Alienation, Identity, and Trauma in William Faulkner's *Light in August*

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Abstract

This paper conducts a critical examination of William Faulkner's exploration of alienation, identity, and trauma in Light in August*, drawing upon trauma studies and existential philosophy to scrutinise the existential anxiety permeating the protagonist's experiences. Central to this analysis is Faulkner's depiction of Joe Christmas, whose life is marred by profound alienation and psychological turmoil. The study expounds on how Christmas's past traumatic experiences, in tandem with societal rejection and marginalisation, fuel his ongoing struggle for identity and belonging. This relentless quest reflects deeper existential questions surrounding self-acceptance and connection, underscoring a universal human desire to overcome isolation and achieve self-understanding. By employing psychoanalytic and existential frameworks, the article provides an in-depth interpretation of Christmas's alienation and psychological crisis as emblematic of broader human concerns. Ultimately, Faulkner's portrayal of these existential predicaments within the context of the American South reiterates his ability to interweave individual and societal trauma, revealing enduring insights into the complexities of the human condition. Through this approach, the article enhances scholarly appreciation of Faulkner's literary contributions, offering a critical perspective on how his works confront fundamental issues of human identity, societal oppression, and the quest for meaning within a fractured world.*

Keywords: alienation, identity, trauma, existential anxiety, William Faulkner

1 Introduction

Light in August happens to be one of the major novels by William Faulkner. Published in 1932, it is set in the fictional Yoknapatawpha County in the American South and narrates the intertwining lives of several characters against the complicated backdrop of the American South, in a place and at a time where and when racial segregation was an integral pith to the Southern American experience. While the main narrative arc traces the journey of Joe Christmas, a complex figure with a mysterious racial background, the novel is also the story of Lena Grove, Byron Bunch, Luca Burch / Joe Brown, Gail Hightower and Percy Grimm. Though developed as separate individuals with no initial congruence to catenate them, the characters are linked by their traumatised and alienated psyches and their search for significance and identity as social outcasts. Their converging is made inevitable by psychical proclivities which ostensibly steer them towards an inexorable spiral.

Alienation, a feeling of disassociation engendered by estrangement, exclusion, or withdrawal, suffuses the separate and collective lives of characters who are driven by societal bigotry and traumatic experiences. Alienation, according to Schacht (1996: 10), is "the loss or absence of identification with, and participation in, the form of life characteristic of one's society." Since the 20th century, the various synonyms and concepts related to alienation have come to dominate the discourse on human relationships. Scholarly inquiries into the psyches of individuals described as "estranged," "peripheral," "compulsive," "atypical," "detached" and "solitary" underscore the pre-eminence of the tropes of alienation in contemporary literature. These studies, from disciplines such as philosophy to sociology (See, for example,

Baum 1975; Geyer 2001; and Ghosh 2017; Martin and Stack 1983; Schwartz 2017), collectively highlight the pervasive concern with apprehending the myriad dimensions of alienation within the context of modern existential social dynamics. Schacht further deconstructs this, noting that:

> Ours is a world in which monolithic societies are sustainable only by totalitarian means. The globe has shrunk, economic life has become internationalised and popular culture is following suit, tourism is everywhere, travel is routine, and great numbers of people are on the move, for reasons both good and dismaying. Successive waves in communications technology are further rapidly eroding the conditions of isolation upon which the local acculturation process has long depended. (1996: 3)

Alienation in the early 20th century stemmed from a synthesis of socio-economic, political, and cultural factors. Rapid industrialisation and urbanisation disrupted traditional modes of existence (religion, community, family, class, gender, and nation), disintegrating previously cohesive rural communities and creating impersonal urban environments. This transition fostered widespread feelings of disjunction and isolation, leading to "a sense of weakened attachment to the central institutions in society" (Weakliem and Borch 2004: 415). Capitalist economic structures, with their focus on efficiency, often marginalised worker autonomy by reducing labour to monotonous, specialised tasks, thus exacerbating estrangement. Modernist intellectual and cultural movements reflected and amplified these sentiments, frequently depicting a fragmented and disenchanted reality. The aftermath of World War I further escalated disillusionment, dismantling prevailing ideologies and precipitating an existential crisis. Collectively, these factors reshaped the socio-cultural landscape of the early 20th century (See Bantock 1973; Curtnutt 2018; Flynn 2006; Josipovisi 2010; Levenson 1999; McDonald 2007; Owoeye 2010; Ogunrotimi 2014). Although anarchist movements (drawing on the writings of William Godwin in England, Wilhelm Weitling in Germany, and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon in France) attacked the hierarchical authority of monarchies, governments, and corporations, they could not halt the development and expansion of depersonalised political and economic institutions from the 20th century onward.

Identity is a major construct in the modern novel, as characters navigate challenges of self-definition and belonging amid turbulent life experiences, in terms of race, gender, class, religion and nation. The early 20th century saw shifts in identity due to rapid industrialisation, urbanisation, and socio-cultural changes. As traditional social structures eroded, growing urban environments fostered dislocation and fragmented selfhood. The mass movement of individuals from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds disrupted societal monoliths, creating conditions that foreshadowed irreversible multiculturalism. The modernist construct emphasised alienation and the search for meaning, reflecting existential ambiguity in a world that had become increasingly chaotic in its nebulosity. The devastation of World War I was symbolic, as it intensified identity crises, fostering widespread scepticism toward the few enduring creeds that had been used to build up pre-war identity stereotypes, while rising nationalist movements highlighted political dimensions of identity. These upheavals (political, social, cultural) reshaped conceptualisations of selfhood, leaving a lasting impact on the early 20th-century socio-cultural landscape (Coetzee & Shevin-Coetzee 1995).

Trauma, perhaps, serves as the linchpin connecting the motifs of alienation and identity, leaving an indelible mark on the characters in 20th-century literature. If trauma can be caused by "extreme differences of wealth, status, and power that facilitate oppression, abuse, and scapegoating concerning class, gender, race, or species" (LaCapra 2014: xi), these constructs

have become the central problematics of human existence. The early 20th century saw trauma emerge as a critical concern due to World War I's unprecedented violence and devastation, leading to widespread psychological scars and recognition of PTSD (shell shock) (Fussell 2000; Warwick 1991). This period also marked the rise of Freud's psychoanalytic theories, which heightened awareness of trauma's deep-seated effects on behaviour and mental health. The interwar period's social and economic volatility, including the Great Depression, further compounded collective anxiety. Modernist literature and art explored concepts of fragmentation and psychological distress, underscoring trauma's pervasive impact. Consequently, there was an increasing recognition of trauma's profound influence on both individual and societal dynamics, reshaping mental health understanding.

This research provides an in-depth examination of William Faulkner's *Light in August*, deconstructing his exploration of alienation, identity, and trauma within a racially configured Southern society. By applying trauma and existential theories, we aim to deepen understanding of the protagonist, whose struggles against societal prejudices and search for self-identity reflect far-reaching socio-cultural and psychological dilemmas. We hope to contribute to Faulknerian scholarship by illuminating the protagonist's profound psychological and existential struggles, foregrounding the pernicious effects of racism and marginalisation, and examining enduring issues of identity crises and stigmatisation. Ultimately, we aim to underscore the universal human longing for connection and self-discovery, reinforcing the enduring relevance of Faulkner's work in modern existential and psychological contexts.

2 Trauma Theory: Disrupting Temporality and Selfhood

Trauma theory, rooted in psychoanalytic and post-structuralist thoughts, postulates that traumatic experiences disrupt the rectilinear temporality and cohesive narrative of the self. Trauma, as articulated by scholars such as Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Dori Laub, fractures the continuity of experience, creating a temporal fissure that resists integration into the coherent narrative of the individual. Caruth laid the foundation for trauma theory in the introductory essay to *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995), saying:

> The pathology cannot be defined either by the event itself - which may or may not be catastrophic, and may not traumatise everyone equally - nor can it be defined in terms of a distortion of the event, achieving its haunting power as a result of distorting personal significances attached to it. The pathology consists, rather, solely in the structure of experience or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it. To be traumatised is precisely to be possessed by an image or event. (4–5)

In her seminal work, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), Caruth spotlights the paradoxical nature of trauma: an event not fully experienced at the time but returning insistently as intrusive memories and flashbacks. She deconstructs temporal disjunction as intrinsic to traumatic experience, characterised by fragmented, non-linear memory that resists integration into a cohesive narrative. Caruth contends that trauma disrupts temporal perception, with past traumatic events incompletely apprehended during their occurrence but repeatedly re-experienced later. Thus, being traumatised means being persistently haunted by memories or images of the event. This phenomenon, expressed through

deferred action, "belatedness" (92), creates a temporal aporia where the traumatic past continually intrudes upon the present, leaving the event unassimilated and the present chaotic.

This disjunction highlights trauma's inaccessibility and incomprehensibility, defying integration into cognitive and temporal frameworks. Consequently, the traumatised subject inhabits a paradoxical temporality where the traumatic past is neither wholly past nor entirely present but is continuously re-enacted, collapsing conventional temporal boundaries. Caruth's analysis underscores the limitations of traditional narrative forms in conveying trauma, prompting a re-evaluation of historiography and narrative structures to address traumatic memory's disjunctive temporality adequately.

Trauma's temporal disjunction significantly challenges the existentialist view of selfhood. Existentialism, notably in Jean-Paul Sartre's works, emphasises self-definition through conscious choice and commitment. However, trauma theory complicates this by underscoring the limits of agency and how trauma can undermine control over self-narrative. The unassimilated traumatic event haunts the subject, rendering self-construction fraught with interruptions and gaps.

2.1 Existentialism: Freedom, Responsibility, and Sartre's Notion of "Self" and "Other"

Existentialism, as a philosophical movement, emerged in the mid-20th century, with figures like Jean-Paul Sartre, Martin Heidegger, and Albert Camus at its forefront. It grapples with fundamental questions of human existence, such as the nature of freedom, the burden of responsibility, and the confrontation with the absurd. Sartre's existentialism is articulated in works like *Being and Nothingness* (2003) and *Existentialism is a Humanism* (2007). He posits in the latter that existence precedes essence, meaning individuals are not born with predetermined purposes or identities but must forge their essence through actions and choices. This elaborates the concept that human existence is contingent upon human actions, foregrounding its unpredictable and uncertain nature. This existentialist bend challenges traditional notions of human nature while highlighting individual autonomy and responsibility in configuring their meanings and significance.

Sartre's framework, as presented in *Being and Nothingness*, is concerned with the interplay between "self" and "other," explicating themes such as freedom, responsibility, and the dynamics of human relationships. At its core lies his assertion that existence precedes essence, emphasising individual consciousness and agency in defining one's existence rather than being predefined by external factors.

Central to Sartre's exploration of "self" and "other" is the concept of "the Look" (i.e., regard), which serves as a pivotal metaphor for the existential encounter between individuals or between an individual and society. This notion underscores how the gaze of another can objectify and reduce the subject to a mere object within the other's perception. This encounter disrupts the individual's sense of self, triggering an identity crisis as one becomes aware of being viewed and judged externally. The subject-object dichotomy inherent in "the Look" challenges subjective freedom and autonomy, highlighting the existential tension between being-for-itself (pour-soi) and being-for-others (pour-autrui). Sartre's famous aphorism, "L'enfer, c'est les autres" (Hell is other people, in the play *No Exit,* 1989), encapsulates the anguish stemming from this intersubjective encounter. It reflects the existential dilemma wherein the presence of others imposes a dualistic framework upon the self, compelling individuals to negotiate between authentic self-definition and the external demands projected onto them by society.

Furthermore, Sartre critiques the phenomenon of "bad faith" (mauvaise foi, explicated in Part 1, Chapter 2 of *Being and Nothingness*) as a form of self-deception in which individuals evade their existential freedom and responsibility by averting "one's gaze from facts, or options and choices, that at some level one knows to exist, but about which it is more convenient to be ignorant" (Blackburn 2005: 34). This evasion can manifest through denying one's freedom by attributing actions to external factors or conforming to societal roles and identities imposed from without, thereby obscuring authentic self-determination.

Authenticity, in Sartrean terms, entails embracing existential freedom and responsibility to actively define oneself through choices and actions. Relationships with others become pivotal sites of existential tension where individuals negotiate subjective freedom amidst the intersubjective constraints and influences of social interaction. Recognition by others plays a crucial role in shaping identity but also poses a threat to existential freedom when it imposes external definitions and expectations.

In conclusion, Sartre's analysis of "self" and "other" offers a profound exploration of human subjectivity within existential philosophy. His framework challenges individuals to confront the complexities of intersubjective relations, the struggle for authentic self-definition, and the constant negotiation of freedom and responsibility in defining identity amidst the gaze and expectations of others. This inquiry signposts as a compelling critique of how social dynamics shape individual existence and the existential ramifications of interpersonal encounters.

2.2 The Convergence of Trauma, Existentialism, and Intersubjectivity

The intersection of trauma theory, existentialism, and Sartre's notion of "self" and "other" provides a fertile ground for exploring the complexities of human subjectivity and relationality. Trauma, with its disruptive force, challenges the existentialist ideal of coherent self-construction. The traumatic event, in its return and repetition, fractures the individual's sense of agency and continuity, rendering the project of self-definition an arduous and often Sisyphean task. According to Sartre, the impact of the past (as trauma assails the present) is huge, and it "is not a subjective nuance which comes to shatter the memory; it is an ontological relation which unites the past to the present … (the) past never appears isolated in its pastness" (2003: 133). In his elaboration, Flynn asserts that:

> That relation is not external, it is internal and constitutive. I "am" my past, I don't simply
> have it. But this past has an identity and a permanence that is ever increasing as I continue
> to live. Its ontology is factical; it assumes the features of being-in-itself. So I am my past
> in the manner of not-being it. (2014: 196)

As Sartre deconstructs in *Being and Nothingness*, the past plays a pivotal role in configuring human consciousness and existential experience. He posits that memory is an active cognitive process integral to present consciousness, wherein recollections are selectively assimilated and occasionally distorted. The past is not inert but perpetually revisited and reinterpreted, complicating notions of a static self. Crucially, Sartre introduces "bad faith," where individuals may falsify their freedom by subscribing uncritically to societal norms, leveraging past circumstances as rationalisations for present conduct. Amid these influences, Sartre underscores the significance of existential choice, affirming the freedom to select one's actions independent of past determinants. The intersubjective dimension of trauma complicates this

schema, as trauma is embedded in social contexts. The "look" of the other can re-inscribe individuals in narratives of victimhood. Conversely, recognizing the other's humanity and empathetic engagement offer pathways for healing, enabling survivors to reclaim agency and reconstruct their sense of self.

3 Alienation in *Light in August*

Light in August commences with a vivid depiction of Lena Grove, a pregnant woman from Alabama, resting by a Mississippi roadside with her feet submerged in a ditch as she clutches her shoes. After a month of travel, hitchhiking on wagons or traversing dusty paths on foot, she remains resolute in her determination to reach Jefferson. Lena believes that her lover, employed at a planing mill in the city, will marry her. She aspires to finally don her shoes upon arriving in the urban setting. This solitary image of Lena, burdened by pregnancy and pursuing a man she believes will give her life meaning, serves as a prelude to the novel's central themes. The description of the wagon plodding along the road subtly symbolises the alienated lives of the characters. While the lives of other characters are more thoroughly explored, Faulkner lays the foundation for alienation through Lena's presentation on that isolated, forlorn road:

> The sharp and brittle crack and clatter of its weathered and ungreased wood and metal is slow and terrific: a series of dry sluggish reports carrying for a half mile across the hot still pinewiney silence of the August afternoon. Though the mules plod in a steady and unflagging hypnosis, the vehicle does not seem to progress. It seems to hang suspended in the middle distance forever and forever, so infinitesimal is its progress, like a shabby bead upon the mild red string of road. So much is this so 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 al-ready measured thread being rewound onto a spool. So that at last, as though out of some trivial and unimportant region beyond even distance, the sound of it seems to come slow and terrific and without meaning, as though it were a ghost travelling a half mile ahead of its own shape. (5-6)

The last part of the above quotation ("a ghost travelling a half mile ahead of its own shape") metaphorises the experiences of most of the characters. Alienation, a pervasive motif in the novel, profoundly impacts the lives of its characters, particularly the primary figure, Joe Christmas, whose life Farrell (1995: 84) says is "heaped with injustice" and "dark satanic mills that have figured prominently in Joe's childhood" (Rampton 2008: 69). This pervasive sense of alienation undergirds the extent to which societal expectations and personal histories contribute to his estrangement and disconnection from whichever community he finds himself.

Christmas's alienation begins in early childhood, marked by abandonment and rejection. Found on the doorstep of an orphanage on Christmas Day, he is named "Christmas," symbolising his identity as an unwanted gift. The orphanage, meant to be a refuge, becomes the first site of his social alienation, where the other children "have been calling him Nigger for years" (125). His early exposure to racial prejudice occurs when his "supposed" grandparents claim he is the product of a relationship between their daughter, Milly Hines, and a Mexican, later suggesting that his father might be black. Even the dietician, operating under the conviction that Christmas has caught her while she was breaching moral and professional

propriety, retaliatorily racializes him as Black, a discursive act that initiates a chain of psychological and institutional violences, ultimately resulting in his expulsion.

The critical scene in which Christmas is punished for overhearing the dietitian's sexual encounter accentuates his premature exposure to adult complexities and his enforced separation from innocence. This event not only precipitates his departure from the orphanage but also instils in him a deep sense of shame and displacement. Faulkner introduces Christmas as a figure of liminality, perpetually existing at the margins of societal norms and expectations.

It is unsurprising that early in the novel, the other characters know nothing about him ("They did not know him at all," 27), as he has lived a peripatetic life. After leaving home at seventeen, he wandered for sixteen years before arriving in Jefferson, refusing to develop a specific identity or maintain stable relationships. Tragically, even at the end of the novel, he remains inscrutable to others, just as he was at the beginning. However, according to Byron (a mill worker who tries to help Christmas), if Christmas's behaviour does not signal danger to those around him, the very sound of his name should have indicated something imminently destructive:

> It seemed to him that none of them had looked especially at the stranger until they heard his name. But as soon as they heard it, it was as though there was something in the sound of it that was trying to tell them what to expect; that he carried with him his own inescapable warning, like a flower its scent or a rattlesnake its rattle. Only none of them had sense enough to recognise it. (29)

Though Joe Christmas's life is marked by a sense of perpetual motion, reflecting his internal disquiet and search for belonging, his nomadic existence is symbolic of his alienation. As the narrator reveals, there is "something definitely rootless about him, as though no town nor city was his, no street, no walls, no square of earth his home" (27). He drifts from place to place, never staying long enough to form meaningful connections or to establish a sense of home. This rootlessness is a physical manifestation of his internal temper, highlighting the theme of existential displacement that pervades the novel:

> He thought that it was loneliness which he was trying to escape and not himself. But the street ran on: catlike, one place was the same as another to him. But in none of them could he be quiet. But the street ran on in its moods and phases, always empty: he might have seen himself as in numberless avatars, in silence, doomed with motion, driven by the courage of flagged and spurred despair; by the despair of courage whose opportunities had to be flagged and spurred. He was thirty three years old. (93)

Christmas feels like a perpetual outsider, looking at others from the outside as he is never welcomed or happy sticking with any side of the racial divide.

The episode in which Christmas works at the mill and his subsequent relationship with Joanna Burden further elucidate this trope. Joanna's house, located on the outskirts of the town, symbolises a liminal space where Christmas's alienation intensifies. Joanna herself, an outcast due to her Northern background and her family's abolitionist history, mirrors Christmas's alienation. Their relationship, characterised by cycles of passion and violence, serves as a microcosm of Christmas's larger struggle with estrangement and belonging. Because they are both alienated, they remain inscrutable to each other, offering little protection against the world:

> She told him very little, anyway. They talked very little, and that casually, even after he was the lover of her spinster's bed. Sometimes he could almost believe that they did not talk at all, that he didn't know her at all. It was as though there were two people: the one whom he saw now and then by day and looked at while they spoke to one another with speech that told nothing at all since it didn't try to and didn't intend to; the other with whom he lay at night and didn't even see, speak to, at all. (96)

Rather than providing the much-needed acceptance to each other, they probably reflected a deeper level of estrangement that further foregrounded and increased their personal trauma. Whatever succour they found in or provided for each other was temporary, as they could neither deny nor escape the centrality of the trauma they felt it in their lives:

> Sometimes he could almost believe that they did not talk at all, that he didn't know her at all. It was as though there were two people: the one whom he saw now and then by day and looked at while they spoke to one another with speech that told nothing at all since it didn't try to and didn't intend to; the other with whom he lay at night and didn't even see, speak to, at all. (219)

Indeed, their coming together only served to accentuate their alienation within the temporary security and consolation provided by the circumstance of having someone to relate with. One is not surprised to discover that Christmas's nomadic experience has not provided him with enough stability to imbibe the requisite psychological intricacies needed to formulate relationships, hence that "she more than shocked him: she astonished and bewildered him. She surprised and took him unawares … he thought she was under a delusion…he thought that she was mad" (244-245). On her part, she sees her relationship with him as her own attempt at personal perdition, though an escape from "her whole past life, the starved years" (250).

Joe Christmas's alienation is exacerbated by his experience within a liminal space configured by racial-cum-social disjunction. His ambiguous racial identity, fluctuating between blackness and whiteness, situates him as an eternal outcast, incapable of being fully integrated into the sociocultural constructs of either collective. This racial ambiguity engenders a disruption of subjectivity, amplifying the estrangement characterising his engagements with a society pivoted around inflexible demographic dichotomies. Within the white community, he is subjected to institutional racism and rejection, perceived exclusively through the prism of blackness, while the black community keeps an emotional distance, sensing his detachment and liminal essence.

Christmas's interpersonal relationships further demonstrate the complexity of his demographic liminality, as he is continually positioned in a state of transition between potential acceptance and inexorable rejection. His tempestuous interactions with women and authority figures gird his incapacity to reconcile the splintered dimensions of his identity, with every fleeting prospect of integration collapsing under the stifling gravity of societal norms. This unrelenting swing between repudiation and ephemeral acceptance escalates his alienation, disallowing any steady construction of self or affiliation. Ultimately, Christmas's existence within this marginal in-betweenness accentuates his existential anguish and isolation, as his alienation materialises not solely from external societal rebuff but also from his internalised battle with his own variable racial identity.

4 Identity in *Light in August*

In *Light in August*, the theme of identity is intricately woven into the character of Joe Christmas, whose search for self-definition and belonging drives the narrative. Christmas's ambiguous racial identity serves as a focal point for his existential internal conflict and external struggles, highlighting the complexities of identity in the racially charged South.

In the words of Mathews (2009), the novel depicts critical "areas of social life undergoing change in the modern South: relations between sexes and relations between races" (160). Christmas's indeterminate race prevents him from finding a stable place in a society stratified along racial lines. His assertion that "I don't know it" (240) if his father was black signposts the depth of his liminality; he is stuck in a space where there are no discernibly stable sociocultural constructs. His refusal to acknowledge any black heritage and insistence on identifying as white when it suits him reflect his internal conflict and awareness of the harsh realities of racial hierarchy. "Sometimes he would remember how he had once tricked or teased white men into calling him a negro in order to fight them, to beat them or be beaten; now he fought the negro who called him white" (92-93). This ambiguity becomes a source of profound alienation. Christmas is caught between two worlds, unable to fully embrace either. His relationships with women, particularly with Bobbie, the waitress he loves, and Joanna Burden, the older woman who becomes his lover, are fraught with tension and violence, revealing his deep-seated anger and confusion. These relationships underscore his inability to connect on a human level, further emphasising his existential isolation. Faulkner uses Christmas's violent tendencies to illustrate the internalisation of societal frustration. The brutality he exhibits is a manifestation of his inner turmoil and the external pressures of a racially prejudiced society. His violent outbursts are not merely acts of defiance but also desperate attempts to assert his identity in a world that continuously denies his humanity.

The name "Joe Christmas" extends beyond mere designation; it evinces his lack of background, connections, and distinct identity. It intimates that he is viewed as a tabula rasa, a vessel onto which others can project any imaginable character and manipulate him into embracing it. From a young age, Christmas grapples with the burden of his mixed-race heritage, never fully accepted by either black or white communities:

> The newcomer turned without a word. The others watched him go down to the sawdust
> and vanish and appear with a shovel and go to work. The foreman and the superintendent
> were talking at the door. They parted and the foreman returned. "His name is Christmas,"
> he said.
> "His name is what?" one said.
> "Christmas."
> "Is he a foreigner?"
> "Did you ever hear of a white man named Christmas?" the foreman said.
> "I never heard of nobody a-tall named it," the other said. (29)

This lack of belonging fuels his sense of alienation and self-loathing, leading him to reject any racial identity and attempt to be assimilated into white society. However, his efforts are not only half-hearted but futile, as he is ultimately denied acceptance due to his perceived difference.

When Joe Christmas suddenly appears in the town three years before Lena, he stands out in almost every imaginable aspect:

And the group of men at work in the planer shed looked up and saw the stranger standing there, watching them. They did not know how long he had been there. 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, and he wore a tie and a stiff brim straw hat that was quite new, cocked at an angle arrogant and baleful above his still face. He did not look like a professional hobo in his professional rags, but there was something definitely rootless about him, as though no town nor city was his, no street, no walls, no square of earth his home. And that he carried his knowledge with him as though it were a banner, with a quality ruthless, lonely, and almost proud. (27)

Christmas's search for identity is further exacerbated by his traumatic past, which was marked by abandonment, abuse, and a lack of familial ties. Without a sense of belonging or connection to a family pedigree or heritage, he struggles to define himself and find purpose in a world that thrives on categorisation. His experiences with racism, violence, and betrayal shape his identity, leaving him disillusioned and disconnected from society.

Christmas wrestles with his identity amidst the racial biases ingrained by his grandfather, culminating in tragic consequences epitomised through Doc Hines's violent actions. This fixation on race intertwines with Calvinist beliefs, evident in figures like Calvin McEachern and Joanna Burden. Faulkner portrays these fixations as remnants of a dehumanising religion, symbolising the erosion of Southern values. Joe's pursuit of self-understanding is obstructed by societal hostility and persecution. He embodies the struggle of transitioning from a nebulous existence to a fully realised individual, especially within the racially charged environment of the South. Raised by a grandfather who treats him as if he is a convicted felon, he traverses a labyrinth of manipulation and hardship in his pursuit of self-definition. Enduring a spectrum of mistreatment, from betrayal to physical mutilation, he yearns for a place of belonging and autonomy. His passive disposition and vulnerability make him a poignant figure, constantly seeking refuge and a genuine sense of self.

Christmas's racial ambiguity and uncertain heritage profoundly shape his sense of self, fueling a relentless internal struggle and deep-rooted self-loathing. This lack of belonging leaves him adrift and unmoored, unable to reconcile his dual identity and plagued by an incubus-like sense of overwhelming otherness. Caught between two worlds, Joe struggles to find acceptance in a society that refuses to see him as he truly is. This internal turmoil manifests in destructive behaviour and pervasive self-loathing, as he seeks to escape the painful reality of his existence. His racial ambiguity becomes a metaphor for broader themes of identity and belonging, highlighting the devastating consequences of societal prejudice and the human cost of denying one's true self.

Christmas's struggle for self-identity takes a queer turn when we deconstruct one of his most revealing assertions in the novel. After affirming uncertainty about whether one of his parents was black and realising he has spent most of his life in rejection due to the belief that he has negro blood, he declares, "If I'm not, damned if I haven't wasted a lot of time" (241). This situation fundamentally undermines the stability and the integrity of social constructs within the community. In a society characterised by racial, religious, and class distinctions, where Christmas could ostensibly be perceived as white, his racial identity is not substantiated through demographic praxis but rather through oral transmission. This raises the critical question: if identity is so precarious and contingent, does it require tangible evidence, or could mere interpellations or questionable factoids suffice to dictate an individual's racial classification? While Christmas grapples with a laborious quest for self-identification, this

crusade seems destined for failure not due to emotional frailty on his part, but because of the magnitude of the opposition, which in this case is societal prejudice. According to Singal (1997):

> Joe's prolonged struggle to achieve identity is in turn closely connected with another central and problematic issue in *Light in August* that of free will. On the one hand, it is clear that Joe is, in Alfred Kazin's words, "the man things are done to, . . . who has no free will of his own." More precisely, he is the victim of powerful social and psychological forces that largely determine his life, the ultimate example of a man held captive by the interlocking religious, racial, and sexual beliefs of his culture, which lodge in his unconscious during childhood and later dominate him without his ever being fully aware of their power. In the words of Lee Jenkins, "the very thoughts that he thinks about himself have already been determined." To this extent Joe has no control over his identity but rather becomes what his society insists that he be. Viewed from this perspective, he is a helpless pawn of his circumstances. (170)

As "a helpless pawn," without "control over his destiny," Christmas becomes a subject for contextual vagaries, a transient arriviste who refuses to subscribe to any connection to anyone or anything, and to the end "remained a foreigner to the immutable laws which earth must obey" (Faulkner 1968: 320). Ultimately, his refusal to accept societal categorisation, and his predilection for preferring the liminal space between the races is a form of social protest, which the society does not tolerate; "He never did anything. He never acted like either a nigger or a white man. That was it. That was what made the folks so mad" (331).

5 Trauma in *Light in August*

Trauma significantly impacts individuals' sense of self and belonging, often exacerbating feelings of alienation and triggering identity crises. Traumatic experiences, such as abuse, violence, or loss, disrupt one's sense of security, leading to emotional disorientation and existential uncertainty. Trauma distorts perceptions of trust and safety, inhibiting survivors' ability to form meaningful relationships and deepening their sense of isolation. This mistrust, coupled with an internal struggle to reconcile past experiences with present identity, results in profound identity chaos. Individuals may grapple with feelings of shame, guilt, and self-blame, further alienating themselves from others and reinforcing negative self-perceptions. For those from marginalised communities, trauma compounds existing feelings of exclusion, magnifying the impact of systemic injustice and societal stigma. Ultimately, trauma disrupts identity and belonging by inducing mistrust, distorting self-perception, and perpetuating feelings of shame and alienation. Recovery necessitates a comprehensive approach, addressing emotional, psychological, and social dimensions to foster reconnection and self-acceptance.

In *Light in August*, William Faulkner portrays a myriad of traumatic experiences endured by the characters, illustrating the profound impact of personal histories on individual psyches within the racially charged and socially repressive South. Christmas experiences a childhood marked by abandonment, abuse, and racial identity confusion. Raised in an orphanage after being abandoned by his grandparents, he faces rejection and ostracism from both black and white communities due to his ambiguous racial background. This sense of alienation and lack of belonging fuels his inner turmoil and self-destructive behaviour, ultimately leading to acts of violence and a desperate search for identity and belonging. Despite

having "seen and experienced" a lot, he is unable to develop strong attachments to others because of his inability to maintain any significant connection to anyone, anything, or anywhere.

The impact of a traumatic past on the present in an individual's life is highlighted in the opening paragraph of chapter six, which takes the reader to Christmas's childhood, specifically at five years old:

> MEMORY believes before knowing remembers. Believes longer than recollects, longer than knowing even wonders. Knows remembers believes a corridor in a big long garbled cold echoing building of dark red brick sootbleakened by more chimneys than its own, set in a grassless cinderstrewnpacked compound surrounded by smoking factory purlieus and enclosed by a ten foot steel-and-wire fence like a penitentiary or a zoo, where in random erratic surges, with sparrowlike childtrebling, orphans in identical and uniform blue denim in and out of remembering but in knowing constant as the bleak walls, the bleak windows where in rain soot from the yearly adjacenting chimneys streaked like black tears. (111)

This opening of Chapter 6 portrays young Christmas poised to surreptitiously access the dietician's quarters at the orphanage, seeking to appropriate more of her toothpaste. Faulkner's narrative prominently explores the enduring influence of memory on individuals, profoundly shaping their present and future. This theme constitutes a central focus within Faulkner's extensive examination of his characters' moral constitutions.

For many of Faulkner's characters, the past embodies an inheritance characterised by hardship, suffering, degradation, and shame, a legacy that relentlessly pursues and metastatically shapes their subsequent lives. Christmas's formative years are marked by a history of mistreatment and neglect, which manifest as memories possessing a potency surpassing any straightforward, objective recounting of his life's events. Faulkner contends that even seemingly trivial occurrences, such as a child clandestinely appropriating toothpaste, can reverberate far beyond the moment of their unfolding. The orphanage's austere and oppressive corridors delineate a psychological domain that Christmas internalises, carrying it as an indelible memory throughout his existence. Whether consciously acknowledged or not, these experiences endure as immutable fixtures in Christmas's psyche.

Beneath the surface of recollection and contemplation lies a deeper stratum, wherein reside the profound and ineradicable wounds, both psychological and physical, that Christmas bears. It is this collective reservoir of memories, encapsulating a history of affronts and abuses, of rejections and persecutions, that fundamentally delineates his identity and ultimately contributes to his tragedy. The trauma inflicted on Christmas by his adoptive father, Simon McEachern, plays a crucial role in shaping his character. McEachern's strict and abusive upbringing leaves Christmas emotionally scarred and resistant to authority, relationships or any form of sympathy or affection. The harsh discipline and religious fanaticism imposed by McEachern (who preached about "the superiority of the white race …," 325) instil in Christmas a deep-seated resentment and a tendency towards rebellion. This abusive upbringing is a significant factor in Christmas's development of a hardened and defensive persona. Brooks (1983) traces the origin of Christmas's harrowing experience with the McEachern to an early age:

> When Joe is eight years old, Mr. McEachern demands that Joe memorize the catechism. Joe refuses. His stubbornness more than matches that of his foster father. The ordeal begins before

breakfast on a Sunday morning and goes on past suppertime. Joe has no food, and, lying in his bed, wonders why he feels "weak and peaceful." Later that evening, his foster mother slips up the stairs with a tray of food. She tells Joe that her husband does not know that she is bringing it. What does the boy do? He takes "the tray and [carries] it to the corner and [turns] it upside down, dumping the dishes and food and all onto the floor." Then he silently gets back into bed. Long after she has gone, he kneels above "the outraged" food and "with his hands ate, like a savage, like a dog." (170)

The physical and emotional abuse Christmas endures at the hands of McEachern shapes his interactions with others and his perspective on the world. This relationship highlights the cyclical nature of trauma, as Christmas's violent tendencies can be seen as a response to the violence inflicted upon him during his formative years. Faulkner's portrayal of this abusive relationship underscores the idea that trauma engenders trauma, perpetuating a cycle of suffering and violence.

Joe Christmas's relationship with Joanna Burden is another significant site of trauma. Joanna, an outsider due to her Northern heritage and her family's abolitionist past, represents a complex mixture of maternal and romantic figures for Christmas. Their relationship is marked by intense passion and violent conflict, reflecting Christmas's internal anguish and the impact of his past traumas on his ability to form healthy, enduring relationships. This is not appreciated by Christmas, who reflects, "That not only had she changed her life completely, but she was trying to change his too and make him something between a hermit and a missionary to negroes" (257). Joanna's attempts to impose her vision of redemption and salvation onto Christmas escalate his sense of entrapment and confusion. Her alternating roles as paramour, mother, and religious deliverer create a complex and untenable dynamic. Faulkner uses this relationship to illustrate how trauma can distort interpersonal connections. Christmas's violent reaction to Joanna's attempts to control him accentuates his desperation to assert autonomy amid overwhelming internal and external pressures. Any invasion of his personal space, even kindness, is met with disdain and contempt. He fears attachment because it signifies a loss of his "individualism or…essential isolation" (Brooks 1983: 185). This is evident in his relationships with individuals like the older girl at the orphanage (Alice), Mrs. McEachern, and Joanna Burden. By his teens, Christmas had become so attuned to mistreatment that he normalised it; anything else invites disaster.

The issue extends far beyond what is immediately apparent. A central question emerges: if Christmas could ostensibly pass as a white man— for example, Mrs. Hines states, "He dont look no more like a nigger than I do ..." (328), and another white character remarks, "That white nigger that did that killing up at Jefferson ..." (326)—why does he not embrace this identity? Why does he continually feel compelled to test the boundaries of his relationships, particularly with white individuals, by asserting his partial black ancestry when he could apparently "choose" (Longley 1966: 166) to identify as white? Such a choice could have potentially circumvented the suffering and tragedy that characterised his adult life. Rather than allowing others to dictate "how and what to be" (Longley 1966: 167), he could have adopted one of the two racial identities and adhered to it. Despite his lived experience within both black and white communities and his cognizance of the respective leverages and complications of associating with either group, "he chooses neither" (Longley 1966: 168). His traumatic childhood appears to have cultivated a disposition that is "ruthless, lonely, and almost proud" (Faulkner 1968: 27), alongside a predilection for self-harm. It is plausible that his upbringing has fostered a deep psychological resistance to social categorisation and an aversion to seeking love through conformity (Hence, we cannot take his word for it that all he ever wanted was to

become "one with loneliness and quiet that has never known fury or despair," 314). This desire for freedom, nonconformity, and autonomy persists throughout his life, leading him to reject both racial and social associations and classifications and providing the substratum for his nomadic ostracism, as he is perpetually on the move, though, as he admits, this does not translate to any meaningful achievement:

> he is entering it again, the street which ran for thirty years. It had been a paved street, where going should be fast. It had made a circle and he is still inside of it. Though during the last seven days he has had no paved street, yet he has travelled further than in all the thirty years before. And yet he is still inside the circle…"I have never broken out of the ring of what I have already done and cannot ever undo." (321)

Inevitably, his trajectory is not one of linear escape but an abortive circumscription within the inescapable ring of his own enacted and immutable identity, a self-originating determinism from which veritable autonomy remains eternally unattainable.

6 Conclusion

Though Faulkner was not a member of the Lost Generation, most characters in his novels grapple with alienation, identity, and trauma, particularly in the face of the new vectors of "fragmentariness, materialism, dispiritedness, sordidness, indeterminacy and incoherence" (Ogunrotimi 2009: 57). In *Light in August*, the tropes of alienation, identity, and trauma are central to the novel's structure, illuminating the complexities of societal ostracism and the enduring legacy of historical and societal injustices.

Alienation permeates the lives of the characters, particularly Christmas, reflecting his sense of ontological estrangement from society and himself. Christmas grapples with feelings of isolation and detachment as he navigates the conundrums of race and societal acceptance in the American South. He cannot self-identify with either the white or black communities and is rejected by both. His experience underscores the impact of anarchic oppression that is systemic and societal, highlighting how individuals are marginalised and depersonalised by larger forces beyond their control. Similarly, other characters like Brown, Joanna Burden, Lena Grove, Hightower, and Grimm are ensnared in alienation, victims of historical prejudices and personal failures.

Identity crisis is another central construct in the novel, as Christmas endures ongoing crises while trying to reconcile his present self with past trauma. Haunted by his uncertain racial identity and traumatic upbringing, he wrestles with challenges of belonging and self-acceptance in a society that rebuffs him and denies his humanity. His traumatic past prevents him from eluding the ghosts of childhood and the injuries inflicted by an oppressive society, manifested in many people he encounters as he traverses the South. This experience highlights how past traumas continue to shape the present and perpetuate cycles of violence and oppression. Christmas only becomes free when he stops running, realising that fleeing only feeds his fear and adds to his trauma. He ultimately discovers that his acts of violence in reaction to societal rejection do not heal his wounds or provide comfort. According to Alexander (2012: 3), "Individual victims react to traumatic injury with repression and denial, gaining relief when these psychological defences are overcome, bringing pain into consciousness so they are able to mourn." In the end, Christmas decides to discard his repression and denial and confront his phobia head-on. Sundquist (2008) affirms that

reciprocating "violence with violence" (110) only makes Christmas behave according to "type," in line with societal expectations of someone of his ilk.

An often overlooked yet critical dimension of *Light in August* is the role of society in shaping human destiny. The experiences of Lena, Brown, and Christmas reflect their lack of understanding regarding the community they enter upon arriving in Jefferson. At first glance, one might draw conclusions about the town's character based on Byron Bunch's gentle demeanour and the protective attitude extended towards Lena Grove, suggesting Jefferson is a hospitable, non-judgmental, and supportive environment. However, this perception starkly contrasts with the treatment of figures such as Reverend Hightower and Joanna Burden, indicating a more complex and ambivalent social fabric.

The persecution endured by Joanna Burden's abolitionist family within the community ("They hated us here. We were Yankees. Foreigners. Worse than foreigners: enemies," 235) underscores the deeply entrenched racism characterising the townspeople. Reverend Hightower, whose obsession with the past glories of his ancestors comes at the expense of engaging with present reality, faces a uniquely debilitating psychological environment that exacerbates his isolation and leads to profound alienation. He becomes "oblivious of the odor in which he lives - that smell of people who no longer live in life: that odor of overplump desiccation and stale linen as though a precursor of the tomb" (300).

The more dominant aspects of Southern society, as portrayed in the text, are dark, cruel, and unforgiving, implacable in their rigidity and impositions. Percy Grimm epitomises the community's collective attitude. The South, as Faulkner renders it, possesses an abundance of figures like Grimm—individuals who zealously defend what they perceive as the "integrity" of Southern identity. However, even the most archetypal Southern characters, such as Grimm, Sutpen (in *Absalom, Absalom!)*, Quentin (in *The Sound and the Fury*), and Colonel Sartoris (in *Sartoris*), are alienated, existing "out of tune with nature, with community, and with time" (Warren 1966: 259). The dialectics of history and social dynamics that distinguish the Southern experience have an ontologically traumatic impact on these characters, complicating their identity and deepening their alienation. Fargnoli, Golay, and Hamblin (2008) corroborate this hermeneutics, noting that "most of the characters in *Light in August* bear a special relationship to the community. They are strangers or outcasts" (155). Even Percy Grimm, who sees himself as a champion of Southern values, unequivocally symbolises alienation, like the other characters, who are fundamentally unmoored.

More than merely creating "new social and geographical territory for modern literature" (Watson 2015: 251), what Faulkner has done in *Light in August* is he has presented a deeply incisive interrogation of the tropes of alienation, identity, and trauma, offering a critique of the legacy of systemic oppression and societal division. Through the multifaceted experiences of its characters, particularly Joe Christmas the protagonist, the novel delves into the complex converging of race, gender, and social stratification within the American South, exposing the deeply ingrained prejudices and cultural norms that mould individual and collective identities. Faulkner's illustration not only challenges entrenched assumptions and biases but also engages with the wider philosophical and existential problematics girding identity, belonging, self-actualization, and the pursuit of social justice. *Light in August* operates as a platform through which Faulkner critiques the historical and cultural forces that perpetuate alienation and exclusion, reflecting the peculiar socio-political complexities of the early 20th-century American South.

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