

# The in-between role of Gail Hightower in William Faulkner's *Light in August*

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UFR ETUDES ANGLOPHONES

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Mémoire de master 1 - 18 crédits – Mention Bien

Spécialité ou Parcours : Littérature Américaine

Sous la direction de **CLAIRE MANIEZ**

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**To my family.**

*“In my end is my beginning”.*

**T. S. Eliot, Four Quartets**

**I would like to thank Mme Claire Maniez for her orientation and, especially, her patience in guiding me in the process of writing this thesis.**

## Introduction

Among his novels, *Light in August* appears to be the one in which William Faulkner most successfully knitted complex issues such as racism, sexism, fanatical religion, obsession with the past, alienation from community, and solitude. Alongside with these various themes, this book, published in 1932 during what critics call Faulkner's major creative period, presents an unconventional structure with different lines of action, making "the text's multiple elements to work dialectically" (Kreiswirth, 57). As a matter of fact, the three major plots in *Light in August* (those of Joe Christmas, Lena Grove and Gail Hightower) seem to parallel each other at the same time they are mutually opposed.

This thematic and structural richness has led some critics to consider the novel Faulkner's best work (Bloom, 6), as well as "the strangest, the most difficult of [his] novels" (Kartiganer, 1982: 91), perhaps being "accessible to understanding", yet "resistant to *comprehension*" (Pitavy, ix). Without getting into the debate over *Light in August*'s place among the author's other masterpieces, the important point to be noticed is that this novel provides both readers and critics with such various interpretations that Eco's idea of an "*oeuvre ouverte*" is promptly brought to mind. Open as it might be, this book still troubles its readers who seek in it a "dorsal spine", a stabilizing and unifying plot, which could guide them through the apparent incongruous chronology, its merging voices of narrator and characters, its allegories, and, especially, its ambiguities.

The characters in the novel play essentially ambiguous roles, making difficult to define how they integrate with the rest of the narrative. Joe Christmas, for example, has already been assumed as a Christ-like figure, unable to be integrated to the community by being not only a stranger, but also a person who does not really know who he is. Lena Grove, though depicted sometimes with a comic tone, seems to represent the depositary of fertility in intrinsic connection with earth and nature, escaping then from the immobilizing and barren events by giving birth to the child who will ultimately bring life back to Jefferson. But it is Gail Hightower that has intrigued many critics for his role as the moral voice and consciousness of *Light in August*, either for being incapable of performing such a role as a character, either because Faulkner failed in his characterization.

Once a minister, Hightower was ostracized from the community after his wife, driven to an affair by his inability in being a "natural husband" (LA, 71), committed suicide. Enclosed in what became his sanctuary and "in what the town calls his disgrace"

(LA, 48), he is the passive observer who refuses to take part in life. And as the events which follow Lena's arrival unfold, he is slowly and unwillingly brought back into the course of action. It is another ambiguous character, Byron Bunch, who assumes the role of narrator and disrupts the death-like life of the defrocked minister.

It is precisely with this return to the course of action that this study is concerned. Thematically, Hightower enabled Faulkner to deepen his conception of engagement toward others and toward the past, even when this same engagement is paradoxically linked to death. The obsession which imprisoned the minister ever since he was eight years old is, at a larger scale, the obsession of the whole American South – a romantic tale of chivalry sustained after the Union's victory. Haunted by the ghost of his grandfather, tragically dead in a henhouse, yet still the incarnation of heroism and "eternal youth" (LA, 483), Hightower surrenders to reveries of galloping horses and thundering hooves at the metaphorical cost of his own life and of literally of his wife's. But more poignant is perhaps how Faulkner permits his character to regain awareness of the living world. It is through narration, through the story told by Byron Bunch, that the minister is taken out of his retreat. Gail Hightower becomes, then, narratee of the story he himself refuses to take part in. He is brought into it, *mis en scène*, and, as it will be demonstrated, so does the reader.

The first part of the present study intends to investigate the importance of Hightower in the economy of the novel, his participation in the unfolding of the events and the reason Faulkner might have depicted him in such vague terms. As will be shown, the role of an observer and reflexive character had already been previously sketched by Faulkner. That he should be a minister is also going to be discussed, as well as all the major criticisms made about the characterization of Hightower.

In his characterization process, there is still a major point usually overlooked by some critics: that the role of this character could also serve as a major narrative tool, indispensable in fulfilling Faulkner's attempt toward a polyphonic plot. The character is essential in serving the narrative with a narratee capable of guiding the reader, and of reflecting about the story which has been told to him. Hightower finds himself in the same "horizon of expectations" as the story unfolds as the reader himself. He is therefore not only a moral consciousness extracting meaning from the events he avoided but was nevertheless drawn into – he is also, and especially, a mediator, a narrator's tool to engage the reader and, as in a sort of *mise en abyme*, the character himself.



Cast by Faulkner, outcast by the community. The second part of this work deals more with Gail Hightower in the fictional world of Yoknapatawpha County, his obsessions as a person, his retreat from and revival back to life. In “A serene vase”, there will be presented the major themes linked to his withdrawal as well as the various structural and stylistic parallels with other characters also considered pariahs. In “A cracked urn”, the focus will be directed especially to the final scene where the minister reflects upon his life. This moment of the “final copper light of afternoon” (LA, 466) will be regarded as an apotheosis for the old man who, exiled from human intercourse, finally accepts the truth of a barren isolation. This final scene will also permit this study to reach its final part, that of a yet not fully observed role of Gail Hightower.

In this last part it will be presented how the character functions as an in-between persona, acting in the plot allotted him, as well as a metaphor of the narrative itself. Focusing especially on chapter twenty-one, and paying close attention to several passages from the book, it is aimed to demonstrate how Hightower enables the narrator to make a reflection not only about universal themes, but also about the same characters that inhabit *Light in August*, and ultimately, about the reader who, like Gail Hightower, hides behind books and can see the life in Jefferson as an observer. Being in-between plots (that of Lena and Joe), people (Lena and Byron, Joe and Percy Grimm), and life and death (the birth of Lena’s baby and the killing of Joe), this ambiguous character would also act as an intermediate instance, both retreat and denial, action and awareness. His “ultimate dammed flood” (LA, 492) released by the “wheel of thinking” (LA, 490), acts as a recycling metaphor for all the events the book presented to its readers. His last and circular vision “*convoque les personnages du roman pour une parade finale, mais les fait défiler cette fois-ci sur la même ‘roue’*” (Bleikasten, 1983: 358). Cast and then outcast, Gail Hightower accepts his past, his passive yet still guilty role in his wife’s suicide, and is finally ready to act.

## Part I - Characterizing

*“Perhaps I accepted more that I could perform.  
But is that a crime? Shall I be punished for that? Shall I be  
held responsible for that which was beyond my power?”  
Light in August, 489.*

The role of Gail Hightower in Faulkner’s *Light in August* is an ambiguous one. A reflective figure, usually sitting immobile by the window, this character has aroused the attention of critics who either considered him a failure (Howe, 1962; Kazin, 1976), a not fully realized character (Pitavy, 1973; Millgate, 1971), or even, on the contrary, an impressive achievement of Faulkner (Bloom, 1988; Collins, 1982; Hirshleifer, 1982). These discussions are centered on the importance allotted to Hightower in the economy of the novel, whose themes and plots seem to be scrutinized through his observations. His study room is the place where the narrative of the story imbricates, where all the plots seem to converge in order to update the reader. By the window, waiting for the visions of men and horses led by his dead grandfather, he also muses on the condition of pariah, of outcast. So comfortable is he that his life, converted into reveries unleashed at dusk, “in the lambent suspension of August” (LA, 491), is described in paradoxical terms of death.

It is this man, a defrocked minister and the target of numberless rumors in the community of Jefferson, that Faulkner seems to have elected as the diegetic consciousness of *Light in August*. As a matter of fact, Hightower is comprises the major recurrent themes of the novel, that is to say religion, sexism and sexuality, racism, and, above all, the intricate relationship between man and community. Furthermore, he is capable of anticipating the events which will follow Joanna Burden’s murder, since he himself suffered from the violence perpetuated in Jefferson by the dichotomization of man and woman, black and white, good and evil.

What I intend to show in this first part is the importance of Gail Hightower as a character in relation to the structure of the novel. We shall investigate the Southern context in terms of Civil War and religion, whose moral and ethics are essential in the understanding of the character. Additionally, we will discuss the process of characterization, highlighting that what could be considered a flaw, could actually be the

crux of the character's role. Finally, I intend to demonstrate how Hightower's presence functions as a mediation tool between the plots, and a universalizing channel for Faulkner's conceptions of community and religion.

## **In terms of representation**

As some critics have noticed (Millgate, 1971; Pitavy, 1973), Gail Hightower, or at least his obsession and position as an immobile observer, seems to have been in Faulkner's mind even before *Light in August*. Millgate notices that Hightower "is clearly a character with special significance for Faulkner, a type who had long haunted his imagination" (130). A prototype of the minister could be found in two unpublished short-stories, "Rose of Lebanon" and "The Big Shot" (130-131), both with the same character, Gavin Blount. In the former, Faulkner depicts a doctor fascinated with the Civil War and whose name, like Hightower's, was inherited from a dead grandfather. In the latter, Blount appears as a representation of "the old sense of honor dead everywhere else in America except in the south and kept alive here by a few old ladies who acquiesced in '65 but never surrendered" (Millgate, 1971: 131).

It is also important noticing that the scene introducing Hightower was first designed to open *Light in August* (Pitavy, 1973: 9). Further arrangements, however, made the novel appear as it is presently published, with Hightower being introduced in chapter three (although previously and superficially mentioned in chapter two), and having his childhood told in chapter twenty. All these indications support the thesis of how such a type of character was important in the conception and making of the novel. It would seem that the ex-minister represented for Faulkner more than just a religious outcast, whose disgraced life could reveal concealed aspects of the community in Jefferson. Through Hightower, the author also found a channel for discussing the complete retreat into aestheticism. As Bleikasten observes, the romanticized reverie serving as refuge is "*platonicienne [...] et assurément keatsienne [...]. Mais de l'idéalisme keatsien Hightower nous offre une version singulièrement appauvrie, presque caricaturale, sa réduction à l'esthétisme le plus exangue et le plus stérile [...]*". And the French critic completes by observing that "[e]n tant que personnage, Hightower se place ainsi à la croisée de deux grandes tentations de la jeunesse de Faulkner: l'héroïque et l'esthétique" (1983: 313).

But it is precisely this élan in preserving himself from the dangers of life that institutes Hightower as the most suited character for the reflecting of events. He is an outcast (a position which shall be discussed in the next chapter), and by exiling himself he acquires the necessary distance to perceive what the community really is. Nevertheless, he was also part of the social life, the man “who was at one time both master and servant of [the community’s] believing” (LA, 75). His attributes are not only those of a distant spectator, but also of someone who suffered from the violence destined to the misfit. Put in other words, the role he now willingly calls upon himself – that of an exiled person –, is an outcome of the role he once was unable to fulfill – that of a reliable minister. As he will later acknowledge: “[t]hey did their part; they played by the rules’, he thinks. ‘I was the one who failed, who infringed. Perhaps that is the greatest social sin of all; ay, perhaps moral sin’” (LA, 486-487).

This “sin” is to have negated his function as a moral and religious leader. In the context of the American South, especially after the Confederacy’s defeat, preachers were a necessity (Wilson, 31). They served their communities with moral and religious patterns, perpetuating, then, the Protestant ethics so deeply rooted in the South. Moreover, they played the role of mediators, even justifiers, in relation to the defeat in the Civil War and its subsequent “sense of guilt”, as Kazin puts it. The American critic adds that the question was “why the devout and God-fearing Confederacy could have gone down [...]” (Kazin, 7). It seems obvious that this guilt would be materialized in the works of Faulkner, especially in *Light in August*. As he once said, this religious culture is “[...] just there. It has nothing to do with how much of it I might believe or disbelieve – it’s just there” (Wilson, 27-28).

Gail Hightower is also “just there”. Or, after being ostracized, he was left ‘over there’, in a “[...] house unpainted, small, obscure, poorly lighted, mansmelling, manstale” (LA, 48). Yet he is a pillar of the community, and a necessary one. He acts, as a matter of fact, as a reminder to the people of what it is like to be a misfit, to engender doubts and suspicious where certainty seems to be a moral standard. “[U]sing religion as if it were a dream” (LA, 61), the institutionalized church could not have him anymore. Once a minister, he saw himself forced to resign from the Presbyterian Church in Jefferson – the city where his grandfather was killed and where he always wanted to be appointed. His sermons, his obsession with the Civil War, “[...] went faster than the words in the Book; a sort of cyclone that did not even need to touch the actual earth” (LA, 62). On top of that, he

would later have on him the stigma of a cuckold who did nothing to prevent his wife's death.

This universe of absolute, fatal, and self-righteous (Wilson, 22) life seems to be molded by what Faulkner called "the spirit Protestant eternal" (29). This is, in other terms, the perpetual shared belief in the supremacy of whites, of men, and a ferocious suspicion toward pleasure and sex. Those are puritanical terms, even more than a code of conduct heralded by a specific denomination. It is a "civil religion" (33), institutionalized and whose principles were usually criticized in the work of Faulkner through characters who were either obsessed or simply crazy (consider, for example, Doc Hines and McEachern in *Light in August*). On the other hand, the author gives more of his trust to characters embracing a "folk religion" and its "simple piety" (39). Examples of such figures vary from Byron Bunch in *Light in August* to the black servant Dilsey in *The Sound and the Fury*.

But not only do these ethics imply self-negation and a romanticized view of the past. They also have a fundamental role in the American economic system, as well as in other Protestant countries. André Bleikasten is right when he identifies in Southern Puritanism a way of focusing on work, building up a more productive society even if self-deprivation is implied (92). The image of Joe Christmas working for his foster father shows precisely how the Protestant austerity is directly linked with a work-oriented mind<sup>1</sup>. And the greatest sin of all is to merge pleasure with waste of money (93). Fundamentally, this world is one of extremes, impervious to any sort of mixture or ambiguity. It is depicted in the chiaroscuro (LA, 310) seen throughout the novel, with morality and righteousness defined in terms of light and dark, shadow and clarity.

From this milieu emerges the character of Hightower, and Faulkner did no more than observe his own environment to see the need of a minister in *Light in August*. The fact that he is defrocked only accentuates his role of participant and outcast, member and sectarian concomitantly. It is an in-between role, a figure capable of rendering one of the most important aspects of the American South – the puritanical ethics, which, nevertheless, seem to increase violence instead of mitigating it. He represents this constant return to the past in whose romanticized glory the inhabitants of the South still seem to dwell. Hightower is, according to Collins, "The Enchanted Soul of the South", as though his

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<sup>1</sup> Another example of this Protestant asceticism is found on page 159: "The boy's body might have been wood or stone; a post or a tower upon which the sentient part of him mused like a hermit, contemplative and remote with ecstasy and selfcrucifixion".

dreams reverberated the entire paranoia of “the impotent force of tradition” (63). As Byron Bunch wittingly observes,

[A] fellow is more afraid of the trouble he might have than he ever is of the trouble he’s already got. [...]Yes. A man will talk about how he’d like to escape from living folks. But it’s the dead folks that do him damage. It’s the dead ones that lay quiet in one place and dont try to hold him, that he cant escape from (LA, 75).

This weight of supporting the tradition of the South, of the dead, appears to be too much for Hightower. He is unable to cope with his situation as a minister, as a husband, and as a man<sup>2</sup>. And, in order to compose this character and put him on stage, Faulkner depicts him as an isolated type whose only contact with the external world is the prosaic Byron Bunch. Not even when the ex-minister sits by his window does he seem to observe what is going on outside: “[...] he does not actually see the trees beneath and through which he watches the street, waiting for nightfall, the moment of night” (LA, 60). He is totally immersed in his reverie, in his eagerness to relive, dusk after dusk, the moment in which galloping horses pass by his window toward battle. The question that inevitably arises is how such a character would be able to be the reflective voice in the novel, and how could he not be considered just another grotesque figure of the South.

In terms of characterization, Hightower remains one of Faulkner most controversial types. Twice in the novel he is regarded in the position of an “eastern idol” (LA, 90 and 315), sitting immobile and seeming to be decomposing as death takes control of him:

His skin is the color of flour sacking and his upper body in shape is like a loosely filled sack falling from his gaunt shoulders of its own weight, upon his lap (LA, 78-79).

And when Hightower approaches, the smell of plump unwashed flesh and unfresh clothing – that odor of unfastidious sedentation, of static overflesh not often enough bathed – is well nigh overpowering (LA, 299).

He has been to town to do his semiweekly marketing, where, gaunt, misshapen, with his gray stubble and his dark spectacleblurred eyes and his blackrimmed hands and the rank manodor of his sedentary and unwashed flesh [...] (LA, 308).

These examples show how Hightower is portrayed by Faulkner, as an unappealing sort of man who reeks of reclusion and death. His flesh seems to be decomposing and the

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<sup>2</sup> Hightower’s inabilities in being a natural husband will be studied in part two.

smell he emanates is that of the tomb. The ex-minister presents characteristics of an oxymoron, having an aspect “gaunt” and “flabby”, recluse behind “spectacleblurred eyes” which do not allow him to see life going on all around. He constantly pinpoints his absence in life, his immunity bought after he left the church, his unwillingness to meddle. Furthermore, he has a different style, more elaborate, a vestige of reading and theological education. Hightower, for example, is the only character in the novel to use the modal “shall”, to correctly address others in terms of grammar, and to rely on a vaster vocabulary. Consider, for example, Byron Bunch as he fretfully tries to think of what to say to Mrs. Beard: “Again he could not think of the word that Hightower would know, would use without having to think of it” (LA, 418). Yet, this cultivated man is incapable of facing the same life that others, more simple and uneducated, can at least endure.

Another point to be highlighted in Hightower’s characterization is his obsession with the past, with his dead grandfather. According to Pitavy, Faulkner was not able to make plausible the ex-minister’s fixation, due, especially, to the extent to which Hightower was caricaturized (1973: 83)<sup>3</sup>. Alfred Kazin defines the character in more acute terms, observing that Hightower is “too much the creature of defeat and of obsession, to compel our interest or our belief” (155)<sup>4</sup>. Millgate, on the other hand, points out how the ex-minister is “not a fully realised character, though he might have been so if Faulkner had told the story of his life at an earlier stage in the novel and had treated that story with a higher degree of dramatisation” (1971: 130).

Perhaps what intrigued these critics is the essential grotesqueness of Hightower, fundamentally alloyed with his role in the novel. Indeed, when Faulkner puts him in a situation in which he seems ‘too real’, Hightower loses strength and becomes only a caricature of a dying and pathetic man. However, as Collins puts it, “[i]n his stream of

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<sup>3</sup> Pitavy continues by stating that “Faulkner seems to be less able to show a character’s evolution than to reveal gradually a character already complete in his imagination, and who appears to grow because the reader gains deeper knowledge of him as time goes on” (83).

<sup>4</sup> Here is the entire passage: “Hightower, by general consent, is one of the failures of the book: he is too vague, too drooping, too formless, in a word too much the creature of defeat and of obsession, to compel our interest or our belief. But this is so partly because Hightower is both a surrogate figure for Faulkner’s meditations and a kind of scapegoat on whom Faulkner can discharge his exasperation with Southern nostalgia and the endless searching in the labyrinths of the past for the explanation of the Southern defeat and of the hold it keeps on the descendants of the Confederate aristocracy. Hightower is a failure because Faulkner both uses and parodies him. Because of the absurdly literal symbolism of his name, his constant watchful position behind the green lamp, his useless reveries, he is never on the same scale with the other characters, who are equally obsessed by the past, but who function on the plane of some positive action. [...] Hightower, acting in various section of the book as a foreground observer, brings to them not merely a stillness but a deadness which intervenes between us and the other characters. This shapeless, ghostly body of thought has its symbolic place in the mind of Hightower” (155).

thought, his musings, memories, visions, he becomes one of Faulkner's best creations (63). And here we reach the paradox of having to give this character more than just belief, but also trust him, rely on his capacity to extract from Jefferson the points Faulkner himself might have wanted us to absorb. His inaction provides the novel with a counterpoint to the events that apparently are unstoppable. The study room where Hightower sits still is the place for the narrative to merge and generate new lines of action, updating the reader and creating expectations on what is going to unfold. He is an unconventional kind of hero, perhaps not a modern one, but a criticism on what should be the ideal Southern American moralist.

Advocating for this anti-heroic characteristic, Welsh points out that,

the twentieth-century novelist retains the low mimetic mode and the gestures, but mainly as a kind of staging, of departure point, for prolonged descents into the ironic and circlings back to the mythic mode (130).

It is a reversal of the mythical and traditional significance of the hero, now viewed as limited and unreliable, whose vices and weaknesses enrich the novel rather than undermining it. And although partial, even exaggerated, Hightower's description is in fine accord with his own assumption that he cannot participate in life anymore. He is what he believes he is, and Faulkner explicitly gives us the key to this character by choosing his name and allotting clear significance to it. As William Gass writes, "[the character's] reality is borne by their name. They *are*, where it *is*" (50). And, along with the other meaningful names in the novel, Gail Hightower represents both an ironic and substantial manner of characterization. The novel itself prevents its readers through Byron Bunch, who reflects on names and their meanings:

And that was the first time Byron remembered that he ever thought how a man's name, which is supposed to be just the sound for who he is, can be somehow an augur of what he will do, if other men can only read the meaning in time (LA, 33).

Seemingly, when telling the events that occurred in Jefferson to Hightower, the narrator comments on Byron's inability to read the signs:

It seemed to him that fate, circumstance, had set a warning in the sky all day long in that pillar of yellow smoke, and he too stupid to *read* it (LA, 83, my italics).



The readers too may not read in time the significance of the plethora of names and characters in *Light in August*. Hightower is someone who refuses “the harsh *gale* of living” (LA, 478, my italics), and is extracted from social interaction to be a recluse in his ‘high tower’. In addition, it is necessary to bear in mind that characters are not people, they live in and by words, and only through them is one capable of reading. Modernist writers such as Virginia Woolf and Joseph Conrad had already refused the notion of the possibility in fully depicting a character. This attempt is always biased, made upon impressions and various points of views. In this context, what Gail Hightower really represents is the decadence of the South, its Protestant ethics taken to extremes, its social life rooted in the dichotomies of race, sex, and austere morality. He is an anti-hero to the extent that he fails his church, his wife, and, in a pathetic attempt, Joe Christmas. Refusing to take part in life, he becomes a channel of death. These attributes, however, do not represent a failure in his characterization. They reinforce his role as the unfortunate preacher who, forsaken by his flock, is left imprisoned by the memories of a romanticized past. He alone is able to think of religion in terms that would not be plausible in other characters. And even the narrator seems to rely on Hightower to develop what would be considered an intrusion of his part, endowing the ex-minister with a capacity to think of the events as having the purpose to reach and convince the narratee, and therefore, the reader.

## On mediation

The character of Gail Hightower, although briefly mentioned before (LA, 48), only appears in chapter three – sitting by and looking through the window from where he can see the street. The narrative so far has introduced three of the major characters, each one of them not having any relation to one another, except for Lena Grove and Byron Bunch who meet at the end of chapter two. Hightower, then, is a new figure in the book, and the reader will follow his story in the same terms it was told to Byron Bunch. This latter, arriving in Jefferson seven years before the narration's present, is informed of what means the acronym "D.D." in the sign in front of Hightower's house, or what the people in town jokingly said it meant:

[H]e asked and *they* told him it meant Done Damned. Gail Hightower Done Damned in Jefferson anyway, *they* told him (LA, 60-61, my italics).

What is interesting about this chapter is how the ex-minister's story is told by the people of the town. Phrases such as "they told him", "they told Byron", "the town said", "the town believed", "the town thought" etc, proliferate and give the reader the impression of being before a city meeting with everybody present, except for Gail Hightower. This technique is common in the work of Faulkner. By using it, he intends to create a different voice than that of the narrator, a voice which makes the community's credo more tangible and visible. Byron Bunch, in this context, acts as a mediator for the story, being the narratee to whom the town explains the life of Hightower, and offering also a critical response to all those rumors:

Byron listened quietly, thinking to himself how people everywhere are about the same, but that it did seem that in a small town, where evil is harder to accomplish, where opportunities for privacy are scarcer, that people can invent more of it in other people's names (LA, 71).

As though, Byron thought, the entire affair had been a lot of people performing a play and that now and at last they had all played out the parts which had been allotted them and now they could live quietly with one another (LA, 73).

But Hightower himself in chapter four is going to become the narratee of *Light in August*, with Bunch assuming the role of narrator. The defrocked minister, always in his immobile position, will discover the events that occurred in Jefferson as the reader will, always subject to the voice of his addresser. Through Byron Bunch, the narrator withholds

information in order to create suspense, and the wonderings of Hightower could be associated to those of the reader:

‘Oh’, Hightower says. ‘The house that burned yesterday. But I don’t see any connection between – Whose house was it? I saw the smoke, myself, and I asked a passing negro, but he didn’t know’ (LA, 78).

‘Oh’, Hightower said. ‘But I don’t see..... If they were comfortable, and Miss Burden didn’t ---’ (LA, 79).

What he does not know, nor does the reader, is that Miss Burden was brutally murdered, her head almost cut off, and her house set on fire with the body still in it. But the reason for Bunch to postpone revealing this is his love for Lena Grove, which he is tentatively trying to convey. During his telling, he frequently says that what he knew “was not the worst of it” (LA, 78), that he himself did not “know [...], then, the other. The rest of it. The worst of it” (LA, 81), and that would be for him “[t]o tell on two days to two folks something they aint going to want to hear and that they hadn’t ought to have to hear at all” (LA, 79). The information of what really happened only partly appears later on, in disconnected phrases which try to embed the whole dimension of what is going to unfold in the novel:

About Christmas. About yesterday and Christmas. Christmas is part nigger. About him and Brown and yesterday (LA, 89).

Yet chapter four is also important for in it Faulkner also draws attention to the plot itself, which so far had been depicted in comic tones. Consider, for example, the opening scene of the novel. In the first chapter, Lena is introduced, and we are able to see her crossing Mississippi all the way from Alabama (LA, 3). After a brief narration of her story, the reason of her journey is subtly hinted by the people she encounters on the way:

*Lucas Burch? I don’t know of anybody by that name around here. This road? It goes to Pocahontas. He might be there. It’s possible. Here’s a wagon that’s going a piece of the way. It will take you that far* (LA, 7).

For the first time the reader can recognize and partially grasp that she is after a certain Lucas Burch. And it is also known that she is pregnant, a simple type ordering “*sour-dines*” (LA, 27), who does not listen to the people when they warn her that the man

in Jefferson is called Byron Bunch, and not Lucas Burch. By the time she reaches Jefferson, when the burning house of Miss Burden is attracting the town's attention, the reader has so far imagined a story in which a fleeing man is tracked down by a pregnant woman, who confuses him with another man. Kreiswirth observes that this confusion of names create "new narrative expectations", leaving the plot "opened up to fresh possibilities and direct[ing] the reader to posit questions about the whereabouts of Lucas Burch, the identity of Bunch, and the outcome of Lena's travels" (61).

Chapter two will sustain these same expectations, as it deals with the impressions caused by the arrival of Joe Christmas at the planing mill. Again, it is through Bunch's musings that the image of Christmas is depicted, adding more blanks to the story, and opening new possibilities for the plot to evolve. Another character is presented, Brown, then making us wonder how they could be possibly related to the story of Lena Grove (Kreiswirth, 62). As the chapter reaches its closure, the reader finds out that Brown is actually Lucas Burch, and that Byron Bunch has fallen in love with Lena. These complications are not fully resolved until we reach chapter four, with Byron clarifying the events to Hightower, with the reader starting to get well aware that "the novel disrupts any expectations of a unified plot structure" (Porter, 60).

As already mentioned, in the study room where Hightower and Bunch meet on the day following the events, the narration seems to merge and update the reader. The revelations that Christmas is "part nigger" (LA, 89) and that Miss Burden has been assassinated (LA, 91), do not allow the reader to consider the story as something comic or just casual. Our judgments are overturned and new expectations arise. Wolfgang Iser interestingly points that,

Once the reader is entangled, his own preconceptions are continually overtaken, so that the text becomes his 'present' while his own ideas fade into the 'past'; as soon as this happens he is open to the immediate experienced of the text, which was impossible so long as his preconceptions were his 'present' (64).

The present is now Byron filling the gaps of what had been left unanswered in the three previous chapters. And Hightower's questions highlight the points of interest to the reader: "[w]hat is that you think I will not want to hear? What is it that I have not heard?" (LA, 79). And as Byron reveals the story, the ordinariness of a pastoral tale collapses as the ex-minister unconsciously previews the outcomes:

Yet Byron can see in the other's face something latent, about to wake, of which Hightower himself is unaware, as if something inside the man were trying to warn him or prepare him (LA, 81).

And now there begins to come into Hightower's puzzled expression a quality of shrinking and foreboding as Byron talks quietly [...] (LA, 82).

Hightower is also entangled in the story. He listens and forebodes, as though being prepared for what he will face throughout the novel, just like the reader who now understands that with the presence of Hightower the narrative is going to be recycled. He becomes a narrative tool (Millgate, 1987: 39) to close the first cycle of the *Light in August*, that is to say the first four chapters (Pitavy, 1973: 16), before the plunge into Joe Christmas' recollection of his past (chapters 5-13). After this long flashback, the examiner will again assume the function of narratee in chapter thirteen, when Byron explains to him why he wants to take Lena out of Mrs. Beard boarding house, and in chapter sixteen, with Mrs. Hines telling the story of Christmas' birth. In all these occasions, Hightower acts as a mediating instance between what has been told and what is going to be. According to Hirshleifer,

[...] Hightower seems to speak for Faulkner and to be raised out of himself into a sort of mediate figure between the community, including the readers, and the more alienated figures of the novel (25).

What emerges from this mediation characteristic is a centripetal operation in which the character gains force to better analyze the events and slowly be dragged into the course of action he always refused to take part in. The text in *Light in August* is constantly redirecting the reader to new lines of action, with the narrator lending his voice to the community of Jefferson, which is obviously impregnated with prejudices and distortion of facts. The ability Hightower develops in his exile to reflect on what happens outside his window not only empowers the narration with an inner voice more detached than the others, but also enables the narrator to universalize his conceptions on the major themes present in the novel.

## Universalizing

As previously exposed in this part, the context of the American South makes possible the *mise en scène* of a character such as Gail Hightower. Although an outcast, he embodies the traditional romanticized nostalgia of an inglorious past. He is also the moral and religious leader who failed in serving his church. Yet it seems that Faulkner endowed the Reverend with another characteristic, one that shall resonate all throughout the novel. In Hightower, the growing awareness of the condition of all the other characters in the novel reflects also a global perspective in the human situation. It is by delving into his own environment that Faulkner can make his concerns universal. In the words of André Bleikasten, “Faulkner wrote about specific people in specific places, and he did so in full awareness of his complex Southern experience. He took no shortcut to universality” (99). It is then given to Hightower the role of providing the novel with insights generated from local experiences, but that could reverberate into a broader scale.

If we consider the moment when the ex-minister learns about Christmas’ supposedly “black blood”, we find a man grasping the magnitude of what is about to happen in Jefferson:

It is certain, proved, that he has negro blood? Think, Byron; what will it mean when the people – if they catch..... Poor man. Poor mankind (LA, 100).

And from the recluse pariah there seems to emerge a feeling of compassion, an empathy with the man in announced tragedy:

‘Yes’, Hightower says. He sits with his eyes closed, erect. ‘But they have not caught him yet. They have not caught him yet, Byron’ (LA, 100).

Later on in the novel, Hightower thinks when looking at Byron Bunch:

It is because so much happens. Too much happens. That’s it. Man performs, engenders, so much more than he can or should have to bear. That’s how he finds that he can bear anything. That’s it. That’s what is so terrible. That he can bear anything (LA, 299).

This notion of the human condition is drawn by Hightower at the view of the prosaic Byron Bunch. The Reverend appears to be in the context of the book the one capable of conveying these thoughts in a way that would be impossible in other characters.

It is certain that the feeble preacher is also biased and many of his attitudes in *Light in August* inspire pity rather than agreement. However, as already discussed, it is precisely through this failure that Faulkner is able to conduct a major reflection on the community of Jefferson. Accordingly, Millgate states that “Hightower’s reflectiveness [...] remains an essential element in Faulkner’s self-conscious attempt to universalize the themes of the novel” (1987: 39). Put in other words, religion, race, and sex are all scrutinized during Hightower’s broodings.

The most poignant of these reflections is that dedicated to the Protestant religion. Sitting by the window, Hightower is able to listen to the organ’s music that comes from his old church, “a sound at once austere and rich, abject and proud, swelling and falling in the quiet summer darkness like a harmonic tide” (LA, 76). This music pervades *Light in August* and stands for one of its best metaphors, as well as for the Southern Protestant aestheticism:

The organ strains come rich and resonant through the summer night, blended, sonorous, with that quality of abjectness and sublimation, as if the freed voices themselves were assuming the shapes and attitudes of crucifixions, ecstatic, solemn, and profound in gathering volume. Yet even the music has still a quality stern and implacable, deliberate and without passion so much as immolation, pleading, asking, for not love, not life, forbidding it to others, demanding in sonorous tones death as tough death were the boom, like all Protestant music (LA, 367).

This music is the *requiem* Faulkner intends his readers to listen to. And it is Gail Hightower in his petrified position who is capable of making these analogies possible. He was part of this chorus, even helped it be sung, and would have continued to propel its message if it weren’t for his incapacity in keeping his dead grandfather out of the pulpit. Yet his comments seem genuine, true enough to be considered valuable not only to the community of Jefferson who had deserted him, but to all human beings living under this code of behavior that “drive[s] them to crucifixion of themselves and one another” (LA, 368).

## Part II - Outcasting

*"I'm not in life anymore"*

*Light in August, 301.*

Life, for Gail Hightower, is a tale of chivalry. Since his childhood, the impressions of his grandfather's deeds during the Civil War has left him incapable of dealing with everyday situations. Issued from a sick mother, who "had been invalid for almost twenty years" (LA, 467), and fathered by a man "of Spartan sobriety beyond his years" (LA, 472), Hightower finds in the death of the grandfather the source for his own life. He believes that by retreating from human intercourse, he would be able to preserve his future, "inviolable, like a classic and serene vase" (LA, 478), and in that same vase the "virginal desire which makes heroes" (LA, 483) would rest untouched. Yet, the "gale of living" is embedded in his name, and therefore embedded in him, despite all the attempts he made to be concealed from this "circumvented wind" (LA, 478). Had he been able to read it in time, his life, and that of his wife and perhaps that of Christmas, would have had a different ending.

But he chooses the exile. He sits immobile at his window thinking about the life he abandoned<sup>5</sup>. After being forced to resign from the church, Hightower surrenders to his reveries, dies for the town, and delves into meditations considered innocuous by the narrator, who compares Hightower's reading of Tennyson to "[...] listening in a cathedral to a eunuch chanting in a language which he does not even need to understand" (LA, 318). That is exactly what Hightower has become: a silent listener, surrounded by the music that comes from his ancient church and that has long lost its meaning. It is interesting to note the use of the word "eunuch", which states perhaps that he, the defrocked minister, is also a man of dubious sexuality.

No wonder the community preferred to deprive the minister from his role as a moral leader. He would have been left alone if it weren't for Lena's arrival in town, and Miss Burden's murder. His retreat would have not been disturbed if it weren't for Byron Bunch's narration, which, against all of Hightower's efforts, makes him act once again.

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<sup>5</sup> Bleikasten, in his article *L'espace dans "Lumière d'août"*, points that "[l]a fenêtre [...] ouvre une brèche dans le mur de la solitude, elle perce une trouée, offre une échappée au regard captif et maintient une fragile communication entre le dedans et le dehors, entre le songe et le réel, entre passé, présent et avenir" (418).



My intention in this second part is to analyze the minister's role as an outcast, the parallels with the other pariahs, and, finally, the last chapter concerning Gail Hightower, in which he ultimately acknowledges his faults and envisions the possibility of being free from his past.

## The “serene vase”

The first mention to Hightower in *Light in August* illustrates what his most important characteristic is: a lonely man living “[...] in what the town calls his disgrace” (LA, 48), an “[...] outcast who has been denied by his church” (LA, 49). As a matter of fact, loneliness, denial, and exile constitute the life of a man who resigned his pulpit after failing at it. The church could not accept his obsession with the dead grandfather, with the Civil War and its past of battle, looking baffled to him,

in the pulpit with his hands flying around him and the dogma he was supposed to preach all full of galloping cavalry and defeat and glory just as when he tried to tell them on the street about the galloping horses, it in turn would get all mixed up with absolution and choirs of martial seraphim, until it was natural that the old men and women should believe that what he preached in God's own house on God's own day verged on actual sacrilege (LA, 63).

As Pitavy correctly observes, this passage shows how Hightower's incongruous speech reflects on the language of the narrator, “in Faulkner's deliberate anacoluthon” (149)<sup>6</sup>. It is an incoherent behavior, which sounded to the town “like a horsetrader's glee over an advantageous trade” (LA, 61). Seemingly, when McEachern examines Joe at the orphanage, his stare is compared to that of someone who “[...] examine[s] a horse or a second hand plow, convinced before hand that he would see flaws, convinced before hand that he would buy” (LA, 142). Neither Hightower, blinded by his obsession, nor McEachern, blinded by his austerity, can actually see the people in front of them. In the case of the minister, the refuge he expected to have in the seminary was actually a shelter in which he would be able to fantasize about his life, about his past. By becoming a

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<sup>6</sup> Another example can be found on page 364, when Hightower, learning of Christmas's arrest, breaks down in front of Byron: “Byron Bunch, the guardian of public weal and morality. The gainer, the inheritor of rewards, since it will now descend upon the morganatic wife of – Shall I say that too? Shall I read Byron there too?”.

preacher he would be able to find his “only salvation”, that was “to return to the place to die where [his] life had already ceased before it began” (LA, 478).

This place is Jefferson, or what he considered to be the heroic ground where his grandfather was killed. It is also the landmark which defines the boundaries of his reveries, his refusal in accepting the world of the living, where he could “convert his life into the purity of the tale” (Kartiganer, 1988: 24). What he did not expect was that his wife would go “bad on him” (LA, 59), and kill herself in Memphis, as though his choice towards reclusion would ultimately drag others into death. He fails not only because he sells his fantasies in the pulpit, but also for revealing his inability in being “a natural husband, a natural man” (LA, 71). Before turning to this point, we should briefly analyze why Hightower developed such a fixation with his grandfather, why he “skipped a generation” (LA, 478) and became a man not suited for the functions he assumed upon himself.

When musing about his past, the minister recollects his childhood, and we are presented with the scene in which he finds a uniform from the Civil War. It is a Confederate garment, and the young Hightower wonders whether a Northern soldier had been killed by his father, “wondering with still more horror yet at the depth and strength of his desire to know” (LA, 470). This passage illustrates how death first seduced the child, and how the desire to understand it molded his personality. Moreover, the uniform, a reminiscence of a deceased man, intrinsically connected with his living father, carries also “the evocation of his dead mother’s hands which lingered among the folds” (LA, 469). At supper, watching his father “with terror and awe and with something else”, the boy is speechless, unable to cope with the weight of the dead upon the living. This scene can also represent the mourning of the entire South, the burden laid upon the defeated Confederacy, which, at Faulkner’s time, was still peopled by the ghosts of the Civil War.

In the absence of a sick mother and in the presence of a sober father, Hightower developed a fascination for his grandfather, who had been long dead before he was born. In opposition to the father’s austerity, the grandfather, also named Gail Hightower, had “a bluff, direct, coarsely vivid humor which lacked less of purport than wit” (LA, 470), and was considered by the son a “lusty and sacrilegious [...]” man (LA, 473). The young boy would ask then the black servant to tell him the stories of “grandpa”, the men he had killed, and, paradoxically, “[...] he listened now [...] without terror. It was not even triumph: it was pride” (LA, 470). What caused repulsion in him at the view of his existing and present father, was exalted in the dead and ghostly grandfather. And here Faulkner makes

clear the difference between ghosts and phantoms. Commenting on Hightower's attitudes towards his past, the narrator puts that,

He found no terror in the knowledge that his grandfather [...] had killed men 'by the hundreds' [...]. No horror here because they were just ghosts, never seen in the flesh, heroic, simple, warm; while the father which he knew and feared was a phantom which would never die (LA, 477).

Edmond Volpe is right when he observes that the minister "associates his father with the real world; the story of his grandfather releases him from the terrors of reality" (quoted in Kartiganer, 1988: 24). It is important to observe, however, how the present life of Hightower partly echoes that of his father, even if the son is incapable to see it. Firstly, both were ministers, although the parent was one "without church" (LA, 474), and whom the war changed, "deodorized", as the grandfather sarcastically noted. Secondly, the two of them also performed medical roles, be it as a midwife in the case of the son, or a real doctor, in the case of the father. The latter enabled his wife to "produce life", and "possibly kept her alive". And here we find the first contrast between them, since Hightower could not prevent the death of a baby when he tried to assist a Black woman in labor. He would have to wait for almost ten years to be successful in delivering a living baby, that of Lena Grove. But what really differentiates father and son is the way they react to real life. Although sober and austere, the father,

[...] lived by his principles in *peace*, and when war came, he carried them into war and lived by them there; when there was preaching on *peaceful Sundays in quiet groves* to be done, he had done it, without any particular equipment for it other than *his will and his convictions* and what he could pick up as he went along; when there was the saving of wounded men under fire and the curing of them without proper tools, he did that too, again without other equipment save *his strength and courage* and what he could pick up as he went along. And when the war was lost and the other men returned home with their eyes dead, *he looked forward* and made what he could of defeat by making practical use of that which he had learned in it (LA, 474, my italics).

The obvious narrator's approval of how the father lived contrasts with the life of Gail Hightower, who always wanted peace (LA, 311), but never found it. His Sundays were fraught with galloping hooves and war, not to mention his wife's crisis in the middle of the sermon. The word "groves" is interesting in this context. It recalls Lena Grove and her eternal simplicity and calmness, her acceptance of fate without being troubled.

Moreover, it is exactly “will and convictions” and “strength and courage” that the son lacks. His “shrinking and denial” behavior, encapsulated in a forced retreat, has nothing to do with how his father managed defeat, looking forward and learning from it. The courage of the father was not due to combat, since he was a “soldier without an enemy”. It was not the pride that overpowered his son when the boy listened to the stories of the dead grandfather. Indeed,

It was as though the very cold and uncompromising conviction which propped him upright, as it were, between puritan and cavalier, had become not defeated and not discouraged, but wiser (LA, 474).

This wisdom will not be attained by the son until the final moment, in chapter twenty, in which Hightower acknowledges his guilt in exiling himself from human intercourse, trying to be preserved in reveries that not only cost his life, but that of others. The code his father lived by seems to debunk that of his previous aesthetical convictions, making parent and son overcome “a distance in time that not even the decades of years could measure” (LA, 469-470). As Bleikasten points out in “Fathers in Faulkner and *Light in August*”,

[W]hat seems to be at issue in Faulkner’s intricate family chronicles is not the father as a person (a character), nor even the father as genitor, as the actual begetter of sons and daughters, but rather the haunting question of fatherhood, in its psychoethical as well as in its wider cultural implications (43).

Yet the fixation with the grandfather can have another explanation, more implicit and that was definitely decisive in Hightower’s exile from the community. As mentioned above, he was not considered a natural man by the people, someone incapable of satisfying his wife (LA, 59), and who raised doubts about his relationships with his servants. As a matter of fact, the text never makes it clear that the minister is homosexual, but hints at that direction in several parts, rendering ambiguous the nature of his feelings for Byron Bunch. Their “intercourse” at Hightower’s house, always at night, is first described as something that “the town does not know” (LA, 48). And as Byron thinks of the reverend’s exile he concludes that if the town knew about the visits, “they’d take us both out and whip us again [...]” (LA, 73). This passage makes it clear that there is a suspicion over Hightower, who, even physically, is described as in a state of “monstrous pregnancy” (LA, 308) and being “queershaped” (LA, 413). Furthermore, Hightower “notices that his

thinking sounds querulous, like the peaceful whining of a querulous woman [...]” (LA, 404) and amuses himself by imagining Byron Bunch with “a handkerchief about his head, and earrings” (LA, 369).

In an article about this issue, López argues that “[...] Hightower spends his life concealing his homosexuality from his wife, his congregation and fellow townspeople, and even from himself”, and that the window by which he sits every day is metaphorically a closet where “he comes to confront [...] the suppressed desires that paradoxically both define and destroy his life [...]” (76). This psychoanalytical interpretation is valid to the extent it compares Hightower’s nausea after finding the uniform in the attic to that of other characters “which accompanies virtually every sexual act and situation in the novel” (79). We can take as examples Christmas vomiting in the dietitian’s room (LA, 122), or when he finds out that Bobbie was menstruated (LA, 189). López still mentions the episode in which, at the view of Christmas being castrated, one of his persecutors vomits (79). In addition, the article discusses the presence of smells and the metaphors linked to liquids which would closely relate to the sexual experience, as well as the the imagery of the young Hightower feeling the “bark of trees [...], savage, filled with, evocative of, strange and baleful half delights and half terrors” (LA, 318). On this specific part, López states that this condition is that of the child who,

[...] willed himself to forget the dark desires and nausea invoked by an old trunk and a forbidden queer love by displacing them onto conspicuous displays of pride over his grandfather’s war exploits (87).

In fact, the minister envisions the deeds of his grandfather as heroic bursts, telling them to his wife “[...] in the bright, happy voice of a child” (LA, 482). The same infantile imagery is sustained when he makes his way to Jefferson, pressing his face “like that of a child” (LA, 482) against the window of the train, as well as during his telling when “[h]is voice was high, childlike, exalted” (LA, 485). Seemingly, Hightower refers to the men who accompanied his grandfather as “boys” or even “schoolboys” (LA, 483), as though depicting them in such naïve and childish terms in order to prevent him from acknowledging the real nature of his obsession. Later on in the novel, the minister will recognize that he had a “hunger”, and that his wife could not have “any part in the

assuaging of it” (LA, 488). His life, then, including his sermons in the church and reveries at the window, were a frustrated attempt to unleash his secret and unconscious desire<sup>7</sup>.

The father, in this context, is a key figure. He replaces the mother and engenders in the child a mixed feeling of terror and desire, of immanent reality. The dead grandfather, on the other hand, is the phantom that enables the minister to delude himself, to live in a tale of chivalry his concealed secret without having to name or even assume it. The father is also a pattern, a model to be doubled in the character of Byron Bunch, who traveled several miles, just like Hightower’s father, to support a country church. Byron too seems to live peacefully with his code, and, despite his comic tones, is capable of assuming responsibilities and fighting for what he considers correct. This simple man is to disrupt the reverend’s life not only with a narrative, but also with an “unrequited love” (López, 85).

The parallel between Hightower’s father and Byron Bunch illustrates more than just unconscious desire. It is one of many analogies in the novel which correlate characters and their stories<sup>8</sup>. Bunch, for example, is someone considered “a minor mystery to the town and who had been for seven days wellnigh a public outrage and affront” (LA, 421). Of course his condition is not that of the minister, Joe Christmas or Joanna Burden. Yet he is a foreigner who came to Jefferson seven years before the narrative present, and who always tried to keep a distance from many of the town’s events. In addition, he does not think exactly like his fellow coworkers, brooding on the condition of men in Jefferson with a wider perspective. In the withdrawn figure of Hightower, at least until he meets Lena Grove, he sees a master, an advisor, “a repository of wisdom” (Millgate, 1971: 132). What seems to be present in this relationship is a parental bond, with Byron having to deny the supposed affiliation because of his love for Lena. Hightower, on the contrary, could become “the father of the father” (Duvall, 154), by having authority over the one he unconsciously relates to his real progenitor.

Another parallel regarding Hightower, referring to a metaphorical relation of father and son, can be found in the figure of Joe Christmas<sup>9</sup>. The latter, in his flight from prison and from Percy Grimm, finds his last refuge in the house of the defrocked minister.

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<sup>7</sup> Hirshleifer interestingly notes that “[...] the conflict between the ‘galloping hooves’ of Hightower’s dream and his wife has the symbolic force of a contrast between normal and abnormal sexuality. Horses are characteristically used by Faulkner in reference to abnormal sexuality experience in contrast with cows which represent normal love and fecundity (this is, of course, most fully developed in *The Hamlet*)” (12-13).

<sup>8</sup> Tucker mentions “the binary distinctions according to which the communal world of Jefferson organizes itself” (140).

<sup>9</sup> Sundquist writes that Hightower is Christmas’s “last figurative father” (95), and Bleikasten calls him the “*père veule et impuissant*” (*L’espace dans “Lumière d’ôut”*, 417).

However, Hightower fails in providing an alibi for him, and Christmas is shot and castrated in the kitchen. The town, trying to explain why he had headed towards the minister's house, promptly affirmed that they were "like to like" (LA, 443). Their likeness in the novel, indeed, appears not only in their condition of outcasts – which ultimately defies a hermetic community – but also in the way they think, act, or even dress (Geoffroy, 173). Consider, for example, their search for peace, never finding it<sup>10</sup>, and their willingness to buy immunity by their own actions.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, they were both regarded as having satanic characteristics<sup>12</sup>, eating savagely<sup>13</sup>, and misunderstanding the conception of love between man and woman<sup>14</sup>.

However, as Geoffroy observes, we cannot simply identify the minister with Christmas without properly paying attention to what separates them. Hightower, for example, exalts youth and its beauty: "*To be young. To be young. There is nothing else like it: there is nothing else in the world*" (LA, 318). Christmas, on the other hand, seems to despise it: "*It's terrible to be young. It's terrible. Terrible*" (LA, 181). According to Geoffroy:

*Il semble impossible que deux cris aussi irréconciliables sortent d'une même bouche, et l'on y reconnaît si bien l'impatience de la jeunesse et la nostalgie de l'âge mûr qu'il est plus logique de les associer à des personnages dont l'âge correspondrait à la nature de ces souhaits (174).*

The scholar, however, states that this difference accentuates their parental bond, and the fact that Hightower wanted to name Lena's baby only confirms this hypothesis. As a matter of fact, Mrs. Hines, Christmas's grandmother, keeps calling the newborn by the name of her grandson:

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<sup>10</sup> Joe Christmas, before his final scene with Joanna Burden: "*All I wanted was peace*" (112), and Hightower refusing to take part in the story: "I just wanted peace" (LA, 311).

<sup>11</sup> For retreating himself and for enduring the KKK's assault, Hightower states: "I have bought immunity" (LA, 310-311). Christmas tried to be immune from women and his puritanical view of sex: "With the slain sheep he had bought immunity from it for too long now for it to be alive" (LA, 187).

<sup>12</sup> Hightower's face, when leaving the church after his wife's suicide, "looked like the face of Satan in the old prints" (LA, 69); Christmas invaded a church attended by Black people, and "[t]hey saw that his face was not black, and a woman began to shriek, and people in the rear sprang up and begun to run toward the door [...] 'It's the devil! It's Satan himself!'" (LA, 322).

<sup>13</sup> The minister "seemed to eat like an animal" (LA, 65), and Christmas ate "like a dog" (LA, 155).

<sup>14</sup> When considering his relationship with Ms. Burden, Christmas thinks: "My God. How little I know about women, when I thought I knew so much" (LA, 235). Hightower passively admits his inability in understanding his wife: "So this is love. I see. I was wrong about it too" (LA, 481).

She keeps on talking about him like his pa was that – the one in jail, that Mr Christmas. She keeps on, and then I get mixed up and it's sometimes I cant – like I am mixed up too and I think that his pa is that Mr – Mr Christmas too (LA, 409).

Yet Hightower fails to prevent Christmas assassination. The minister, “*bien que promu au rang de père depuis la mise au monde réussie de l'enfant, n'est guère ici qu'une figure paternelle affaiblie, pathétique et pitoyable*” (Geoffroy, 174). His house, once a sanctuary, was invaded by death<sup>15</sup>, and his life, the serene vase untouched and hermetic, was forever changed. The course of action, the events he tried to dodge, force him to renounce his aesthetic position, immobile, indifferent to what was going on outside his window.

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<sup>15</sup> Tucker observes that “the most savage violence of the novel takes place indoors” (148), and Bleikasten compares Joanna Burden's house, that of the crime, to Hightower's, that of the punishment (*L'espace dans "Lumière d'ôut"*, 416).



## The cracked urn

The image of the urn is constant in *Light in August*. As critics have argued, this analogy is directly linked with Keats's *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, a poem about the ethereal condition of the spirit and of art. According to Michel Gresset, the urn in Faulkner is part of his idealism, a sort of dorsal spine in his work (17). The title of the novel itself can be identified with this condition of recalling the old times, "*ce plaisir à imaginer l'Antiquité*" (20). In reality, the light that pervades the narrative is, as Faulkner himself observed, "a luminosity older than our Christian civilization [...], just that luminous lambent quality of an older light than ours". The urn, then, is a peaceful reservoir of the spirit, an attempt of the poet to capture the essence of art in its beauty which lasts through time.

A first reference to this symbolic vessel is found in *Light in August* when Lena Grove makes her way to Jefferson. She goes on

backrolling now behind her a long monotonous succession of peaceful and undeviating changes from day to dark and dark to day again, through which she advanced in identical and anonymous and deliberate wagons as though through a succession of creakwheeled and limpeared avatars, like something moving forever and without progress across an urn (LA, 7).

Lena becomes the representative of this type of serenity, of atemporal marching, contrasting with the devastation she finds on her way. The people she meets are only means for her journey to continue, they are "avatars" who statically prompt her onward, "forever and without progress". This apparent oxymoron is the proper definition of the urn, immobile as an object, yet always moving as a metaphor for the spirit. It is a "strong ambivalence toward the transience at the heart of the human condition" (Korenman, 124), having time as the great enemy to be tackled. Furthermore, as Korenman points out, this ambivalence is also present in the way Faulkner depicts his characters who have a tendency to alter their past in order to cope with their present. According to this critic, Faulkner "[...] presents these characters with great sympathy and compassion. The ambivalence he exhibits toward them arises from the mixed feelings with which he, like Keats, regarded the passage of time" (124). That is the case of Gail Hightower, the minister who once in the seminary tried to become a hermetic urn inaccessible to the "circumvented wind" of life. That is the essential difference between the image of the urn Faulkner uses with Lena Grove – impregnated and capable of producing life –, and that of the minister – barren and isolated from human contact.

Hermetic as it might have seemed to the minister, the urn does not resist the impact of Christmas's death and Lena's baby birth. By his window, in chapter twenty, Hightower tries to reconcile his past with the current vision he has of humanity, his responsibilities towards others, and the acknowledgement of his fault in sealing himself off from real life. This final reflection has several analogies with Keats's *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, as Michel Gresset demonstrates (33). The French critic identifies, in chapter twenty, a hundred and twenty-five words directly extracted from the poem, such as "bride" (LA, 471, 476), "silence" (LA, 466), and "shape" (LA, 478 twice, 483, 486, 488), only to consider the first stanza<sup>16</sup>. And, following Gresset's analysis,

[...] *nul doute que les autres chapitres consacrés à Hightower (I, IV, XIII) révéleraient, à leur tour, la dette de Faulkner à cette Ode que mérite désormais la qualification de fondatrice d'un pôle de la pensée romanesque de Faulkner* (34).

Yet, as mentioned above, the urn is empty of life. It is a subterfuge in order to avoid joy and suffering, and to preserve the image of the galloping horses vivid in his mind. So desperate is his desire to be kept apart that he even assumes that he is "[...] not in life anymore", and that "there is no use in even trying to meddle, interfere" (LA, 301). However, as the events reach Hightower, as he is drawn into the scene, the minister has no other alternative than to react. It is interesting to note that Byron Bunch twice wakes up Hightower, the first time to announce that Christmas was arrested (LA, 363), and later to send the minister out to the cabin to help in Lena's baby's birth (LA, 394). These two passages indicate the state of coma, of "complete surrender", in which Hightower lived,

[...] as though he had given over and relinquished completely that grip upon that blending of pride and hope and vanity and fear, that strength to cling to either defeat or victory, which is the I-Am, and the relinquishment of which is usually death (LA, 393).

From his torpor, the defrocked reverend is woken, firstly, to experience the fear of death characterized in the arrest of Christmas. Secondly, he is dragged out of his sleep to deliver life, even if once in the past he failed to do so<sup>17</sup>. The "I-Am" is basically the capacity to endure, found everywhere in Faulkner's work. It also relates to the Christian

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<sup>16</sup> Bleikasten also notes the "*saturation du chapitre XX par le lexique de l'ode de Keats*" (*Parcours de Faulkner*, 350).

<sup>17</sup> Four years before Bunch arrived in Jefferson, Hightower had not been successful in delivering the baby of a Black family (LA, 73-74).

Bible, in God's response to Moses, when the latter asked for His name: "I Am that I Am". Closed in his fears and fantasies, Hightower cannot "be", since existence is action and life. What Byron Bunch tells the minister in his second visit is a clear narrator's irony that only makes Hightower's denial more visible:

I aint going to get you mixed up in it when it aint none of your trouble. You haven't seen her, and I don't reckon you ever will. I reckon likely you have never seen him to know it either (LA, 300).

The mentions are to Lena and Christmas, and both of the predictions will turn out to be untrue. Gail Hightower will be mixed up in the story, not only by delivering Lena's baby, but also by trying to provide Christmas with an alibi. As Percy Grimm arrives at the minister's house, he encounters the old man who says that Christmas was with him on the night of the murder. At this frail excuse, Grimm cries: "Has every preacher and old maid in Jefferson taken their pants down to the yellowbellied son of a bitch?" (LA, 464). The minister is totally exposed, and flung aside by Grimm is incapable of stopping the latter from castrating and killing Christmas in his own kitchen. What follows this episode is Hightower's revelation, waiting for the galloping horses to come as he sits by his window. But the "wheel of thought" will take this man back into his past, uncovering frustrated desires and hidden guilt. After Christmas's death and Lena's baby's birth, Hightower is fully woken and aware of what his life has become.

This final moment in chapter twenty has been discussed by many critics who have not reached an agreement about whether the minister is fully released from his reveries. Korenman, for example, states that "Hightower is not able to live with his new understanding. It is too late for him to be reborn. Instead, he returns to the obsessive image of his grandfather which has haunted him throughout his life" (126). This opinion is due to the last scene which, after the minister's acknowledgments, depicts the men on horses "[...] forwardleaning in the saddles, with brandished arms, beneath whipping ribbons from slanted and eager lances" (LA, 492-493). It would be, then, as though "the thundering phantoms arrive[d] in time to turn back [...] self-revelation [...]" (Taylor, 219)<sup>18</sup>, frustrating and undermining what the narrator calls Hightower's apotheosis (LA, 491).

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<sup>18</sup> Kartiganer has a similar opinion, observing that "[a]t the conclusion of this confession of perverse desire, Hightower has only summoned new energies to serve the illusion that is still paramount" (26). For Porter, "death and historical time reassert their dominion" (66).

That is not, however, the opinion of Harvey L. Gable, who, in an article called “Hightower’s apotheosis in ‘Light in August’”, advocates that the minister’s last scene “[...] represents a culmination of his life – a culmination, I claim, in triumph” (425). According to this critic, Hightower is not the same man after being injured (Christmas strikes him in the head as he enters the minister’s house) and because of the metaphors that abound in the entire novel (426). Already noted by Bleikasten in *Parcours de Faulkner*, the allegories of the road and of the circle comprise many of the characters in the book. Lena Grove, for example, opens and closes the novel on the road, traveling after her fleeing husband. The wagon which is to take her to Jefferson,

[...] seems to hang suspended in the middle distance forever and forever [...] like a shabby bead upon the mild red string of the road. So much so is this that in the watching of it the eye loses it as sight and sense drowsily merge and blend, like the road itself, with all the peaceful and monotonous changes between darkness and day, like already measured thread being rewound onto a spool (LA, 8)<sup>19</sup>.

The road blends with the wagon and with the sight Lena has of them. The imagery is intrinsically related to her role in the novel, of timeless progress and peaceful acceptance. On the road, Lena advances as the wagon does, moving “forever and forever” and merging with the atmosphere around her. Joe Christmas, on the other hand, sees his life as a “[...] savage and lonely street which he had chosen of his own will [...]” (LA, 258), a street he entered “[...] to run for fifteen years” (LA, 223). The road for him brings no liberation, no movement at all as he sees himself trapped in the circle that imprisoned him all his life:

Though during the last seven days he has had no paved street, yet he has travelled further than in all the thirty years. And yet he is still inside the circle. ‘And yet I have been further in these seven days than in all the thirty years’, he thinks. ‘But I have never got outside that circle. I have never broken out of the ring of what I have already done and cannot ever undo’ [...] (LA, 339).

The conjunctions “yet” and “but” are clear signs of Christmas’s situation as a living incongruity<sup>20</sup>. The road for him is a cage, a succession of names and places he passes by in

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<sup>19</sup> Porter observes that this passage relates to Henri Bergson’s conception of time (72).

<sup>20</sup> Faulkner uses the same technique in introducing Christmas in the novel through the impression he makes on his coworkers: “He looked like a tramp, *yet* not like a tramp either. His shoes were dusty and his trousers were soiled too. *But* they were of decent serge, sharply creased, and his shirt was soiled *but* it was a white shirt [...]. He did not look like a professional hobo in his professional rags, *but* there was something

order to find – or flee from – his identity. He runs, whereas Lena walks. And as the narrator comments earlier in the novel:

He felt like an eagle: hard, sufficient, potent, strong. But that passed, though he did not then know that, like the eagle, his own flesh as well as all space was still a cage (LA, 160).

That is precisely the same cage that Hightower lives in. It is the circle he has created for himself, the aesthetic urn that he believed the seminary was providing for his life. His wife was not part of this circle. She was an abstract idea, taken “from a book” (LA, 479) that “turns out to be [false] when applied to life” (LA, 481). As Hightower later realizes, he took part in the death of his wife, he “[...] became her seducer and her murderer, author and instrument of her shame and death” (LA, 488). According to Gable, “the living fluid becomes dead ashes inside the urn” (427), and it is for Joe Christmas to symbolically break the dying urn in order to reestablish its vitality:

[...] running up the hall, his raised and armed and manacled hands full of glare and glitter like lightning bolts, so that he resembled a vengeful and furious god pronouncing a doom (LA, 463).

This assault leaves permanent marks on Hightower. It seems as though he “[...] becomes an anointed devotee of Christmas” (Gable, 432)<sup>21</sup>, turning the blow into a spur to release his own thinking “[...] like a wheel beginning to run in sand, the axle, the vehicle, the power which propels it not yet aware” (LA, 488). “Wheel”, “axle”, “vehicle”, “propels” are words that soundly provide the idea of turning, of being spun faster and faster in order to be released from the “sand”. Finally, the wheel is released as he gradually accepts his responsibility towards others and his failure with his wife and his church:

And I know that for fifty years I have not even been clay: I have been a single instant of darkness in which a horse galloped and a gun crashed. And if I am my dead grandfather on the instant of his death, then my wife, his grandson’s

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definitely rootless about him, as though no town nor city was his, *no street*, no walls, no square of earth his home” (LA, 31, my italics).

<sup>21</sup> Gable presents three indications to consider Christmas’s blow as a sort of anointment. First because the minister offers himself as a substitute for Christmas by stating that the latter was with him on the night of the crime. “Second is the literal fact that Hightower’s head is split open by Christmas in a visual parody of the spiritual reality of the splitting urn”. The third point is “more obscure”, but Gable mentions it because of the classical references in the novel: “the fact that in Roman tradition [...], slaves were freed by the symbolic gesture of a blow to the head” (432-433).

wife...the debaucher and murderer of my grandson's wife, since I could neither let my grandson live or die... (LA, 491).

It is interesting to remark the word "clay", an essential material in the making of vases. What Hightower assumes here is that, trapped in the moment of his grandfather's death, he was not able to live his own life. And worse than that, he propelled his wife to suicide and abandoned his people at church in order to live in his fantasies. Furthermore, there is the clear recognition of his "desire", his "hunger" to break free from the constraints of austerity he engendered for himself, as it was already signaled before in his sermons which "express[ed] his unconscious desire to smash the very walls that, consciously, he work[ed] to defend [...]" (Gable, 430 ). The urn is cracked, but its content is not that of Christmas's vision in the woods, after learning that Bobbie is menstruated, that is to say "something liquid, deathcolored, and foul" (LA, 189). Hightower's spirit is an "ultimate damned flood [that] breaks and rushes away" (LA, 492). These terms are those of release that transform the minister into someone "lighter and lighter". There is a clear opposition to the character once depicted as "almost monstrous" (LA, 89) to the man "[...] lighter than a forgotten leaf [...]" (LA, 492). As seen throughout the novel, he is always drenched in sweat that pours down "like tears" (LA, 365). At this final moment, however, "[...] sweat begins to pour from him, springing out like blood, and pouring" (LA, 490)<sup>22</sup>. It does not seem too farfetched to make an analogy to the blood that springs from Joe Christmas "[...] like a released breath [...] like the rush of sparks from a rising rocket [...]" (LA, 465). Like the castrated man in his kitchen, Hightower is liberated from his circle of solitude in the face of death. Unlike Christmas, he is able to live on and reconcile with his past.

As the men on horses reappear and rush past the minister's window, the reader is aware that he is not the same man. His style is different. If we consider the text as a whole, we will find Hightower's voice different from that of the community, being more elaborate and intellectualized. At the end, however, he loses much of his eloquence, and his style changes too:

'Why, it's...', he thinks. 'I have seen it, recently...Why, it's that...boy. With that black pistol, automatic they call them. The one who...into the kitchen where...killed, who fired the -' (LA, 492).

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<sup>22</sup> Collins sees in this passage "[...] an obvious parallel to the vision of sin in Gethsemane", where Jesus sweated blood before being arrested and, later, crucified (85).

It is the first time Hightower uses the interjection “why”, which is found everywhere else in the mouth of all the other characters. Besides being more colloquial, he also loses his capacity in naming people and things. He is unable to define both Grimm and Christmas in satisfactory terms. The former is a “boy”, despite all his cruelty in the assassination of the latter. Christmas, by the way, is a dash, an incognito beyond the capacity of being described. Language, here, follows the “high tower” collapse, the significant change in the man’s behavior:

‘I am dying’, he thinks. ‘I should pray. I should try to pray’. But he does not. He does not try. ‘With all air, all heaven, filled with the lost and unheeded crying of all the living who ever lived, wailing still like lost children among the cold and terrible stars... (LA, 492).

What is being renounced is the vain attempt to direct his voice upwards, to heavens incapable of answering his prayers. The protestant religion, in Hightower’s opinion, had entrapped truth and peace in “[...] one of those barricades of the middleages planted with dead and sharpened stakes [...]” (LA, 487). The cry of men, on the other hand, is everywhere around him, and it is precisely the cry of a baby that impels him to continue on living. The minister finally draws himself back to the community of men, and to the community of Jefferson. As the group of horses passes by his window, this one man is finally contemplated “with [...] honor and pride and life” (LA, 492), contrasting to the character who, at the beginning of the novel, could not “[...] say even to himself: ‘There remains yet something of honor and pride, of life’” (LA, 60). As a matter of fact, he “[...] achieves a victory by traveling the moral distance from selfish immunity to redemption by the conviction that immunity cannot be bought” (Hirshleifer, 21)<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup> In his article, Hirshleifer also makes a comparison between Hightower and Conrad’s Heyst.

### Part III – Acting

*“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”  
Light in August, 466.*

Hightower’s last scene, in chapter twenty, reserves something more for him and for *Light in August*’s readers. The outcast, brought back to the course of life and aware of his denied past, is finally confronted with all the faces he negated during his retreat. Along with the “wheel of thought” appears a halo, a composite of all the major characters of the novel who come to light under Hightower’s new state of mind. Free from his constraints, he achieves more than just acceptance. He is also enabled with vision, with the capacity to distinguish the visages that merge into each other and give *Light in August* its last dramatic hue<sup>1</sup>.

As the opening sentence of this chapter states, the minister’s window is “like a stage” (LA, 466), where his last role can be played. His reflection calls upon the people of Jefferson to parade in front of his eyes, and provide the narrative with a luminous final act of “peaceful” faces (LA, 491). There is a clear metatextual trait in this passage. Not only the characters, but also the major themes of the novel are discussed and brought together in Hightower’s vision.

With this last part, I intend to show how the *mise en abyme* is present in chapter twenty, as well as to provide references from the book in which Faulkner discusses the questions of identity and language. Finally, we will discuss Hightower’s ultimate role as a mediator capable of providing *Light in August* with a mirror in which readers are able to see the image of the main characters and grasp the meaning of the light in “[...] the lambent suspension of August”.

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<sup>1</sup>The following chapter, written in comic tones, serves as an epilogue to the book. It presents a furniture dealer telling his wife about Lena Grove and Byron Bunch’s journey going after Lucas Burch.



## The “fading letters”

Set in front of Hightower’s house, “carpentered neatly by himself and by himself lettered” (LA, 58), there is a sign that the minister considers his “monument” (LA, 57). It is an oblong object, presenting its face to the street, and conceived to announce that “Reverend Gail Hightower, D.D.”, would be giving “art lessons”, making “handpainted Xmas & anniversary cards”, and developing photographs. Placed in his yard after he resigned from his church, the sign was supposed to help him find new ways of making money. Sitting by the window, he does not need to read it. Nor do the townspeople, who know by heart what is written in the legend that, by the way, has never attracted a single art student. Hightower’s monument appears, in this introduction to the life of the minister, as a metaphor for the man cloistered in the house: a decorative piece of stone that is no longer of use for its purpose. Furthermore, the sign can also be taken as the gravestone of a man who died for life, an epitaph which “[...] glittered with an effect as of Christmas”. It is interesting to observe the word “Christmas” in this context. If we consider the sign to be the minister’s gravestone, the reference to the character who is both agent and victim of death is not casual.

Yet the sign can tell us more about Hightower and about *Light in August*. Describing this small monument, the narrator states that “[...] the paint and the shattered glass had weathered out of the fading letters. They were still readable, however [...]” (LA, 58). In the next paragraph, there is a similar passage:

So the sign which he carpentered and lettered is even less to him than it is to the town; he is no longer conscious of it as a sign, a message. He does not remember it at all until he takes place in the study window just before dusk. Then it is just a familiar low oblong shape without any significance at all (LA, 60).

What seems to be at stake in these passages is the insignificance of language when compared to the life of Hightower. The minister can also be described as “fading letters” composed of “shattered glass” and of a dying paint. And despite being “still readable”, Hightower cannot find meaning in his life as well as in his sign. Language, in this context, does not convey any significance and is as full of failure as the life of the minister, as incoherent as his sermons and conversations about the Civil War that “[...] did not make sense at all” (LA, 61).

The failure of language is depicted in several other passages in *Light in August*<sup>2</sup>. There is, for example, the sound of the wagon approaching Lena Grove, coming “[...] slow and terrific and without meaning [...]” (LA, 8). There is also Joe Brown (Lucas Burch) “[...] talking and laughing, his voice heard clear across the square and back again in echo, somewhat as a meaningless sound in a church seems to come from everywhere at once” (LA, 40)<sup>3</sup>. Duvall provides other examples:

[...] Calvin Burden who ‘read from the gilt and blazoned [Spanish Bible] in that language that none of them understood’<sup>4</sup> [...]. Joe Christmas, raised first in a white orphanage and then by white adoptive parents, fails in his attempt to merge with the black community because he finds blacks’ ‘voices murmuring, talking, laughing in a language not his’<sup>5</sup>(151).

Another interesting point to be noticed is the “harmonic tide” of voices that comes from the Presbyterian Church (LA, 76). Byron Bunch asks himself whether Hightower “[...] hears it too [...] *Or maybe he has listened to it so much and so long that he dont even hear it anymore. Dont even need to not listen*” (LA, 81). This condition of not hearing, of not being capable to understand sounds and voices, is a leitmotif in the whole novel. It is underlined and stressed as Joe Christmas is chased and murdered. After his flight, the fire alarm goes off “[...] beginning and mounting to a slow and sustained scream that seemed at last to pass beyond the realm of hearing, into that of sense, like soundless vibration” (LA, 460). And it follows Joe and Percy Grimm as the former heads towards his cabin and then to the minister’s house. This sound also follows Joe’s state of mind, that cannot be described, that is “beyond the realm of hearing” (language and words), going “into that of sense”, which cannot be accurately described. Then the siren falls, as though holding its breath, and accompanies the narrative and its climatic point in which Joe Christmas is trapped. It only mounts again as the castrated man lies in the minister’s kitchen:

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Duvall, pg. 151.

<sup>3</sup> This passages echoes that of Hightower, already quoted on page 26 of this study : “It is like listening in a cathedral to a eunuch chanting in a language which he does not even need to understand” (LA, 318).

<sup>4</sup> LA, 243.

<sup>5</sup> LA, 114.

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 (LA, 465).

This “crescendo” also surpasses the realm of language. Christmas’s state of mind is never described during this final moment, as though no words could actually account for it. There is only the “sound and fury” of life in its encounter with death. But before this tragic ending, the narrator warns the reader about this incapacity of language in providing sense for Joe Christmas. In a clear parallel with Hightower, he points that Christmas

[...] was hearing a myriad sounds of no greater volume – voices, murmurs, whispers: of trees, darkness, earth; people: his own voice; other voices evocative of names and times and places – which he had been conscious of all his life without knowing it, which were his life [...] He could see it like a printed sentence, fullborn and already dead [...] like the faded and weathered letters on a last year’s billboard [...] (LA, 105).

Like in the case of the minister, the “faded and weathered letters” relate to a life “fullborn and already dead”, meaningless as it cannot be associated with other lives and other people. Both Christmas and Hightower, on this matter, are divided selves. The former, split between his “black blood” and his white color. The latter, frozen in his urn of hidden desire and barren aesthetics. Their identities are closely linked to their names, to “[...] all the sounds and rhythms that proceed” from them (Gass, 49). They are two, and for that matter, they are no one<sup>6</sup>. And around these two characters there seems to be always present a sound “of trees, darkness, earth”, to which they do not heed for being enclosed in their alienation<sup>7</sup>.

The letters that lose strength and vigor reflect directly on how other characters see themselves, since the failure of language is intrinsically related to identity<sup>8</sup>. Hightower’s wife, for example, registered in a hotel in Memphis “under a fictitious name”, committing

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Bleikasten in his article “The Closed Society and Its Subjects”: “To have an identity: to be one; to have two identities: to be no one” (86).

<sup>7</sup> “The sound of insects” is present in many passages with Christmas and Hightower. Cf. LA, 90, 91, 215, 219, 222, 229, 261, 318, 387, and 391.

<sup>8</sup> Consider, for example, the conversation between the Black gardener and the small Christmas at the orphanage : ““What you watching me for, boy?” and he said ‘How come you are a nigger?’ and the nigger said ‘Who told you I am a nigger, you little white trash bastard?’ and he says ‘I aint a nigger’ and the nigger says ‘You are worse than that. You dont know what you are. And more than that, you wont never know. You’ll live and you’ll die and you wont never know’” (LA, 383-384).

suicide shortly after that. Her “rightful name” is found by the police in a piece of paper “torn [...] up and thrown [...] into the waste basket” (LA, 67). Seemingly, the young Joe Christmas refuses to accept his new “Christian” name (LA, 145), and even Lena Grove admits that she had been incorrectly taken for Mrs. Burch: “I told you false. My name is not Burch yet. It’s Lena Grove” (LA, 18)<sup>9</sup>. For Lena, by the way, the insistence of the people in telling her that the man who lived in Jefferson was named Bunch, and not Burch, makes no difference at all: “I thought they had just got the name wrong and so it wouldn’t make any difference” (LA, 51). Here, in Lena’s naivety, it is possible to see Faulkner’s irony at its best. Not only will it make all the difference, but it will also determine the future of all the other characters.

But it is Byron Bunch who best defines the crisis between language and identity. After realizing that Lena is not a virgin, and hearing her “moaning wail” that “[...] was not his tongue nor that of any man” (LA, 399), he departs from Jefferson with the intention of not coming back. As he hounds up a hill on his mule, he thinks:

It is like the edge of nothing. Like once I passed it I would just ride right off into nothing. Where trees would look like and be called by something else except trees, and men would look like and be called by something else except folks. And Byron Bunch he wouldn’t even have to be or not be Byron Bunch (LA, 424).

Byron suffers because of his unrequited love for Lena. After the hill lies “the edge of nothing”, the place where names are of no importance since they do not mean anything, they do not account for his anguish. As he marches away from Jefferson, from the mill where he found his safe place in order to be kept away from evil, he loses ground on what he considered the order and the meaning of things. He hopes to get through the barriers of his old identity to mitigate his pain. Yet, as he goes on toward the top, he acknowledges that this aspiration is not real. He crosses the crest of the hill and sees that everything continues there: “the trees which are trees, the terrific and tedious distance which, being, moved by blood, he must compass forever and ever between two inescapable horizons of the the implacable truth”. For, just like language itself, his reality might seem incomprehensible, but lies still in front of him, all around. Words can lose their meaning, but not their presence:

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<sup>9</sup> For more on names and identity, cf. Tucker (142-143).

*All right. You say you suffer. All right. But in the first place, all we got is your naked word for it. And in the second place, you just say that you are Byron Bunch. And in the third place, you are just the one that calls yourself Byron Bunch today, now, this minute...* (LA, 424).

There is a transient quality in this passage, with meaning and identity being subject to time. What he tries to convey, his suffering, cannot be fully expressed since it is only “his naked word”, heralded by a certain man named Byron Bunch in the time present. It is interesting to note how biased Byron becomes, he who at the beginning of the novel was a reliable narrator. His words now are questioned, doubted as he himself doubts them. After tracking Burch down and being beat up by this latter, he returns to Jefferson and meets a man on the road who tells him that Christmas was dead: “I thought maybe you hadn’t heard. About an hour ago. That nigger, Christmas. They killed him” (LA, 442). Byron, the one who narrated Christmas’s story to Hightower, now is informed of the brutal ending of this same story. We are never informed of his reaction. Yet, in his current state of mind, the news would not impress or overwhelm him. In his mind, just like on Hightower’s signboard, the letters seem to fade away.

## The halo of faces

If we consider that the characters in *Light in August* are sometimes alienated from themselves and in search of identity, we will ultimately discover that they suffer also from a metaphorical blindness. The case of Gail Hightower is perhaps the best example of a self-imposed inability in seeing. With “[...] his dark spectacleblurred eyes” (LA, 308) the minister contemplates his life, but can never actually see the people and the faces around him. He was not able, seemingly, to see what was going on with his wife, her trips to Memphis and her collapsing mental situation. As the reporters from Memphis arrive at his church, in Jefferson, he tries to avoid them by “[...] keeping his face concealed [...] behind the book” (LA, 68-69). But it is at the beginning of his relationship with his wife that the minister’s blindness is depicted more clearly:

He believed at once that she was beautiful, because he had heard of her before he ever saw her and when he did see her he did not see her at all because of the face which he had already created in his mind. [...] He did not see the face for three years [...] He did not see her face at all (LA, 479).

The illusion he creates functions as a mask that blots out and blurs up his capacity to see the faces around him. It is a denial of reality, if reality goes against what is calcified in his delusional mind. Joe Christmas’s stepfather is another case of self-denial. He was simply unable to see that the boy he had adopted had become a man (LA, 161). And Hines, Christmas’s disturbed and fanatical grandfather, is described by the narrator as having “mad” eyes (LA, 127):

Though he was looking directly at her face he did not seem to see her at all, his eyes did not. They looked like they were blind, wide open, iccold, fanatical (LA, 129).

Again his cold mad gray eyes did not seem to see her, to look at her at all (LA, 131).

These people are unable to see because they are blinded by obsession, fanatical religion, austerity, and racism. They have on their faces “looks” that are referred to as

“gray”, “cold”, petrified and mineral characteristics of people immobile in their convictions. It is only a moment of anger, of surprise, when life escapes from their control, that vision is reestablished. When Mrs. McEachern sees Joe after he comes back from the party at which he possibly killed his stepfather, she sees the face that her husband “[...] had seen [...] as the chair fell” (LA, 208). Seemingly, when Joe, in his flight, meets Bobbie and tries to take her way with him: “He just stared at her, at the face which he had never seen before [...]” (LA, 217). And Hightower seeing his wife “[...] for the first time as a living face, as a mask before desire and hatred [...]” (LA, 480).

As a matter of fact, the mask is a common metaphor in Faulkner. It represents the social code we are submitted to, the conventions of morality and conduct that guide human intercourse. In *Light in August*, the mask can be seen on the dietitian, who had been fearing that the young Christmas would tell about her sexual encounter with a man in the orphanage: “[...] she carried her own face like an aching mask in a fixed grimace of dissimulation that dared not flag” (LA, 124). It also appears as Joe strikes McEachern with a chair and screams to the people around him: “Dont a one of you move, now’, he said looking steadily and ceaselessly at faces that might have been masks” (LA, 206). But more interesting is the mask used by Hightower himself, who is described as having “two faces” (LA, 89).

Yet Bleikasten is right when he observes that “[...] *le moment arrive toujours où les masques tombent, où les statues s’animent, où il faut commencer à accepter l’inéluctable confrontation avec l’autre*” (*Parcours de Faulkner*, 351). These masks are confronted with eyes that kill and die, like those of Christmas, and cannot last unchanged on the face of the characters. The mask on Hightower is, at a first moment, an illusion of a martyr, of a person who considers himself immune from the community’s acts:

He seems to watch himself, alert, patient, skillful, playing his cards well, making it appear that he was being driven, uncomplaining, into that which he did not even then admit had been his desire since before he entered the seminary. [...] Allowing himself to be persecuted, to be dragged from his bed at night and carried into the woods and beaten with sticks, he all the while bearing in the town’s sight and hearing, without shame, with that patient and voluptuous ego of the martyr, the air, the behavior, the *How long, O Lord* until, inside his house again and the door locked, he lifted the mask with voluptuous and triumphant glee: *Ah. That’s done now. That’s past now. That’s bought and paid for now* (LA, 489-490).

But that is just acting. The real mask will only fall when Hightower recognizes in others the face he denied in himself, when he sees the faces of other characters peacefully arranged in a halo. The minister always sought peace, but never found it. With the halo that ends his chapter he will finally glimpse at the possibility of living more peacefully. This is his final act, in silence, with no music or sound coming from his ancient church. It is a moment to actually see, and this time there is no acting, no delusion:

He seems to watch himself among faces, always among, enclosed and surrounded by, faces, as though he watched himself in his own pulpit, from the rear of the church, or as though he were a fish in a bowl. And more than that: the faces seem to be mirrors in which he watches himself. He knows them all; he can read his doings in them. He seems to see reflected in them a figure antic as a showman, a little wild: a charlatan preaching worse than heresy, in utter disregard of that whose stage he preempted [...] (LA, 488).

Hightower has in front of him an audience of faces, as he used to have in his congregation. But now he sees them, and he sees himself in double perspective of a man who observes and who is being observed. He is a “fish in a bowl”, as well as a reflection of all the other faces that contemplate him. But the most important words in this passage are perhaps “antic” and “stage”. They reveal the mask, the acting, the false role of a leader which the minister had assumed for himself and has not been able to fulfill. Once he tells Byron: “What a dramatist you would have made” (LA, 389), but during all the time it was him performing the role, on stage, unconvincing.

Yet another aspect must be analyzed. The halo of faces is also a reflection of the novel itself, a recollection of the characters that “[r]eviennent en procession” (Bleikasten, 357):

The halo is full of faces. The faces are not shaped with suffering, not shaped with anything: not horror, pain, not even reproach. They are peaceful, as though they have escaped into an apotheosis; his own is among them. In fact, they all look a little alike, composite of all the faces which he has ever seen (LA, 491).

Among the faces he distinguishes his wife’s, those of the people from Jefferson and from his ancient church, that of Byron Bunch and Lena, and those of Christmas and Percy Grimm. These last two blend together forming “[...] a more inextricable [...]



compositeness”. Christmas and Grimm, victim and executioner, occupy the same place, as being antithetical arguments of the same logic<sup>10</sup>, revealing the final analogy between life and death, beginning and end.

The faces provide a final parade in which the characters are shown as having achieved peace. It is a halo of light, the same light of August, and probably echo of the title of the novel. We find, in Hightower’s vision, a *mise en abyme* that intends to put under analyzes not language (*le code*), but the subject (*l’énoncé*) of *Light in August*, the fictitious world of Jefferson. According to Dällenbach, “[...] *est mise en abyme tout miroir interne réfléchissant l’ensemble du récit par reduplication simple, répétée ou spéculaire*” (52). Explaining this definition, Hutcheon writes that,

[The first type] is a simple reduplication, in which the mirroring fragment has a relation of similitude with the whole that contains it. A second type is a repeated reduplication ‘in infinitum’ in which the above-mentioned mirroring fragment bears within itself another mirroring fragment, and so on. The third type of doubling is labeled ‘aporistique’, and here the fragment is supposed to include the work in which it itself is included (55-56).

Hightower’s vision, then, would be a type of “*mise en abyme aporistique*”, being structured on the level of the “*énoncé*”, its story. The halo makes clear reference to the title and to the light that pervades the novel, and the faces reduplicate the characters and give them a new meaning by conciliating the faces in one peaceful composite. It is important to notice that a *mise en abyme* at the level of the “*énoncé*” “[...] can direct the reader to future events, yet unread<sup>11</sup>, or to past ones, both within and preceding texts” (Hutcheon, 56). That is the case of Hightower’s “apotheosis”, in which the reader is directed to past events as in “*effet de répertoire*” (Ricardou, 78).

The faces are peaceful, the masks are off. Faulkner, through his defrocked minister, calls upon his characters to be reviewed in a last circle of light. It is a halo in which death and life merge together to form a single composite: that of progress and movement,

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<sup>10</sup> For Bleikasten, “[d]e même qu’une seule et même place marque sur le cadran des horloges midi et minuit, un même lieu, sur le cercle de lumière, est assigné aux visages naguère ennemis de Christmas et de son bourreau, Percy Grimm” (*Parcours de Faulkner*, 357).

<sup>11</sup> When Joe acknowledges that killing Joanna Burden would be part of his fate and tragedy, after she insisted to pray over him, he says to himself: “*I had to do it*” (280). And although he had not yet done it, since the killing takes place only two nights later, we know he has. The crime has already been communicated to the reader through Byron Bunch, who tells the story to Hightower. Had the reader not been aware of the crime, this sentence Joe semi-consciously says would only indicate his fatal destiny as already set. It would be fictional past hinting to the unfolding of events in fictional present. However, the reader does know, in his own reading time, that the crime occurred. Joe is, therefore, entangled not only in the chaotic world of Jefferson, but also in that of the narrative itself.

“forever and forever” turning, like Hightower’s “wheel of thought”. The minister becomes then the last mediator figure, between narrator and narratee, author and reader, and the diegetic townspeople. He seems to become too the ultimate intermediate sphere between his fellow characters and the infamous “Player” or “Opponent”, who “[...] created spontaneous rules” (LA, 438) and moved the characters “[...] just like chessmen” (LA, 437). The same Player that guided McEachern in his search for Christmas (LA, 204), and Grimm in his frenetic persecution (LA, 462, 464). This force has been already regarded as a sort of malevolent, indifferent God, propelling Christmas to death and denying him any possibility of future. Yet, this Player, as the word itself tells us, can surprisingly be the author himself, invading the narrative world with its “[...] final and supreme Face [...], cold, terrible because of Its omniscient detachment” (LA, 488-489). This last face is envisioned by Hightower, in his darkening room waiting for the galloping hooves. He seems to be forever trapped in that place, with the visits of the dead grandfather and his “boys”. Yet, the minister is also in the light of a new understanding, in a halo of people that during his life he kept on denying, between the Face and all the other faces.

## Conclusion

In this study I intended to analyze the role of Gail Hightower in William Faulkner's *Light in August* in its structural, thematic, and aesthetical perspective. As we have seen, the character of the defrocked minister was already in Faulkner's mind when the author started writing the book, and represented for him a type that stands for the romanticized past of the South of the United States. Hightower is also used by Faulkner as a narrative tool to update the reader regarding the new facts that unfold in the story told by Byron Bunch. Acting as a narratee, Hightower serves as a mediator between the reader and the story, forcing Byron's narration to give answers and to fill previous gaps, and opening the possibility for new plots of action.

It is to his role of outcast, however, that most critics have directed their attention. The minister, affected by his wife's suicide, and forced to resign from his church, retreats himself in a self-imposed exile, living his fantasies alone by his window, at dusk. These reveries are those of his grandfather's group of men who, during the Civil War, carried out a raid on General Ulysses Grant's stores in Jefferson. His reveries, furthermore, relate to his hidden desire, his "hunger" for heroism and, clearly, his homosexuality. His encounter with Joe Christmas and the birth of Lena's baby drastically change the minister's life, and redirect him back to human intercourse.

Finally, we discussed the failure of language and the crisis of identity which face many of the characters. Hightower's final apotheosis is discussed in terms of a reflection on the novel itself, as a *mise en abyme* whose intent is to mirror the characters of *Light in August* and place them into the same halo of light.

I recognize, though, that this analyzes is partial and incomplete. *Light in August* is an "*oeuvre ouverte*", with many plots of actions and several characters. To choose just one of them is to separate this character from the wholeness of the book, which is precisely its analogies, its parallelism, and, paradoxically, its disjunction. Gail Hightower, however, always seemed to me a superb achievement of Faulkner. He is a major character because of his flaws, his inabilities and childish fears to face real life. Moreover, with his reflection, he touches at the core of Southern culture, especially its dominant religious morality.

This singular character can also serve as a model for future studies on narratorial self-awareness in the works of William Faulkner. Through Gail Hightower, it is clear that

the American author wanted to give new insights on his novel, without interfering too much as a narrator. He endows the character with a capacity to go beyond the limits of Jefferson and to make general assumptions about the condition of men and the decadent “glorious” South. Hightower can, finally, summon the characters for a last scene, for a final act in which there are no more masks and their faces are calm. Perhaps that “light in August” is ultimately related to this last halo of faces and to the real light that, according to Faulkner, has a different quality in the month. And it is the grotesque figure of the minister who envisions what none of the other characters possibly could. In his in-between position, he assumes a role of both pathetic outcast and visionary intellectual, of guilty husband and dedicated midwife, of a barren urn and a living gale.

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**MOTS-CLÉS** : William Faulkner, *Lumière d'août*, Gail Hightower, caractérisation.

## **RÉSUMÉ**

Ce mémoire traite du roman *Lumière d'août*, de William Faulkner, spécialement du rôle du personnage Gail Hightower. Divisée en trois parties, cette étude présente, en premier lieu, le processus de caractérisation de Hightower et son rôle de médiateur dans l'intrigue. Secondement, nous analysons le rôle thématique du personnage, lié directement à son exil dans le monde fictionnel de Jefferson. Finalement, nous essayons d'établir un rapport entre le dernier chapitre de Hightower avec les concepts de mise en abyme et métatextualité. Cette étude vise, au bout du compte, à démontrer que le prédicateur sans église joue un rôle ambigu de paria et de médiateur, restant entre histoires et personnages. A travers Hightower, Faulkner a pu transmettre ses opinions sur la religion et sur le Sud décadent, trop attaché à son passé romantique de gloire.

**KEYWORDS** : William Faulkner, *Light in August*, Gail Hightower, characterization.

## **ABSTRACT**

This study deals with William Faulkner's *Light in August*, especially with the role of the character Gail Hightower. Divided in three parts, this thesis presents, firstly, Hightower's process of characterization and his role of mediator in the plot. Secondly, we analyze the character's thematic role along directly linked to his retreat in the fictional world of Jefferson. Finally, we try to establish a connection between Hightower's last chapter with the conceptions of *mise en abyme* and metatextuality. This study aims, ultimately, in demonstrating that the defrocked minister plays an ambiguous role of outcast and of mediator, remaining between plots and characters. Through Hightower, Faulkner was able to convey his opinions on religion and on the decadent South, too attached to its glorious and romanticized past.