The Narrative Structure of *Light in August*

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*Light in August* is now regarded as one of Faulkner's major novels, and it is doubtful if any of the others combines so richly the easy natural comedy and the violent tragedy of which Faulkner at his best is a master. Consider the perfection of the brief dialogue early in the novel when Lena Grove confronts Byron Bunch at the lumber mill, expecting to find her pseudo-husband:

"You ain't him," she says behind her fading smile, with the grave astonishment of a child.

"No ma'am," Byron says. He pauses, half turning with the balanced staves. "I don't reckon I am. Who is it I ain't?" (Modern Library edition, pp. 43-44)

Or consider the terrible scene in Hightower's kitchen, when Joe Christmas, the escaped murderer, is cornered and castrated by that incipient storm-trooper, Percy Grimm:

When the others reached the kitchen they saw the table flung aside now and Grimm stooping over the body. When they approached to see what he was about, they saw that the man was not dead yet, and when they saw what Grimm was doing one of the men gave a choked cry and stumbled back into the wall and began to vomit. Then Grimm too sprang back, flinging behind him the bloody butcher knife. (pp. 406-407)

*Light in August* was first published in 1932, and it is interesting to speculate on how differently Faulkner's reputation might have developed if this novel had been quickly reprinted in the Modern Library—instead of *Sanctuary*, included in that series the same year, and thus for a long time the most easily accessible of Faulkner's novels. Not until 1950 was *Light in August* added to the Modern Library, and most of the serious discussion of the novel has appeared within the past ten years. Interpretation has frequently been concerned with symbolical implications. Thus Richard Chase wishes to persuade us that "linear discrete images," such as a picket fence, the identical windows in a streetcar, and rows of identical houses "stand for modernism, rationalism, applied science, capitalism, progressivism, emasculation, the atomized consciousness and its pathological extensions" (*KR*, X, Autumn 1948, 540). Meanwhile, too little attention has been given to the extraordinary structural problems which Faulkner solved in *Light in August*.

What, essentially, is the story of the novel? How does Faulkner tell it? And why did he tell it the way he did? If we look at the beginning and ending, usually positions of great emphasis, we might say that this is the story of Lena and Byron. They meet, Byron at first sight falls in love with Lena, he helps her, she refuses him, he arranges for her seducer Brown (or Burch) to see her again, and he vainly fights the escaping Brown. In the last chapter, which has the quality of an epilogue, Byron is doggedly faithful to Lena, and her eventual acceptance of him is implied. In essence, this is a simple small-town idyll, with a touch of comic irony. Lena never deceives Byron, for when they meet it is obvious that Lena is pregnant and deserted by her lover. Yet for Byron there is no meanness or cheapness in her. His help to her is a gift. He never shows any resentment at her reluctance to allow him to take the place of the vanished and worthless Brown. The comic tone of the last chapter is the contribution of the furniture dealer, the rank outsider ignorant of previous episodes, merely trying to make a good story for the amusement of his wife. It
is important that the Lena-Byron story is told in chronological sequence, just as it developed. This is the simple narrative thread that gives a recurrent sense of forward motion.

The word *recurrent* is deliberate, for during most of the novel (Chs. 3-19) we are chiefly occupied with the Joe Christmas story, which is told in violently non-chronological order. Clustered about the Joe Christmas story are the four stories or sub-stories of (1) Joe’s partner Brown (or Burch), of (2) Joanna Burden, the benefactress and mistress murdered by Joe Christmas, of (3) the Hineses, grandparents of Joe, and of (4) Hightower, the unemployed, discredited preacher. Three levels of time are used. There is the present, which begins with the report of Joanna Burden’s murder (Ch. 4). This present action is continued by the sheriff’s investigation of the crime, Christmas’s arrest, escape and death (Chs. 13-19). By time and coincidence the major action concerning Christmas is related to the Lena-Byron action, through Byron’s friend Hightower. The second time level is the immediate past in which Christmas committed the crime: part of Ch. 2 explains Brown’s (or Burch’s) association with Christmas; Ch. 5 tells the quarrel between Brown and Christmas on the night of the murder; Chs. 10, 11, and 12 tell the story of Christmas’s relationship with Joanna over a period of three years, including the murder and Christmas’s flight. The third level of time is the remote past, which gives distance and perspective to our knowledge of three characters. The early life of Hightower, the unfrocked preacher, is given in Chs. 3 and 20, the boyhood of Christmas in Chs. 6-9; and the story of Joanna Burden’s abolitionist family is interjected into Christmas’s early acquaintance with her in Ch. 11. Through the Hineses the circumstances of Christmas’s birth are brought out in Chs. 15-16.

Deprived of the vitalizing force of description and dialogue, such a structural synopsis seems more confusing than the novel itself, but the elements of the structure are at least underlined: the contrast of major and minor action; the intertwining of present, immediate past, and remote past. How are these elements combined and made to function? What advantages accrue from this structure to set over against the loss in clarity involved in departure from a straight chronological sequence?

An important consideration is the relation between the enveloping—though minor—Lena-Byron story and the central Joe Christmas story. It is a chronological accident that they come together at all, for Lena arrives in Jefferson on the very day that the murder is discovered. There is a startling contrast between the simplicity of the one action and the devious complexity of the other that is appropriate to the characters involved. Each story helps to make the other more acceptable. Since Faulkner shows that he can tell a story simply, it is reasonable to suppose that the complexity of the Joe Christmas story is deliberate and accountable. And since the author demonstrates a strong liking for complexity, it is natural to accept his simple episodes as genuinely simple, not artificially simplified. There is, too, the obvious contrast of love and hate. Joe Christmas is a loveless person. In youth he distrusts the kindness of Mrs. McEachern as he later does that of Joanna. He is not at home with whites or Negroes, with men or women. Lena and Byron, on the contrary, are lovers. They supply the circle of humanity which Christmas stands outside of. Both stories are, if you like, implausible, but their implausibility is minimized by their contrast.

The first link between the two actions is an incidental mention in Ch. 1 of the fire at the Burden place. The next link is in Ch. 4, when Brown’s confused story, retold to Hightower by Byron, and
from this we learn what the town first finds out about the murder. This leads backward in Ch. 5 to the day and evening Christmas spent preceding the murder, with his concluding thought: “Something is going to happen. Something is going to happen to me.” Now at this point we already know what is going to happen. We know that Joe is going to murder Joanna Burden. But we do not know why he will, and this is a spring of interest powerful enough to carry us through five chapters of Joe’s early life and one of Joanna’s before we come back to the night of the murder in Ch. 12. Ch. 13 then begins on the morning after the murder and the fire. With our own superior knowledge we watch the sheriff struggling to piece together the bits of evidence. The spring of interest now is in wondering how long it will take the Sheriff to catch up to the understanding of the crime which we as readers already possess. The flight and capture of Joe Christmas is next suggested in a series of scenes. Then in Ch. 15 the Hineses are catapulted into the action. The spring of interest now becomes surprise rather than suspense. We the readers, who felt we knew the whole story of Christmas now learn that his grandfather took him to the orphanage because of his supposed Negro blood, a “fact” Christmas later came to suspect. But the Hineses do not merely support the idea that Christmas has Negro blood. Their own conflict creates a new suspense about Christmas, now prisoner in the county jail. Hines tries to incite the lynching of his own grandson, and his wife tries to prevent him. Next there is the desperate proposal that Hightower give a false alibi for Christmas, Hightower’s refusal, Christmas’s unexpected and hopeless break away from the Sheriff, and his violent death in Hightower’s kitchen.

The slow shift from minor to major action, the strategic use of the reader’s responses, and the solid delineation of Joe Christmas are triumphs of narrative structure. Yet two important characters seem insufficiently developed: Joanna Burden and Hightower. The full focus of attention is turned on Joanna in only two chapters (11 and 12); elsewhere she is incidental. In these chapters Faulkner tells first of the seduction of Joanna, then the tangled earlier history of the spinster, the last of a New England abolitionist line, perversely settled in the South. After Colonel Sartoris killed her half-brother and grandfather, Joanna lived in isolation, using her income to support Negro schools. At forty-one, after Joe possesses her, she turns into a nymphomaniac, determined to possess him completely by adding religious sanction to their relationship. The climax of Ch. 12 is Joanna’s melodramatic attempt to compel Joe to pray with her at the point of a gun. It is this gesture which precipitates the murder, though the murder itself is implied rather than described at this point. Joanna’s behavior seems to me convenient to Faulkner’s purpose of accounting for Joe Christmas’s action, but not sufficiently developed to be acceptable in itself as a convincing portrayal of Joanna.

The objection to Hightower is of a different kind. Like Joanna, it is true, Hightower is a character isolated by a peculiar family history, and in fiction as in life, an isolated character is harder to judge than one in close and familiar association with other people. The episodes of his life fit into no ordinary pattern. If the fictional character is vivid we tend to accept him as at least an interesting possibility. Years before our story opens, the scandal regarding Hightower’s wife had lost him his church and had ostracized him from the community, yet he refused to leave it. Living on without purpose, he is nevertheless represented as developing an attitude of intense compassion. “Poor man, Poor mankind,” he says when he first hears the story of the murder. His assistance at the
birth of the Negro baby, and later at the birth of Lena's child, illustrates this idea. He listens with compassion to the strange story of the Hineses, even though he vigorously refuses to give the false alibi for Christmas. (Ironically, when Percy Grimm has cornered Christmas, Hightower vainly shouts the alibi he had earlier refused to give.) Like Joanna, the unfrocked preacher is convenient to Faulkner's action, but unlike her, Hightower sometimes seems the mouthpiece of the author. Before the Hineses come in, Hightower is represented as thinking:

Listening [to Protestant music], he seems to hear within it the apotheosis of his own history, his own land, his own enquired blood: that people from which he sprang and among whom he lives who can never take either pleasure or catastrophe or escape from either, without brawling over it. Pleasure, ecstasy, they cannot seem to bear: their escape from it is in violence, in drinking and fighting and praying; catastrophe too, the violence identical and apparently inescapable. And so why should not their religion drive them to crucifixion of themselves and one another? he thinks.

(p. 322)

In this and many other passages, the design of the author seems too palpable, to use Keats's adjective. Finally, in Ch. 20, there seems to be an attempt to magnify the importance of Hightower beyond his significance in the action. Before discussing this chapter further, however, I wish to set it in its context.

The peculiar structure adopted by Faulkner permits the maximum of variety in tone and texture in the last three chapters of the novel. At the very end of Ch. 18 the news of Joe Christmas's death comes to Byron Bunch in the flattest and least circumstantial tone of country gossip. "What excitement in town this evening?" says Byron, and the countryman, still disappointed that he himself had missed the excitement, replies: "I thought maybe you hadn't heard. About an hour ago. That nigger, Christmas. They killed him" (p. 387). Ch. 19, which follows immediately, is a typical Faulknerian time complication. Instead of taking us at once to the murder, Faulkner begins with various opinions on why Christmas had taken refuge in Hightower's house. This leads into the scene at the railroad station, where Lawyer Stevens is putting Christmas's grandparents on the train for Mottstown and promising to send the grandson's body to them for burial. As it happens, a friend of Stevens, a college professor, alights from this very train, and it is to the professor that Stevens gives four pages of his own theory that Mrs. Hines saw an irrational hope in the preacher and confided it to Christmas when she visited him in the jail, just before his escape. Stevens theorizes shrewdly:

And he believed her. I think that is what gave him not courage so much as the passive patience to endure and recognize and accept the one opportunity which he had to break in the middle of that crowded square, manacled, and run. But there was too much running with him, stride for stride with him. Not pursuers: but himself: years, acts, deeds omitted and committed, keeping pace with him, stride for stride, breath for breath, thud for thud of the heart, using a single heart. It was not alone all those thirty years which she [Mrs. Hines] did not know, but all those successions of thirty years before that which had put that stain either on his white blood or his black blood, whichever you will, and which killed him. But he must have run with believing for a while; anyway, with hope. But his blood would not be quiet, let him save it. (pp. 392-393)

This passage illustrates Faulkner's remarkable capacity to reveal the complexity just beneath the seeming simplicity of the surface. It is the revelation of complexity that generates a strange yet believable intensity. Concreteness and abstraction are cunningly blended. There is the picture of the manacled man making the sudden break in the crowded square, there is the sense of his running
in “stride,” “breath,” and “thud of the heart.” But running with him are “years, acts, deeds committed or omitted,” abstractions not bare for us, but richly prepared for in the previous accounts of the orphanage, the McEacherns, Barbara Allen, and Joanna Burden. The structure of the narrative has placed us inside these abstractions. We understand the difference between belief in freedom and mere hope of it.

At the end of Stevens’s account there is a break in the chapter and a shift in tone to a straightforward account of Percy Grimm, born too late for World War I, but now the young captain of the National Guard company. Percy seems the personification of civic responsibility, of law and order, forcing the sheriff to permit Legionnaires to act as special guards over the weekend. On Monday afternoon Percy instantly interprets the deputy’s shots as announcing Christmas’s escape. Then follow four pages of as sharply told pursuit as I know. Minutes later—seconds, perhaps—Percy follows Christmas into Hightower’s house. Hightower’s protest and false alibi enraged him, and the disciplined intelligence by which Percy pursued gives way to blood lust. Shooting through the overturned kitchen table behind which Christmas cowers, Percy mortally wounds him. Then seizing a butcher knife, he castrates the living man. For many writers this crude act of violence would be the ultimate effect. It seemed to rush out of his pale body like the rush of sparks from a rising rocket; upon that black blast the man seemed to rise soaring into their memories forever and ever. They are not to lose it, in whatever peaceful valleys, beside whatever placid and reassuring streams of old age, in the mirroring faces of whatever children they will contemplate old disasters and newer hopes. It will be there, musing, quiet, steadfast, not fading and not particularly threatening, but of itself alone serene, of itself alone triumphant. Again from the town, deadened a little by the walls, the scream of the siren mounted toward its unbelievable crescendo, passing out of the realm of hearing. (p. 407)

The seemingly disjointed organization of this chapter has justified itself. Every necessary explanation has been made earlier. When the shattering climax comes, the print on the page renders the concentrated experience.

Ch. 20, with its long account of Hightower’s early life, is structurally much less effective. Miss Hirshleifer, whose analysis of this novel (Perspective, II, Summer 1949) has been much praised, says that it “is not anticlimactic after Christmas’s death, but the vital philosophical counterpart of it” (p. 233). I agree that this was probably Faulkner’s intention, but I think the chapter fails for most readers to overcome this sense of anticlimax. First, as to the intention. Hightower though discredited and isolated, is the conscience that broods over the action of the novel. He is also the link between the Lena-Byron and the Joe Christmas action. Through his suffering, Hightower has learned compassion: “Poor man. Poor mankind,” he says, and when Christmas takes refuge in his house, Hightower instinctively shouts the false alibi he had earlier refused to give. As this action illustrates, Hightower’s compassion came too late in life to be effective. Even as a boy, he idealized not the earnest peace-loving father, but the swashbuckling grandfather. Hightower’s religion was thus corrupted.
from the beginning by his dreams of a past military glory, so corrupted that even his marriage was poisoned—though Hightower’s wife was certainly frustrated and neurotic before her marriage. It is the corruptness of Hightower’s religion, the pitiful lateness of his mature compassion, that represents the sickness in the spiritual life of Jefferson. Needing a religion of wisdom and compassion, the community gets all too often, even from a “good” minister like Hightower, a religion of dynamic hatred, intolerance, and frustration. And thus the brutalities of the Joe Christmas story can occur.

The foregoing statement is doubtless too simple. But I think that it gives the general direction of Ch. 20, and justifies Miss Hirshleifer’s insistence that it is not anticlimactic. Yet in my first reading of the novel I missed this meaning, or at any rate found it obscured by a great deal of elaboration that did not seem pertinent. The reason, I think, is that in trying to avoid the obvious ways of registering this idea, Faulkner has overreached the reader (this one, anyway) as, in a sense, Shakespeare never overreaches the reader or spectator. With the tremendous climax of Ch. 19, the reader is almost literally in a state of shock. As he turns the page to begin the next chapter, I think he expects to find out what happened next—at least what happens to Hightower, for he already knows that Lawyer Stevens put the Hineses on the train for Mottstown that evening, promising to send the body of Joe Christmas to them for burial. Ch. 20 begins:

Now the final copper light of afternoon fades; now the street beyond the low maples and the low signboard is prepared and empty, framed by the study window like a stage.

He can remember how when he was young, after he first came to Jefferson from the seminary, how that fading copper light would seem almost audible, like a dying yellow fall of trumpets dying into an interval of silence and waiting, out of which they would presently come. Already, even before the falling horns had ceased, it would seem to him that he could hear the beginning thunder not yet louder than a whisper, a rumor, in the air. (p. 408)

This leads into Hightower’s memories of his childhood, his father, his grandfather, his mother, and the old Negro slave. Now I can very well believe that being involved in an event like the killing of Joe Christmas would cause a man, particularly an isolated and introspective man like Hightower, to remember his early life, to reconstruct and search for a meaning in the whole pattern of his being. But for me the transition is too abrupt, the long chapter digresses too much from natural reminders of the immediate past. There are one or two references to Hightower’s bandaged head. That is all. There is no answer even to the obvious question: When Byron returned to town for Lena, did he go to see Hightower? It seems to me that Faulkner’s narrative judgment is less sound in Ch. 20 than in Ch. 19. Nevertheless, this may be a defect in the reader rather than in Faulkner. Once the intention of the Hightower chapter becomes clear, or when the chapter is read as an episode partially detached from its structural context (that is, as an account of Hightower’s youth) it is memorable. The little boy fingering the coat his father wore in the army is a fine detail, and so is the remark of the old slave: “No suh. . . . Not Marse Gail. Not him. Dey wouldn’t dare to kill a Hightower.” And I would not want to sacrifice the wonderful vision of the wheel merging the faces that represent Hightower’s experience in a swirling confusion that announces his death as he looks out the window. Whether Ch. 20 is satisfactory or not in the general strategy of the novel, it offers a remarkable contrast in tone and texture to the violence of Ch. 19.

The final chapter strikes still another note, the unexpected one of comedy. In
the Lena-Byron action, which must now be concluded in harmony with the opening of the novel, and with the characters of Lena and Byron, all the elements of a conventional ending are present. Now that Brown has run out on her a second time, there is really nothing for Lena to do but reward the patient and devoted Byron. Granted her easy acceptance of what life brings her—a lover, a baby, a ride in a wagon—we may doubt whether she would ever have shown any reluctance or delay in taking such an obviously good mate as Byron. But regardless of when she accepts him, the prospect is that the last chapter will be a conventional footnote, with an intimation of happy wedded bliss. Faulkner is not the man to be trapped into any such tame conclusion. Instead of winding up the Lena-Byron story himself, that is in his own voice, he invents a traveling furniture dealer, a rank outsider who knows nothing of the previous history of this strange pair—or trio, if you count the baby. The furniture dealer, telling the story to his wife, doesn’t really have to explain the story he tells, because he can’t be expected to understand it. He simply tells what he saw and what he heard, with a few shrewd guesses. Within these limits he is so good a storyteller that he entertains the reader as well as his wife. Lena’s persistence in the search for the worthless Brown, and her reluctance to take Byron may in fact be implausible. Seen through the furniture dealer’s eyes, they seem merely comical illustrations of the unfathomable perversity of women. The furniture dealer sets down Lena’s reluctance to her childlike interest in travel, and Lena’s final comment bears him out: “My, my. A body does get around. Here we aint been coming from Alabama but two months, and now it’s already Tennessee.”

In this paper I have not tried to show that the narrative structure of *Light in August* is perfect. Joanna Burden remains convenient rather than convincing, Hightower is too obtrusive, and the fusion of major and minor actions may be called ingenious rather than inspired. Yet when the difficulties of the structural problems are fairly confronted, the achievement overshadows such defects. In 1939 George M. O’Donnell called the novel “confused” and “malproportioned.” Richard Rovere (1950) and Irving Howe (1951) both found it loose in structure. These judgments do not take into account the difficulty of the problems Faulkner faced, and the resourcefulness of his solutions. If the structure of the novel is firmly grasped, we may find that the story itself is more interesting than paraphrases of its supposed symbolic meaning.

### The Narrative Structure of Faulkner’s *Light in August*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Ch.</th>
<th>Forward Action</th>
<th>Immediate Past</th>
<th>Remote Past</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sat.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Lena’s arrival in Jefferson. Burden fire sighted.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sat.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Brown’s association with Joe Christmas explained.</td>
<td>Byron identifies Brown as Burch (Lena’s seducer).</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sun.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Byron tells Hightower of Lena’s search for Brown (Burch), of the fire, of the murder of Joanna Burden.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fri.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Christmas quarrels with Brown, goes to town, returns: “Something is going to happen to me.”</td>
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</table>
6-7-8-9
Christmas at orphanage, adopted by McEacherns, meets waitress and tells her he is part Negro, beats up McEachern at dance, is himself beaten by waitress's friends.
10 Christmas, three years before the murder, enters Joanna Burden's kitchen.
11 Christmas seduces Joanna Burden.
12 Story of the Burden family, abolitionists settled in the South.
Fri. Christmas murders Joanna when she draws a pistol.
Fri. Christmas commandeers a car to further his escape.
Sat. 13 Sheriff investigates murder.
Tues. Byron tells Hightower he is moving Lena to Brown's cabin at Burden place.
Wed. Hightower learns that Christmas's trail has been found.
Wed. Hightower urges Byron to leave Lena.
Wed. 14 Deputy reports Lena staying at Brown's cabin.
Tues. Christmas disturbs Negro church.
Fri. after murder Christmas captured at Mottstown.
Fri. 15 Hineses learn of Christmas's capture.
Sun. 16 Through Byron, Mrs. Hines asks Hightower to give false alibi for her grandson, Christmas. Hightower refuses. Byron takes Hineses to Lena's cabin.
Mon. 17 Lena's baby born. Byron, previously refused by Lena, quits his job.
Mon. 18 Brown, taken by deputy to see Lena, escapes.
Mon. Brown, pursued by Byron, beats him up.
Mon. Byron learns Christmas has been killed.
Mon. 19 Lawyer Stevens puts Hineses on train, promising to send Christmas's body for burial.
Mon. Christmas escapes, is shot and castrated by Percy Grimm.
20 Hightower's early life—his Civil War father and grandfather, his invalid mother, his marriage to the minister's daughter.
Mon. 21 The traveling furniture dealer's story of Byron's dog-like faithfulness to Lena, and her eventual acceptance of him.

Light in August: The Two Actions Chronologically Arranged

The story of Lena and Byron is told in the following chapters: 1-2, meeting in Jefferson. 4, Byron's account of Lena, given to Hightower. 13, Byron moves Lena to Brown's cabin at the Burden place. 14, Deputy reports Lena living in Brown's cabin. 17, Lena's baby born. 18, Brown, confronting Lena, abandons her and later beats up Byron. 21, Byron accompanies Lena, and is eventually accepted by her.

The story of Joe Christmas is told in the following chapters: 15, birth of Joe Christmas (told by the Hineses, his grandparents). 6-7-8-9-10, Joe's early life (orphanage, adoption by the McEacherns, affair with the waitress, fifteen years of wandering, meeting with Joanna Burden). 5, Events leading up to Joe's murder of Joanna. 12, scene immediately before the murder. 1, first mention of the fire which broke out after the murder. 13, Sheriff's investigation of the murder. 4, Brown's story (as told to Hightower by Byron). 13-14, Christmas's trail to Mottstown. 15, Hines tried to incite, Mrs. Hines to prevent the lynching of Christmas. 16, Hightower refuses to give false alibi for Christmas. 19, Christmas killed when he escapes and takes refuge in Hightower's house. (According to Stevens, this was at the suggestion of Mrs. Hines.) Hightower does give the false alibi, but in vain.

The principal episodes from the remote past are as follows: 3, 17, 20, Hightower's early life. 11, Joanna Burden's family history and early life. 6-7-8-9-10, Joe Christmas's early life (listed above).