that was important to you.

On his next meeting with Bobbie, Joe made love to her. Some time later Joe told Bobbie that he may have Negro blood, but she accuses him of lying. Note that when Joe told Bobbie about this possibility, he seemed trusting and open. Later in his life you'll see him mention his possible mixed blood as a way of deliberately taunting or defying people. But that pattern does not seem to have begun yet. Note also that Bobbie, despite her apparent affection for Joe, cannot accept the possibility of his being of mixed race.

When Joe finally discovered that Bobbie was a prostitute, he cried. But though he began to drink and smoke with the other regulars at the diner, he also continued to pursue his relationship with Bobbie much as he had before he knew about her prostitution. Joe's crying may be important here. Remember that he had always rejected Mrs. McEachern's kindness because he felt that she was trying to get him to cry. With Bobbie he is willing to cry and to accept her for what she is.

Joe's experience with Bobbie finally seems to be drawing him into the flow of love and life. Because you already know that Joe later becomes more closed, you should be wondering about what will cause the change.

^^^^^^^^^^LIGHT IN AUGUST: CHAPTER 9

Chapter 9 describes Joe's final violent confrontation with McEachern. It also recounts Bobbie's subsequent rejection of Joe.

McEachern sees Joe sneaking away from the house and being picked up by a car. He goes after Joe and, though he has no way of knowing where Joe is, he finds him easily at a country dance in a one-room schoolhouse. McEachern yells at Bobbie and hits Joe in the face. Then Joe falls McEachern by hitting him over the head with a chair.

This brief section is a rare look inside McEachern's consciousness. Faulkner uses some fairly strong terms in describing McEachern, for example, "bigotry." Nonetheless, he may also make you feel a bit sorry for McEachern when he reminds you that, to McEachern, Joe is still the child McEachern has nurtured and sheltered. But perhaps the strongest feeling that comes through here is McEachern's complete certainty both about the rightness of his actions and about the inevitability of all that is happening.

NOTE: CALVINISM McEachern is a Scottish Presbyterian. Presbyterianism is one of several Protestant denominations whose teachings derive from the theology of John Calvin, one of the original giants of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation. Calvinism holds that God has chosen a small predestined elect for salvation. Though no human actions can explain or change God's choice, one sign of membership in the elect is the strength of a person's religious faith. And Calvinists have traditionally expected strong religious faith to show itself in a life of hard work, frugality, and stern morality. McEachern's certainty as he pursues Joe seems to derive from his own conviction that McEachern is among the elect in a world of the damned. Note that the Southern variety of Scottish Presbyterianism was one of the strictest of the Calvinist groups.
Note that McEachern has hit Joe in the face before. This time Joe responds in kind with apparently fatal results. In the course of this chapter, several other people will hit Joe in the face. You have already seen the Joe Christmas of some fifteen years after hitting Brown in the face. Apparently, Faulkner is showing how Joe learned his own violence from the violence others perpetrated on him.

As soon as McEachern loses consciousness, Faulkner returns to Joe's point of view. Bobbie is screaming at Joe and calling him a bastard. He doesn't seem to notice her anger even when she hits him in the face and drives away. Joe rides home on McEachern's horse, goes to the attic, and with Mrs. McEachern looking on, steals the money his adoptive mother has hoarded. Note that he behaves toward Mrs. McEachern as harshly as you might expect from the man you were first introduced to in Chapter 2. But toward Bobbie he still appears to be tender.

NOTE: THE FAUST LEGEND Faulkner compares Joe to Dr. Faust. According to German legend, the magician Faust made a pact with or sold his soul to the devil. Both the German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) and the English Elizabethan playwright Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593) wrote famous dramas about Faust. Here Faulkner seems to be suggesting the rebellious freedom of a man who has defied society's moral code. But he could also be hinting that the freedom Joe feels will be brief, just as a deal with the devil has its price. In addition, Faulkner may have been thinking of the fact that in Goethe's version of the Faust story, Faust is always striving, never satisfied. Christmas's life henceforth will always be restless too.

Joe rides away from the McEachern house. He beats the horse to try to get it to run faster, but the tired animal slows to a halt. Faulkner's description of this ride is another example of his fondness for pictures of frozen motion. In this instance the picture of Joe leaning forward "in an attitude of terrific speed" while his horse stands still might be a metaphor for the life Joe is about to enter, one of running while getting nowhere.

Joe beats the horse on the head, then runs the rest of the way into town to the diner. He finds the proprietors, Max and Mame, dressed for the road with their bags packed. They ask Joe if McEachern is dead. Joe is impatient with the question. He wants Bobbie to come with him and to get married. But she is still furious, and she calls him a "nigger." A friend of Max's knocks Joe to the ground and hits him in the face repeatedly.

For the second time in his life, someone has decided that Joe must be black. Compare Bobbie's accusation to the dietitian's. Both women are afraid and angry. Though neither knows Joe's racial identity for certain, they jump to conclusions when it suits them to denounce him. And in both cases those who hear the accusation seem to accept it as true even though they have no evidence. As the fact of Bobbie's rejection sinks in, Joe feels a wind blowing her and all the people around her out of his life.

Chapter 10 recounts Joe's fifteen years of wandering. The fifteen years begin when Bobbie leaves him and end when he arrives at Joanna Burden's house in Jefferson. The chapter shows that Joe's major preoccupation during this entire period is his uncertain racial identity.

Bobbie and her friends leave Joe semiconscious on the floor. He finds and drinks some whiskey, then steps out into the street.

For the next fifteen years, Joe wanders streets that seem to blend into one long, never-ending highway. He goes as far south as Mexico, then as far north as Chicago and Detroit, then back south again. He works at a variety of jobs. Sometimes, after he has had sexual relations with a prostitute, he tells her that he is black, and, apparently because the prostitute thinks that accepting a black customer is beneath her, she kicks him out without making him pay. Sometimes he tells white men that he is black, just to provoke them into a fight.

But when a Northern prostitute doesn't react to his statement that he is black, Christmas is enraged that a white woman would accept a black, and he beats her. Later he lives with a black woman in the North. At night he tries to breathe her darkness into himself, but at the same time he feels his body repelled by this effort.

You are finally seeing Joe Christmas as a fully formed adult. Bobbie's betrayal of his love is the final event that seems to set the course he takes thenceforth. Faulkner emphasizes Joe's transiency by associating him with the street. But Joe's wandering seems quite different from Lena Grove's journey along country roads. For one, Joe keeps
returning to cities, whereas Lena travels through the small towns and hamlets she knows best. And unlike Lena, who tells her story to all who will listen, Joe remains close-mouthed.

Note also that the one constant in Joe's life is his preoccupation with his uncertain racial identity. His isolation seems to stem from his refusal to accept either of the two racial categories to which he could belong. While Lena's travels seem connected to her certainty about her life and destiny, Joe's seem to emerge from his internal conflict about what he really is. Is Joe always running away? But even if he is, might his refusal to belong to either of the racial categories make him a hero? Or does his obsession with these categories mean that he is still their victim?

Joe finds himself in a small Mississippi town, Jefferson. He notices a large house on the town's outskirts. Someone tells him that Mrs. Burden lives there alone. At night, Joe sneaks in through the window and goes to the kitchen where he eats. Then Joanna Burden appears behind him.

LIGHT IN AUGUST: CHAPTER 11

This chapter relates the first phase of the relationship between Joe and Joanna. It also fills you in on Joanna's family history.

Joe and Joanna fall into a routine. She leaves food for him in the kitchen, but they talk to each other very little if at all. She lends him a cot and lets him stay in the cabin outside. He learns that Negro schools and colleges regularly ask her for advice. But he knows very little else about her.

One night he sneaks up to her bedroom. She struggles with him, then gives in. Later he calls her way of struggling manlike. Because you are learning about Joanna only through Christmas's thoughts and memories about her, much of this chapter tells you something about both of them at the same time. Note that Christmas sees in Joanna and her house the possibility of a security he had never had on his endless street. But his thoughts don't dwell on this possibility. Instead, as he seems to do with most people, he defines his relationship with her as a battle. Christmas seems to relish his battle with the "manlike" Joanna more than he does the security and intimacy most people seek in romantic relationships. And the quality he describes as manlike seems to be part of what attracts him to Joanna.

Joe is angry at Joanna's calm reaction to his sexual assault. The next night he attacks her again. The following day he plans to flee to his endless street once more, but that night he finds himself heading to the house again. He finds food waiting for him, but he throws it against the wall. Remember that he threw it on the floor when Mrs. McEachern tried to feed him. The following day Joe goes to the mill and gets a job there. For the next six months, he goes to the mill by day and eats at a restaurant in town during the evening, thereby avoiding Joanna entirely.

One day Joe gets home from work and finds Joanna sitting on the cot in his cabin. She tells him some of her family history. Born in Jefferson, she has never been away from the town for longer than six months. But her grandfather, Calvin, was the son of a New Hampshire minister. Calvin traveled to California, converted to Catholicism, then denounced the Catholic Church and married a Protestant. He brought up his son and three daughters with the frequently repeated warning that they must learn to hate hell and slaveholders. And he threatened to beat God into them.

Note that like Joe himself Joanna was brought up in a strict religion. Grandfather Calvin talked about what his children must hate rather than about what they should love. Like Simon McEachern, he seemed to think that the way to teach a child religious feelings is with beatings.

NOTE: Faulkner says that the Burdens come from a background of New England Unitarianism. But the Unitarians are noted for championing individual freedom of belief and for their advocacy of a religion based on reason rather than on fixed biblical doctrine. As Faulkner describes the Burdens, they seem to be another variety of Calvinist, just as Joanna's grandfathers' first name suggests. Some readers resolve the apparent discrepancy by noting that when Calvin Burden first left New Hampshire the Unitarian Church had not yet evolved far from its Calvinist roots.

After Calvin Burden killed a man in an argument over slavery, the family had to move west. Then Calvin's son, Nathaniel, ran away from home at age fourteen. What do you make of the profusion of runaways in this novel? Lucas Burch, Lena Grove, Joe Christmas, and now Nathaniel Burden all flee home.
When Nathaniel returned sixteen years later, he was living with a woman, Juana, and they had a child, also named Calvin. Grandfather Calvin commented that his grandson looked black. According to Grandfather Calvin, the black race is "stained by the sin of human bondage." You may now be wondering if this family of firm abolitionists was itself racist.

The three Burden men received a Federal commission to go to Jefferson, Mississippi, to help with the freed slaves. In Jefferson a Confederate officer named Colonel Sartoris killed both Calvins. Later Nathaniel's wife died too. But Nathaniel stayed in Jefferson, though he sent to New Hampshire for another wife.

One day Nathaniel Burden showed his four-year-old daughter, Joanna, the graves of her grandfather and half-brother. He told her that God had made the black race as a curse for the white race's sins and that the only way for the white race to rise is to lift the black race up with it. But he also said that the white race would never be completely successful in that mission.

Is the racism of the Burdens any different from that around them? Though Jefferson ostracizes the Burdens for helping blacks, the Burdens seem to be haunted by racial categories, and they see blacks not as individuals but as a "curse."

Joanna's description of her past raises some other interesting questions about her. How much is she a part of Jefferson? You might see her as an outsider from the North. Yet you could also point to the fact that she has lived in Jefferson all her life. Has the town shaped her at all? Finally, think about Joanna's isolation. Is it something unfairly imposed by the town? Or is it a choice of Joanna's and a sign of her limitations?

Joanna asks Joe if he is sure that he is part black. Joe says that he isn't sure but adds that if he isn't part black he has wasted a lot of time. If you decide to argue that Joe has freely chosen his way of life, might not this statement be evidence of his awareness of having made such a choice?

Chapter 12 describes the next two phases of Joanna and Joe's relationship, a phase of sexual passion and a phase in which Joanna tries to bring Joe religion. The chapter ends immediately after Joanna's murder.

After their conversation, Joanna and Joe's relationship enters a second phase. Their days are the same as they always were, but at night the couple conduct a wildly passionate affair. Joanna falls into fits of jealous rage; she makes Joe hunt for love notes that she hides away; she becomes obsessed with sex and with the forbidden words of sexual activities.

Joe thinks he is falling into a sewer. The metaphor he uses makes his and Joanna's affair seem like something beyond his control. He feels that the street represents who he is better than does this new pit he feels himself being sucked into. But you could also claim that Joe's having stayed in the cabin so long indicates that he is ready to change his life and leave that street on which he has spent the last fifteen years.

Why is Joanna so passionate about Joe? Perhaps she is simply compensating for a lifetime without love. But note that during their lovemaking, she murmurs, "Negro! Negro! Negro!" At this moment even her sexual passion seems directed to the racial categories with which she has always been preoccupied. Joe may have good reasons as well as bad reasons to beware of Joanna Burden.

The couple's relationship is beginning to enter a third phase. By now Joe is working at the mill and bootlegging liquor on the side.

NOTE: Joe refers to Joanna as a "phantom" of her night personality. The words "phantom" and "shadow" recur frequently in Light in August. Some readers think that this metaphor suggests that each character perceives others as shadows or phantoms. According to this point of view, the image emphasizes the inability of each individual to know another fully.

Joanna's passion is subsiding. "Dear God," she implores, "let me be damned a little longer." It's possible that Joanna sees her relationship with Joe through the eyes of her father's and grandfather's religious outlook.
Joanna suggests to Joe that they have a child. For a brief second he considers accepting the lifetime security of marriage to Joanna. Then he decides that he couldn't accept that security because to do so would be to deny his thirty years of having "lived to make me what I chose to be." Here Joe seems to be suggesting that he has chosen his life's course, but he also seems to feel that the choices he has already made make it impossible for him to change course now. Is he right about either? Both?

Joanna announces that she is pregnant. Joe thinks of leaving, but he doesn't. Re may have more feelings for her than he is willing to admit. One night Joanna summons him to her room, but she has no interest in his touch. She tells him that he is wasting his life and asks him to become her assistant in helping the Negro schools. Joe refuses.

She does not call him for some months. By now Joe has brought Brown into his business and his cabin. One evening Joanna leaves Joe a note. He assumes that she wants him as a lover again and heads for her room without even reading the note.

When Joanna asks him to declare himself black and to go to a black law school and work with a black lawyer, he refuses. She hits him, and he hits her back. Staring at her, Joe notices how old she looks. He realizes that she is not pregnant but menopausal.

Joanna summons Joe many times in the next several months. She tells him she needs to save his soul. She asks him to kneel and pray.

Whom else from Joe's life does Joanna resemble? You could argue that Joe has been as naive in his relationship with Joanna as he was with Bobbie. In both cases he expects continuing love, and in both he feels betrayed. Like Bobbie, Joanna classifies him as a black, even if her goal is to "help" him. And like McEachern, this woman whom he considered marrying wants to impose her self-righteous religion on him.

It is now August. It is the night on which Joe began this long reverie into his past. He enters Joanna's house, and she asks him to kneel in prayer. He refuses. She aims an ancient revolver at him and fires.

Shortly thereafter, Joe finds himself standing in the road. He stops a car. The young couple in the front seat give him a ride but seem terrified of him. When they let him out, he realizes that he has been holding the revolver. Joanna had put two bullets in the chamber. The one she fired at Joe didn't go off. The other she had meant for herself.

Chapter 13 abruptly shifts from Joe Christmas's point of view to the collective point of view of the Jefferson townspeople, who have come to look at Joanna's burned-down house. Then it recounts a blundering posse's search for Christmas. It concludes by returning to the story of Byron Bunch and Lena Grove.

Within five minutes after a passing traveler stopped at Joanna Burden's burning house and found her body, crowds are gathering at the site to gawk. Some of them are sure that the murderer was black and that he had raped the victim too. Firemen arrive, but, with no water source for their fancy firefighting equipment, they join the gawkers. The people feel outraged by the crime but nonetheless seem to be enjoying their outrage.

The sheriff wants to interrogate a black man and asks that one be brought to him. He and his deputies bring a black man inside the cabin and ask him who lived there. When he says he doesn't know, they beat him. Finally he admits that two white men had lived there, and the sheriff realizes that the men were Brown and Christmas.

Note that the sheriff, unlike the gawkers, seems to be making a serious attempt to find the culprit. However, by beating a randomly chosen black man, all he gains is some information that was part of the town gossip already.

Back in town the sheriff notices a wagon arriving with a pregnant woman as passenger. The woman is of no concern to him, but the reader can recognize her as Lena Grove.
The sheriff notifies Joanna's New Hampshire nephew of her murder, and the nephew offers a thousand-dollar reward for the killer's capture. The reward brings out Brown and his story about Christmas. Now the chase is on. The sheriff's main resource is two bloodhounds he has brought from out of town. Their first time on the trail the bloodhounds dig up some cans of food; the second time they howl at the doorway of the cabin; the third time they find Joanna's revolver; and the fourth time they get lost.

NOTE: HUMOR The story of the bloodhounds is one of the longer bits of humor in Light in August. Besides entertaining you, what does Faulkner accomplish by this sudden turn to comedy? One possible effect is to remind you that the tragedy of Joe Christmas is not Faulkner's final statement about life. In this sense the bloodhound story foreshadows the novel's comic ending. Perhaps the ineptness of the posse's chase tells you something about the town too. And the posse's blundering may make them more sympathetic figures.

Byron visits Hightower and tells him that Lena will move to the cabin that Brown and Christmas had lived in. He says that she insists on living there because she sees it as the home of her Lucas. Hightower recognizes Byron's love for Lena and advises him to leave Jefferson. He says that Byron is being guided by the devil.

Why is Hightower so upset? Perhaps his old religious training is coming to the fore. Or perhaps, like the other religious figures in the novel, Hightower is asserting a moral objection to the possibility of an improper sexual involvement. You could also argue that this morality is only a front. Hightower, whose own marriage was unhappy, may be afraid that Byron is heading for a similarly unhappy experience with a woman. But Hightower may also be afraid for himself. Does he sense that his friend's growing emotional entanglement will make his own aloofness harder to maintain?

When shopping, Hightower hears that the posse has picked up Christmas's trail. Note that, like the rest of the town, both Hightower and Byron accept without question Brown's contention that Christmas is black. But Hightower seems upset about Christmas's capture and worries that Christmas will somehow shatter Hightower's own dearly bought peace.

A proud and defiant-looking Byron Bunch comes to visit Hightower. He tells Hightower that he is living in a tent near Lena's cabin. Hightower advises him to leave; otherwise, he says, the result will be either sin or marriage. Hightower seems more upset at the possibility of marriage, which he calls a woman's invention. This exchange seems to suggest that religious morality is not Hightower's reason for objecting to Byron's behavior, though you may already have noticed that many of the novel's religious figures are hostile to women.

Chapter 14 recounts both the posse's continued search for Christmas and Christmas's actions during his flight. It shows Christmas achieving a new self-awareness, and it concludes with Christmas's decision to allow himself to be captured.

The sheriff receives a report about Christmas. A white man had entered a black church during a revival meeting, had slapped the preacher in the face, had hit one of the older men, and then had begun to smash things. This behavior is not so strange when you consider that Christmas has been striking back at preachers ever since he hit Simon McEachern over the head with the chair. He has just killed Joanna Burden, and one possible reason was her preaching at him. And you have already seen his hostility to women and his tendency to associate feminine qualities with blacks.

NOTE: MORE PARALLELS BETWEEN CHRISTMAS AND JESUS In addition to Christmas's name and some of the imagery Faulkner uses in describing him, a third element in Light in August also connects Joe Christmas to Jesus Christ. Some of the events of his life parallel events in Jesus's. For example, this incident in the black church occurs on a Tuesday. Tuesday of the Christian Holy Week was the day Jesus cleansed the temple. Later in this chapter, on a Thursday night, the night of the Last Supper, Christmas is fed a mysterious meal. Some readers conclude from these parallels that Christmas is meant to resemble Jesus at least in being an example of suffering and sacrifice. Others feel that the parallels only point out the ways in which Christmas's sacrifice is less meaningful, even empty. And still others think that the religious parallels are too superficial to be important at all. Interestingly, in Faulkner's early drafts of Light in August, Christmas died at 33, as did Jesus. But in Faulkner's final typescript, the author deliberately deleted this parallel by making Christmas three years older.
Once more the sheriff brings out the posse and the bloodhounds. The dogs seem to be on Christmas's trail, which leads to a black family's cabin. The men surround the house skillfully and professionally. But the only people in the cabin are a black woman and her child. The mother is wearing Christmas's shoes. Faulkner relates this incident in a way that brings out its absurd and even slapstick qualities. Some readers have criticized Light in August for a lack of unity among its various stories and between its comic and tragic elements. Here Faulkner alternates between the serious story of Christmas's flight and a much more lighthearted narration of the sheriff's pursuit. What advantage do you see in such a technique?

As Light in August returns to Christmas's point of view, try to reach a final opinion about this central character. Some readers perceive him primarily as a victim. You could argue that he is a victim of society's (and in particular the South's of that epoch) arbitrary categories. You might claim that he is a victim of religious fanaticism. You could further point out that he is forced to be a sacrificial scapegoat so that Jefferson can confirm the stereotypes that bolster its prejudices. But others see Christmas as a hero, a man who refuses to accept the security that he would gain by conforming to people's expectations of either race. You might even want to see him as a villain, a man so brutalized by others that he can only be brutal himself. Whichever opinion you hold, you will have to decide if Christmas changes and develops after his murder of Joanna Burden. What new understandings does he come to?

NOTE: Faulkner has narrated Christmas's story in the past tense and Lena's in the present. In this section he narrates Christmas's story in the present tense. Could this change of tense be evidence for a change in Christmas's consciousness?

For example, he is wearing a black man's shoes and feels that the blackness he has been trying to escape all his life is now creeping up his legs. Does this feeling suggest defeat or a new maturity? Christmas is aware that he no longer knows what day it is. After a while, he no longer feels the need for food or sleep. He refers to the blacks who flee from him as "brothers." Are these changes only signs of the gradual deterioration of a fugitive deprived of food and shelter for several days? Or are they signs of some new and higher awareness?

Christmas thinks that he is tired of running. He may be thinking about the days after the murder, or he may be talking about the running he has been doing all his life. He seems to feel a new sense of peace. When a young black from another county comes by in a horse-drawn wagon, Christmas gets a ride into Mottstown, twenty miles from Jefferson. As they arrive in Mottstown, Joe sees in his mind the endless street that he has been traveling all his life. It has made a circle, he thinks. He thinks that in the last few days he has traveled farther than in his whole life before, yet he has still not broken outside of that circle. One way of reconciling both parts of this thought would be to say that during his flight Christmas has attained a new self-awareness but that this new awareness is fatalistic. According to this interpretation, he sees the pattern of his life and of his choices but feels it is too late to change them.

Chapter 15 introduces Doc and Mrs. Hines. It tells about their startling reaction to Joe Christmas's arrest and ends as the couple is heading for Jefferson to try to influence Joe's fate.

An old couple named Hines has been living in the black section of Mottstown for thirty years. They have always been mysterious, and the town thinks them crazy. During their first five years in Mottstown, Hines was home only once a month, though since then he has lived there year round. People have heard that he holds revival services in black churches, and black women are sometimes seen delivering food to Hines's house. But for some reason, people have been willing to forgive what they regard as his crazy tolerance of blacks.

Hines's wife is rarely seen, but Uncle Doc, as Hines is called, hangs out in the town square much of the day. Eventually the townspeople discover the subject of Uncle Doc's sermons to the black congregations. He shows up uninvited and preaches the superiority of the white race.

Faulkner introduced one other character by describing her unusual relationship to blacks, a relationship that also included being visited by black women bearing food. But Joanna Burden seems quite different from the crazy Doc Hines. And yet this initial superficial similarity may be a clue to some deeper correspondences. Joanna Burden, in her own way, is haunted by race and believes blacks to be inferior. And at the end of her life, Joanna preaches to a man she takes to be black, Joe Christmas, that he should accept his proper station in life. Are there surprising links
between Doc Hines and any other characters as well? Despite these links, Doc Hines is certainly the novel's most extreme racist and religious fanatic.

NOTE: REPUTATION VS. REALITY Faulkner uses a technique here that he also uses in many other portions of Light in August. He introduces a character by his reputation, then gradually shows us what the character is really like. In this particular instance, the initial opinion that Hines is "crazy on the subject of Negroes" is ironic, because he is indeed crazy on that subject but not in the way the townspeople meant. You have probably found that when you get to know people they sometimes turn out to be quite different from what their reputation had led you to suspect. In Light in August, Faulkner tells his story in a way that allows him to explore those discrepancies.

Doc Hines is in downtown Mottstown when he hears that a murderer named Christmas has been captured. Slobbering at the mouth, Hines beats his way through the crowd gathered around the captive. He seems insane. When he reaches Christmas, he strikes him and yells, "Kill the bastard!" Two men take Hines Home. When they tell his wife about the incident, she too seems extremely interested in Christmas.

When the two men leave, Mrs. Hines is trembling. She tells her husband that she wants an answer to a question that she has refrained from asking for thirty years. She wants to know what he did with "Milly's baby."

The story of Joe Christmas's capture spreads through town. Note how the town gives its own incorrect interpretation of the facts. The townspeople say that the man's "nigger blood" led him to let himself be captured so easily. They point to his foolishly burning the Burden house and say that he tried to pin both his bootleg liquor business and the murder on a white man named Brown. Of course, unlike the townspeople, you know Brown's true character. Are they right in accusing Christmas of setting the fire? The townspeople continue by describing how Christmas came into town and got a haircut and some new clothes. They claim he used money he stole from Joanna Burden. Is such a theft likely? Then, according to the townspeople, Christmas walked the main streets until someone recognized him, hit him in the face, and held him. They say that what made people angry was Christmas's refusal to act either black or white.

The townspeople tell how Doc Hines came back into town again and tried to get the crowd to lynch Christmas. And they comment on how surprised they were to see Hines's wife come after him and quiet him down.

Then they describe how the Mottstown sheriff tried to calm the crowd so that the Jefferson sheriff could take Christmas back. How serious do you think the possibility of lynching is here? Certainly the threat is present, but Faulkner also gives us reason to believe that some of that threat is mere bluster.

The townspeople also talk of Doc and Mrs. Hines going to the railroad station and waiting for the 2 A.M. train to Jefferson. After hours of being very quiet, Doc began to scream, "Abomination and bitchery!" By now Doc should remind you very closely of a character you met early in the novel.

\[\text{LIGHT IN AUGUST: CHAPTER 16}\]

Chapter 16 recounts two visits of Byron to Hightower. In the first, Byron tells Hightower about Christmas's capture, and in the second, he reveals that Doc and Mrs. Hines are Christmas's grandparents. Byron asks Hightower to offer Christmas an alibi.

Byron visits Hightower again and tells him about Christmas's capture. Hightower seems to feel that a demand is being made on his sympathies, and he doesn't want to get involved. He talks about having taught himself to stay uninvolved, then catches himself in mid-sentence and changes his words to "taught by them." By "them" Hightower presumably means the community. As with Christmas, the question arises as to whether Hightower has chosen his way of life or whether the community has forced his isolation upon him.

Hightower seems to compare his own persecution to Christmas's and blames the community for driving people to acts that the same community then punishes. Hightower's insight about Christmas may well be valid, but Hightower does not yet seem to be equally insightful about his own life.

Byron has left, and Hightower is sitting by his study window, staring out at the street. He knows without looking at a watch just when the church music is to begin. Note how characters in Light in August are often dependent on fixed
routines that are keyed to certain days of the week or times of the day. Recall what happens to these characters when they have to give up their routines. When Lena Grove enters his life, Byron Bunch drops his schedule of working on Saturdays and leading a choir on Sundays. Even Christmas seems to change when he no longer knows what day it is.

Listening to the church music, Hightower thinks about the people of the South and what he sees as their tendency to escape from both pleasure and pain by drinking, fighting, and praying. You may find this characterization an accurate description of many of the figures in this novel. But once more he doesn't seem to show any insight into his own ways of escaping pleasure and pain. He expects that the town will crucify Christmas. And, he says, they will do so gladly and, he seems to imply, self-righteously.

Byron returns to Hightower's study. He is accompanied by Doc and Mrs. Hines. If you think back to the Byron you first met in Chapter 2, you may notice how much he has changed. Why is this man, who used to care so much about staying out of trouble, now getting so involved in the case of Joe Christmas? Once Byron let himself fall in love with Lena, he seems to have become readier to help other people too.

From Byron and the Hineses, Hightower learns that Joe Christmas is the son of the Hineses' daughter. Even fifty years ago Doc Hines was so violent a man that his wife thought the devil was in him. When their daughter Milly was eighteen, she sneaked away with a Mexican who worked in a traveling circus. Distraught, Hines began to rant about the sinfulness, the "bitchery and abomination," of women. Convinced that the Mexican was part black, Hines took his horse and his pistol and, without knowing where the couple were, he nevertheless managed to find them easily. Hines's uncanny ability to find his "sinning" daughter is reminiscent of McEachern's equally striking ability to find his eighteen-year-old son, Joe Christmas, when he too sneaked off with his first love. Like McEachern's pursuit of Joe, Hines's chase after Milly also ended in violence. Hines shot the Mexican dead. Later, the circus owner confirmed that the Mexican was part black.

NOTE: When Light in August was first published, most readers assumed that Joe Christmas was indeed part black. After all, the circus owner confirmed Joe's father's racial identity, and even sympathetic characters like Byron Bunch and the Reverend Hightower don't doubt it. But now almost all readers agree that the novel never makes Joe's racial origins definite.

When Milly was to give birth, Hines refused to let anyone get her a doctor, and she died. He then kidnapped the baby and went away with him for five years. When he came back, the couple moved to Mottstown, and Hines never told his wife that he had left the child at an orphanage. Hines was, of course, the janitor there.

Now you finally know about Joe's earliest experiences, those before even his own earliest memory. Hines was the first, and apparently the most extreme, of a series of religiously motivated, racially obsessed, and sexually repressed people to play important roles in Christmas's life.

Byron asks Hightower to give Christmas an alibi by saying that Christmas was with him rather than with Joanna Burden on the nights that Brown saw Christmas leave their cabin. Byron seems to be suggesting that, to save Christmas, Hightower should imply the existence of a homosexual relationship between himself and Joe. Hightower screams his refusal. He doesn't say that he can't. He says that he won't.

~~~~~~~~LIGHT IN AUGUST: CHAPTER 17

In this chapter Lena's baby is born. Byron forces Hightower to help deliver the baby, and this act revitalizes Hightower.

At dawn the next morning, Byron wakes Hightower to tell him that Lena is in labor. Byron asks him to go to Lena's cabin with the book Hightower had once used to guide him in delivering a baby many years before. Before Hightower can protest, Byron leaves for town to get a doctor.

As he entered Hightower's house, Byron noticed that he could find his way in the dark, as if he were being led. Byron finds his way with an uncanny certainty similar to that which guided both McEachern and Hines when they chased their "sinning" children. Faulkner seems to be drawing a parallel and making a contrast. Hines and McEachern were acting out of anger. Their mission was to punish, and they were sure they were instruments of God. But Byron is in love, and his mission is to help someone whom Hines and McEachern would regard as a sinner too.
And unlike Hines and McEachern, Byron doesn't seem convinced that God is leading him. In fact, he says that God is watching him to see what he will do. Notice how Faulkner makes his points by comparisons and contrasts.

Byron and the doctor are late. When they arrive, the baby is on Lena's lap. Doc Hines is asleep on another cot, and Mrs. Hines is crouching over Lena and the baby.

NOTE: INCONGRUOUS AND CONTRADICTORY IMAGES Faulkner describes Mrs. Hines as resembling both a "rock" and a "crouching beast." He sees in her face both "peace" and "terror." Later in this chapter he describes Lena's face as "neither innocent nor dissimulating" and Hightower's as "firm" and "gentle." This use of expressions that link two contradictory or incongruous terms is typical of Faulkner's style in Light in August. Some readers think that Faulkner uses this stylistic device to emphasize the unresolved tensions that he seems to find characteristic of human life.

Mrs. Hines calls the baby "Joey." She seems to think he is her grandson, Joe Christmas. Does this hint that Joe is somehow resurrected in Lena's baby to continue the novel's Christian symbolism? Or does it remind us that, whatever Joe's end, life and birth and love go on? Or is it a forced and unsuccessful comparison that doesn't accomplish anything? Which of these interpretations makes the most sense to you? Why?

Meanwhile, Byron hears the baby cry, and the cry reminds him of Lena's crying in labor. He suddenly realizes that until now he has not really believed that Lena is not a virgin. He remembers that he will have to tell Joe Brown (Lucas Burch) about Lena.

Hightower walks home. On the way he is fretful. But when he gets to his house, he gradually realizes that he is feeling good. Apparently, helping with a birth has revitalized him. Instead of going back to sleep, he reads Henry IV.

NOTE: Henry IV, Parts I and II, are historical plays by Shakespeare. They portray Henry IV's attempts to suppress a rebellion by those loyal to the former king, whom Henry had deposed. The plays are largely about the ethical and practical consequences of political action. Apparently, Hightower's foray outside his study has given him a taste for this portrayal of action in the real, historical world. The Henry IV plays are also about the education of Prince Hal, the future Henry V. Hal mixes with common folk and learns how to be a fuller human being. So these plays are especially appropriate for Hightower at this moment.

Hightower hopes that Lena will name the baby after him but suspects that she will name it after Byron. Note that the baby now has three symbolic fathers, Hightower, Byron, and Christmas. Later, Hightower walks the two miles back to Lena's cabin and enjoys the sights, sounds, and smells of the natural world around him. He imagines the Burden plantation as it once was. Like Christmas he associates blacks, women, and nature, but, for Hightower, the association is now a positive and life-affirming one.

When Hightower arrives at Lena's cabin, she is initially disappointed. She was expecting someone else, probably Byron. Note the change from when she first met Byron and was disappointed because she had been expecting Lucas Burch. Is Lena as completely constant a character as she had seemed?

She tells Hightower that Mrs. Hines has her so mixed up that she almost thinks that Christmas is indeed the father of her baby. Hightower urges her to send Byron away. She will not be good for Byron, Hightower believes. Lena tells Hightower that she has already rejected Byron's offer of marriage. She will never see him again, she thinks, and she cries.

Then Hightower goes to the mill and learns that Byron has quit his job.

\--------\LIGHT IN AUGUST: CHAPTER 18\--------\n
Chapter 18 marks a turning point for Byron. In this chapter he plans to leave Jefferson but first arranges for Lucas Burch to see Lena. When Burch flees again, Byron fights him, then returns to Lena.

Byron is in town to see the sheriff. He thinks that the town probably regards him as a fool for protecting Joe Brown's woman and baby with no reward for himself. He stops by his old boarding house, where he learns that the landlady has rented out his room. The landlady seems to have a lively interest in Byron, Lena, Christmas, and Brown.
Through Byron's worries and the landlady's gossip, Faulkner once more raises the question of the community's reaction to the major characters' stories.

Byron finally sees the sheriff. The sheriff thinks of Byron as a man whose behavior has outraged the town during the last week. Apparently Byron's attempts to help Lena have not only destroyed his old peaceful routine, but have also made him a scandal to the town. Always an outsider, is Byron Bunch now becoming another of Jefferson's outcasts? The sheriff agrees to Byron's request that he send Joe Brown to see Lena and mentions that he expects Christmas to plead guilty in order to save his life.

From a hiding place near Lena's cabin, Byron sees the deputy sheriff bring Joe Brown, alias Lucas Burch, to Lena. Byron turns away and starts to ride his mule up the hill and away from Jefferson. He is leaving town. He thinks about how much suffering he has had to bear. Then he looks back and sees Joe Brown fleeing from the rear window of Lena's cabin. Byron feels as if a wind is blowing through him.

NOTE: WINDS The wind that Byron feels is one of several metaphorical winds in Light in August. Christmas feels a wind on several occasions, most notably when Bobbie Allen turns against him. Hightower's first name suggests the gales he shelters himself against. Here the "cold" and "hard" wind seems quite unpleasant. Perhaps the wind is the harshness of life from which one can only shelter oneself at the cost of one's vitality. When Christmas feels the wind after Bobbie's betrayal, it's a sign that his life is changing. Is it a similar sign here for Byron? Does Byron cope with harsh disappointments better than Christmas?

Byron decides to intercept Brown and to fight him. He expects to lose but wants to make the effort.

NOTE: Faulkner once said that the writers he admired most were those who had tried to accomplish so much that they inevitably had to fail. Some readers think that his great admiration for grand but doomed efforts shows in his novels too. However humble, Bunch's assault on Brown may be one of these doomed yet courageous actions that Faulkner so appreciated.

Faulkner tells you about Brown's encounter with Lena. The deputy sheriff takes Brown to Lena without telling him where he is going. Brown is upset and even desperate when he sees Lena. She asks him when they will be getting married. He is evasive, and when she gives him the opportunity to leave, he flees by the back window to avoid the deputy sheriff.

Brown cuts through the woods to where the railroad tracks mount a hill. He finds a black man to take a message to the sheriff. The message demands Brown's thousand-dollar reward for having informed on Joe Christmas. Brown feels as if everyone around him is a chess piece being moved by an unbeatable opponent. Compare Brown's fatalism to McEachern's or Hines's. They feel sure of victory, while Brown feels sure of defeat. How does Byron's attitude compare to both of these others? Byron seems to be more aware of having to make choices whose outcomes are uncertain.

Byron finds Brown and challenges him to fight. Brown beats Byron until he lies bleeding and in a semiconscious state that resembles Christmas's after Bobbie's friends had beaten him up. Remember that after Christmas returned to full consciousness he began his fifteen-year flight down the streets of America's cities. You'll soon find out whether this beating will mark a similarly drastic change in Byron's life.

The freight train approaches. After he sees Brown jump on it, Byron heads back to Lena. Unlike so many of the novel's other characters, he seems to have decided not to flee. On his way back, he hears that Christmas has been killed.

Chapter 19 recounts Christmas's escape from custody, his pursuit by Percy Grimm, and his death and mutilation. It also introduces Gavin Stephens, who gives his interpretation of Christmas's behavior.

Faulkner begins this chapter with the town's speculation about Christmas's motivations during the events leading to his death. But he doesn't return to Christmas's point of view. So, like the town, you won't know for sure why Christmas acts as he does. But, unlike the town, you know what his thoughts and feelings had been before. In
forming your opinion about Christmas's final hours, you will have to find your evidence both in the pattern of his whole life and in his mental state during the days after the murder.

The townspeople believe that Christmas, who had escaped, allowed himself to be cornered and killed, and they speculate about why. Gavin Stephens, the Harvard-educated district attorney, is talking to a visiting friend. First, he gives his opinion of Mrs. Hines's motivations. According to Stephens, she had lived without hope for thirty years. But the birth of Lena's child gave her a new feeling of hope, including the hope that she could save Christmas. If Stephens is right, then Hightower was not the only person restored to new life and hope by the birth of Lena's baby.

Stephens continues by explaining that Mrs. Hines visited Christmas in jail. He speculates that she encouraged him to take refuge with Hightower and that his escape from custody was a result of her suggestion. Stephens then explains Christmas's subsequent and seemingly contradictory actions as a conflict between his black and his white blood. In thinking about Stephens's explanation, remember that no one is certain that Christmas has black blood. Don't hesitate to be skeptical about Stephens's rather mechanical interpretation of Christmas.

Faulkner now goes back in time to the events immediately before Christmas's escape. Percy Grimm, a captain in the Mississippi National Guard, is trying to organize a group of American Legionnaires who will patrol Jefferson in order to prevent a lynching.

Grimm had always been unhappy that he had been born too late to serve in World War I.

NOTE: When you read of Grimm's unshakable enthusiasm for the war he missed, keep in mind that many of the American writers of Faulkner's generation had been deeply disillusioned by that war. Though Faulkner himself had tried to fight in it, he later wrote Soldiers' Pay, a novel that reflects the common disillusionment.

When Grimm joined the National Guard, he felt that he had found his vocation. Faulkner says that Grimm's life then opened up before him like a "corridor." Remember that Faulkner had already associated Christmas with the orphanage corridor. So the association of Grimm with a corridor is the first hint of some similarity between him and Christmas.

The Legion commander doesn't like Grimm's idea. But Grimm, who believes that the uniformed white American is superior to all other men, convinces many of the Legionnaires to join him, and the sheriff reluctantly deputizes Grimm. Note the contrast between Grimm and the Jefferson sheriff. Grimm disdains the sheriff for taking time off to go home and eat. The sheriff seems a pragmatist, calm and commonsensical, a man with ordinary human appetites. Grimm, on the other hand, is described as "prophetlike"; he doesn't even go home to sleep. Is the religious imagery another link between Grimm and Christmas?

Grimm hears gunshots and senses immediately that Christmas has escaped. Without knowing where Joe has fled, he sets off in pursuit. Grimm's every move seems right, and Faulkner compares him to a chess piece moved by a seemingly infallible player. Are you reminded of the seemingly infallible certainty with which McEachern pursued Joe and Hines pursued his daughter, Milly?

Christmas enters Hightower's house, and Grimm follows with three other men behind him. They find Hightower with his face bleeding from Christmas's blows. Offering the alibi that he had previously refused to give Christmas, Hightower says that Christmas was with him the night of the murder. But Grimm shoots Christmas five times, then castrates him and yells, "Now you'll let white women alone." What do you think of Grimm's self-image as a patriot and opponent of lynching? Has this final act revealed his true racist motives, motives of which he himself may have been unaware? It may be significant that the killer of Christmas is a lone individual rather than a lynch mob from the community.

NOTE: NELSE PATTON When Faulkner was eleven years old, Nelse Patton, a black man in Oxford, was accused of decapitating a white woman. Some people think that this murder was the source for Christmas's decapitation of Joanna Burden. But unlike Christmas, Patton died at the hands of the community. A mob urged on by a local politician took him from the jail. The jailers did little to stop the crowd, which shot Patton to death, then mutilated him horribly.

As Christmas's blood rushes from his body, he seems to become a permanent part of the memories of all the
onlookers. In addition to trying to explain Joe's behavior in these last minutes of his life, you also have the perplexing problem of interpreting this description of his death. Is this passage a continuation of the analogy to Christ? Does it suggest that Christmas's metaphorical crucifixion gains a meaning and a value from its impact on the onlookers and the community? But, if so, why doesn't Faulkner tell what the impact on the community is?

LIGHT IN AUGUST: CHAPTER 20

Chapter 20 recounts Hightower's family background. You learn about his father and about the grandfather with whom Hightower is so preoccupied. At the end of the chapter, Hightower seems to have new insight into himself.

As twilight nears, Hightower is sitting by his study window as he usually does at this hour. He is remembering his life. He was an only child, born when his father was fifty. His mother had already been an invalid for twenty years. Hightower had often thought that his mother had become sick because she had not had enough to eat when his father had been away during the Civil War. His father was against slavery, and he refused not only to own slaves but also to eat food prepared by slaves. As a result, Hightower's mother had to depend for food on what she could grow herself in her garden.

You learn more about Hightower's family in this chapter. Is his father another mistreater of women? Later, you may find the father a rather sympathetic figure. But here, a bit like McEachern and perhaps like Hightower himself, he seems to care more about his absolute principles than about the welfare of a human being close to him.

Hightower's father was a minister. He joined the Confederate Army as a chaplain, not as a soldier. But Hightower's Episcopalian grandfather seems to have had an almost opposite personality from that of Hightower's Presbyterian father. The grandfather was fond of whiskey, cigars, and horse racing, never went to church, owned two slaves, had a coarse and lively sense of humor, and killed Union soldiers with gusto. The two men seem to have gotten along fairly well nonetheless. How do these two men compare to Joanna Burden's father and grandfather, or to Joe Christmas's grandfather and adoptive father? You may find Hightower's ancestors quite decent by comparison. Some readers think that Hightower's family represents Faulkner's view of the old, bygone South.

When Hightower's father came home from the Civil War, he became a doctor, a profession he learned during the war. Hightower remembers growing up with three phantoms and a ghost. The phantoms were his father, from whom he felt distant, his invalid mother, and Cinthy. Cinthy had been his grandfather's slave. She came to live with Hightower's father after both the grandfather and her own husband had been killed in the war.

The "ghost" was Hightower's grandfather. Hightower was fascinated by Cinthy's tales about his grandfather's heroic exploits in the Confederate Army. Remembering these tales, Hightower thinks that his own life ended with his grandfather's death, a death that had taken place even before Hightower had been born. Why was Hightower so willing to live in his memories of his grandfather rather than in the ongoing world around him? Even Joe Christmas didn't decisively withdraw from love and life until after a series of harsh experiences.

Hightower entered the seminary, intent on gaining a ministry in Jefferson, the town where his grandfather died. But he also saw the church as a shelter from "the harsh gale of living." Note that at this time he sought shelter not by isolating himself but by participating actively in a community institution. Hightower remembers that he had seen his future in the image of a vase. Compare this use of the vase or urn image to the way Faulkner uses it when discussing Lena and Christmas.

In the seminary Hightower met his future wife, then the daughter of a teacher. They had been courting for two years before Hightower ever saw her for who she was. Faulkner says that Hightower never saw her face but only a face he had created or learned from books about love. Faces will again be important later in this chapter. One night this woman spoke of marriage and of her desire to escape from the seminary. Hightower had not known until then of her desperate discontent. She planned a campaign to convince the church to send Hightower to Jefferson for his ministry. Hightower seemed somewhat disillusioned by the notion that he could not simply tell the church elders his honest reasons for wanting Jefferson.

After graduation Hightower got married. He seemed disappointed again to find that his marriage was rather passionless. Most of Hightower's disappointments seem to have come from his wife. Hightower's disappointing experiences with women are much milder than Joe Christmas's, but they nonetheless seem to show that his
grandfather's memory was not his only formative influence.

Hightower remembers that, on the train to Jefferson with his new bride, he talked excitedly of his grandfather's death. His grandfather had been killed during a courageous raid behind Union lines. However, the grandfather wasn't killed by enemy bullets but rather by someone defending a henhouse when the hungry Confederate soldiers decided to take a few chickens. This passage also contains a hint that the house Hightower later bought in Jefferson was the one from which his grandfather had been shot.

Hightower seems to be reevaluating his life. He blames himself for ignoring the needs of his congregation and of his wife. He regards himself as his wife's murderer. He thinks that God cannot be blamed for everything. Compare this thought to Hines's and McEachern's feeling that they are instruments of God's will.

Hightower sees faces around him. They reflect him back to himself, and through that reflection he sees his grandfather more critically for what seems to be the first time. He also recognizes that he had been glad to be persecuted by the Jefferson townspeople, presumably because that persecution justified his withdrawal. He begins to make excuses for his behavior, then comes to a sudden insight. This insight isn't completely clear, but Hightower seems to be implicating his cherished grandfather in his wife's death. The idea seems to be that if he has let his own life be taken over by the memory of his grandfather, and if his wife died as a result of his absorption in that memory, then that remembered grandfather is a murderer too.

The wheel of faces that Hightower sees turns into a halo. He recognizes Joe Christmas's face in it. Then he sees that Christmas's face is blended with the face of Percy Grimm. Hightower feels that he is dying. Then, as he has heard every night at this hour, he hears once more the horses of his grandfather's cavalry galloping outside his window.

Helping Lena Grove changed Hightower's feelings about life, and his trying to help Joe seemed to indicate that he was no longer withdrawing from his obligations to other people. Does this final reverie imply that Hightower has come to some new and permanent insights about himself? If so, why does the reverie end with Hightower's imagining his grandfather's cavalry charge once more? Some readers think that Hightower has attained greater insight than the novel's other characters. But other readers think that Hightower remains mired in obsession or that, after attaining insight, he retreats into the obsession again.

NOTE: For many years, readers assumed that Hightower dies here. But in an interview in the 1950s, Faulkner said that Hightower does not die. Most readers now agree that the novel gives you no way of knowing if Hightower dies, just as it gives you no way of knowing if Joe Christmas is part black. As you might imagine, the question of whether Hightower dies is not as important as the question of whether he achieves insight.

LIGHT IN AUGUST: CHAPTER 21

Chapter 21 ends the novel by returning to Lena's and Byron's story, now told by a new character, a furniture dealer who gives them a ride. The furniture dealer tells how Lena rebuffs Byron's attempt to make love to her. But, ever-hopeful, Byron is sticking with Lena, who is continuing her travels.

A Mississippi furniture dealer has just returned from a business trip to Tennessee. He tells his wife an amusing anecdote about two people he met on the road. An improbably matched couple with a baby asked him for a ride. They didn't have any particular destination. The woman was young, pretty, strong, and hearty. The man was small, plain, and meek. The furniture dealer gave them a ride, and, when they hinted that they would like to sleep in his truck at night, he agreed. The woman said that she had been on the road for two months and that the baby had been born back in Jefferson. By now you probably realize that this couple is Byron Bunch and Lena Grove.

The furniture dealer gives you a new perspective on Byron and Lena. He emphasizes the physical discrepancy between them, and he makes Byron seem more pathetic than ever. The furniture dealer knows nothing of Byron's goodness nor of his moral courage. Why does Faulkner choose to end the story of Byron and Lena, and, for that matter, the novel as a whole, from the point of view of this completely new and anonymous character? Though the furniture dealer isn't from Jefferson, he still seems to be one of the chorus of community people who have commented on Light in August's action throughout the novel. Unlike most of this novel's major characters, he seems happy, neither frustrated nor obsessed. And he is telling this story to his wife in bed. Their flirtatious banter shows them to be perhaps the only happy couple in the novel, a contrast both to the sexually obsessed Joe and Joanna and
to the sexually empty lives of most of the novel's other characters.

Lying awake at night, the furniture dealer saw that Byron was up to something. Lena was sleeping in the truck, and Byron was supposed to sleep outside. But Byron sneaked into the truck to try to make love to Lena, who had consistently refused his offers of marriage and who claimed to be still searching for Lucas Burch. Lena woke up and told Byron that he should be ashamed of himself. Then she picked him up and put him off the truck. Apparently mortified, Byron ran into the woods. The next morning he hadn't returned, and the furniture dealer and Lena set off without him. But farther up the road, there he was, waiting. Byron climbed back into the truck and told Lena that he had come too far to quit now.

Some readers think that this ending and especially its comic tone, doesn't fit with the tragic Joe Christmas story that makes up the largest part of the book. Others think that the ending is Faulkner's way of setting the Joe Christmas tragedy against a background of the happier lives of more ordinary people. If you accept this viewpoint, you could visualize a progression from the isolated and obsessed Joe Christmas, through the more socially integrated but still frustrated Byron Bunch, to the happy life of the still more ordinary furniture dealer and the many other anonymous people he may represent.

^^^^^^^^^^LIGHT IN AUGUST: GLOSSARY

AVATAR Person embodying some entity or concept much larger than himself.

BEALE STREET Memphis street famous as the center of the city's bars and brothels.

BELIKE Perhaps, probably.

BIG HOUSE Main house, where the owners of a plantation live.

BOOTLEGGER Transporter and seller of illegal liquor during the years when the U.S. government prohibited such activities (1919-33).

BUCKBOARD Light, four-wheeled carriage. The name comes from the seat's being mounted on a long board that connects the front and rear wheels.

BY ORDINARY Ordinarily.

CAP-AND-BALL REVOLVER Most common handgun of the Civil War period. It was loaded from the front with both bullets and powder. A hammer detonated a percussion cap, which then ignited the powder.

CAPTAIN Term of respect.

CARPETBAGGER Northerner who went South after the Civil War to make money under the Northern-imposed Reconstruction regime.

CHANCESO Accident.

CHAP Child.

CIRCUIT RIDER Preacher who circulates among country churches and preaches at a different one each Sunday.

CLUMB Climbed.

COTTON HOUSE Small house in which cotton is stored between picking and ginning. It is usually about ten feet square.

CRITTER Any creature, including a person.

CULTIVATOR Mule--or tractor-drawn implement for loosening the soil around growing plants.

DRAW TIME To be paid for time worked.
FIELD PEAS Pea often planted with corn and usually cooked with molasses.

FIRE SIREN Large steam whistle installed at the power plant and used as a general community alarm.

FIT TEN Suitable.

FUR PIECE Far piece, that is, a long way.

HALVERS Half share.

HEIFER Young cow.

HIRAM Hiram Hayseed was a contemptuous term for a farmer.

JOHN JACOB ASTOR German-born fur trader and capitalist (1763-1848) thought of as a symbol of big-city wealth.

MIZ Mrs.

MOTTSTOWN Fictionalization of Water Valley, Mississippi, a town about twenty miles south-southwest of Oxford. Faulkner even uses the correct Water Valley-Oxford timetables for the train between Mottstown and Jefferson.

MOUGHT Might. It is pronounced to rhyme with "out."

PALM LEAF FAN Fan made from dried palm leaves. Palm trees do not grow in Mississippi, and the fan was bought in stores.

PLANNING MILL Place where logs are sawed into lumber. The Jefferson mill was based on a real mill a mile south of Oxford.

MEMPHIS City in southwest Tennessee. It is 75 miles north-northwest of Oxford and is the main urban center for northwestern Mississippi.

RIGHT SMART Larger number or amount.

SWOLE BELLIED Pregnant.

WASH-STAND Table with a basin used for washing and shaving in a house without plumbing.

YANKEE Union soldier in the Civil War, or, by extension, any Northerner.

---

LIGHT IN AUGUST: ON THE CHARACTERS

Lena's fertility and her earthmothering womanhood are not in question, but her way of knowing, emphatically in the foreground, keeps her consciousness within the limitations of childhood. Faulkner, unlike many of his critics, refrains from passing any ultimate judgment on this child-woman, showing us instead the implications of her immunity from suffering. If Lena reconciles nature and society, it is because she sees in both only what reflects herself.


Light in August is the strangest, the most difficult of Faulkner's novels, a succession of isolated, brilliantly etched characters and scenes that revolve around, finally blur into, an impenetrable center—the character Christmas. As remote from us and his author as he is from the society around him, Christmas withholding some ultimate knowledge of himself, some glimpse into the recesses of being which we feel necessary to understanding. Yet just as obvious as his distance is the fact that he epitomizes every character and movement in the book. Whatever is in Light in August is here archetypally in this figure whose very name begins his mystery: Joe Christmas.
...Yet this mystery is the meaning of Light in August, for the impenetrability of Christmas becomes the only way Faulkner can articulate a truly inhuman, or larger-than-human, wholeness of being of which the others--Lena, Hightower, Byron, Joanna, Hines, Grimm--are the human shadows.


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 chickencoop, 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 to save or to deny Joe Christmas because of their dreams. Reason and imagination can prove an integrative force, identifying the interests of the individual with those of the community and establishing a link between the private and public worlds. They can also be destructive insofar as they enable man to invent infinitely various excuses which permit him to live while ignoring life itself. Rationally conceived categories and myths may render morality simpler and clearer by providing formulas of universal applicability, but in the process they destroy those essential motives for morality which must be found by the individual in life itself. This is the truth that Hightower could only know; it is also the truth which Byron, in fumbling and often farcically inadequate fashion, seeks to l