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GROTESQUES IN FAULKNER'S *LIGHT IN AUGUST*

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ABSTRACT

On the basis of Sherwood Anderson's definition of the grotesque, the paper analyses three figures in William Faulkner's *Light in August*, exploring the social roots of their grotesqueness. Joe Christmas is a grotesque in the sense that he sticks to the truth that he can live a life lacking a definite racial identity. Joe's awareness of his racial identity undergoes two phases: passive acceptance of a black identity and active maintenance of an undefined identity. Joe, as a victim of the racial discrimination, in the process of struggling between the white and the black identity, became a "grotesque" and eventually became a murderer and arsonist. Joanna Burden holds the truth that she should bear the curse of slavery for the white people all through her life. Her confinement in the truth expelled the real value of life from her, rendering her a virtual prisoner, who lost the freedom to seek a life of her own. Gail Hightower's obsession with the heroic southern myth made him forget the present. These grotesques are psychologically isolated people living in the small post-Civil War town in the south, who believe so much in their own truth that they can never be integrated into the community in which they live. As victims of the social institutions, they arouse the readers' sympathy, and their tragic life induces readers to think more deeply about the social root of their grotesqueness.

Key words: grotesque, William Faulkner, *Light in August*

I. Introduction

As the banner of the American Southern Literature, William Faulkner built his own fictional kingdom -- Yoknapatawpha County, against the backdrop of the American South which nurtured him. Located in the northern part of the state of Mississippi with Jefferson as its county seat, this fictional place has become the setting of many of his novels. Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha novels center on the rise and fall of several families in Jefferson and its suburbs in nearly 150 years, spanning from the 1800s to the post-WWII years. Created in these novels are several hundred characters with peculiar features, including the declining aristocrats in the South, the emerging bourgeois upstarts, the poor white as well as the black and the Indians suffering from racial discrimination. The Yoknapatawpha County, as a matter of speaking, is the miniature of American Southern society in that era and the characters are typical ones created in this typical social background, among whom are some grotesques living in this county without being reconciled with it. This paper focuses on

the three figures, namely, Joe Christmas, Gail Hightower and Joanna Burden, exploring the social roots of their grotesqueness.

According to Baldick's definition, grotesque is "characterized by bizarre distortions, especially in the exaggerated or abnormal depiction of human features. The literature of the grotesque involves freakish caricatures of people's appearance and behavior, as in the novels of Dickens. A disturbingly odd fictional character may also be called a grotesque" (Baldick 93). This general definition indicates that abnormality in appearance and behavior is the most important feature of a grotesque, so being weird, distorted or ugly is always associated with the grotesque.

Sherwood Anderson, who allegedly influenced William Faulkner, creates in his short story cycle, *Winesburg, Ohio*, a group of grotesques, the definition of whom serves as the foundation of this paper. As Anderson claims, when a person "took one of the truths to himself, called it his truth, and tried to live his life by it, he became a grotesque and the truth he embraced became a falsehood" (25). The deformity of the Andersonian grotesques is more psychological than physical. They are psychologically isolated people living in the small post-Civil War town of Winesburg, who believe so much in their own truth that they can never be integrated into the community in which they live. As Philip Thomson maintains in a more abstract way, the most distinguished characteristic of the grotesque is "the fundamental element of disharmony, whether this is referred to as conflict, clash, mixture of the heterogeneous, or conflation of disparate" (20). This disharmony is the root of their grotesqueness, which leads to their isolation, to a larger extent, out of their own will.

*Light in August* is set in Yoknapatawpha County with Jefferson as the center of activities in the 1930s when Jim Crow laws still enforced segregation in the South. In the Southern states at that time, the black were still brutally exploited and ravaged while a large number of white were becoming increasingly poverty-stricken; with the terrible educational system and the corrupted justice departments, violence and murder were prevalent. Although the Civil War ended decades ago, the spiritual remains of the slavery system was not yet eliminated. As a result, the capitalist industrial development of the South lagged far behind that of the North. Take Jefferson as an example. There was only a lumber-mill in it and the workers there barely made a living, who were coarse and vulgar in speech, apparently uneducated. The black lived a more miserable life, living in shabby cabins existed before the Civil War and surviving on helping in the white people's home under the threat of lynch.

## II. Joe Christmas

Joe Christmas is a grotesque in the sense that he sticks to the truth that he can live a life lacking a definite racial identity. Joe's awareness of his racial identity undergoes two phases: passive acceptance of a black identity and active maintenance of an undefined identity.

The first phase is from his birth to his adolescence, in which Joe was deliberately made into a black boy. Alfred Kazin views Joe as a "tabula rasa, a white sheet of paper on which anyone can write out an identity for him and make him believe it" (Kazin 248). The first time Joe appears in the novel, his flesh is described as "a level dead parchment color" (Faulkner 34). This skin color not only denies his pure black identity, but also indicates his parchment nature: he is waiting to be written, which is true at least in his first phase.

Joe's dubious black identity was not determined biologically by his parents, but by his grandfather Hynes. His mother dated secretly with a Mexican in an acrobatics troupe and had Joe. His grandfather learned from the boss of the troupe that the Mexican might have black blood, so he killed Joe's father in a rage. Deliberately, Hynes did not ask a doctor in his mother's labor, resulting in her death in childbirth. In this way, Joe was made into an orphan at his very birth by Hynes due to his suspected black blood.

Hynes used to be a preacher, his life being turbulent, but he was convinced that the black were evil in the eyes of God, and they had to serve the white. Hynes' Puritan belief made him unable to tolerate her daughter's infidelity, treating Joe as "God's abomination" (373) and "the teeth and fangs of evil" (386). He saw himself as the messenger of God, punishing the evil on behalf of God. Therefore, it was not long before Joe was sent to the orphanage. As the day was just Christmas, Joe had this ridiculous surname—Christmas. Hynes then went to the orphanage to work as the gatekeeper. Whenever Joe played with other children, Hynes was always watching him with a malicious look, which made the other children jokingly call him "nigger" to

derogate him. By this means Joe's young mind was full of low self-esteem and doubts about his racial identity. He did not know whether he was black or white, because he did have a white appearance, but others called him nigger.

Besides Hynes, the orphanage dietitian further pushed him to accept his black identity. Still a five-year-old boy, Joe accidentally caught the dietitian in her secret date with her lover. She tried in her vain attempt to bribe Joe for fear that Joe would tell on her. However, young Joe refused to accept the bribes without knowing what happened. She cursed him as "little nigger bastard"(122), which made Joe believe that he was black.

This belief in his black blood became so deeply ingrained into Joe's mind that he even gave up his chance of being a white boy. Due to his apparent white appearance, Joe was adopted by McEachern as a white child at the age of six. McEachern was a religious fanatic who forced Joe with his fists into reciting the religious doctrines. When Joe was still in the orphanage, he had asked innocently: "Is God a nigger too?"(383) Now he knew that God is white, and God will not bless such a nigger as him. Therefore, in his twelve-year life in his foster father's house, Joe kept resisting stubbornly against the patriarch's despotism. He became indolent, even stealing his mother's money to hang around with a prostitute called Bobbie. He attributed his misbehavior to being a nigger because the black behave as the black, and black behavior was the evil way of behavior, which was the general view of the white people in the community. In the foster family, he could have followed an ordinary white child's trajectory of growth, but the shadow in his childhood took root early in his mind; as a result, he considered his possible black descent as the excuse of his misconduct.

The second phase is from the time when Joe left the foster family to his death, in which Joe refused to be either a black or a white. He had a fifteen-year bohemian life after leaving the McEacherns, trapped in the dilemma of his identity. He wandered around the south, trying to live like a white man. Unfortunately, when he was with the white, he deliberately induced them to call him nigger to bring a fight, beating others or beaten; and with the black, he initiated a fight because they called him white. He went to the north, and lived with a black woman like husband and wife, but he still denied this kind of life from the bottom of his heart. His appearance and heart being in a split state, Joe can neither be a white nor a black, thus becoming a grotesque. As one of the black gardeners said to him at an early age: "You are worse than that. You dont know what you are" (384).

At the age of thirty, he returned to the familiar south and lived in the town of Jefferson. His hybridity is such a disharmony to the town's people that he isolated himself from the town upon his arrival. He chose the thatched cabin for his own residence which was next to Miss Burden's house on the edge of the town. The cabin is the residence of the former black before the Civil War. When working in the lumber mill, he never tried to integrate into the other workers. Subsequently, he was bootlegging wine. In the eyes of the town people, he was indeed a grotesque.

Then he became Miss Burden's secret lover. When he told Miss Burton that he was a black man, she asked him how he knew that. Being "at once humorless and sardonic", Joe said, "If I am not, damned if I haven't wasted a lot of time" (254). Denying his black identity is tantamount to canceling his attempt to be a black for so many years. Likewise, he does not want to be a black man, because he clearly knows that in the traditional south, the black are cursed and the white are chosen by God. Therefore, he refused Miss Burden's arrangement for him to be a real black: to take over a few black schools in her charge, to go to black schools for education, and to study law from a black lawyer. This arrangement made him angry: on the one hand, admitting his black identity is equal to putting himself into the bottom of the society; on the other hand, he could not tolerate being controlled by a woman. Finally, one day when Miss Burden forced him with a gun to kneel down for the prayer, he, partly out of self-defense, cut her throat with a knife. Then, he set fire to the house, and fled.

Miss Burden's murder became the top concern for the town people. Brown, who lived with Joe to help him bootleg wine, insisted that Joe be the murderer for Joe was a black man. The town people also undoubtedly believed "it was an anonymous negro crime committed not by a negro but by Negro" (288). Eventually, Joe was captured, first castrated and then lynched by Grimm, an extreme believer of white supremacy.

Joe's tragedy originated from the racial discrimination. The deeply-rooted belief in white supremacy deprived those people of their human nature: Hynes did not hesitate to kill his own daughter, pushing his grandchild to the abyss; Grimm brutally castrated and killed Joe; as a victim, Joe, in the process of struggling between the white and the black identity, became a "grotesque" and eventually became a murderer and arsonist.

### III. Joanna Burden

Joanna Burden, another grotesque in the novel, holds the truth that she should bear the curse of slavery for the white people all through her life. Being called as "a nigger lover" (292), Joanna had been a discordant figure until her death, living in the town, but isolated from the town.

Her firm belief in the white's curse was imposed upon her by her father. Joanna's grandparents were northerners before they moved to the south. Her father is a believer in the Calvin doctrine. When she was only four years old, her father took her to her grandfather's and brother's tomb and let her remember:

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....The curse of every white child that ever was born and that ever will be born. None can escape it. (252-253)

As Miss Burden's surname indicates, she will bear this lifelong curse, craving for the redemption on behalf of the white.

Joanna, while inheriting from her father the duty to help the black, did not truly understand the plight of the black or did this as the rebellion against the racial discrimination, but by the fear of the "curse". For her, the black are just "abstract objects" instead of the same human beings as the white. Helping them is equal to redeeming her curse from God. She devoted her life to this redemption while isolating herself from the town. Being eccentric, she was alone in her forties and lived on the edge of the town deliberately avoiding communications with the town people. Once in a while, she would leave the town to take care of several black schools in her charge. Back to the town, she would be sitting all day long. Living in the town of Jefferson, she fulfilled her obligation to help the black out of the town, not caring about whether there were suffering black people in the town.

Joanna's attitude towards the black was reflected in her relationship with Joe. As Joe's lover, she did not see Joe as an equal person with herself. She arranged for Joe to live in the small cabin beside her tall house, allowing Joe to sit with her only at night, and during the day she changed back to her stereotyped sternness. She manipulated Joe with a note of paper, making him date with her at her regulated time and place. She was groaning with her hands when she was with Joe. "Negro! Negro! Negro!"(260) It can be seen that Joe is not a living person for her, but an abstract symbol. She wanted to mold Joe into a real black man and marry him to reach her goal of saving herself.

Joanna never tried to integrate into the town, and likely, the town would not accept her. In the eyes of the town people, this fortyish spinster is an abolitionist, a friend of the black's and a grotesque out of tune with the town. This is obviously not allowed by the town. After the murder of Joanna, the town people regarded it as her retribution, even viciously speculating that "she had been ravished too: at least once before her throat was cut and at least once afterward (288)". They made use of her death to justify their racism and the miscegenation they feared. As Andrews maintains, "The narrative voice highlights the hypocrisy within the white Southern community that has ostracized Joanna when alive but then co-opts her when her death suits their racist expectations" (Andrews 9).

Living in the shadow of the "curse" instilled by her father, Joanna Burton spent all her life with her firm belief in the truth that she could save her own soul by uplifting blacks. This attempt made her a grotesque in the town people's mind, which is summarized as follows:

She had lived such a quiet life, attended so to her own affairs, that she bequeathed to the foreigner, an outlander, a kind of heritage of astonishment and outrage, for which even though she had

supplied them at last with an emotional barbeque, a Roman holiday almost, they would never forgive her and let her be dead in peace and quiet (289).

Her confinement in the truth expelled the real value of life from her, rendering her a virtual prisoner, who lost the freedom to seek a life of her own.

#### **IV. Gail Hightower**

Compared with the fore-mentioned two characters, Gail Hightower is more similar to Andersonian grotesques. The truth he holds so deeply in his life is the heroic southern myth.

In his critical study, *William Faulkner* (1951), Irving Howe says "Faulkner in his stories and novels has been conducting a long, sometimes painful and at other times heroic examination of the southern myth. He has set his pride in the past against his despair over the present, and from his counterpoint has come much of the tension in his work." (cited in Rubinstein 542-543) The Reverend Hightower represents those who were indulged in the southern myth—the heroic past.

Those people like Hightower are so restricted in this imagined heroism in the southern past that they cannot face the reality. "Hightower's life is ruled by incidents that occurred 60 years earlier. But in LIA this history appears only as romantic legend, a patrimony of honor and duty haunting Hightower and the south" (Meyerson & Neilson 23). Hightower's grandfather had participated in the American Civil War, but was not a real hero, and finally died because of stealing chickens. Such an imperfect person became Hightower's idol. He would boast about his grandfather, even when he was delivering a sermon in the church. The memory of his grandfather, which existed only in his own imagination, made him forget the present.

As Byron, one of the characters, explains, "A man will talk about how he'd like to escape from living folks. But it's the dead folks that do him the damage. It's the dead ones that lay quiet in one place and don't try to hold him, that he cant escape from" (75). His obsession with the past prevented him from caring about how other people view him and to make it worse, led to his total indifference to his wife. Consequently, he remained aloof even when his wife's sex scandal was well known. He was expelled from the church when the news of his wife's suicide in her lover's place was spread all over the town. Choosing not to leave the town, he settled down in a remote street of the town, becoming a grotesque.

His voluntary isolation did not bring him the peace for it was impossible for the town people to tolerate any person who was not in harmony with it. The presence of Hightower himself was the shame of the town. In order to completely drive him away, the town tried every possible means, tough and soft, in vain. They sent someone either to persuade him, or to beat him, while spreading his rumors. Hence, he could only live in seclusion, away from the crowd. Hightower was reluctant to leave because "a fellow is more afraid of the trouble he might have than he ever is of the trouble he's already got. He'll cling to trouble he's used to before he'll risk a change." (75)

In his comparative study of the two authors, Bidney clarifies the "Andersonian themes of guilt-inducing gossip and hypocritical deception that Faulkner apparently transfers to the subplot of Hightower" (Bidney 398). Hightower would rather be curled up on the grandfather's fantasy than face up with the real life. He could tolerate the negation from others, because he also denied others, which made him unable to communicate with people, became emotionally disabled, and finally ended up in loneliness.

#### **V. Conclusion**

Joe Christmas, Joanna Burden, and Gail Hightower are the victims of various social ideas, their depressed and distorted minds making them grotesques. However, Faulkner portrays these characters in his master's hand not to allow readers to appreciate their deformity. Instead, their tortured life reflects the life of the southern town in the 1920s and 1930s. As Howe maintains, "*Light in August* is the most socially inflected of Faulkner's novels, sensitive to the limitations and distortions society imposes on human conduct. In none of his other books is there such a full rendering of the force of dead institutions and dead matter as they exact their tyranny upon men" (cited in Rubinstein 553). These grotesques have their own value. Though deformed, these characters arouse the readers' sympathy, and their tragic life induces readers to think more deeply about the social root of their grotesqueness.

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