

## Treatment of the Female Characters in the Novels of William Faulkner

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### Abstract

William Faulkner's portrayal of female characters in his novels reflects the complexities of Southern society, gender roles, and patriarchal oppression. His women are often shaped by historical, cultural, and familial expectations, struggling against the rigid structures that confine them. Faulkner presents a wide range of female figures, from the tragic to the defiant, offering nuanced perspectives on womanhood. Characters like Caddy Compson in *\*The Sound and the Fury\** embody rebellion against traditional expectations, yet they are often defined through male perspectives. Similarly, Addie Bundren in *\*As I Lay Dying\** challenges the roles imposed upon her, expressing disillusionment with motherhood and marriage. Temple Drake in *\*Sanctuary\** represents the dangers of a society that objectifies and commodifies women, exposing the violence they endure. Meanwhile, Miss Rosa Coldfield in *\*Absalom, Absalom!\** and Joanna Burden in *\*Light in August\** reveal how women who defy social conventions suffer alienation and tragedy. Faulkner's narratives highlight the tension between women's agency and societal repression, portraying them as victims of patriarchal control yet imbuing them with moments of strength and resistance. His use of stream-of-consciousness and fragmented storytelling further emphasizes the subjectivity of female experiences, often filtering their stories through the perspectives of male characters. While his works critique the oppressive structures that limit women's autonomy, they also reveal his own entrenchment in certain gender biases, as many of his female characters are denied complete narrative authority. Faulkner's exploration of femininity is deeply interwoven with themes of loss, identity, and decay, mirroring the decline of the Old South. His women are symbols of change and continuity, embodying both the burden of the past and the potential for transformation. Through his portrayal of female characters, Faulkner offers a profound commentary on the intersections of gender, power, and social decay in the American South.

**Keywords:** Gender roles, Patriarchy, Female agency, Southern society, Oppression

Faulkner's novel *Light in August* is an exploration of racial conflict in the society of Southern United States. Originally Faulkner planned to call the novel *Dark House*, which also becomes the working title for *Absalom! Absalom!*

Supposedly, one summer evening while sitting on a porch, his wife remarked on the strange quality that light in the south has during the month of August. Faulkner rushed out of his chair to his manuscript, scratched out the original title, and penciled in 'Light in August' however this story is probably apocryphal given the huge symbolic role that both light and the month of August play in the novel.

The narrative structure consists of three connected plots. The first depicts the story of Lena Grove, a young pregnant woman who is trying to find the father of her unborn child, Lucas Burch. With that purpose she learns her home town and walks several hundred miles to Jefferson, a town in Faulkner's fictional Yoknapatawpha County. There she is supported by Byron Bunch; an employee in the planning mill who falls in love with Lena and hopes to marry her. The narrative plot of Lena's story is also circular: it builds a framework around the two other plots. One of these is the story of the enigmatic character Joe Christmas and her involvement with Joanna Bundren ensue all the action in the second plot. The third plot tells the story of Reverend Gail High-water. He is obsessed by the past adventure of his confederate grandfather, who was killed while stealing chickens from a farmer's shed.

However, the novel presents the characters of Lena Grove and Joanna Bundren, each one is quite opposite to one another and around whom the plot revolves significantly. Firstly we should concentrate on Lena Grove and our study will interpret Lena Grove's role in William Faulkner's *Light in August* by closely investigating the social conditions which produce the narrator's ideology. Previous criticism has stripped Lena of her subjectivity by denigrating her as a bovine earth mother or fertilizing her mythological earth goddess. Our study, however, rights the discourse by showing that the narrator presents ample evidence of Lena's psychological development. It also argues that the critical misunderstanding of Lena stems from the critical misunderstanding of Faulkner's narrative voice. Allen Tate has famously argued that:

'With the war of 1914-18, the south reentered the world but gave a backward glance as it stepped over the border that backward glance gave us the southern Renaissance, literature conscious of the past in the present.'  
(44, *American South in Civil Wars*)

This 'backward glance and its re-entry into 'the world' is the territory of much of Faulkner's fiction, including *Light in August*, unlike Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*, which nostalgically mythologizes a south that never was. Faulkner's narrative critiques a very real southern present of the 1930's; it explores a new post industrial, post-reconstructed south; a south where Marx's maxims that 'the tradition of all the dead generation weights like a nightmare on the brain of the living' proves true. Marx's maxim's pertinence here gains strength because in *Light in August* a discord exists between historic communal traditions and new modes of earning a living: the novel presents a society in flux in which

individual citizens have little pretence of economic security and in which hierarchical divisions, economically and racially, are breaking down. It is precisely this flux that makes the community fetishized all the more its history and turns it into a rigid ideological code of all the major characters in this novel only Lena survives psychologically whole. Light in August investigates this New South that Lena's flexibility allows her to survive, for she becomes a community of one (or two within one), who never had a past worthy of mythologizing. She becomes the lone light in the darkness of what Harold Bloom calls William Faulkner's 'fourteen years of nihilistic splendor'. Her light, however, is only relative to the darkness she encounters in Jefferson. Faulkner's bleak narrative landscape from *The Sound and the Fury* to *Go Down Moses* begins of course in the mind of Benjy Compson, the 'idiot' and ends with a curiously bitter like McCaslin. Of all the families of Faulkner's canon the Bundrens, the Compson, the Sartoris, the Sutpen's, the Hightowers and the Griersons, only Luna Grove still travels, transcending the narrative which attempts to contain her.

Lena Grove is absolutely unique in Faulkner's oeuvre; she achieves paradigmatic psychic health because she alone becomes a community of one, who live life for herself and on her terms; a dialectical achievement made possible by the post-antebellum, post industrial south from which she springs, ignorance, and naiveté on the one hand and more recently, commentators as strong as Beleikastan has fetishized her as representative of a mythological goddess on the other. Olga Vickery, for instance correctly notes that:

'Each person (Lena) meets, sees not her but an image of what he believes her to be, and that image is at least partly predetermined by the convention that identifies virginity with virtue.' (40, *The Novels of William Faulkner: A Critical Interpretation*)

She errs, however, by arguing that 'certainly the real Lena, more than slightly stupid and more than slightly selfish is unworthy of the dreams and the devotion she inspires'. (47) Textual evidence abounds suggesting that Lena is not stupid and that the only devotion she inspires, belongs to Byron, which stems from his own fetishization of her. While Lena as Earth-Goddess has become a critical cliché, Cleanth Brooks, the original normative Faulknerian, claims that the title Earth-Goddess is a little highfalutin for Lena' (65, *William Faulkner: First Encounter*) and that here serenity 'has frequently been put down to sheer mindlessness, and Lena, to be sure, is a very simple young woman'. (67) Irwin Howe argues that Lena:

Stands for the outrageous possibility that the assumption by Faulkner and his cultivated readers may be false the assumption that suffering finds consciousness. For Lena is an one who does "right" with a remarkably small amount of consciousness or suffering, neither of which she apparently needs very much: she is Faulkner's wry tribute to his own fallibility, a

tribute both persuasive and not meant completely to persuade.' (16, William Faulkner: A Critical Study)

Donald Kartiganer furthers Howe's argument by adding that 'insofar as consciousness is concerned and the modernists' (46, Faulkner and Ideology) grasp of life as a struggle toward full awareness, Lena Grove is the character least relevant, for she is herself barely conscious at all'.

Indeed Lena has become the Ulysses bow of criticism down the year's right from the inception of the novel. However, it is true that Lena is trapped within male discourse, but these same commentators do not see how Lena shapes this male discourse and ultimately escapes beyond it. She has yet to succumb to 'Patriarchal Culture', unlike the horribly failed relationship between Christmas and Joanna, Lena's demonstration that she can live on her own terms obviates the need for such gender distinctions. Such distinctions do not much concern her. Far from a 'hollow' victory, Lena's victory is her fulfillment defined by no one but herself.

Despite having no money, no husband, having no home, mothering a fatherless child through the great depression, Lena still smiles as she travels towards the unknown. She has laboured for her victory. Whereas most of the characters in the novel allow the past to write their future, Lena reverses this by allowing her present to rewrite her past.

When the narrator, in the process of describing Lena's life, recalls that Lena 'later (...) would say to herself "That's just my luck." (34. Light in August); he grants her a life beyond the temporal world within the novel. No other character except Christmas is given such privilege. He grants thoughts and life to her beyond his text which colours her action throughout the rest of the novel. Deborah Clarke astutely notes that:

'From the very start of this novel we see the failure of male imagination to understand the female psyche. In some ways these failures makes Lena one of the most threatening figures in the text once again. Faulkner display an awareness, generally attributed to women writers, of such marginalization and that he attempts to write beyond it.' (87, Robbing the Mother)

Lena, however, never imposes her desires upon another person. She, therefore, lives in a perfectly balanced economy. Doreen Fowler asks, 'Where in Faulkner's fiction do we find a woman who is young. sexual, unashamedly feminine and also capable of ratiocination?' (63, The Return of the Repressed). Careful readers of Faulkner's writing know they may find one in Lena Grove. With no intention, she is the narrator and those who are receptive to her the 'otherness of another self. (64) In such nihilistic landscape, Lena's hard earned joy is nothing less than heroic. Feminist as Jennifer Nicke also have argued that we need to move beyond the general category of 'women' to where class, race and

gender coalesce. The construction of gender, then, specify the gender 'women', needs to be studied within its complex Social and linguistic matrices. Our contention, right now, is that William Faulkner's text provides a richly woven narrative fabric in which to study the interplay of race and gender in the shaping of the 'female subject'.

The other female character of *Light in August*, Joanna Bundren, who is often subsumed under discussion of Joe Christmas in interpretations needs to be re-examined in order for us to understand the complex shaping influences which determine her ill-fated relationship with Joe Christmas. We can hesitatingly present forward the view that we cannot interpret the portrayal of Joanna's gender without understanding the significance of Faulkner's choices regarding Joanna's heritage in other words, her race, religion and peculiar social position in a very recent study. The Feminine and Faulkner, Minrose Gwin has reaffirmed the power of the female subject to create, disrupt and even de-construct the forces that would arrest and restrict free play of multiple meanings. As captivating as are Gwin's 'conversations', with Faulkner's texts, however, we must take a different path in discussing the female subject here, especially in Joanna Bundren.

Joanna Bundren, a so-called 'nigger-lover', is a very much odd woman with a rather unusual past. Her last name represents generations of self-imposed struggle and despair. Faulkner gave her and her family the last name of Bundren to further illustrate, explain and characterize Joanna and her nature, Joanna is the first mentioned in chapter two by a townsman-type narrator as:

A woman of middle age. She has lived in the house since she was born, yet she stills a stranger, a foreigner whose people move in from the North during Reconstruction. A Yankee, a lover of Negroes, about whom in the town there is still talk of queer relations with Negroes in the town. (67. *Light in August*)

It is clearly evident that Joanna has no sense of community with the town man, or they with her. A character of the novel elaborates it by saying:

They say she is still mixed up with niggers. Visit them when they are sick, like they were white Folks say she claims that niggers are the same as white folks. That's why folks never go out there. (71. *Light in August*)

Joanna is alienated from the southerners. She has lived among her whole life. Her alienation only makes her dejected, a hopeless spirit, impossible to overcome. Joanna's grandfather and father got a commission to go 'Jefferson' 'to help with the free Negroes' (77), and Joanna, at the age of four, was informed by her father, who had taken her to the graves of her grandfather and brother, that her:

'Grandfather and brother are lying there, murdered not by one white man but by the curse which God put on a whole race before your grandfather or

your brother or me or you were even thought of a race doomed and cursed to be forever and ever a part of the white race's doom and curse for its sins... None can escape it." (81, *Light in August*)

Terrified Joanna asked, 'None even me?' and he said, 'Not even you. Least of all, you.' (84) Following that, Joanna says that she:

'Seemed to see (Negroes) for the first time not as people, but as a thing, a shadow in which I lived, we lived, all white people, all other people. I thought of all the children coming for ever into the world, white, with the black shadow already falling upon them before they breathe. (84, *Light in August*)

Here the full extent of Joanna Bundren is revealed. She feels that she must do whatever she can to relieve herself and other human from the curse. The 'shadow' makes Joanna herself feel weighed down and helpless. Her name is the symbol of the state of her conscience; she must always carry her guilt and name, till death.

Joanna Bundren's conscience is weighed down by her feelings that the white race is being punished by God for the treatment of the black race. Her name signifies the burden; she carries her entire life and which ultimately leads to her destruction. Her heritage is the cause of her pain, as well as her death. Faulkner's characterization of Joanna Bundren would have served its purpose without giving her such an obvious name, yet her character would not have been so painfully poignant without that reminder of her burden. It's not fair to say that her name determined who Joanna Bundren became, but it certainly contributed to her life and the feeling that, like her name, she was born with and could not escape the curse.

However, William Faulkner portrayed varied characters, especially women in his novels and Lena Grove and Joan Bundren are the prominent ones among them. These characters certainly hold u the feminine perspective along with the varied colours of life surrender and serenity, sex and sin. Indeed, the women in Faulkner truly represent the incalculability's of life about.

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