CHALLENGING FAULKNER'S FEMALE CHARACTERS IN "LIGHT IN AUGUST"

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Abstract: *William Faulkner's female characters in* "Light in August" *cross boundaries in search for liberation, refusing to follow the traditional patterns of feminine behaviour. Both Lena Grove and Joanna Burden are regarded as non-conformists, who choose to shape their own personalities and identities. The present paper intends to analyze Faulkner's female protagonists approaching the way in which the established feminine conduct is defied taking into account their attitude and their personality construction.*

Keywords*: feminine, sexuality, diversity, identity.*

William Faulkner's *Light in August* presents the author's concern with the rearranging of the traditional South as black individuals and women started emancipating at the beginning of the 1920s offering him an opportunity to approach such issues in his work. This major novel was written in only six months and it is a rigorous analysis of social and racial constraints. Faulkner attempts at presenting a new world, with structures that are different from the ones known in the South, where the communities misunderstood individuals and consequently misjudged them.

> *Light in August* was written from an early obsessive preoccupation with gender, femininity, and eros to race and boundaries between whiteness and blackness. Nowhere would those shifts from pastoral to gothic and from the erotic sublime to something like a racial sublime be more pronounced or more startling than in his seventh novel, *Light in August*, a work that has often frustrated the best efforts of Faulkner's readers and critics and that has been pronounced at various times both pastoral comedy and gothic nightmare. (Donaldson 2007: 360)

When William Faulkner was asked about his characters and their creation, especially about the distinction existing between the male and female ones he answered a student of the University of Virginia: "It's much more fun to try to write about women because I think women are marvelous, they're wonderful, and I know very little about them, and so I just – it's much more fun to try to write about women than about men – more difficult, yes." (Gwynn, Blotner 1959: 45)

Faulkner was invited to talk about his works and sometimes decipher what he intended the reader to understand and when the author talked about *Light in August* he mentioned that at first he only knew that his novel would be about a young, pregnant woman walking on a country road. The successful work progresses from Lena Grove to Gail Hightower to Joe Christmas and shows that Faulkner cherished his female characters and even though he had other male protagonists he wrote in such a way that women were seen from a different perspective than before. This subversion of dominant categories is one of the characteristics of the novel which attracts the readers and intrigues them. It is worth mentioning that even though the women are mostly described

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especially using the perspectives of the males characters of the novel there is quite an accurate presentation of them.

> *Light in August* offers a striking case in point, for at one level it exhibits Faulkner's ability to understand and portray women struggling with the limitations imposed upon them by a restrictive Southern society and by the very nature of the human condition, whereas at another it embodies the potential for reviving the old argument about whether Faulkner is a misogynist or an admirer of women - both because many of the female characters simultaneously fascinate and terrify the men with whom they come in contact and because their portrayals can sometimes be interpreted as circumscribed and reductive. Nevertheless, it is part of the richness of *Light in August* that it so variously depicts members of both sexes desperately attempting to come to terms with the ideas about gender that have been imposed upon them by the culture in which they have come to maturity. The women of the novel - like the men - are at once psychologically distinctive individuals and emblems of the ongoing difficulties human beings have with socially conditioned concepts of masculinity and femininity and with questions of appropriate behavior in which gender is an issue. Moreover, the novel as a whole reveals in intriguing ways the problematic presence of the "feminine" as an informing principle, the term "feminine" denoting that which is dependent, emotional, and marginal – just as "masculine" is that which is independent, rational, and culture-centered. (Bryant Wittenberg 1999: 103-104)

The writer stated that he admired the courage and endurance of women and so he chose to project his thoughts through Lena's story. "Lena Grove on the loose: but to get there she's had to escape from a familiar kind of cage. As for so many of the women we've encountered in Faulkner's South, Lena feels trapped by the life the men in her world expect her to lead" (Matthews 2009: 160). Families like the ones Lena belongs to are not truly concerned with her well-being. At twelve she is left orphan and her brother and sister-in-law take her in. She carefully observes how her sister-in-law has to work hard for the family and her children, to her family being added yet another member – Lena. The sister-in-law is somehow a projection of what Lena's life was supposed to be and as she becomes pregnant she seems to follow into the footsteps of the woman who is closer to her. Her brother does not seem worried in any way when he finds out his sister is pregnant and abandoned by Lucas Burch, as no signs of affections are shown between the two. "Families like Lena's have less reason to value chastity, since their interests are less served by the sexual and racial barriers that guard privileged status." (Matthews 2009: 160)

Lena Grove may not be the emancipated woman one would expect nowadays, but she certainly is different from other women who were viewed as belonging to their husbands, never having a say in important matters and being forced to follow the rules of the society: "just let one of them get married or get into trouble without being married . . . right then and there is where she secedes from the woman race and species and spends the balance of her life trying to get joined up with the man race. That's why they dip snuff and smoke and want to vote" (Faulkner 1990: 15). Lena gets help from the Armstid family and while the husband seemed surprised by the relaxed way she behaved the wife was first scandalized by the fact that Lena got the chance to travel even though she was pregnant and unwed and by the way in which she seemed so calm about it. However, Mrs. Armstid gives Lena the money she had put aside in a gesture of female solidarity supporting her to continue her journey.

If in the beginning Lena is confident that God will help her reunite with Lucas in order to raise their child together as she travels she learns that things might not go the

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way she wants and possibilities she had not once taken into account occur. She is one of the earth goddesses/mothers as some of Faulkner's characters are called as she embodies the vitality of nature, having an earthy nature. "If in a sense she is the force that harbors the seed and brings the germinating organism to perfection, if she is the sexual force renewing and sustaining the animate world, she is not at all the sexual temptress using lures and wiles" (Brooks 1987: 82). In the novel we have no hints that Lena set her mind to seduce Lucas or Byron but we are made to believe that she simply followed her instincts.

Lena Grove depends on one man after the other and does not take herself seriously until she understands that independence is important and she had come quite a long way. In a strict society which values women's virginity the situation created by Byron Bunch when he falls in love with unmarried pregnant Lena is against everything people have been used to "contrary to all the tradition of his austere and jealous country raising which demands in the object physical inviolability" (Faulkner 1990: 44). Faulkner's protagonist can be regarded as a case which can be psychologically analysed and even diagnosed:

> Lena Grove, for example, is certainly capable of being analyzed in social-psychological terms as the product of an orphaned and exploited childhood in which she was forced to care for her older brother's children and to do his housework, as eventually finding solace with a man who impregnated and abandoned her, and as managing to survive through such defense mechanisms as passive-aggressiveness, denial, patience, and mordant humor. (Bryant Wittenberg 1999: 115)

Another important female character of the novel is represented by Joanna Burden, who is an outsider in the town she lives because she is the heir of a family who was anti-slavery, believing that black individuals deserved to be free. People do not like her because of her views and because she is unmarried and does not behave like the other women of the town of Jefferson:

> She has lived in the house since she was born, yet she 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, despite the fact that it is now sixty years since her grandfather and her brother were killed on the square by an ex-slave owner over a question of negro votes in a state election. But it still lingers about her and about the place: something dark and outlandish and threatful, even though she is but a woman and but the descendant of them whom the ancestors of the town had reason (or thought that they had) to hate and dread. (Faulkner 1990: 46–47)

The relation that Joanna has with Joe Christmas is ambiguous and it can also be considered as a hint to racial hybrid as Joanna's father's first wife was a Mexican woman called Juana, therefore resulting her name. There are ties between the families of the two and the Mexican heritage and identity. There were different elements, which brought them together, among which the fact that her sexuality was confusing and she could connect to Joe as they were both marginalised members of the community.

> Faulkner clearly situates *Light in August* in the US South, but Mexican identity plays such a pivotal role in both Christmas' and Burden's known and unknown pasts that the novel acknowledges the actual presence of Mexico within the US South, above and

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> beyond the similar experiences of lost wars and northern domination that the two spaces share." (Esplin 2015: 273)

In both their families there are Mexican, black and white roots, even though Joanna explains to Joe Christmas that there are no actual black ancestors, but that her grandfather explains some of the relations in his family using the term blackness.

> So the couple lived for a good while, she in the rundown old plantation house, he in a cabin on the grounds. In the dusk of one evening, they do begin to talk about matters of consequence. Here they share a kind of amity in which they open their hearts to each other. In this scene they might even seem to be a wedded couple, growing into some deeper understanding of each other. But this was not to last. (Brooks 1987: 90)

Joanna tries to live what is was denied as a teenager and young woman, dreaming of romance and of all the sexuality she had been denied and in the second stage of her and Joe's relationship she wants to explore her sexuality and live a few passionate months, fact which surprises Joe as she craves for no only sexual interaction, but also affection and love.

There was a mixture of feminine and masculine stereotypes in their relationship as Joanna was a masculinised woman; she did not seem as fragile as other female characters in the novel. When Joanna was found dead many believed that the one who committed the murder was a negro. In a way they pointed to the fact that even though she tried to help them their nature was violent and there was no other escape for her, but only this tragic fate. Joanna is a threat to the values of the community as she is not married, has no children and also advocates for the blacks. Even her house is outside the town so she is socially and physically at a marginal place regarding the community she belonged to, at least officially.

"The town folks' collective fantasy punishes Joanna sexually for her willingness to mix racially, but also for her refusal to confine herself to wifely domestic activities. We may begin to see how motives of racial and sexual containment interlock in the single stereotype of white female chastity menaced by negro lust." (Matthews 2009: 163-164)

Another character meant to be against the rules, even though she is a married woman is Mrs. Hightower, who in the earlier stages of the novel was meant to be an active character as part of her husband's vivid memories. Mrs. Hightower is certainly a mystery as we are told that she had been miserable at her husband's side despite having been raised with the expectations that one day she would be a pastor's wife. She received very little attentions from Gail Hightower and her expectations and enthusiasm were crushed. She is alienated slowly from her husband and the townspeople and when she cannot take it anymore she has an outburst in the church, which leads to her being sent to a sanatorium because she is believed to be deranged for having such a reaction. The months passed and no one showed interest in her health or state of mind, so when she returned she decided to act as the people expected the minister's wife should: going to church, prayer meetings and visiting and receiving visits from the women of the town.

As the time passes she understands that she does not belong to such a society and she leaves for Memphis in a very open adulterous experience and one weekend it is announced that she had fallen from a hotel window and the man accompanying her was in a drunken state and was arrested for the deed. Her intention is believed to be that of embarrassing her husband as much as possible like a sort of revenge for all her suffering

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during their marriage. Her death made her a rebel and many were left staring at her tomb observing that somehow fate can be challenging. The town decided that she was sexually frustrated and judged her and now came the time when they had to think long and hard about life and its brevity.

In the novel there are also some sexual figures: Bobbie Allen and the dietician Miss Atkins, who provoke Joe in one way or another. Bobbie is the waitress-prostitute, who ignores his lack of experience and who offers him what he needs, becoming a part of a relationship more than a provider of services. However, she has a problem with black individuals and when her friends beat him she does nothing, not knowing for certain that he is or not black. The disillusionment he felt about women and sex was connected with his disappointment regarding Bobbie and their relationship's end. The situation with the dietician is different as Joe observes that her sexual desire, although challenged by her fear of getting caught urges her to forget about professional and social values.

"In *Light in August,* as in other of Faulkner's works, the readiness of people to label women as "whore" or "nonvirgin" or "menopausal" or "sexually repressed" limits their ability to truly see them as individuals, and this has implications for nearly every woman depicted" (Bryant Wittenberg 1999: 106). He manages to present fascinating women and to expose the way they react to a culture that does not offer them protection and guidance, but oppresses them and makes them feel marginalised at times. Faulkner's intentions seem to be the ones where he intends to find a resolution between the masculine and the feminine creating a balance between the two.

> Given the power and phallocentricity of the language and codes that govern the society represented in and by the town of Jefferson, it is hardly surprising that so few figures show the capability of challenging them in any way. Although Lacan himself asserted the potential for the speaking subject to achieve *la parole pleine* and for language to renew itself perpetually – and indeed the extraordinary multivalence of Faulkner's fiction bears eloquent testimony to the suppleness and the radical possibilities inherent in at least one Western language – almost none of the characters in *Light in August* does other than submit to its more constrictive operations, to the rule of the murderous wordsymbols. (Bryant Wittenberg 1995: 157)

Light in August brings forwards several types of women, with different background and experiences, who one way or the other challenge the rule established by the southern American society at the beginning of the 20th century, revealing that when they set their minds to it the female characters can change the view of the ones around them, determining the cultural changes of the society.

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