Light in August  
A Literary Analysis of Character Development

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Date: October 15, 2005 
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Course: ENG4U1
“Memory believes before knowing remembers. Believes longer than recollects, longer than knowing even wonders.” (William Faulkner, *Light in August*, 119) The experience of life provokes beliefs that each one strongly holds onto, even when it is forgotten why such beliefs still exists. These strongly held viewpoints are the basis of personalities, labeling them into categories of either innocent or cynical, sanguine or pessimistic, original or clichéd. When the characters in *Light in August* experience discrimination, violence, isolation and sorrow it is their attitude towards these obstacles in life that determines whether they overcome successfully or not. Joe Christmas and Lena Grove are the protagonists of the story that experience life in all its devastation, but their perspective on their situations is what determines the final fate. William Faulkner’s *Light in August* contrasts Joe Christmas’ pessimism to Lena Grove’s optimism through the impact of their childhoods, reactions towards love and attitudes towards their future.

Childhood plays a major role on how people interact with society and what their visions on life are. Joe Christmas’ memory of his childhood takes a serious toll on his adult life, disparaging him with deep resentment of himself and the people around him as well. His strict adopted father, Mr. McEachern, brutally abuses Joe repeatedly in an attempt to force religion onto him. “When the strap fell, he did not flinch, no quiver passed over his face. He was looking straight ahead, with a rapt, calm expression like a monk in a picture.” (Faulkner, 145) The emotional suppression that Joe faces can only be endured through his stubborn and headstrong attitude, which he learnt as young as the age of five. In his adult life, this buried anger explodes into violence with “…something of the exaltation of his adoptive father he sprang full and of his own accord into the stranger’s fists.” (Faulkner,
Joe takes on the abusive nature of his adoptive father, a childhood experience that silently bleeds into his adult life as well. Joe also struggles throughout his life with his identity of being a Negro. The constant discrimination he faces as a child from his grandfather and the children at the orphanage compels him to manipulate the idea of being ‘black’ into a form of an immoral advantage. Joe would use this discrimination to scare the prostitutes he slept with into thinking that they had just slept with a Negro. Fearing their reputation, they would flee as quickly as possible, before he could pay them. However, he doesn’t realize that within his heart, he struggles for acceptance until he sloped down into the Negro town of Freedman and “…he began to run, glaring, his teeth glaring, his inbreath cold on his dry teeth and lips, towards the next street lamp…” (Faulkner, 115) When he realizes what it means to be Negro, he is scared that this is the life he is truly entitled to: “…the black life, the black breathing…compounded the substance of breathe so that not only voices but moving bodies and light itself became… with the now ponderable night inseparable and one.” (Faulkner, 114) This manic reaction continues because Joe can never completely comprehend the reality of his ethnicity and therefore, is in constant conflict with himself. Lena Grove, however, is the complete opposite of Joe Christmas. Orphaned at twelve, she endures a life of great responsibility, as a guardian for her sister-in-law’s children and a house-keeper. When Lena becomes pregnant out of wedlock, she faces society’s wrath as an immoral outcast. However, she never complains about her situation and never asks for help, but accepts whenever it is offered as she sets out on a journey to find the father of her child. “…walking slowly, the shoes unlaced about her ankles, until she reached the top of the hill a mile beyond.” (Faulkner, 8) Regardless of her past and her current situation, she reveals great determination and optimism by striving to reach her goal.
“I reckon a family out to all be together when a chap comes. Specially the first one. I reckon the Lord will see to that.” (Faulkner, 21) She doesn’t let her past stand in the way of a better future and she identifies herself as a woman of courage by pursuing the distance of finding the father of her baby, pregnant and alone. Her faith, even when there is no light in her life, goes a mile in distinguishing the type of character she is. Joe Christmas’ pessimistic actions were the effect of his violent and confusing childhood which influenced his adult personality. Lena Grove, on the other hand, battling with her unfortunate situation and society’s judgmental opinions, she continues to persevere optimistically. She continues to do so even when love forsakes them both.

Joe Christmas and Lena Grove were both betrayed by their lovers which was also a major turning point in their lives. Joe Christmas’ first girlfriend, Bobbie, was the one thing in his life that can be considered remotely positive. A prostitute how was also much older than him, their relationship was constantly tainted with infidelity, however, Joe constantly finds himself protecting her as if she were his own. Joe found his emotional comfort in Bobbie, expressing his anger, happiness and thoughts to her and soon his entire teenage life revolved around the time he spent with her. However, events took a drastic turn when Joe murders his adopted father over a dispute about Bobbie. “Why, I committed murder for her. I even stole for her…. Then she too seemed to blow out of his life on the long wind like a third scrap of paper.” (Faulkner, 217) Somehow, even the small positive influence in his life had a negative finality to it, changing his view on women as models of suffering and sorrow. His future relationship with Ms. Burden shows that he never had an emotional connection with a woman again. However, Joe created his own sorrow because he knew that Bobbie would never be anything more than a prostitute to him, yet he made her a very
important part of his life. Lena’s dilemma also originates from the same circumstances as Joe’s. Betrayed by Joe Brown, who abandoned her and her unborn baby, Lena Grove travels all the way from Alabama to Mississippi in order to find him. She knows in her mind that it is useless to pursue on her journey because he will never be the father or husband she expects him to be, but she adamantly continues on her journey. The main difference between Joe and Lena is that when she finds a new love, Lucas Burch, she doesn’t reject him. “‘Aint nobody never said for you to quit…” (Faulkner, 506) were her words to Lucas Burch when he attempted to gain her love and approval for one last time. Even though Lena was betrayed the same way that Joe Christmas was, she never gave up on love. If Joe had taken on the same perspective as Lena, perhaps he would have been able to recover from his traumatic past. However, for Joe Christmas, he had already determined his fate when he resorted in murder to express his emotional conflict. Lena Grove and Joe Christmas’ attitudes towards the turning point of their emotional love life would determine their outlook on their future life and their fate as well.

When Joe Christmas and Lena Grove have their hearts broken by their lovers, their perspectives on life is what determines the rest of their future. The constant negative nature of Joe Christmas leads him down a path of destruction and chaos, sorrow and isolation. His past is constantly haunting him: the murder he committed, his hatred for love, his abusive childhood and present abusive nature, the conflict with his identity and the discrimination against him, all contribute to the final fate of his life. With the experience of murdering his adopted father, Joe doesn’t hesitate to murder Joanna Burden, his mistress, as well. “And so as he sat in the shadows of the ruined garden on that August night… he believed with calm paradox that he was the volitionless servant of the fatality in which he believed that he did
not believe…I had to do it, already in the past tense; I had to do it.” (Faulkner, 280) For the last time, the ‘August’ night, the ‘darkness’ dawns on him once again, to represent the murder he is about to commit and the ruined garden, his life. The ‘past tense’ symbolizes that he wants to escape his capture and get rid of all the heavy burden of guilt and remorse he carries. Joe struggled for one last time “…and defied the black blood for the last time, as he had been defying it for thirty years….and let them shoot him to death with the loaded and unfired pistol in his hand.” (Faulkner, 449) With a final thought, Joe continued with his troublesome past until his last breathe, ending his life with an indefinite conclusion to many of the questions that had no certain answers. His future was death. His fate was death. Joe Christmas was the only factor in his own death since he decided on his life’s path when he took the road of immorality. Lena Grove took the path of happiness and hope instead and regardless of the hardships in her life, Lena endured it all with optimism and perseverance. From a third person’s perspective, the state of Lena’s circumstances is clearly perceived: “…I think she had just made up her mind to travel a little further and see as much as she could…. Setting back there in that truck, with him and her now and the baby…” (Faulkner 506) Her future clearly is one of hopeful change for the better. She is no longer alone and even has her own family. She takes the opportunity to see the lands of America one last time, her adventure, before she settles down and takes on the responsibilities as a mother and wife. Lena Grove’s future is the ultimate opposition of Joe Christmas’ death. Their character and attitude towards life is what determined what their life’s verdict would be. Joe Christmas’ fate was death, but Lena Grove’s fate was life.

Light in August pulls its readers into the drama by exposing the true nature of Joe Christmas and Lena Grove and how each contradicts the other. The audience can relate to
each of the characters because they represent every aspect of human nature, the moral and the immoral side. Joe Christmas represents the dark side of human nature, with the worst possible crimes tainting his soul. Lena Grove’s optimistic personality, even when her life seems hopeless signifies that one can only survive if there is faith and hope. Even though they both had the same experiences, their view on life is determined by what their type of personality. By noticing the two different parallels that Faulkner creates with his characters, it is understood that fate is within one’s own hands. Joe Christmas’ fate concluded with death and his last moments were spent in conflict with his life and identity. However, Lena’s fate was life, still continuing on with her adventure, she gaining much more than she had lost. Even though Joe and Lena have the same experience with life, their attitudes are complete opposites. The final fate of Joe Christmas and Lena Grove prove that the only way to overcome life’s hardships is through persevering optimistically rather than negatively.
Bibliography