

The Isolated Individual in William Faulkner's *Light in August*

Pănescu Irina-Carmen

University of Craiova

panescu_irina@yahoo.com

Abstract

William Faulkner pictured the American South in his fictional Yoknapatawpha County with such an artistic force that may be easily viewed as unique in the history of literature. The issues that he touched in art built him a straight, clear and certain way towards winning the 1949 Nobel Prize for Literature. Among the important aspects that the author considered in his works, it is relevant to mention those that refer to problems of race, gender and class, which also represent a concern nowadays, thus proving their truthfulness and permanence in time.

This paper intends to deal with one of the many interesting and debatable topics, namely, the theme of isolation in William Faulkner's *Light in August* and, subsequently, its implications at the literary level and beyond. As the alienated, disconnected and displaced individual does not remain an isolated incident in Faulkner's work, the choice of such a subject to enlarge upon is even more justifiable. Unquestionably, it can be linked to real life and its challenges in the 21st century.

Keywords: race, gender, individual, isolation, Faulkner

William Faulkner's writing depicts the American South, enlarging upon such issues as racial, class, gender conflicts, while most interestingly suggesting that the major problems ultimately spring from the individual's inner conflicts. To paraphrase the author's conviction in his Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech, it is certainly worth writing about *the human heart in conflict with itself* because, as one can imagine, it is within us where all the other troubles in the world start. Thus, although Faulkner clearly localizes himself in Southern America, it is not an error to call him a universal spirit since he did acknowledge people's suffering and pains worldwide, being able to picture situations of happiness or despair which do not remain limited to one particular area, but which could be applied to many different regions on Earth, as well as to various periods in history. Even nowadays, we can still admit the realities he once pictured in his works as being true: racism still exists, and there are still fights caused by differences among people. The twenty-first century has not yet answered satisfactorily to questions of tolerance or acceptance, it has not yet ceased the debates about the color of the skin, and it has not yet solved the problem of extreme poverty. Unfortunately, there is no definite answer for intolerance or starvation. As a consequence, Faulkner is as *real* today as he was a century ago. His Yoknapatawpha County comes as an additional proof that sometimes the imagination equals the present reality or it goes further, into anticipating a future reality. The men and the events in the book come to re-affirm an essential fact, that is, fiction makes the real appear *more real* than it actually is, or than it should be. Sadly but incontestably, an acclaimed writer can descend into the labyrinth of the human mind and extract from there all the evil that we recognize afterwards, in life, around us. On the other hand, he can also discover, within the human soul, all the beauty and innocence that we can see, again, in life. Faulkner did have the talent of drawing people into novels and not turning them into characters, but leaving them as

people, as though they were real, still moving on the stage of life. The following passage nicely captures the aforementioned ideas:

William Faulkner is the greatest writer the South has produced. In twenty-century American fiction, in capturing the rich variety and disorder of American life, no one else has come anywhere close to the depths of intensity and comprehensiveness of Faulkner's imagination. But if ever an American writer took on a subject filled to overflowing with war, violence, pain, cruelty, exclusion, servitude, impoverishment, racial pride, hatred and resentment of the rest of the country, defeat, deceit, and delusions of everlasting power over others, it was Faulkner. (Fowler, Abadie 3)

This essay will consider the individual in Faulkner's work, particularly in the novel *Light in August*. My dealing with such a topic comes as a result of understanding the fact that it is indeed a central issue in the author's art. Quite often his characters' search for identity directly or indirectly represents a theme in itself. Moreover, the individual – because of multiple reasons – remains isolated, alienated or fragmented, a thing which, contrary to expectations, finally makes him special, unique. Therefore, his isolation is not simply a condemnation, but it also functions as a form of self-condemnation. At this level, it is necessary to emphasize again the importance of the subject under discussion, and begin the analysis proper.

Perhaps the most controversial character of *Light in August* is Joe Christmas, primarily because racial identity cannot be exactly determined with him. Joe does not fit in any society, as he is neither black nor white. Ungratefully, he is caught in-between, adhering to no race and religion. Profoundly divided, the character is permanently tormented, and most dangerously, he cannot escape his own interior tensions, which make him a prisoner until the very end. All these facts lead to my giving primacy and supremacy to Joe Christmas, as the first isolated individual to be revealed. Joe's isolation begins with "... his social alienation in the orphanage in which he lives until he is five, and where he is introduced to the concept of being a *nigger*, the primary name by which the other children refer to him." (Bell 120) Evidently, his being partly black *empowers* the white people to use pejorative words when they address him, and naturally, he slowly retreats into his own world. From here on, it is clear that we should view the man in the novel as a social being, prone to divide his own kind into superior and inferior individuals, according to racial criteria and ignoring other aspects, undoubtedly more important than origins or physical appearances. Unconsciously, the marginalized individual, negatively labeled, gradually gets isolated. In Joe's case, it is also his own name that helps him to be perceived as *foreign*, and subsequently gives him the chance to pass unnoticed: "The strangeness of Christmas's name enables him a literal escape from the totalizing power of social abstraction, as he can be figured only as something *foreign* ... Christmas as a surname fails to register meaningfully within a system of representation in which 'a man's name is... just the sound for who he is'." (Bell 118) As will be shown, the names in this book bear great significance in that they encapsulate the characters' character, hinting at some of their main personality traits.

The concepts of *foreignness* or *otherness* are intimately linked to those of *isolation* and *non-identity*. *The other* represents a menacing presence, and on no account could he be welcomed into the same zone as those *being* the same. Thus, he is not granted identity, and the

governing principles will reject him as intruder. Joe's situation resembles the one presented; we can easily see "Joe's intrusion as a figure of otherness into a social texture of white, masculine homogeneity." (Bell 113) The feeling of *non-belonging* creates a sense of inferiority, and the character suffers not only from social alienation but also from inner hollowness. Yet, this is what happens with all the outcast characters: forced to live *outside* the community, they turn to the *inside* but only to find that there is nothing there, except for loneliness and emptiness. However, Joe Christmas best embodies the notion of endless nothingness, for he does not find an actual meaning in earthy life and he cannot find resignation in himself or in heavenly spheres, like the female characters, Lena Grove or Joanna Burden. Whereas the latter attempts a religious attitude to change something that she may have understood as bad or evil, Joe refuses the belief in anything divine, in holy salvation: "She ought not to have started praying over me. ... He began to curse her. He stood beneath the dark window, cursing her with slow and calculated obscenity." (Faulkner 86) With no other resources, with no man or god to offer him support, Joe's redemption never comes. His exclusion from society is further sustained by his self-excluding character, and his isolation painfully extends from inside out. Christmas's self-hatred makes him unbearable to himself, and, not surprisingly, he lives "a life of perpetual dislocation." (Bell 121) He chooses to be basically isolated, even though he has relations to other men, inevitably interacting with them. His isolation is a form of defense, as much as a form of individual incapacity to get attached to places or people: "Able to live anywhere, Christmas is also able to leave anywhere, attached to no home and no particular other." (Bell 121) His relation to Joanna Burden exemplifies his distorted nature in his necessity to be with the woman on the one hand, and his final act of getting rid of the woman on the other hand. His fears come to surface when he is faced with a situation of genuine interaction, his actions destroying and being self-destructive. He murders the woman, thus murdering the hope of being saved from himself: "The closer Joe gets to a female the more he experiences vulnerability and a deathly threat to his selfhood, yet the vulnerability is an expression of the yearning for the female- perhaps as mother ..." (Kartiganer, Abadie 190) Joe Christmas may have experienced relief in disposing of a woman who attempts at intruding into *his selfhood*, no matter how self-destructive and sick that selfhood appears to be. Thus, the character declares his self-crucifixion. It is not an *other* who imprisons him for life within his own damaged soul, but it is himself, his most perilous enemy.

The clash between *the self* and *the other* is also visible in the discrepancies between the high class and the low class people or between the educated and the uneducated individuals. While some enjoy a privileged status, others are doomed to dirtiness, both literally and metaphorically speaking. Thus, "Christmas's poverty occludes any material ascesis that would literally whitewash him, remove his dirt ..." (Bell 114) When a balanced relation self/other is impossible because of such social aspects, when a peaceful relation with oneself is itself affected by exterior pressures, then a sort of individual degradation comes to confirm that society is unhealthy and surely not prepared to accept or tolerate the innate differences among humans. This is a fact in life as it is in the Faulknerian literary discourse.

Apart from racial and class inadequacies, the issue of gender is very much connected with the idea of isolation. As Deborah Clarke notes, "Race and gender are closely intertwined in this novel..." (104). In general, woman is supposed to conform to tradition and stay within her role, which is, of course, limited to established patterns of behavior. As a result, she is reduced

to orders that say a woman should be feminine, virgin until marriage and finally, mother. Yet, Joanna Burden and Lena Grove – female characters in *Light in August* – evidently break the rules. Joe Christmas shows his misogyny, a situation which can further hint at how women are perceived, especially when they are non-conformist: “He had nothing in his nature of reticence or of chivalry toward women.” (Faulkner 213) In her not being subject to conventions, the woman comes to be a strange subject in community, often despised by society, whose preconceptions or misconceptions appear to have been completely ignored or done away with. In this case, Joanna Burden perfectly reflects the harsh consequences of being against the pre-established, natural course of things; she is the isolated female individual, to a great extent trapped into herself, like Joe.

As her name suggests, Joanna is burdened with problems that mostly spring from herself, defining her foreignness in relation to the community she lives in. Although the basic causes of the characters’ isolation are quite the same, there are still significant differences that refer primarily to the way in which they are viewed by the others or the way they *solve* their situations. Thus, while “Lena is heavy with child, Joanna is heavy with many different kinds of burden ... Joe Christmas, the most heavily burdened of all the characters because of his racial schizophrenia ...” (Rueckert 72). There are many references made to blood in the book – as a symbol of race – and the past, which sends to origins, descendants, is not forgotten. Clearly, these references contain all the force to reveal the roots of man’s subsequent disregard for man, as well as man’s choice to get isolated in many forms, on many levels. Joanna Burden is a relevant example in this sense:

She has lived in the house since she was born, yet she is still a stranger, a foreigner whose people moved in from the North during Reconstruction. A Yankee, a lover of Negroes, about whom in the town and out of it, there is still talk of queer relations with negroes, despite the fact that it is now sixty years since her grandfather and her brother were killed on the square by an ex-slave-owner over a question of negro votes in a state election. But it still lingers about her and about the place: something dark and outlandish ... even though she is but a woman and but the descendant of them whom the ancestors of the town had reason (or thought that they had) to hate and dread. But it is there: the descendants of both in their relationship to one another ghosts, with between them the phantom of the old spilled blood and the old horror and anger and fear. (Faulkner 39)

The extract highlights the rotten kind of system that the community sustains, one that gives no credit to the individual as such, but considers the man – a thing that must be re-affirmed – according to various criteria which he cannot possibly hold control of, which are independent of him. Moreover, it is not the man himself who counts but first what *it is said/ it is thought* about him. Consequently, there is no privacy, although there is isolation in town, and there is no seclusion although there is bitter loneliness. The following passage is also worth reflecting upon in this respect:

She is a Yankee. Her folks came down here in the Reconstruction, to stir up the niggers. Two of them got killed doing it. They say she is still mixed up with niggers. Visits them

when they are sick, like they was white ... Folks say she claims that niggers are the same as white folks. That's why folks don't never go out there. (Faulkner 44)

Joanna's relation to Joe Christmas best explains not only her own deep isolation but also that of other characters in Faulkner, when it comes to genuine human contact. The idea is a bit more enlarged upon in *Faulkner and Psychology*:

The prospect of the experiencing of intimacy on the part of Faulkner's characters often seems to signal a threat to autonomy, a sense of an impending attack upon and loss of self, such that human closeness is warded off. The emotional ambience of the world Faulkner creates is often one characterized by antagonism, rigidity, internal and interpersonal conflict, isolation, and anger suppressed if not overtly expressed. (Kartiganer, Abadie 189)

If marriage is a social institution which involves commitment to the other, romantic love seeks to break the social laws and get consumed passionately. However, in Joanna and Joe's case there is neither marriage nor romantic love; rather it can only be stated that: "there is the quite literally *awful* relationship of Joe Christmas and Joanna Burden, both an example and kind of grotesque parody of the romantic love ideal." (Fowler, Abadie 77) Otherwise said: "If there is an account of love in hell, hell in love, it is this one [that is, Joe and Joanna's]. Joanna is already isolated from the world around her due to her inheritance and her politics; and her relationship with Christmas only heightens her estrangement." (Fowler, Abadie 77) This sick relation, at most called doomed passion, is marked by the woman's nymphomania and the man's only physical interest in her: "Her virginity [Joanna's]- as she heads toward menopause- simply, and of itself, implodes, leaving nothing in its wake for Joe to violate. [...] 'Joanna Burden acts as both a body that cannot be raped and a body that is raped'. She is, in a word, (un) rape-able." (Daileader 179-180) The final term – (un) *rape-able* – can further point at the blockage there is between men, at the rupture there is in relations, in spite of all the palpable connections. The idea denotes the superficiality of relating with the other, of responding to any potential genuine feelings or emotions. The individual remains isolated even to a greater degree when he is, first and foremost, unaware of the fragmentation inside him or when the storm of protests persists in him but is unknown to him. The major isolated individuals in *Light in August* embody this premise, Joanna included: "She [Joanna] burns with various kinds of fanaticisms and lusts; often she just burns, and the object of her lust is sometimes sexual, sometimes racial (here, black), but always religious, and sometimes all three at once in the person of Joe Christmas" (Rueckert 76).

The woman appears noticeably alienated from community when compared to Lena Grove, who does not feel embarrassed to tell her experiences to the people she meets in a place she has just reached. Supposedly, she should have kept silent for she did not belong to that community and, moreover, she was far from being a representative of its views and laws. Lena had lost her virginity before marriage – a thing condemned by the social order – the father of the child deserted her, hence she was not married. In sharing her story to everybody, without shame, fear, or self-judgment, Lena seems to establish links to people and, apparently, she is not a loner, at least not in the sense that Joanna is. Nevertheless, as we trace her life,

convincing evidence of no profound connection between her (self) and the others gets contour. Yet, undoubtedly, Lena Grove makes her own way in town; the fact that she does look responsible for her actions and innocent or even naïve provides there an image of herself that cannot cause repulsion. But beyond this, she is going to be a mother, which is the very reason that gives her salvation; ultimately, she will fulfill her role, her duty, her obligation to be a mother. Joanna, although having being a virgin for such a long time, with no child outside marriage, remains the *barren woman*, which thing is worse than sinning like Lena: "Joanna Burden is the opposite of Lena Grove in the sense that she is the non-generative female." (Rueckert 72) In the long run, people reject Joanna and help Lena.

Joanna is a masculine woman in a world which, as it demonstrates by the way Lena Grove is sheltered and aided, values traditional feminine roles. However, her perceived masculinity does not extend to sexuality, for her ... sexual desires set her apart from the asexual, yet very pregnant, Lena. Maternity rather than sexuality seems to determine femininity. Thus she is damned on two fronts - for excessive sexuality and for lack of female identity. (Clarke 98)

While Lena appears natural to the community, the same thing cannot be said about Joanna: "Joanna, on the other hand, whose sexuality and racial beliefs alienate her from the community, appears as unnatural" (Clarke 99). However, Lena Grove remains outside the community in that she is able to take care of herself and, as opposed to other characters, she does not need to be accepted by the others as she accepts herself. We do not sense a feeling of self-denial with Lena; thus, her isolation is self-imposed, whereas the others' isolation is forced upon them. She does not feel impure due to blackness, like Joe, and does not feel sexually sinful, like Joanna, because she is always in a virginal state. At peace with herself, Lena's isolation basically resides in the absence of a husband or of a family whom she could return to. She is, just like Joe, an orphan; only that her loneliness is not doubled by other complicate feelings within. Generally a simple nature, Lena's problem mainly refers to her not being *settled down*: "Lena moves without progressing. Having taken two months to get from Alabama to Tennessee, she can hardly be said even to move in an orbit. Lena does not move: she rotates" (Daidealer 176).

In short, the woman is an isolated individual most importantly due to her literal loneliness, her separateness from the others, as well as her uniqueness in being different without disturbing the people's pre-conceptions. On the contrary, she brings change to the community, where men like Reverend Gail Hightower or Byron Bunch have lived under a curse of unchanging truths which have kept them isolated in some other ways than that of Joanna's for instance, but with a similar dark and sad experience of not being seriously united to anyone. Lena's child is hope for the future or *luck* for that place and those people whose damnation appeared to be eternal: "Poor barren woman. To have not lived only a week longer until luck returned to this place." (Faulkner 101)

Thus, Lena's presence in town essentially alters the lives there. Her relation to Byron Bunch is suggestive for an example: "Byron Bunch ... is one of Faulkner's vertical characters who, when we first encounter him is a peaceful, non-destructive, but isolated and ineffectual idealist" (Rueckert 77). Hightower is also positively influenced by this presence of love and

genuineness. Initially, Byron seems very strange to him because of his feelings for Lena; nevertheless, this is precisely the moment when he becomes aware of *something* he failed to realize before: "He [Hightower] sits motionless, watching Byron with a sort of quiet astonishment ... It is as though he were listening to the doings of people of a different race ... Yet Byron can see in the other's face something latent, about to wake, of which Hightower himself is unaware ..." (Faulkner 65). Therefore, Lena can awake feelings in men; she can determine them to return to life after having been locked within, lifeless. This is Hightower's case as well: "Lost in the past (like so many of Faulkner's characters) and so dead to the present ..." (Rueckert 73). Consequently, there is hopefulness in restoring a primordial innocence, in regaining identity or in re-opening the so-long closed souls to the world; in a few words, in being no longer *isolated*. A *he-individual* or a *she-individual*, black or white, we cannot deny ourselves the peace of *togetherness*, as a victory won against the harshness of *isolation*.

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