Patterns of Victimization in "Light in August"

Caryl K. Sills

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A victim/victimizer pattern characterizes the troubled relationship between Joe Christmas and Joanna Burden, and it is this unreconciled paradox that leads to their tragic deaths. This essay analyzes victim/victimizer transformations through an interdisciplinary lens that draws together psychology, theology, education, the relatively new field of victimology, and Homi Bhabha's negotiation theory.

The central conflict in William Faulkner's *Light in August* transforms Joe Christmas and Joanna Burden from victims of both family and societal abuse into victimizes of each other, a tragic shift that is reconciled only in death. Joe murders Joanna and is castrated, in turn, by the avenging Percy Grimm. To gain insight into the complicated relationship between Joanna and Joe and its defining moment when Joanna mistakes the onset of her menopause for pregnancy, I will consider relevant theories from psychology, theology, education, and the relatively new field of victimology. I will also look at the alternating transformations of Joanna and Joe from victims to victimizers through the lens of Homi Bhabha's postcolonial theory as it defines a series of negotiations wherein the oppressed victim subconsciously identifies with the oppressor/victimizer as a first step to assuming the oppressor's power.

The transformation from victim to victimizer is not necessarily a single, unidirectional change. Rather, it can happen as a series of shifts between submission and aggression as the individual adapts to altered perceptions or circumstances. Moreover, a victim who becomes a victimizer in one situation may simultaneously remain a victim in another situation and, in addition, the individual may reposition herself or himself multiple times. So, for example, even as Joe flees the scene of Joanna's murder, he seems to be knowingly running toward his own fate; it is a death he subconsciously negotiates. Joe is consumed with guilt and shame both for who he is as well as who he could not become for her. Thus he subliminally desires his own death, not so much as punishment, but in order to reassume the more familiar role of victim. It is as if only death can finally reconcile the victim/aggressor, black/white parallax that has overwhelmed Joe throughout his life and now delivers him to the revenge of Percy Grimm. "Then his face, body, all seemed to collapse, to fall in upon itself, and from out the slashed garments about his hips and loins the pent black blood seemed to rush like a released breath. It seemed to rush out of his pale body like the rush of sparks from a rising rocket; upon that black blast the man seemed to rise soaring into their memories forever and ever" (Faulkner, *Light* 465).

Joanna also negotiates her own murder, thus becoming both Joe's victim and victimizer at the same time. The two have been engaged in a power struggle of aggression and submission in an increasingly antagonistic relationship lacking compromise. In death, Joanna, too, reassumes the role of victim whose murder reconciles the paradox of her life. During her life, the townspeople denied Joanna respect as an individual because of her northern roots and her support for Negro education. However, in death they

defend her as representative of white women. She "loses all individuality, becoming simply a white woman and hence an innocent victim who must be avenged" (Vickery 72). Nevertheless, that Joanna Burden deserved "an attained bourne beyond the hurt and harm of man" (Faulkner, *Light* 289) is acknowledged by the townspeople too late, even as they demand a vengeance that echoes Joanna's earlier prophecy to Joe, "Maybe it would be better if we both were dead" (278).

Both Joe and Joanna are victimized by the circumstances of their birth. John Lutz summarizes the similarities between these circumstances: "Both are psychologically split between an identity as a victim and a victimizer: as a white woman, Joanna is both a victim of the patriarchal values of her society and a recipient of the privileges derived from the racial inequality just as Joe, alternately identified (both by himself and others) as a black male and a white male, is both a victim of racism and a source of patriarchal violence" (470). Abused children can become abusers themselves. Therefore, we can expect that physical punishments meted out by Joe's religiously zealous adoptive father, Simon McEachern, modelled for young Joe how brutality rewards an aggressor with complete control. Paulo Freire writes of a possible "'adhesion' to the oppressor," by which the oppressed identify with their opposite and fail to see that there are other choices besides total domination of one group or individual by another group or individual. Freire's example is the peasant who is promoted to overseer and who becomes "more of a tyrant towards his former comrades than the owner himself" (28). In much the same way, Joe mislearns that violence is the only answer: he eventually attacks McEachem, almost beats a prostitute to death because she is not offended when he tells her he is a Negro, and bloodies and eventually kills Joanna

Joe's violence is less rage than shame for his confused racial identity. In one sense, his physical attacks on those who would shame him only mirror the psychological beating he imposes on himself. Such a reaction is all too common, according to Dr. Michael Lewis of Robert Wood Johnson Medical School. Research confirms that psychological attacks on the self, such as insults, humiliation, or threats, can cause aggressive reactions. However, the rage associated with such attacks often turns inward against the self, and instead of hate directed toward the attacker, the self is shamed into submission (165).

Joanna was not physically abused as a child and, also unlike Joe, she had not been transformed into a victimizer prior to their union. Joanna's early victimization was more subtle than Joe's, yet equally devastating as she experienced what theologian Linda Mercadante refers to as the fairly common trap of being "caught in traumatic life changing situations of injustice" which render the victim helpless (283). Joanna describes to Joe the Civil War and its aftermath as "the killing in uniform and with flags, and the killing without uniforms and flags. And none of it doing or did any good (Faulkner, *Light* 255). Of course, that was all before she was even born. Nevertheless, the seeds of Joanna's trauma had been sown fourteen years before her birth when her grandfather and half-brother were shot and killed "over a question of negro

voting" (248). Then, when Joanna was four, her father made her go into a forbidding and frightening cedar grove to witness the unmarked graves: "Remember this. Your 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" (252). Thus did her father's guilt become Joanna's burden in much the same way as Joe was encumbered by not knowing who or what his birth father was (Negro? Mexican?), as well as by the religious fanaticism of his grandfather, Eupheus "Doc" Hines, and his adoptive father, Simon McEachern, who both exemplify the repressive morality of Presbyterian Calvinism.

Joe's and Joanna's early experiences with the constraining ideologies of Calvinism illustrate the psychological insecurity engendered by the belief that God has predetermined for all eternity who will be saved and who will be damned regardless of faith or merit. Not all good people are among the elect, but people who behave badly would certainly not be among the elect. Therefore, does God create some only to have them suffer? This double predestination, that both reprobation and election are within the active will of God, victimizes believers because it promises salvation only to an unknowable few. For example, Faulkner describes Doc Hines as knowing that as a child in the orphanage, Joe "was listening to the hidden warning of God's doom" (383) because Doc believes that he is God's "chosen instrument" and God speaks to him: "Your work is not done yet. [Joe Christmas is] a pollution and a abomination on My earth" (386). More aptly, Doc's wife says of her husband: "the devil was in him" (372). On the other hand, Simon McEachern's fanaticism is based on a literal reading of Scriptures, but the resultant code of morality is overly censorious and transparently self-righteous. He tries to beat Joe into memorizing the catechism, prompting Faulkner to describe him as "the ruthless man who had never known either pity or doubt" (152). Joanna's experience with Calvinistic theology (both her father and grandfather were named Calvin) was no less demoralizing than Joe's. Unable to conform to the Calvinists' restrictive moral code, Joanna abandons any pretence of moral behaviour in her affair with Joe. Faulkner describes her during the second phase their affair as "the abject fury of the New England glacier exposed suddenly to the fire of the New England biblical hell" (258). Nevertheless, during the third phase, Joanna "did not want to be saved. T'm not ready to pray yet. [...] Don't make me have to pray yet. Dear God, let me be damned a little longer'" (264).

Organized religion demands certain behaviour patterns of the individual who, if he or she cannot comply, will be outcast by the majority who prescribe to a particular moral code. Joe and Joanna exist outside of a society defined by its religious presumption, but both have nonetheless been shaped by the values of that community and victimized by its indifference through not only its institutions, but also by those whom its institutions sanction as authorities. From the Civil War up to our own time, the South has been portrayed as the victim of Northern aggression, but, at the same time, as victimizer of its own people of colour. Taking a similar viewpoint, Faulkner

suggests that Southern society's racial prejudice and demagoguery are at the root of both Joe's and Joanna's inability to accept their otherness as defined and imposed by that society. Both suffered very young the consequences of individual and collective indifference to the Other, the one who is different, who is silenced by ignorance or fear, who accepts rejection as his or her due. For Joe, such a view is complicated by what Homi Bhabha calls "the fear/desire of miscegenation" (69). In other words, whether or not Joe's father was black is less the point than Joe's inability to get beyond the fact that it matters to him. He can pass for white, but will not; he tries to fit into the black community, but fails. Later, Joanna's claim that she is pregnant reawakens Joe's fear of miscegenation. This is not a personal apprehension, but one reflected from the society that condemns the mixing of the races. Joe's reaction is visceral and brutal; he acts as he has been acted upon.

In his essay, "On Fear: Deep South in Labor: Mississippi," Faulkner insists that "all Southerners are not white and are not democrats, but all Southerners are religious and all religions serve the same single God, no matter by what name" (99). It follows then, through his characterization of both the defrocked Gail Hightower and the newly repentant Joanna Burden, that Faulkner holds Calvinistic Protestantism responsible for creating victims through a focus on sin. In other words, the faithful might be led to believe that their victimization "was intended by God as a chastening tool [...] suggesting it was at least permitted by God, perhaps to root out some character defect in them" (Mercadante 293). Therefore, when Joanna takes Joe as her lover and submits to his abuse, even invites it, she believes that it must be God's will and a fitting punishment for her inability to provide the opportunities for Negro advancement she owes her family ghosts.

Institutions—social, religious, and political—are made up of individuals, some of whom misuse their authority in perverse ways. Freire writes, as if he had Joe and Joanna in mind, that those who victimize others not only dehumanize their victims, but themselves as well; further, they do not recognize this as self-destructive (29–30). For Freire, "one of the basic elements of the relationship between oppressor and oppressed is *prescription.* Every prescription represents the imposition of one individual's choice upon another, transforming the consciousness of the person prescribed to into one that conforms with the prescriber's consciousness" (28–9). So, for example, Joanna believes she is doomed because, as her father concluded in his graveside exhortation when she was four, the sins of white prejudice are "the curse of every white child that ever was born and that ever will be born. None can escape it" (Faulkner, *Light* 252–53). Prescription is a human imitation of predestination: as God chooses who will be saved and who will be damned beyond both the compliance and understanding of humans, so too does the oppressor attempt to control the oppressed victims' choices beyond their consciousness of this exploitation.

Joanna's re-conversion spares no one, least of all herself. But her need to pray resurfaces out of childhood experiences that are as strange and frightening to Joe as her plan for him to study law: "But a nigger college, a nigger lawyer. [...] Tell niggers that I

am a nigger too?" (277). No, Joe could never live out her plan. For almost two years, he "lived with negroes. [...] And all the while his nostrils at the odor which he was trying to make his own would whiten and tauten, his whole being writhe and strain with physical outrage and spiritual denial" (225–26). But neither can he understand nor fit in with the self-righteous, white church-goers the McEacherns unintentionally taught him to both suspect and despise, those whom Hightower describes with prophetic insight: "Pleasure, ecstasy, they cannot seem to bear: their escape from it is in violence, in drinking and fighting and praying; catastrophe too, the violence identical and apparently inescapable. *And so why should not their religion drive them to crucifixion of themselves and one another*?" (368). Joe's and Joanna's responses to their victimization differ in detail, but not in predictability or consequences. First is anger at the injustice of the situation that has rendered them victims; then anxiety leads to despair with, sometimes, temporary periods of disbelief and denial. Nevertheless, feelings of betrayal and alienation eventually isolate each victim within a private hell of selfloathing and guilt that drives a subconscious desire to imitate the oppressor and thus restore an acceptable self-perception to the victim.

Joe's anger initially erupts when, at fourteen, he takes his turn with a Negro prostitute. Thinking that "the paramount sin would be to be publicly convicted of virginity" (156), he is nonetheless repelled by the "womanshenegro" despite his overwhelming need for sexual release. Consequently, he kicks and beats her until his friends overpower him. Why this extreme reaction? Joe's anxiety over his own identity—is he or is he not part Negro?—propels his violent reaction towards the source of his anguish, anyone of the Negro race. Underlying Lacan's principle in *The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis* is a "consciousness of self" (288) that identifies our need to believe in the self we want others to see us as being. Thus, in Lacanian terms, any relationship with any Negro, however temporary and tenuous, threatens Joe's posture as a white man. Struggling to assert the self as "I am white," Joe's anger needs to destroy any threat that Negroes might accept him as one of their own. The paradox is, of course, that even while questioning his whiteness, he is alternately attracted to and repelled by Negroes.

Joanna's anger is much more contained, but nonetheless debilitating. Early in the novel, Faulkner tells us that Miss Burden "is still a stranger, a foreigner whose people moved in from the North during Reconstruction. A Yankee, a lover of negroes, about whom in the town there is still talk of queer relations with negroes in the town and out of it [...] with between them [the ancestors of the present townspeople and this last Burden] the phantom of the old spilled blood and the old horror and anger and fear" (Faulkner, *Light* 46–7). Both Joe's and Joanna's anger is a reaction to an imposed identity they must, but cannot, reject. According to John Lutz, "coming face to face with his own profound sense of vulnerability and unconscious identification with the oppressed, Joe is unable to acknowledge [a] feeling of kinship, [and] projects his selfloathing onto the inhabitants of Freedman town and represses his feeling of powerlessness" (467). After he ran away from the McEacherns and after the failed attempt

at a relationship with the waitress, Bobbie, Joe "lived as man and wife with a woman who resembled an ebony carving [... yet] his whole being [would] writhe and strain with physical outrage and spiritual denial" (Faulkner, *Light* 225–26). But if he cannot live as a Negro, and if he believes he will be found out if he attempts to pass as white, then who is he? Joe instinctively knows that denial of his Negro blood or his white blood will result in his being only half human, which is to say non-human, an alien. And so he runs away again along "the street which was to run for fifteen years" (223).

Like Joe, Joanna is torn between two lives. Joe tells us that at night, "he would find her naked, or with her clothing half torn to ribbons upon her, in the wild throes of nymphomania" (259), " [a]nd by day he would see the calm, coldfaced, almost man-like, almost middleaged woman" (258). Also, like Joe, Joanna lives isolated from the community, choosing to remain apart from the townspeople who threaten her tenuous hold on purpose, her self-imposed mission to support Negro education as some sort of reparation for their past enslavement and continued degradation. Joe moves into the shack on her property away from prying eyes that, if they looked too closely, might discover the hidden, illegal still that produced the whiskey "which was netting him thirty or forty dollars a week" (271). Despite the excuse that illegal activity must remain hidden, Joe's isolation also represents his tacit recognition of his own alienation from the community.

Intricately bound to Joe's and Joanna's feelings of betrayal and alienation is a selfrejection grounded in guilt. To become mired in self-pity is to be stopped dead in one's tracks, and for Faulkner, this image is no metaphor. Lack of motion is death. In the preface to *The Mansion*, Faulkner writes, "'living' is motion, and 'motion' is change and alteration and therefore the only alternative to motion is un-motion, stasis, death" (n.p.). For Faulkner, life is defined by action, even if such action is propelled by guilt. Joe feels no responsibility to obey the rules of men who, if they knew, would not accept his mixed blood. Therefore, Faulkner shows us Joe actively pursuing his illegal whiskey trade and a passionate affair with Joanna Burden. At the same time, Joanna vigorously defends her detailed plans for the two of them to support and promote Negro education in the face of the community's condemnation of equal opportunity for their former slaves.

Joe's guilt is centered on his belief that he is the product of miscegenation, and the power of miscegenation as a sin, whether knowingly committed or not, is a common theme in Faulkner. Joanna's guilt, of course, is her family's history of failure to redeem themselves and the white race from the "doom and curse for its sins" against Negroes. Mired in their guilt, neither Joe nor Joanna can identify with the community whose judgement threatens whatever self-esteem they still hold on to. Bhabha asserts that the "have-nots identify themselves from the position of the haves" (29). Even so, suffering themselves as Other, neither Joe nor Joanna can admit to a hidden desire to fit in on society's terms. According to Freire, the victim might be attracted to the victimizers' way of life but feels "incapable of running the risks it requires" (29). As noted earlier, Freire calls this "adhesion" to the oppressor and offers as an example the relationship

of the overseer to the slave (27–8). Further, "within their unauthentic view of the world and of themselves, the oppressed feel like 'things' owned by the oppressor" (46). Freire identifies an emotional dependency that "can lead the oppressed to what Fromm calls necrophilic behaviour: the destruction of life—their own or that of their oppressed fellows" (47). Thus, Joe and Joanna are destroyed as much by themselves as by others.

Early in the novel, Byron Bunch comments on "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" (Faulkner, *Light* 33). Thus, the young Joe Christmas reacts to a beating by his stepfather, Simon McEachern, as a piece of "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 selfcrucifixtion" (160). Joe's death, in Faulkner's description, is a sort of resurrection: "the man seemed to rise soaring into their memories forever and ever" (465). However, the Christ parallel is undermined by Joe's inability to accept change or survive disillusionment without reacting destructively. By denying the past rather than accommodating it to present circumstances or future aspirations, Joe stops time in the sense that he cannot or will not move forward, beyond the limitations of his past victimizations. As mentioned earlier, for Faulkner movement is life and stasis is death because all time exists in the present. Therefore, Joe's metaphorical resurrection represents nothing more than his movement too late into a future pre-empted by an untimely death. Irving Howe would seem to agree: "Christmas affects us as a vulnerable man, not a religious token" (210).

Emilio Viano, the founding editor of *Victimology*; reminds us that "most religions are sacrificial"; moreover, "inextricably connected with the idea and the practice of sacrifice, the notion of victim belongs to all cultures" (1). Christianity teaches that Jesus suffered and was martyred to save humankind. However, although Joe's victimization involves great suffering, Faulkner does not push the comparison to the point of making Joe a martyr. A martyr is someone who suffers greatly or constantly because of adherence to a belief or cause. Joe's victimization is more personal and he is never able to find a cause, despite Joanna's offered plan, that might save him from himself. In a similar sense, Joanna Burden recalls the biblical Job in her passivity towards the collective guilt of white Southerners whose society she rejects, yet suffers to redeem. Joanna is a form of the name Joanne, which in Hebrew means "God is gracious." However, her relationship with her God, unlike Job's, is fractious and inconsistent, although ultimately restored. During the nymphomaniac stage of her affair with Joe, "What was terrible was that she did not want to be saved. Tm not ready to pray yet. [...] Don't make me have to pray yet. Dear God, let me be damned a little longer'" (Faulkner, *Light* 264). Finally, however, she does pray and begs Joe to kneel with her. Yet, Joanna's faith, having been tested, has already failed. Why should Joe pray when it signifies not absolution for either one of them, but only his conformity to her will? Moreover, Joe rejects participation in Joanna's reversion to the faith imposed in her childhood because of his adoptive father's hypocrisy. Simon McEachern beats Joe for failing to memorize the catechism, prays for forgiveness, then thrusts the book once

more at the uncowed child. As Joe kneels silently beside McEachern, he regards God as a "presence who could not even make a phantom indentation in an actual rug" (154). This absence haunts Joe the rest of his life.

Despite the symbolic reference of their names, Faulkner draws Joe and Joanna as psychologically complex individuals. True, their victimization leads to posthumous redemption in the eyes of the white community, who see Joanna as a symbol of betrayed white womanhood in the same way as Faulkner describes their reaction to Joe's blackness as symbolically bled "out of his pale body" (465). Nevertheless, it is their disappointments and resultant powerlessness that propel Joe and Joanna from victim to victimizer and back again.

The end of their affair begins two years after it began when Joanna tells Joe she is pregnant and tells him, too, "in a tone musing, detached, impersonal: 'A full measure. Even to a bastard Negro child. I would like to see father's and Calvin's faces. This will be a good time for you to run, if that's what you want to do'" (266). The emphasis here is on the miscegenation, not Joanna's unmarried status. Just as important, this time Joe does not even try to run away, from himself or from Joanna's need to realize her plan by sending him to learn from a Negro lawyer how to be a lawyer himself. Joanna's menopause, as well as her plan to "make of him something between a hermit and a missionary to negroes" (271), signals the beginning of their mutual transformation into victimizers of each other and a death that alone can reconcile the passive-aggressive paradox of their lives.

According to David Minter, "in the story of Joe Christmas, Faulkner virtually obliterates the distinction between victim and agent by stressing Joe's secret affiliation with the world that pursues and mutilates him" (132). Therefore, Joe's transformation from victim to victimizer occurs, for the most part, at the subconscious level of his own death wish. On the other hand, Joe claims to have chosen his life, to have deliberately made choices that allow him to accept the inevitable.

According to Bhabha's negotiation theory, formulated to demonstrate the capacity of the oppressed to resist in postcolonialism, "The process of reinscription and negotiation [is] the insertion or intervention of something that takes on new meaning" (191). So, using Bhabha's example, the transformation value of political change "lies in the rearticulation, or translation, of elements that are *neither the One* [...] *nor the Other* [...] *but something else besides*, which contests the terms and territories of both." In a similar sense, victim and victimizer engage in a power struggle in which the "limits and limitations" of power "are encountered in an agonistic relation" (28) of aggression and submission, but not necessarily all one or all the other. Bhabha tells us that even as we identify with each other, it is paradoxically at a point that is most different between us, "the point that eludes resemblance" (184). Thus, we are not the other, but subordinate to it; yet we attempt to participate in the identity of the other to the degree that we try to manoeuvre our position as closely as we can—to imitate, so to speak— and we can because power need not be continuous or accumulated. There is no impenetrable design or "holism" so that there is room for a negotiated position (185). In other words,

the victim subconsciously identifies with the victimizer by desiring to become like him so as not to be subordinate to him. Fear and hatred mask this need to negotiate an improved position even as the victim seemingly accepts his subjugation. Victimologist Ezzat Fattah puts it this way:

> Victim/offender roles are not necessarily antagonistic but are frequently complementary and interchangeable. **[...]** In many instances, dangerousness and vulnerability may be regarded as the two sides of the same coin. **[...]** Dichotomizing the victim/offender populations into good and evil, innocent and guilty, lambs and wolves, predators and prey, Abels and Cains, is not only an oversimplification of a complex phenomenon but also a deliberate attempt to ignore or at least to overlook the striking similarities, affinities and overlap between the two populations. In many respects they are homogeneous and overlap to a large extent. The roles of victim and victimizer are neither static, assigned nor immutable. They are dynamic, revolving and interchangeable. (7)

This transformation of a pariah into an approved representative of innocent victimization is not so unusual, Anthony Daniels contends in his analysis of Helen Demidenko's Australian prize winning novel, *The Hand that Signed the Paper.* Demidenko's account of the barbarism of individuals caught in war was subsequently denounced as "faked" because she lied about her experience as a Ukrainian national, falsely claiming to be the daughter of an illiterate Ukrainian taxi driver during the Holocaust. Nevertheless, Daniels claims that her thesis remains valid. "The supply of victims is equalled only by the demand for them, which is likewise inexhaustible," Daniels explains. "Victims are essential to our well-being because they provide us with the opportunity to establish our virtue in public by expressing our sympathy or empathy, with them" (5). It is in this same sense that the townspeople transform Joanna into an innocent white female victim after her death.

Freire intimates a similar movement of the oppressor-oppressed contradiction as more than a "mere reversal of position, in moving from one pole to the other" (39). "In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform" (31). Further, "the concrete situation which begets oppression must be transformed" (32). In *Light in August,* Joannas menopause, misread as pregnancy, creates the situation that precipitates the lovers' transformation from society's victims into victimizes of each other. As Minrose Gwin points out, Joanna "insists, above all, upon [...] the narrative desire to invent and reinvent herself. It is the very multiplicity of her creativity, her insistence upon 'playing it out like a play,' which both frightens and excites Joe Christmas" (26). Initially, Joanna's reinvention of herself as victimizer isolates Joe in the more accustomed role of victim; however, his is not yet a closed world, and threatened with the circumscription

inherent in fatherhood and Joanna's plan to make him a spokesperson for Negro rights, Joe twists out from under her oppression and assumes the role of victimizer in turn.

That Joanna needs the societal approval motherhood might confer is apparent; it is her subconscious desire to be accepted that causes her to mistake pregnancy for menopause. In the late 1980's, Judith Wittenberg observed that "[w]hen Joe first meets [Joanna], she responds with the dormant 'mother' within her and she becomes fully sensual, a woman in the throes of total, if temporary dedication to the carnal life and manifesting a powerful, though belated, wish for a child" (117). Paradoxically, as Cleanth Brooks pointed out twenty years before Wittenberg, Joanna can give herself so completely to the cause of Negro education because she has no family to occupy her time (225), but as Brooks implies, she has a strong mother-wish simmering beneath her spinsterhood. In addition, through Francois Pitavy's eyes we can see Joanna as an outsider because of her affiliation with Negroes, but also because she is unmarried and childless.

The significance of Joanna's mistaken pregnancy is considered by Alexander Welsh, writing at the same time as Wittenberg, only as it sheds light on Joe, in that her non-pregnancy stamps him as impotent (126). Irving Howe, in the mid-1970s, writes that *Light in August*uis focused on a series of confrontations," but does not include the threat to Joe if Joanna's pregnancy is real nor the consequences of his reaction when he realizes that she has begun menopause (201). Nevertheless, even if some critics of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s dismiss Joanna Burden as merely a means of revealing the inner Joe Christmas and providing the catastrophe that precipitates his more important death, Joanna's initial misinterpretation of her missed period is indeed significant to our understanding of her relationship to Joe and as the event that presages the double tragedy of their deaths. Joanna's hope that the onset of her menopause is, instead, a pregnancy foreshadows the loss of hope and the negation of life that motivates both Joanna's and Joe's murders. At the end of the novel, Joanna's barrenness is compared to Lena Grove's fecundity (it is Lena's journey to find the man who impregnated her that opens *Light in August* and her journey with her baby and the ever-loyal and loving Byron Bunch at the end of the novel that leads us away from the tragedy). According to Pitavy, "The conclusion of the novel is a statement of faith in the victory of fertility over sterility: that is the meaning of the last chapter" (36).

I agree with Pitavy; however, in order to fully understand why Lena survives and triumphs while Joanna becomes a victim of both herself and Joe, it is necessary to examine more closely the causes and consequences of Joanna's mistaken identification of her menopause. First we must go back, prior to Joanna's confrontation with Joe over her desire to have a child, to a time when their affair entered a phase in which Joe exhibited a passive response to Joanna's nymphomania. "As time went on and the novelty of the second phase began to wear off and become habit, he would stand in the kitchen door and look out across the dusk and see, perhaps with foreboding and premonition, the savage and lonely street which he had chosen of his own will, waiting for him thinking *This is not my life. I dont belong here"* (Faulkner, *Light* 258).

Joanna's initial submission to Joe, although invited, had also been passive. "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" (232–33). However, we know that Joe has a violent streak that, in the past, has transformed him into a victimizer. First there is the incident when, as a young boy, he had to be pulled off the Negro prostitute he might have killed. Then, somewhat older but not wiser, he again attacked a prostitute, this time a white girl who cared not at all if he was black. And, of course, there is Joe's attack on McEachern. In other words, from even a young age, an aggressor lay just beneath the surface of Joe's compliance. As Freire notes, "almost always, during the initial state of the struggle, the oppressed, instead of striving for liberation, tend themselves to become oppressors, or 'sub-oppressors'" (33).

Similarly, the violent passion of Joanna's nymphomania reveals her transformation into the aggressor: "it was as though with the corruption which she seemed to gather from the air itself, she began to corrupt him. He began to be afraid" (Faulkner, *Light* 260). In other words, Joe senses that he is not in control at this point. It is Joanna's passion that dominates their lovemaking and determines when and where she will let him find her. For Joe, this loss of control is also a loss of self that has defined his past aggression.

Negotiation theory argues just such a rearticulation of position between contending forces, in this case, submission to victimization or transformation into an aggressor, but neither one nor the other as separate and distinct behaviours. Thus we find that both Joe and Joanna act in their final confrontation as both victim and victimize^ as Olga Vickery attests in an early critique: Joe and Joanna "are both self-crucified and crucified by others, both villain and victim" (66). Faulkner paints the scene in spare prose: "He stood over the bed. He held the razor in his hand. But it was not open yet. [...] Then he saw her arms unfold and her right hand come forth from beneath the shawl. It held an old style, single action, cap-and-ball revolver." Faulkner tells us that Joanna's hand does not waver, nor do her eyes. "They were calm and still as pity and all despair and all conviction" (Faulkner, *Light* 282). The revolver misfires, but Joe's razor does not fail. Later, after Joe has run away and flagged down a passing car, he notices that he is holding the ancient pistol "with its two loaded chambers: the one upon which the hammer had already fallen and which had not exploded and the other upon which no hammer had yet fallen but upon which a hammer had been planned to fall. 'For her and for me,' he said" (286).

Minter describes Joe's face in death as resembling "the face of a confused, divided, lost child who wants simply to live yet feels himself drawn and doomed to die" (132). I find the description particularly affecting in light of Joe's inability to get past the trauma of his childhood confusion and victimization. He is the innocent betrayed first by Eustache Hines, his grandfather, who brings him to the orphanage, then by the nurse who arranges his adoption to the rigidly Calvinistic Simon McEachern to

prevent the boy from revealing her inappropriate behaviour, and then by both Mr. and Mrs. McEachern, the latter failing to understand him and the former refusing to do so. Finally, Joanna's menopause is the catalyst that threatens Joe's manhood by denying it and threatens his identity by sublimating it to her prerogative. In the nymphomania phase of their relationship, Joanna begins to take control by inviting the where and when of their sexual encounters on her own terms. When her claim to be pregnant is unmasked as menopause, Joanna continues to pressure Joe into joining her plan to promote Negro opportunities in a hostile society. Finally, Joe is fully and consciously aware that she has assumed and intends to retain complete control over both their destinies.

But more than that, Joanna's repressed sexuality explodes into a nymphomaniac phase perhaps because of her unacknowledged desire to become pregnant, in that frequency of sexual contact increases the chance of pregnancy. But why should this sedate matron, who rejects traditional societal expectations, want to become the mother society has expected her to become all along? What secret need to conform is she unable to consciously accept, but unconsciously desires? The impending condition of menopause does not come upon a woman unexpectedly. Therefore, we must consider that Joanna was aware that at her age menopause was a valid reason to miss a menstrual period. Nevertheless, she deliberately chose to assume, hope, pray she was pregnant. In other words, inside the rebel, the Other, is the very real ambition to conform, to be accepted. As a mother, Joanna will be able to identify with her oppressors, the traditional, conservative Presbyterian majority, and thus escape their victimization. Paradoxically, Joanna's child would be of mixed blood, which thumbs her nose at convention even as she seems to embrace it.

Joe's despair at Joanna's menopause resonates throughout Paul Tillich's discussion, in *Systematic Theology* of the temptation of suicide:

> Despair is the state of inescapable conflict. It is the conflict, on the one hand, between what one potentially is and therefore ought to be and, on the other hand, what one actually is in the combination of freedom and destiny. The pain of despair is the agony of being responsible for the loss of the meaning of one's existence and of being unable to recover it. One is shut up in one's self and in the conflict with one's self. One cannot escape, because one cannot escape from one's self. **[...**] There are situations in which the unconscious will to life is undermined and a psychological suicide takes place in terms of non-resistance to threatening annihilation. (75–6)

For Joe, the possibility of Joanna's pregnancy extends the miscegenation, the dichotomy that has paralyzed his life, but it also threatens to bind him to a responsibility he is unwilling and incapable of assuming. A wife? A child? As an outcast of society, such a burden is merely a recapitulation of the pain of his own existence.

In a symbolic sense, Joe and Joanna do commit suicide through their subconscious negotiation of an end to what has remained for each an untenable loss of hope.

As victims, their lives are tragic; as victimizers their lives are unbearable. Joanna's menopause reveals to both their inability to fully embrace life on society's terms, and thus their lives remain as unrealized as the baby that never was. This is the significance of Joanna's mistaken pregnancy as both symbol and event that foreshadows their inevitable victimization as much by their own failure to overcome how society perceives them as it is society's failure to accept those who might look or think or behave outside accepted norms.

Through the troubled relationship of Joe and Joanna, Faulkner makes us painfully aware of both a personal and communal need to break the cycle of victimization by an indifferent society. Life's paradoxes must be reconciled in life; that is the hope at the end of *Light in August.* However, Joe, because of his inner turmoil and inability to deal with life's disappointments and cruelties, pursues death, even if only subconsciously. Joanna, too, invites her final victimization. I suggest that neither Joe nor Joanna, in life, can fully reconcile the paradox of their entrapment in the victim/ aggressor dichotomy. They are stuck in self-images that deny self-acceptance, while struggling to find that acceptance in Others for whom they remain essentially invisible. Mirrors cannot reflect the invisible, and so Joe and Joanna remain powerless victims of repressive morality and patriarchal hypocrisy. In their final confrontation, however, each also becomes simultaneously the victim/victimizer of the other within a society that continues to marginalize and victimize them. Nevertheless, just as Joanna is made visible to the townspeople after her death as a symbol of white womanhood, Joe is made visible to those who witnessed his emasculation and death, and Faulkner tells us: "Upon that black blast the man seemed to rise soaring into their memories forever and ever. They are not to lose it, in whatever peaceful valleys, beside whatever placid and reassuring streams of old age, in the mirroring faces of whatever children they will contemplate old disasters and newer hopes. It will be there, musing, quiet, steadfast, not fading and not particularly threatful, but of itself alone serene, of itself alone triumphant" *(Light* 465).

Light in August begins and ends with Lena Grove, whose quest frames the tragedy of Joe and Joanna and helps us understand their failure to accept change or survive disillusionment without reacting destructively. Joe and Joanna resist conforming to values imposed by a Pharisaical society because they remain haunted by a repressive past that, re-imagined in the present, renders them powerless to accept the future. Whereas Joe and Joanna cannot release their shame for past indiscretions or disappointments, Lena is unhampered by Calvinistic literalism and rejects the shame of behaviour outside of socially constructed morality: she is an unwed mother, she pursues a faithless lover with unquenchable faith that "the Lord will see that what is right will get done" (Faulkner, *Light* 25). And, as Hightower reflects, she is confident that her destiny will be to bear children, "the good stock peopling in tranquil obedience to it the good earth; from these hearty loins without hurry or haste descending mother and daughter." As Hightower sees her, Lena shines with "something tranquil and unafraid" (406).

It is this tranquility and optimism that contrasts so dramatically with Joe's and Joanna's tragedies. Unlike Joe and Joanna, Lena is not victimized by a critical society because she instinctively accommodates the past into the present and can adapt as necessary to get where she intends to go in the future, both metaphorically and in real time. Lena keeps moving forward, travelling at the end of the novel both hopeful and confident, and, for Faulkner, movement in the present is life-defining because it has been engendered by what is past and moves us to what might be possible in the future.

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CARYL KLEIN SILLS is Chair of the Department of English at Monmouth University. She teaches a senior seminar on William Faulkner and incorporates favorite novels of his into an eighteenth to twenty-first century world literature survey required of all undergraduates.

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Caryl K. Sills
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