

The Shackles of the Old South in William Faulkner's *Light in August*:  
the Identity Crisis of Joe Christmas and Gail Hightower

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Faulkner lived in the American South, at a time when systems such as white supremacy and patriarchy were collapsing after the Confederacy's defeat in the Civil War. By applying the technique of "stream of consciousness," Faulkner could raise and describe the issues of race, class, and gender in Southern society. In my thesis, the collapse of the Southern ideology and the effect for the identity formation are examined through the stories of the two main characters, Joe Christmas and Gail Hightower, who symbolize the tragedy of the shackles.

In the first chapter, by alluding to the gap between other people's references to Joe and his own racial consciousness, I demonstrated that the race of Joe is always decided by others apart from his determination to live as a "negro" by obeying Southern ideology. Through the obscurity of Joe's racial identity, Faulkner depicts the collapse of the white/black binary opposition. Meanwhile, Faulkner also illustrates how the shackles of "blood" in the Old South, such as the One Drop Rule and white supremacy, affect racial identity formation for Southerners like Joe caught between the binary opposition.

From the similarities between Hightower and Faulkner that they both longed for their (great-)grandfather and had antagonism with their father, Faulkner clearly projected himself upon Hightower. In the second chapter, I discussed Faulkner's own conflict when he criticizes Southerners and suggests a risk of adhering to ideas of the traditional South, while admitting his own attachment to the South. Faulkner seeks to accept the collapse of the white/black binary opposition in Southern ideology by depicting the change of Hightower's consciousness—the phantom of the Old South—occurring after he witnessed the death of Joe, who contradicts the absoluteness of the binary opposition.

In the third chapter, the ambiguity of the binary opposition of gender and the reversal of gender roles in relation to Joe are examined. Because of the deep connection between woman and race, both of Joe's racial and sexual identities lapse into instability; his identity as a man and a black person is

always threatened by his “enemy,” namely, a woman. Through the existence of Joanna Burden and Lena Grove, who symbolizes the figure of indestructible and uncontrollable woman after the Civil War or World War I, and the collapse of Joe’s masculinity emphasized by his involvement with them, Faulkner depicts the collapse of Southern patriarchy and the reversal of gender roles in terms of “strength.”

Above all, *Light in August* is a novel that delivers a critical message to Southerners that their adherence to conventions causes identity crises for them. As a Southerner, Faulkner actually projected his own conflict in the novel wavering between his attachment to the traditional South and the struggle to transcend from it. Faulkner depicts such issues tragically through the stories of Joe and Hightower, who are at the mercy of the shackles of Southern ideology. At the same time, by placing the story of Lena, who stands apart from the ideology, into the first and the last part of the novel, Faulkner instills hope for “living” to Southern society after the collapse of its antebellum ideological framework. From the structure of the novel that Lena’s “living” story envelops the tragedies of Joe’s emotional struggles and violent death and Hightower’s figure as a phantom, and ends with her new journey with Byron as a ray of light, Faulkner signifies hope for a rebirth of the South after its collapse.