THE CALVINISTIC BURDEN OF
LIGHT IN AUGUST
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PURITANISM as a dominant theme of *Light in August* was first observed two decades ago. Although subsequent studies have noted that religion and repression are recurrent themes linking the stories of Hightower, Lena Grove, and Joe Christmas, they have failed to show specifically how these two motifs in the various narratives are interrelated. The textual explications which have appeared in recent years have been useful for their alignment of patterns of imagery, but only to a limited degree because of their inadequate orientation to the structure and design of the novel. Many "figures in the carpet" have been traced, but no one has solved the mystery of the novel's coherence. More than one critic has pronounced the work structurally imperfect.

Repeatedly, however, we discover that Faulkner’s seeming defects are failures of our own perception, which is not prepared for the new uses to which he applies his resources. *Light in August* presents three interwoven stories, as we readily enough observe, but what we have not seen is the basis of their inner coördination. They are, to begin with, three quite different types of narrative: a tragedy (Christmas' story); a problem novel (the ordeal of Hightower); and a comedy (the Lena Grove-Byron Bunch romance). Each is distinct and is elaborated with extraordinary textual richness on its own conceptual principle, yet all form a harmonious synthesis. The story of Christmas occupies the largest area of interest, but the remaining narratives are in no sense sub-plots. Each story has its own mood, tempo, plot, and theme. The vision of *Light in August*, as in *The Sound and the Fury* (where the structural units are blocks of consciousness, rather than narratives), resides in its total effect, and rests upon our comprehension and response to each unit as an entity, each unit in thematic rela-
tion to each other, and all the units seen as a series of outlooks or attitudes transcending each other progressively toward an artistic resolution. The effect, in brief, is contrapuntal. The writer who had achieved consummate control in the management of multi-level poetic narration in *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying* undertook a greater challenge in *Light in August*. Where in the earlier novels he had used a series of limited points of view, he now chose a triple narrative scheme, exploiting the new possibilities inherent in the use of independent narratives. The result is a greater range and depth of treatment at the same time that the reader's interest in plot action—which had been relatively subordinate in the earlier masterpieces—is constantly recharged. The success of his strategy in heightening the immediate appeals of the work without lessening its intellectual and emotional complexity is proved by the fact that *Light in August* is one of Faulkner's most popularly enjoyed novels, even while—from a critical point of view—it remains essentially obscure.

The Christmas story, or tragedy, is the subject of this study. For purposes of analysis, it is here isolated from the body of the text for consideration as a thematic and structural entity. Its relation to the remaining narratives may be schematically indicated as follows: the Christmas tragedy, a tale of personal and social violence, poses the problem which the remaining narratives must resolve. Its communicated sense of moral injustice and appalling endlessness are forthrightly confronted in the story of Hightower. Hightower's commitment to life—his involvement in Lena's delivery—halts the "wheel" of tragic recurrence. Lena's infant, as the symbolic representation of the future, enters a world which has been liberated by Hightower's ordeal and sacrifice. The final outlook of the novel represents the triumph of the comic over the tragic vision.

In approaching the Christmas narrative it is perhaps best to state at the outset that the story of Christmas is developed by Faulkner along two lines, and that the confusion of these two has been the chief stumbling block in critical interpreta-
tion. As the tragic hero—or, better, victim—Christmas is traced from birth to death. Formative influences are given in great detail, so that we understand the necessity of his violence. After his murder of Joanna Burden, his negation and outrage are shown mounting to a point where he hurls defiances to God from the pulpit of a church he has invaded, then subsiding to a recognition of all men as brothers (simultaneous with the wish for death, for he has ceased to want food), and finally to his voluntary surrender and ugly mutilation by Percy Grimm. As a psychological study, it is the best in literature of an alienated personality who is not articulate or intellectual. Our interest in him as an individual sustains our suspense as to his ultimate fate throughout the novel and tempts us, understandably enough, to assume that his personal experience, like that of Billy Budd—another fictional protagonist symbolized as a Christ figure—is the key to the meaning of the novel.

But many problems arise as a consequence. If the book is considered as primarily Christmas’ story, then the adult years—as some critics have protested—are slighted by the allocation of no more than a few pages for the events of Christmas’ life occurring between adolescence and the age of thirty-three. Equally problematic is the bearing of the Christ symbolism, which, if its purpose is merely to identify Christmas with Christ, is laid on with an extremely heavy hand. The Christ symbolism is strongly reinforced at the end of the novel, for example, in the scene of Christmas’ capture (the assembled multitude, the five wounds, Percy Grimm as Roman soldier, the age of Christmas), but the attempt to apply this terminal emphasis to Christmas as a person leads only to bafflement. Spiritually enervated, he is inadequate to represent the renewal implied in the myth, and the pathos of his plight, increased by association with the Crucifixion cannot be the final effect we are meant to ponder; it is refuted by the story of Lena, which concludes later. Actually, each of the narratives contains a Christ figure, and this is why the symbolism is excessive in emphasis and direction when seen in relation to Christmas
alone. The story of Christmas as an individual is compelling in the extreme, but it is not on this level that the narrative of Christmas is integrated with the remaining narratives in a meaningful composite.

Analyzing the Christmas narrative as an entity, what becomes evident is that the central motif is not Christmas' growth of consciousness or his encounter with "justice," but the conflict between Christmas and Joanna Burden. This conflict comes to its crashing climax (the murder) only a little past the middle of the novel as a whole, in the twelfth chapter (of twenty-one).

Miss Burden has received almost no critical attention as a significant symbol in the novel, probably because her personality and background, unlike those of Christmas, are conveyed tersely (in her sharply highlighted monologue on her family history) and with almost clinical objectivity (in Faulkner’s account of her erotic conduct with Christmas). The result is that she appears monstrous, whereas Joe, whose disturbed personality we understand because of the detail and skill lavished on his early years, seems poignantly human. Yet that Faulkner intends to equate Joanna and Joe as victims of analogous cultural neuroses is suggested in his designation of them as name-twins (Joe and Joanna) and in his care to supply each with a genealogy covering three generations. Joanna's past, coming as it does just at the point in the novel where we are tempted to skip pages to learn what in Joe's illicit relationship with Joanna incited him to kill her and flee, is easily overlooked as a thematic crux. But attention to it is essential if we are to discover why Joanna bears the obviously allegorical surname of Burden and why her forebears carry given names as rich in historical connotation as Calvin and Nathaniel.

An astonishing symmetry emerges when the biographical and psychological data contained in the accounts of Joanna and Joe are assembled. The forces which shaped Christmas are identical with those which shaped Joanna. Only on one issue—the status of the Negro—are the forebears of Christmas
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and Joanna opposed. The encounter and mutual destruction of Joe and Joanna, each the product of identical but conflicting impulses in the culture which produced them, represent, therefore, a profound irony of history. On the highest level of significance, Christmas and Joanna Burden are historical symbols, dramatic personifications of cultural forces. To understand the cunning with which Faulkner has personified in two neurotic personalities forces at work in the culture of the South, it is necessary to trace the psychological problems of Joe Christmas and Joanna Burden in the process of formation, to recognize the relevance of all that is specifically given us about their personal and social past.

Christmas’ problem of self-identity is created, first of all, by his grandfather, “Doc” Hines, who shapes Joe’s early years according to a fantastic vision. The general impression left upon the reader by Hines is that he is a raving lunatic; certainly, the sanity of a man who abducts his own grandson, both of whose parents he has in effect killed, and who watches over the infant with a hatred more doting than the intensest love, is at best dubious. He revels in the dietitian’s torment when she is found by little Joe in “lechery and fornication” with wild exultation. No less frenzied is his incitation of the mob, almost thirty years later, to “Kill the bastard.”

The motives underlying Hines’s conduct, tinged as they are with madness, are not easily discerned, but the importance of Hines’s mission in the life of Christmas requires that we sift the data concerning him with extreme care.

At the time of Christmas’ birth, Hines was in his forties. What his occupation had been in the years preceding is idly speculated upon by the citizens of Mottstown after he settles there. Of the various theories put forward, some derisively, that most generally held (and that which best accords with all that is elsewhere given about him) is that he had once been a minister. At this stage of his life he bears little resemblance to the frothing dotard who is to demand Christmas’ violent death. He is
. . . a hard man, in his prime, a man who should have been living
a hard and active life, and whom time, circumstance, something,
had betrayed, sweeping the hale body and thinking of a man of
fortyfive into a backwater suitable for a man of sixty or sixtyfive.

The people of Mottstown recognize that some intense pri-
vate conviction has taken him out of a realm in which he once
exercised authority:

. . . he talked a little about himself, with a self confidence not alone
of the independent man, but with a further quality, as though at
one time in his life he had been better than independent, and
that not long ago. . . . It was . . . the confidence of a man who has
had the controlling of lesser men and who had voluntarily and
for some reason which he believed that no other man would ques-
tion or comprehend, changed his life.

His religious affiliation is not disclosed, but we may infer
from his repeated allusions to God’s “foreordained Will,” “His
Purpose and His Vengeance,” that its leanings were Calvinis-
tic. It is also clear that assumptions about the inferiority of
the Negro in the eye of God figured in his faith. Historically,
such a combination fits well enough the branch of Presby-
terianism which, during the religious controversy preceding
the Civil War, evolved the theories of Divine sanction for slav-
er. This branch was no longer officially recognized in the
1890’s (when Hines would have been in his forties), yet it was
near enough to have caught up a man living in a cultural “slack
backwater.” The theological reasoning by which Hines
brought himself, during the years he lived in Mottstown, to
enter remote Negro churches and preach “humility before all
skins lighter than theirs” and “the superiority of the white
race . . .” had been forged by Southern churchmen some fifty
years earlier. The citizenry of Mottstown, who tolerated Hines
and his wife without much concern for their activities because
the couple was old and ineffectual, had only a vague notion of
their mission, believing them just “crazy on the subject of
Negroes,” or “Maybe . . . Yankees.” The couple subsisted al-
most wholly on food brought by Negroes in a confused return of gratitude for the white man's "selfdedication to the saving of Negro souls" on a demeaning Biblical argument. The Hineses persisted, Faulkner suggests, as cultural anachronisms "like two homeless and belated beasts from beyond the glacial period."

Adherence to a doctrine of white supremacy maintained on religious grounds is sufficient to account for the shattering of Hines's past when, by a fate he could not avert (though he tried desperately enough to procure an abortionist for his daughter), a presumed part-Negro child is born of his own blood. Such an event, impossible in his eyes as a true expression of God's will as set forth in the Bible, he can only construe as an extraordinary providence, representing God's will in reverse, divine "vengeance." Snatching the child up from its dead mother's body and seeing that it will live, Hines pronounces the significance of its birth in the eyes of the Lord and declares his own future role in relation to it: "It's the Lord God's abomination, and I am the instrument of His will." The "abomination" had, in Hines's construction of God's inscrutable purpose, no human spiritual identity. It was "dead to God." Hines's life henceforth is given over to waiting for the evil which is to come from evil.

Depositing the child on the doorstep of a white orphanage (thereby to enhance its opportunity to bring about evil), he finds his omen-seeking act rewarded when on Christmas Eve the dietitian and her physician lover, desecrating the sacred anniversary with eggnog and lovemaking, discover the "abomination" wrapped in its blanket and name it carelessly in honor of the day, or—as Hines sees it—"in sacrilege" of God's Son. He now takes a janitor's job at the orphanage, and from his station in the yard watches the "abomination" until the intensity of his gaze is felt by both the boy and his playmates, setting Christmas apart and evoking the pejorative, "nigger." Hines notes with assurance that God is actively "... polluting the earth with the working of that word on him," just as he
is convinced that the dietitian's dilemma, upon discovering that Joe may have been witness to her act of surreptitious car-

nality, is a further confirmation of evil by evil. He is as pro-

foundly obsessed by the sinfulness of sexuality in all its aspects

(he had pronounced the onset of his daughter's menses "the womansign of God's abomination"), as by the spiritual inferi-

ority of blacks to whites.

By the time young Christmas has completed his stay at the orphanage, Hines's hatred, the dietitian's deviousness, and the children's epithets have already crystallized for him into a puzz-

led awareness of his peculiar alienation. Of Hines he asks, when rejection by the other children has forced him to lonely reflection: "Is God a nigger too?" To which the bigot replies, with wild irrelevance: "He is the Lord God of wrathful hosts, His will be done. . . ." Looking next to the Negro working in the yard to establish some identification, Christmas asks: "How come you are a nigger?" To which the colored worker replies, resenting the term of address innocently employed: "Who told you I am a nigger, you white trash bastard? . . . You are worse than that. You don't know what you are . . . And more than that, you wont never know. . . . God ain't no nigger." The ef-

fect of these words upon the five-year-old orphan is shuddering to contemplate.

These exchanges soon faded from conscious recollection, but they did not fade from consciousness ("Memory believes be-

fore knowing remembers."). During his boyhood and adoles-

cence with the McEacherns, the question of Christmas' origins was never raised beyond McEachern's futile attempt to pry assurances from the stubbornly "liberal" matron. The course which Faulkner has sketched out as crucial in Christmas' psycho-

tological development continues, however, to be one in which religion is the most pervasive influence.

McEachern lacks Hines's belligerence of temperament; he is a self-mastered, predictable man. But he is equally a dog-

matist of the sect which places God on a "wrathful and retrib-

utive Throne," and conceives life on earth to be a penance of
toil for man’s original sins, the whole book of which he holds
Joe accountable for at one point: “sloth, ingratitude, irrever-
ence . . . blasphemy . . . lying . . . and lechery.” His sect is Pres-
byterian. What is more, he is Scotch, and Scotch Presbyterian-
ism in the South was known for its extreme literalism of Cal-
vinistic doctrine. An enormous Bible and an opened Presby-
terian catechism lie on the lamp-table in his parlor. He is a
faithful communicant; even though other churches are near-
by, he drives a whole hour to attend the Presbyterian church,
five miles away. He sets himself expiations, and in his prayers
at table he not only gives thanks for his food but asks forgive-
ness for the need to eat it. In the unforgettable scene in which
Joe faints from hunger because McEachern has not yielded on
the memorizing of the catechism, the inhuman coldness of the
man is what chiefly shocks us. We remember only on second
thought the object involved—the book of elemental instruc-
tions in the principles of his faith—which authorizes McEach-
ern’s persistence in his own mind.

At worst, McEachern is not perversely cruel; this is why the
boy comes to feel a certain security with his foster father. Mc-
Eachern’s actions always conform to his principles, but these
principles, as he understands and applies them, are merciless.
They make no provision for human frailty; they outlaw the
affections. The Calvinistic conception of an austere Providence
and of divinely delegated order in secular government—in this
case government of the family—sets forth for him his rôle as a
father, just as it had determined the rôle into which he had cast
himself as a husband. Mrs. McEachern’s subordination had
been long ago accomplished. “Timid,” “hunched,” with a
“beaten face,” she looked “fifteen years older than the rugged
and vigorous husband . . . as if she were the medium and . . .
the husband the control.” McEachern’s sovereignty over her is
moral, impersonal, and absolute: “Kneel down, Woman,” he
orders, when he discovers her attempted collaboration in Joe’s
lie about his suit, “Ask grace and pardon of God, not of me.”

His duties as a parent he accepts in the spirit of a steward-
ship emanating from God and entailing above all the responsi-
bility of moral-theological discipline. To the matron at the
orphanage he had declared of Joe: “... he will eat my bread
and observe my religion.” To Joe, on the ride home, he had
said: “You will find food and shelter and the care of Christian
people. For I will have you learn that the two abominations
are sloth and idle thinking, the two virtues are work and the
fear of God.”

McEachern replaces Joe’s “heathenish” name with his own,
takes him regularly to church, assigns him a round of chores,
and when Joe reaches adolescence gives him a calf for his first
private possession. Outwardly, this regimen has much to com-
mend it. Unfortunately, since every element of this program
derives in McEachern from a sense of duty which refuses to
communicate itself through affection, it is rejected by the boy
emotionally even while he submits physically, with impassive
demeanor. The name Christmas he restores at his first oppor-
tunity (while talking to the waitress during their first private
conversation); the church-going affects him so adversely that
association with any of the girls who attend he rules out of
the question a priori. (“To do so would be ... a retraction of
his religious hatred.”) He stealthily sells the calf, realizing, no
doubt—as McEachern tells him soon enough—that his status
as possessor is ambiguous, his title to the calf being meant as
just another lesson: “To teach you ... responsibility of the
owner to that which he owns under God’s suffrance.”

Sexual phobia was commonly enough an accompaniment of
Calvinistic rigor. McEachern possesses it no less than does
Hines. His clairvoyant knowledge of the place where Christ-
mas has taken Bobbie to dance is the seeming “intuition”
which is bred of repressed speculation; he has long been fight-
ing Christmas’ “temptations” vicariously. His enraged out-
burst in the dance hall (he had never met the girl; and the
dance itself was in the schoolhouse, attended mostly by simple
country boys): “Away Jezebel, away harlot!” is completely un-
warranted.
McEachern's ultra-puritanical attitude drives Christmas to express through sexual activity his impulses of defiance and escape, and his longing for some undefinable cessation of his tensions which he calls "peace." Northward and westward, through white communities and black, Christmas journeys on a road which never ends, telling the facts of his Negro origins to the white prostitutes with whom he consorts, trying to absorb their meaning from the black woman whom he takes for a while as wife. Acceptance is not what he seeks, in actuality; had it been, he would have found it, for he is not always turned away. Lacking self-acceptance, he cannot tolerate acceptance by others, even when it is tentatively offered. Over and over he enacts a pattern of defiance and flight, carrying with him his "Calvinistic burden," the heritage of those who have reared him, bearing the psychic weight of multiple rejections—rejection before God, rejection as Negro, rejection as human being. Rigid, solitary, cold, with a latent compulsion toward a joyless violence, he finds "peace" nowhere. At thirty-three, the momentum of his flight propels him into relationship with Joanna, into whose kitchen he breaks to steal food.

Joanna Burden is the granddaughter of Calvin Burden, an anti-slavery agitator from New England, who in the 1880's had been shot by Colonel Sartoris "over a question of Negro voting." She is the daughter of Nathaniel Burden, who had settled in Jefferson during the Reconstruction after having received a commission from the government to come South "to help with the freed Negroes." A spinster, now living alone on the outskirts of Jefferson, she is, like Hines and his wife, disregarded by the townsfolk, who dismiss her as a Yankee, "crazy on the subject of Negroes." She devotes herself primarily to the cause of Negro education. Her voluminous mail consists of correspondence with "... the presidents and faculties and trustees ... and ... young girl students and even alumnae, of a dozen Negro schools and colleges throughout the South." These schools she also visits, and—in complete disregard of what she knows to be the attitudes of Jefferson—receives alone
the Negroes who come to her house seeking educational advice. She gives her personal business affairs, "including her will, with instructions for the disposal of her body after death," into the hands of a Negro lawyer who is a trustee of one of the schools she assists. Negroes come through the woods to her house, bringing dishes of food in expression of their gratitude.

So single-minded a dedication to an inherently good cause deserves admiration; yet, in the terms of the novel Joanna’s mission brings about Christmas’ "crucifixion," as well as her own violent death. The meaning of this meliorative impulse must therefore be established unmistakeably. For its delineation Faulkner uses both the account which Joanna gives Christmas of her forebears and the psychological analysis of Joanna which is implicit in her conduct during the love affair.

The religious orientation of the Burden "mission," suggested in the given name of Joanna’s grandfather, is without question its most determining aspect. Calvin Burden, whose early years were spent in New Hampshire, professed Unitarianism, which we associate chiefly with New England and which is the direct historical descendant of Calvinism. Calvin Burden left New Hampshire in the 1820’s or 1830’s, at a time when New England Unitarianism was a modification of Calvinism only to the extent that it differed on the doctrine of the Trinity and that it placed greater emphasis upon practical Christianity, but its core (the Five Articles, including total depravity) remained essentially the same. Calvin’s own father, Nathaniel Burrington, the minister who named his son in honor of the great Protestant reformer, was, of course, a Calvinist. In his home, we may presume, he applied the principles of the older faith with unyielding strictness; young Calvin rebelled at the age of twelve by running away and becoming converted to Catholicism.

In California Calvin spent a year in a Catholic monastery; ten years later, dissatisfied with the stand of the Catholic

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1 Calvin, nearly illiterate, changed the family name from Burrington to Burden to simplify the spelling.
church on slavery (he was living in Missouri during the years of agitation over the repeal of the Missouri Compromise), he turned anti-Catholic, formally renouncing his allegiance. When his first son was born he felt the need to revive his original faith. There being no Unitarian meetinghouse in St. Louis, he created a private version of his inherited religion out of a Spanish Bible he had brought from the mission and from his memory of the sermons he had heard in his boyhood and in the West,

... producing services which interspersed the fine sonorous flowing of mysticism in a foreign tongue with harsh, extemporized dissertations composed half of the bleak and bloodless logic which he remembered from his father on interminable New England Sundays, and half of immediate hellfire and tangible brimstone of which any country Methodist circuit rider would have been proud.

This perversion of his native faith he inflicted upon his children in family services in the parlor on Sunday mornings, driving home mainly two ideas, one theological, in direct descent from the Calvinistic conception of a god of wrath, and the other social, reflecting the same furious righteousness: “I’ll learn you to hate two things... hell and slaveholders.”

Having killed a man in an argument over slavery in St. Louis, he moved westward to Kansas, where he lost an arm in the bloody civil strife in the 1850’s as a member of a troop of partisan guerrillas. He was much involved in the political aspects of the slavery issue as well, hating the Democrats, but the basis of his anti-slavery conviction was essentially religious. On the day of his son’s wedding, having had too much whiskey, he interrupted the ceremony with a speech:

He got off on Lincoln and slavery and dared any man there to deny that Lincoln and the Negro and Moses and the children of Israel were the same and that the Red Sea was just the blood that had to be spilled in order that the black race might cross into the Promised Land.

His son Nathaniel inherited Calvin Burden’s anti-Catholic
as well as anti-slavery prejudices, waiting twelve years to legalize his marriage to his Spanish common-law wife rather than allow a priest to perform the ceremony and make his twelve-year-old illegitimate son (also named Calvin) a “heathen.” After the war a Washington commission sent him and Calvin Burden to the South to work on behalf of the freed Negroes. An election day argument with an ex-slaveholder, Colonel Sartoris, resulted in the killing of both his father and his son. Whatever fanaticism may have been latent in the man (Joanna remembers very little about her father as a person) was brought out by this event, which left him bereft and embittered. He had thoughts of leaving the South, but the death of his wife deferred the move. He stayed on, and at fifty married again (this time a woman sent to him from New Hampshire), and sired Joanna. The broodings of grief and outrage took him often to the secret burial ground of his slain kin, whose deaths he construed as God’s will and the curse of Adam expressing themselves in the Southern race problem. This grim philosophy he expounded to Joanna, then four years old:

Your grandfather and brother are laying there, murdered not by one white man but by the curse which God put on a whole race before your grandfather or your brother or me or you were even thought of. A race doomed and cursed to be forever and ever a part of the white race’s doom and curse for its sins. Remember that. His doom and his curse. Forever and ever. Mine. Your mother’s. Yours, even though you are a child. The curse of every white child that ever was born or ever will be born. None can escape it. . . . Not even you. Least of all, you.

This extreme puritanism, which to the burden of original Biblical transgression added, for the white man, the burden of supporting the Biblical curse God had put on the sons of Ham, was Joanna Burden’s religious heritage. Born late in the lives of parents already set in ideas and outlook, she was unduly exposed to these concepts, unduly “shaped” psychologically. Forty years later she recalls for Christmas, in her touching attempt
to establish communication with him on terms meaningful to her, the impact made by the great descending weight of this compounded moral responsibility upon her childish soul:

... I seemed to see them [Negroes] for the first time not as a people, but as a thing, a shadow in which I lived, we lived, all white people, all other people. I thought of all the children coming forever and ever into the world, white, with the black shadow already falling upon them before they drew breath. And I seemed to see the black shadow in the shape of a cross. And I seemed to see the white babies were struggling, even before they drew breath, to escape from the shadow that was not only upon them but beneath them too, flung out like their arms were flung out, as if they were nailed to the cross. I saw all the babies that would ever be in the world, the ones not yet even born—a long line of them with their arms spread, on the black crosses.

This ghastly vision prefigures her own crucifixion on the black cross of her elected mission, for surely it cannot be doubted that Joanna, any less than Joe, is crucified. Her ugly slaying is no less replete with meaning than Christmas' twenty-year record of theft, assaults, and killings.

But to complete the tracing of a pattern: Joanna's own fanaticism in her mature life is rabid. Prayer is the issue which brings about her murder. In the mounting guilt and remorse of the last phase of her relations with Christmas, she begins to talk to Joe of "hell" and "expiation" and damnation "forever and ever," and to pray privately. Once Joe submits to staying with her during her ritual of penance, watching her "talk to God as if He were a man in the room with two other men," hearing her naming the obscenities which they had engaged in, for which she believed them both to be damned. After Joe's definite and unshakable refusal to become a Negro lawyer, she insists that he pray with her before proceeding to what is, for her, the only resolution of their torment, joint suicide. When he still remains adamant, she backs the request with a pistol. Her words, reflecting a will which has become absolute under
the delusion of having surrendered itself to the Almighty, might be McEachern's: "I don't ask it. It's not I who ask it. Kneel with me."

Two of the occasionally observable concomitants of the more judgmental Protestant sects are suppression of the "soft" emotions and the self-licensing to physical violence in the name of righteousness (often for the outlet of other emotions which have been suppressed). On Christmas' side, the quiescent urge to do something rash has its source and parallel in Hines's murder of Christmas' father, his furious fist-fights, and in McEachern's whippings and onslaught upon the waitress. On Joanna Burden's side the continuity of aggressiveness is even more militant and dangerous. The black pistol with which Joanna threatens Joe had been carried by her grandfather and had been used many times lethally: Joanna's father also had "killed a Mexican who claimed he stole his horse," not to mention the dead or wounded left behind in such enterprises as "helping some Rangers that were cleaning up some kind of mess where some folks had a deputy treed in a dance hall."

Defiance and revolt, as the consequence of a too judicial early training, is no less a pattern in the Burden family than in the life of Joe Christmas. In the former it is given in the bare outlines of family history, in the latter in psychological close-up. Calvin Burden ran away from home at twelve, his son Nathaniel at fourteen. When Nathaniel meets his father again for the first time some sixteen years later, bringing with him his bride, the old man stands ready with the strap to "learn" him not to run away. In Joanna, the affair with Christmas itself symbolizes psychological revenge. Experiencing a hysterical pregnancy in the later stages of the affair, Joanna muses on its value as defiance: "A full measure. Even to a bastard Negro child. I would like to see father's and Calvin's faces."

Sexual repression in modern literature has been associated with New England puritanism so frequently that the meaning of Joanna's sexual conduct with Christmas in the novel hardly requires comment; it is integrally related as a study of the ef-
fects of intense and prolonged repression. On the first occasion that Christmas possesses her, "the . . . untearful and unselfpitying and almost manlike yielding of that surrender" leaves him incredulous: "It was as if he struggled with another man for an object of no value to either." The thwarting of femininity in Joanna, shown also in her plain attire and her imperviousness to fear of living without protection against molestation, has been so complete that she is not aroused even when she gives herself. In Christmas' second attempt she has willed assent beforehand, but she manifests no feeling. Infuriated, Christmas possesses her brutally, with the result that she bars the door to him for over a half-year.

In the second phase, her frigidity manifests itself obversely as nymphomania. There has, of course, been no female surrender, and never is. During the months that Joanna had kept herself aloof, the tensions of long-accumulated desire and guilt, heightened by those of the climacteric, break in a fury of lust. Christmas now finds himself an actor in her drama of wild self-damnation, living "not in sin but in filth." The inventions of her polluted mind now so far exceed his primitive education in depravity that he is stunned. Grasping at its meaning beyond simple carnality, he is perhaps aware, Faulkner suggests, "of the abnegation in it . . .," aware that her "abject fury" is "the New England glacier exposed suddenly to the fire of the New England biblical hell." When remorse begins for Joanna, Christmas observes the wrestling of two personalities within one body with more aloofness, having already acquired detachment by being unfaithful to her on his trips to Memphis. He sees now with greater distinctness the "two sisters" grappling within one psyche: "the cold, contained woman of the first phase, impervious and impregnable . . ." and the one who "in furious denial of that impregnability strove to drown in that black abyss of its own creating that physical purity which had been preserved too long now even to be lost." The "cold, contained" self-directed Joanna of the writing desk and the cotton housedresses is truly the daughter of the widower who
at fifty had ordered from New Hampshire a "good New England woman," an "efficient housekeeper," to be sent him for wife and who had married the stranger on the day of her arrival. She is no less the descendant of her grandfather, that strong-willed Puritan, who had declared on the day of his marriage that he "reckoned he'd better settle down"—referring only to his religious wild oats—and who promptly did so, without further spiritual vacillation.

Joanna, at the height of her orgiastic frenzy, cries out in mad exultation "Negro! Negro!", crowning her triumph in evil by compounding miscegenation with lust. The added value which miscegenation has to her as symbolic evil and defiance suggests a descent from Doc Hines, rather than from a family of Abolitionists. In truth, however, the Burden mission is characterized throughout by a curious ambivalence on the subject of the Negro. Calvin Burden, who often risked—and ultimately lost—his life in the fight to achieve equal rights for Negroes as citizens, greeted with "bewildered outrage" the dark-skinned Spanish wife his son had brought from Mexico. She was the image of his own wife, Evangeline, except for her darker complexion. "Damn, lowbuilt black folks," he maundered, "low because of the weight of the wrath of God, black because of the sin of human bondage staining their blood and flesh. But we done freed them now, both black and white alike. They'll bleach out now. . . ."

Nathaniel, also receiving his mission from the Bible, explains more precisely the "Burden" interpretation of the white man's relation to the black man's curse: "The curse of the black race is God's curse. But the curse of the white race is the black man who will be forever God's chosen own because He once cursed him." Having lived in the South longer than his father, however, Nathaniel is less sure that the Negro will eventually "bleach out"; that is, achieve fundamental equality. Joanna must struggle to "raise the shadow"; but, he warns her, "You can never lift it to your level. I see that now, which I did not see until I came down here."
In Joanna, the sense of Joe's "difference" supplants all awareness of him as a person, reducing itself to three formulas governing three patterns of conduct, all different and contradictory: herself in relation to a Negro in the sexual act; herself in relation to him as the white mistress of a Southern household; and herself in relation to him as an agent for his regeneration. The erotic significance to her of his mixed blood has already been indicated. As a tenant of the deserted cabin (a cabin originally built to house the slaves attached to the plantation whose charred ruins lie in the meadow nearby) and as the frequentor of her house, he is a "nigger," in the social sense that this word is used in common Southern parlance. Although she sets food for him in the kitchen, she never stays while he eats or sits while talking to him (with one exception); she never invites him into the house proper or gives him leave to enter any room but the bedroom, with the result that he feels, as he must—with his own acute awareness of Southern propriety—a perpetual invader.

As the object of her mission he is nothing human at all; he is the Negro race seen "not as a people, but as a thing." The question that she puts to him when, her lust spent, she resumes her enterprise of racial benevolence with new frenzy ("Do you realize you are wasting your life?"), reverberates with irony backward over the whole narrative of Joe's life. The dramatic impact of these words, addressed to the being whom Faulkner has created for us as Joe Christmas, should be sufficient in itself to guarantee Faulkner's immortality; they belong inscribed over the desk of every compulsive do-gooder. Her subsequent projects for the reconstruction of his future all center with deadly accuracy upon the wound of Christmas' unresolved identity. Compared to this, the sheriff's strapping of the Negro who refuses to tell what he knows about Miss Burden's affairs when the manhunt for her slayer is on, is the gentlest humanity. The sheriff comprehends that the Negro's stubborn silence is self-protective uncoöperativeness which has become cultural habit; he acts swiftly and decisively to
protect him from an immediate danger of mob violence which
the latter has undercalculated. The contrast is intended; it is
one of the many minor implications of the Burden "mission."

Turning to the Christmas-Burden narrative as a whole to
survey its dominant themes, we observe that the most promi-
nent on the psychological level is the devastation wrought by
morally willed coldness. The fanaticism depicted is, of course,
extreme, so that the consequences in alienation and repression
are psychopathological, but the overdrawing sharpens the out-
lines of a pattern recognizable and recurrent in Western cul-
ture as perhaps the greatest single source of personal anguish.
Because a disturbed personality of necessity imposes its dis-
turbance upon the world, most often fatefuly through its own
progeny, no surcease of pain can be optimistically forecast. On
this level, the Christmas-Burden narrative is a psychological
horror story of unprecedented magnitude.

In its broader social application, the theme of alienation and
repression is seen in a variety of ways: in relation to criminal
violence in modern culture (the murder itself); to sectional
violence (the activities of the Hineses and the Burdens, the
Civil War, the continuation of the racial conflict in Southern
society); and to international violence (World War I, which
Percy Grimm was too young to take part in, so that he ex-
presses his drives in the capture of Christmas instead). The
vastness of Faulkner's conception here is suggested in the irony
that Christmas, martyred by the austerity of a faith rooted in
the Old Testament, becomes a symbol of the suffering endured
by Christ in the New. The Judeo-Christian religious tradition,
therefore, is seen as embodying in its very origins the will to
extreme self-suppression and the need to crucify. Christmas,
in his agony, revitalizes for us the symbolic meaning of Christ's
death. He does not, of course, share Christ's role as a moral
teacher. It is Faulkner as artist, creating Christmas as a person
stirring our hearts to pity and love, who transfers the essence
of the myth. The Christmas-Burden narrative arouses our ten-
der awareness of human existence as "perpetual crucifixion."
On the historical level, the Christmas-Burden narrative pursues a somewhat different line of inquiry. Faulkner is a Southerner whose acute moral consciousness has stimulated him to grapple more deeply with the problems of his historical past than any other American novelist, and his exploration is singularly searching and exact. The setting of the novel is the contemporary South (1925 or 1926), and the question which Joe's murder of Joanna poses is this: In what light is the violence of the modern South, especially on the Negro issue, to be viewed? The entire novel, naturally, has bearing upon this problem; insofar as the Christmas-Burden conflict alone is concerned, it is clear that Faulkner means to indicate that the extreme Calvinism and white supremacy of Hines are native to the South, but that equally rooted in contemporary Southern culture are influences stemming from New England Calvinism. These influences express themselves as impulses for Negro equality and education but are impaired by an excessive valuation of principle over awareness of the Negro as a human being. Joanna and Joe Christmas are symbols of abstract historical forces which meet and clash on Southern ground. In a certain sense, the representation of Joanna as Northern attributes the causes of Southern disturbance to outsiders—to the North—but the old sectional dispute is bypassed by the balancing of Hines and Joanna as perverted reformers; by the representation of Joanna as isolated from community (both North and South); by the greater share of guilt to be borne by the South through the enthusiasm (no longer religious) of the young white supremacist, Percy Grimm; and by the Southern people themselves, of whom Hightower observes:

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?²

² Faulkner's italics.
And yet, Hightower's equation of Southern religion with Southern violence is not quite Faulkner's. It is Hightower's own attempt to assume a guilt from which the awareness of history as tragedy must eventually free him. He makes this formulation early in his narrative; later he will progress to a better understanding of the Southern religious problem than this. Faulkner himself, as the artist in command, transcends the crisis of Hightower in the story of Lena and Byron. It is well to remember that neither Byron nor Lena, in whom the hope of the future is vested, is disassociated from religion. Byron used to "spend all day singing in country churches" and Lena's pilgrimage is governed by the faith that "the Lord will see to [it]" that a family will "all be together when a chap comes."

In the Christmas-Burden narrative, which poses the religious and cultural problem to be solved, only the older theological and racial attitudes which linger in the modern South are studied. These attitudes, in their earlier aggressive forms, are not general in the South (neither Doc Hines nor Joanna Burden, in thirty years, becomes part of the Southern communities in which they are tolerated), but their inevitable persistence is a spark igniting the tinder among the populace. As Robert Penn Warren, in the interviews comprising the recent volume, Segregation, has a young Southerner state, thereby unwittingly summing up the extent to which the South is a prisoner of its own history: "Race prejudice . . . ain't our hate; it's the hate hung on us by the old folks dead and gone." In Light in August Faulkner probes the relation of this hate to the entire history of Southern religion. The old Calvinism he condemns, but to the complexity of the Southern religious problem in the novel as a whole he does full justice. No contradiction exists between his recognition of the importance of religion in the South, as seen in Light in August, and his appeal to his countrymen in a recent article on segregation:

There are all the voices in fact, except one. That one voice which would adumbrate all into silence, being the superior of all since
it is the living articulation and sovereignty of God and the hope and aspiration of man. The Church, which is the strongest unified force in our Southern life since all Southerners are not white and are not democrats, but all Southerners are religious and serve the same God. . . . Where is that voice now?