

Alicia Hickman
EH 499 – Kaivola
28 April 2008
Senior Research – Final Draft

Pent Black Blood Rushing from His Loins:
An Examination of Race and Gender in *Light in August*

Memory believes before knowing remembers . . .
Light in August, 119

In the epigraph above, Faulkner launches into a flashback in the life of one of the novel's major characters, Joe Christmas. The epigraph reveals the fallacy found in the idea of certainty and truth. In *Light in August*, there is no truth, no certainty, especially within the identity of Joe Christmas. He is not certain about his ethnicity or his gender. What he does have, however, is, to Faulkner and the novel, more powerful than any absolute. He has memory, belief and knowing. Identity, including race and gender, is not inherently fixed, but rather is shaped by what a person remembers and believes to be true. It is also shaped by what society expects and requires of them, such as codes for gender and racial behavior. Race and gender, therefore, can be seen as a type of social performance, especially within characters, like Joe, who have no definite signifiers of their racial or gender status. And, while Joe's memory shapes his identity, it simultaneously creates the split subjectivity that haunts him through most of the novel. In fact, Joe struggles between what his memory believes, that he is a "nigger" (*LA* 122) and what his knowing remembers: he looks white. It is this conflict that shapes Joe's performance of race. This conflict is further exacerbated by its occurrence within the Jim Crow South, that tumultuous period after the Reconstruction Era when society was rigidly structured in terms of binaries, such as white/black and male/female (Bush 485). Joe's performance of gender, which can also be divided into subcategories of black and

white masculinity, is even more fragile. Joe struggles with which masculine type should he “perform.” Within Southern/segregated society, these performances are not the same.

Within the Jim Crow South, Joe comes to act the role of the dangerous black man who threatens white femininity as well as white masculinity, fulfilling the myth of the black rapist constructed by white males. He must be killed to maintain the white social power structures that keep blacks oppressed, voiceless and subservient. For this society, these structures reflect “reality” not “performance.” Because Joe maintains a state of anonymity throughout much of his three-year stay in Jefferson, his “real” identity as a black male, as Jim Crow laws dictate the definition of race, comes as a shock to all the citizens of the small town. They feel betrayed that a man like Joe, who looked like them (see *LA* 350), turned out to be black. Joe, then, is viewed as an interloper, one who has pretended to be something he is not in order to infiltrate white society. He threatens the differences that define that society by his very existence. He upsets the delicate segregated balance between the whites and blacks of Jefferson, which may serve as an allegory for the South as a whole. Integration of the races and genders, of the self as well as “normal”/white society, pollutes it in the process. That which is not white is seen as the Other, something abnormal, unwanted and repulsive. This Other is also known as “the abject.” To integrate, therefore, is to allow white society to be degraded by abject blackness. This same construct is found within gender roles as well. Males are the preferred gender and white masculinity is the preferred gender performance. Anything other than that, especially any performance from a “white” male other than white masculinity, is seen as a perversion. Within this rigidly segregated and binary structures

of identity that shape the ideology of the South, transgressing these lines can only end in violence.

Because the Other or the abject exists within Joe, he cannot simply occupy the white masculine role assigned to him. His creolized consciousness, for his body does not appear creolized or miscegenated, forces him to seek out a power structure that will enable him to gain the power he thinks he, as a “white man” deserves but as a “black man” should be denied, which leads to a violent negotiation for power. Joe’s internal struggle, then, spills out into white society where the people of Jefferson also must deal with Joe’s racial and gender performances. Furthermore, Joe’s search for internal “grayness” is wholly rejected by this society. The only outcome of such a struggle within Faulkner’s novel, and in fact within much of the Jim Crow South, is violence. In his negotiation for power, Joe must take on the role assigned to him by white society – that of the hypersexual and dangerous black male. And yet, Joe’s deep fear and disavowal of the abject within himself forces him down a path to self-destruction and violence. His fears of blackness and the feminine drive him to self-hatred and a desire to hurt others. The result, ultimately, is death and castration, where “pent black blood” rushes out of his emasculated loins, revealing his blackness and his inability to perform white masculinity according to the structures of society. Within Joe, we see an indicator of the society of the Jim Crow South and the irreparable damage that can be done to black/miscegenated identity and selfhood.

Because of the problems arising from Joe’s race, which informs his gender performance, it is necessary to understand how and why the constructs of white and black masculinity evolved the way that they did and what effect that had on men of (possibly)

mixed race, like Joe. One construct of black masculinity functioning in *Light in August* as well as the South as a whole, is the myth of the black rapist. According to scholars like Lisa K. Nelson, author of “Masculinity, Menace and American Mythologies of Race in Faulkner’s Anti-Heroes” and Kobena Mercer whose *Welcome to the Jungle* examines black masculinity through a post-colonial perspective, this myth functioned on multiple levels. It threatened “white femininity and thus white supremacy simultaneously provid[ing] an excuse for racial control” (Nelson 53). Furthermore, “the rape myth provided a master narrative for the enactment of masculine sexuality, only in this case the protagonist was the black man” (Nelson 53). The black man was, therefore, sexualized and presented as a beast. By portraying black males as thriving on animalistic and sexual urges, white males and their society stripped African-American men of their humanity. Furthermore, this myth became fact, through the indictment and subsequent lynching of hundreds of black males for their alleged sexual violence against white women.

Mercer theorizes that the power structure afforded to black men is linked to this sexualization because physical/sexual power was the only realm open to them. There were “limitations placed on black masculinity by white slave holders – their lack of authority, familial responsibility and ownership of property – black masculinity had to be defined differently . . . [as] a code of ‘macho’ behavior” (137). Mercer’s theory makes sense, especially within the post Reconstruction South. Before the emancipation of slaves, most black males did not own land or raise their own children. Therefore, black men were allotted to physical labor on the plantation. During Reconstruction, these standards shifted and more power was allocated to black men. However, this power was

limited by the surrounding white society. Apart, in their segregated quarters, black men were not forced to adhere to the binaries of white and black masculinity.

Mercer notes the white male preoccupation with the black male's sexuality and phallus, part of what he calls "the colonial fantasy," which stems from "a rigid set of racial roles and identities which rehearse scenarios of desire in a way in which traces the cultural legacies of slavery, empire and imperialism" (133-4). Mercer points out that a mixture of "fear and fascination" is bound within the white male's understanding of black sexuality; through this fascination the black male is "transformed into the Other" (134). Mercer uses Franz Fanon to argue that this designation of black males as Other is used to "allay their [the white master's] fears and anxieties, as well as provide a means to justify the brutalization of the colonized and absolve any vestiges of guilt" (134). We see this very clearly in the actions of Percy Grimm, the young National Guardsman who kills and castrates Joe in order to preserve the purity of white Southern women but also to preserve his own white masculinity, which is derived from, and depends upon, the subjugation of the black man.

Joe has been acculturated to see and understand his identity as part of a binary system that functioned so strongly during the Jim Crow era. Given this binary system of identification, the term miscegenation is incomplete because it denotes only the mixing of races and not those of gender, sexual orientation or cultures. Instead, we must use terms that encompass both racial and gender blurring, such as Édouard Glissant's idea of *métissage*. It is this term that Valerie Loichot uses in *Orphan Narratives* when describing the identity of Joe. *Métissage*, a term that comes naturally to Glissant, the Francophone writer, needs to be clearly defined as Loichot, who is writing to an American/English

speaking audience. *Métissage* does “not only defines race, but can also describe cultural, social, and gender blurring” (Loichot 117). Also, the term *créolisation*, which also refers to “an object whose intrinsic differences can cohabit” (Loichot 117), is also important for us because it shows exactly what Joe is not and also what he truly desires to be. He is not someone in who differences can cohabit without violence. Loichot builds upon Glissant’s usage of *métissage* by using it to define Joe’s status within the novel, saying that the term does something that Faulkner either could or, more likely, would not: categorize Joe correctly. I agree with Glissant, who, in *Faulkner Mississippi*, writes that “Creolization is the very thing that offends Faulkner: *métissage* and miscegenation, plus their unforeseeable consequences” (83). By accepting the *métissage* within Joe, Faulkner would also be accepting the integration of a rigidly and violently segregated South, a South dependent on heritage and history, as Faulkner shows through his body of work set in Yoknapatawpha county. In order to accept *métissage*, the dominant and traditional interests and power must be relinquished.

Furthermore, when creolization does assert itself within Southern culture it must be condemned. Glissant’s critique of Faulkner’s novel, serves as a warning against, what seem to be in Faulkner’s novel, the horrors of integration, miscegenation and *métissage*. Any system that breaks down the boundaries between binary structures is seen as an evil. Joe, for us, becomes nearly the perfect embodiment of that evil through his mixed identity. Because Joe cannot adhere to one set of rules for his racial and gender performances, instead oscillating between whiteness (how he acts in town) and blackness (how he acts with his female lovers), he signifies the natural rebellion against clearly defined codes of behavior and identity. Furthermore, Joe’s troubled and unsatisfied

acceptance of black masculinity speaks more to his ardent desire to be fully creolized, to have a unified identity. This is why, before his death, Joe speaks about longing for a state of “grayness” within himself. Joe’s identity and split subjectivity call for a creolized consciousness. However, this consciousness is not and will not be accepted by white society.

Perhaps it is this English/American repulsion of integration that poses such difficulties in defining characters, like Joe, using the English language. As Loichot notes, neither *métissage* nor its Spanish cognate *mestizaje* have an equal in English, partly owing to the more fluid definitions of race within Francophone and Spanish colonies. Because of the intense creolization of slave populations with whites and native groups, the French and Spanish languages were forced to adapt to the constant shift in racial definitions. The English rejection of such kinds of terms are also an effect of the “extreme binary classification of people of the imagined “black” and “white” races in the United States (Loichot 124). These terms clearly illustrate, merely by their definition, the problems arising from their presence within an atavistic, binary-based society. The “blurring” that they identify causes them to be seen as something Other than the norm. Because these terms are available to French and Spanish speakers, they allow for a more fluid line of thinking. They also describe the inner conflict within Joe, which spills out in his relationships with others.

The issue of *métissage* within Joe is only exacerbated by the idea of the abject or the repulsive within the self. Because Joe believes himself to be of mixed race, whether his father was African-American or Mexican, he feels a deep shame and repulsion, which white society has taught him to feel about the Other as blackness and miscegenation.

Julia Kristeva, in *Powers of Horror*, defines the abject as something that “disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (4). According to this understanding, two things in the novel can be constituted as abject: miscegenation and integration. Both of these elements “disrespect” borders set in place by racism and segregation by combining one (whiteness) with the Other (blackness). These two elements supposedly come together within Joe by way of this mysterious father, a man who may be African American or Mexican.

The idea of abjection is expanded in ways relevant to our study of Joe by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*. Butler discusses Kristeva’s theory of the abject in relation to the Other within oppressive societal structures where a “discrete subject” is created through expulsion (Butler 133). For Butler, “the ‘abject’ designates that which has been expelled from the body, discharged as excrement, literally rendered ‘Other’” (133). Furthermore, the “repudiation of bodies for their sex, sexuality, and/or color is an ‘expulsion,’ followed by a ‘repulsion’ that founds and consolidates culturally hegemonic identities along sex/race/sexuality axes of differentiation” (Butler 133). How painful is it for one to expel the abject within him/herself? And what actions are made manifest by this dichotomy of expulsion and repulsion? We find this difficult answer within the actions and reflections of Joe throughout *Light in August*, mainly through his interactions with blacks and women – both of which repel and attract him due to his miscegenated identity. Furthermore, Joe’s attempt to expel his abjectness can never be complete because his memory and belief are always present in his mind, as is his past, which informs his ideas of white and black masculine identity.

Butler's discussion of the abject, while fitting for Joe, does not completely explain Joe's anxious performance of black masculinity. Because Joe's race, and thus his masculinity, is not clearly defined *on* his body, through his skin color, he can choose between which masculine role he prefers to play. Understanding Butler's idea of gender performance provides a powerful tool in understanding Joe's gendered performance of race, physical violence and his overt sexual acts. Butler posits that "acts, gestures and desires produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produces this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause" (136). These acts, she goes on to say, are "*performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means" (136). For Joe, what he is performing is often difficult to understand. Is he performing black masculinity or hypermasculinity?

Some critics, such as Jay Watson in his essay "Overdoing Masculinity in *Light in August*; or; Joe Christmas and the Gender Guard," posit that Joe's main issue is a hypermasculinity, which stems from a desire to "outman" other men, without exploring the racial tensions behind this idea. For Watson, Joe is too masculine for the people of Jefferson who seek to police gender performance by limiting the levels of femininity and masculinity within its society. However, what Watson does not seem to articulate in his argument is the visible binary of masculine types within the Jim Crow South. In fact, as Mercer has shown in his study of black masculinity and its coded types, Joe is acting exactly the way he believes black males should behave. Therefore, Watson's claim that Joe's error is "the *overdoing* of masculinity itself, in an uncanny extension of masculine

sexual desire and opportunity to the nervous populace of Yoknapatawpha to acknowledge neither law nor limit” (150) ignores the deep-seated issues at the heart of Faulkner’s novel. Jefferson’s reaction to Joe, once they find out he is black, is typical of a white segregated society that has instilled an oppressive system in which blacks are to be feared and hated. Joe is killed because he plays black masculinity (as constructed by white society) too well. He takes it to its farthest limit, the rape and murder of a white woman, which is this society’s greatest fear, thus giving the town the opportunity to expel the Other within and reclaim their white forms of masculine performance.

By combining concepts of *métissage*, abjection and Otherness, we may further understand Joe’s conflicted identity, which come to the fore in his actions with women. Joe’s belief that he may be bi-racial stirs in him a repulsion of the self, a self that has been defined as Other and abject by white society. Because of this Otherness within, Joe is unable to reconcile what might be (his mixed race) and what is (the fact that he looks white). Because of the gender constructs separating black masculinity from white masculinity, Joe does not know where he fits and how he is to realize his maleness and sexuality within these confines. The result is Joe’s ardent desire to expel and reject everything abject within himself, his blackness and his feminine tendencies, i.e. tenderness, sensitivity and emotion. He is, as Glissant would define him, a *métis*, living in a world of binary structures where the blending and blurring of elements is strictly forbidden. As a result, Joe is viewed by society as not fully human. With this knowledge, whether conscious or unconscious, Joe acts and reacts to the white/black and male/female social structures around him. Because Joe contains elements of racial uncertainty and miscegenation, he becomes a nearly perfect example of the acute challenges to the post-

Reconstruction South and, in fact, any society that is facing a radical de-colonization and integration of the oppressed with their oppressors.

Joe's overt misogyny may be understood as a typical sentiment among males who feel threatened by femininity. His misogyny begins at an early age with his virulent hatred of his adopted mother, Mrs. McEachern, who attempts to dote on the young orphan but is consistently rejected by Joe. At seventeen, before he leaves his parents' house, he reflects on his adopted mother, thinking "It was the woman who, with a woman's affinity and instinct for secrecy, for casting a faint taint of evil about the most trivial actions" (*LA* 168). The narrator further explains Joe's hatred of women by describing the underlying cause, "that soft kindness which he [Joe] believed himself doomed to be forever victim of and which he hated worse than he did the harsh and ruthless justice of men" (*LA* 168-9). Women, for Joe, are symbols of weakness and victimization. And by accepting their kindness, he would be allowing himself to become a powerless victim. This is why Joe rejects a first woman who loved him, saying, "She was trying to make me cry. Then she thinks that they would have had me" (*LA* 169).

Doreen Fowler, in "Joe Christmas and Womanshenegro," describes Joe as representative of the society in which he functions: "Joe, to a certain extent, represents his society and its attitude toward women; further, his feelings for women are related, in a complex way, to his attitude toward blacks" (147). We can push this idea further by analyzing his relations with black women. Through the lens of expulsion and repulsion, these women become not only an aversion for Joe because they are women, but also because they embody the two elements within himself that he despises: blackness and femininity. Fowler makes the claim that this "dread" of black women comes from his

innate fear of subjugation, which “they seem to almost embody” (151). This seems convincing, given the binaries of the Jim Crow South and Joe’s miscegenation. Joe, knowing the one-drop-rule, understands that, regardless of the amount of blackness within him, he is still defined by this society as black. Blackness equates subjugation. In order for Joe to expel these feelings of subjugation and Otherness, he hates and reacts with violence to the black women with which he has contact.

Never confident of his race or his masculinity, Joe seeks out others who can affirm his conflicted identity. Beth Widermaier, in “Black Female Absence and the Construction of White Womanhood in Faulkner’s *Light in August*,” rightly claims that these scenes “can be read as Kristeva’s abject, revealing how black women are associated with a threat to symbolic order” (32). It is the abject, not only embodied by the black race but also by the female gender, which Joe runs from for the entire novel. It is the Other that he seeks to escape only to realize that it has been with him, inside of him, the whole time. Joe’s first interaction with a black woman is also his first sexual encounter, which forever solidify the connection between gender and race performance for Joe. At fourteen, Joe and some other boys set out to lose their virginity by having sex with a young black girl. She is unnamed and the scene is “presented as a normal adolescent initiation” (Widmaier 27). However, the narrative structure gives insight to Joe’s feelings during the interaction, which ends, not in the loss of Joe’s virginity, but in the brutal beating of the young nameless woman.

When his turn comes, “he could not move at once, standing there, smelling the woman smelling the negro all at once; enclosed by the womanshenegro . . . Then it seemed to him that he could see her – something, prone, abject” (*LA* 156). Joe then

begins to kick and hitting the girl about the face until “there was no She at all” (*LA* 157). Joe clearly feels a sense of repulsion during this exchange by aligning her with the term “abject.” However, as Widmaier notes, all the focus of this scene is on Joe, not on the beaten black woman. In fact, she does not speak and is depicted without agency or subjectivity, placing all of the emphasis on Joe’s reaction to the girl (Widmaier 28). This is important because it shows Joe’s fear of black women, which can be understood as his fear of being like them, of being subjugated and stripped of his power.

Later, Joe makes a conscious decision to live only with blacks after nearly beating a white prostitute to death. Joe lives “as man and wife with a woman who resembled an ebony carving” (*LA* 225). And yet, Joe cannot overcome his feelings of repulsion with both blackness and the female form. In Joe’s desperate attempt to join black society, he comes to the realization that he is not wholly one of them even though he tries “to breathe into himself the dark odor, the dark inscrutable thinking and being of negroes, with each suspiration trying to expel from himself the white blood and the white thinking and being” (*LA* 225-6) while the woman, once again nameless, lies sleeping beside him. But his attempt to expel his whiteness, which he defines as abject, at least during this period, fails and the “odor which he was trying to make his own would tighten and tauten, his whole being [would] writhe and strain with physical outrage and spiritual denial” (*LA* 226). The element within both of these scenes that causes such strong reactions within Joe is not, necessarily, the abjectness of black or white but the idea of miscegenation. Always conscious of the binary society in which he is a part, Joe’s shame of his possible mixed race rises to the surface during sexual encounters with women who are, without a doubt, black. While there is no actual violence in this scene, there is the hint of violence

and hatred within Joe. His attempt to be black, to expel his whiteness, fails, making him, ironically, only more racist toward blacks. It is also within this scene that the inner struggle of Joe's split subjectivity is most visible. Joe believes that he is trying to escape a white social structure that denies him power, which is partly true, but Joe is really trying to escape the whiteness within himself believing that it will make him whole, which he can never be until he accepts both his whiteness and blackness, thus making him creolized. It is this creolized identity that Joe so desperately longs for by the end of the novel, when he is finally at peace with his inner condition of "grayness."

Joe's violence towards white women is also partially motivated by issues of race and his own repulsion towards miscegenated beings, including himself. Joe's motivation to live solely with blacks comes after a violent altercation with a prostitute in a Northern city, in which Joe is living at the time. Joe's use of prostitutes is not uncommon before this event. However, what is different is the prostitute's reaction to Joe's admission that he is a "negro" (*LA* 225). In the South, the woman would kick him out, ashamed at having had sex with a black man, which would result in a beating from the other white male clients at the bordello. However, with this particular prostitute, race is not an issue and she demands her money, saying, "You look all right. You ought to seen the shine I turned out just before your turn came" (*LA* 225). The term "shine" here is being used a derogatory term for African Americans. This sends Joe into a violent rage and he begins to beat her, once again as with the young girl in the shed, Joe needs several men to subdue him. He is, after this episode, "sick" with the realization that "there were white women who would take a man with black skin" (*LA* 225). Joe, himself, believes in the stereotype of the black rapist and the caricature of white femininity as too pure to have

sex with a black man. What disgusts Joe so ardently here is the prostitute's blasé attitude toward the issue of miscegenation. Joe, before this point, has only known the strict binaries of Southern culture, which deny black males the right to have intercourse or any kind of relations, besides that of servant, with white women. Joe's disgust with the North's acceptance of miscegenation stems from the repulsion he feels towards himself.

Joe does not have a long-standing sexual relationship with any white woman until he begins his affair with Joanna Burden, a white woman who fights for black rights. Joe's relationship with Joanna begins violently and ends with violence as well. However, his relationship, which lasted three years, is far from ordinary, due in part to Joe's struggle with race and gender, but also because of Joanna's variance of those elements as well. One key to understanding their relationship can be found in Caryl Sills' article, "Patterns of Victimization in *Light in August*." Sills presents an important interpretation of Homi Bhabha's negotiation theory, which analyzes Joe and Joanna's affair in terms of victim/victimizer relationships.

This negotiation of power transforms Joe and Joanna from victims to victimizers of each other, which can be understood as a result of the "oppressed victim subconsciously identifies with the oppressor/victimizer as a first step to assuming the oppressor's power" (Sills 163). Because they are both victims of white patriarchal Southern society they seek, in each other, power and stability through abuse and control over the other. During the first phase of their affair, Joe has intercourse with Joanna whenever he chooses, entering her room through her unlocked kitchen. However, in the second phase, Joanna turns victimizer by forcing Joe to play sex games and putting on faux-rape scenes in her yard, screaming "Negro! Negro! Negro!" during sex. Joe feels

like a player in Joanna's sexual script in which she has become the aggressor and victimizer through the sexual power she holds over him. While Joe attempts to assert his dominance, through sexual power, over Joanna, it is she who dominates Joe through her manipulation of race relations. Even though he is "raping" her, she is allowing him as a black man to take her, a white woman. In this binary society, race trumps gender in negotiations for power.

The three phases of Joe and Joanna's relationship are integral in understanding the culmination of the aforementioned issues of racialized gender and *métissage*. In the first phase, Joe comes and goes as he pleases, always sneaking into the house by way of an unlocked door or window, emphasizing his complicity in the propagation of the black rapist motif. During the first phase, Joe repeatedly "rapes" Joanna. I use quotations around the term because Joanna allows Joe to "despoil her virginity" over and over again, allowing Joe to believe that he is, in fact, raping her, when she is the one in control. Joanna performs masculinity during these nightly sessions, displaying a "mantrained habit of thinking" (LA 235) and having the "strength and fortitude of a man" (LA 234). Having tired of this, Joe's decides to actually rape Joanna, saying to himself, "I'll show the bitch" (LA 236). This stems from, as we find a few pages later, from Joe's recognition of the type of relationship he and Joanna have. He is "her nigger." She sets out food for him, "*for the nigger. For the nigger*" (LA 238 emphasis within text), Joe repeats to himself. Joe is furious that Joanna is treating him as her private sex object. Their relationship, at this point, is only sex. They do not talk; they do not even sit down together. And it is this realization, that Joe is not the figure of horror and power that he needs to be, which causes Joe to rape Joanna.

Faulkner describes their relationship as three phases because the actions in each is so radically different from the preceding one, and yet, all three contain the same issues a negotiation of power through race and gender. Therefore, the second phase shifts from the performed rape of Joanna by Joe into a fetishized sexual relationship. The language in this section of the novel is riddled with images of darkness and filth. Joe experiences Joanna's overt femininity and sexuality as repulsive because it is this kind of behavior that is "allowed" only to black women, not white women. Joe describes this period as though "he had fallen into a sewer" which "ran only at night" (*LA* 256). As Joe "watched her pass through every avatar of a woman in love" (*LA* 259) he becomes more repulsed by her and what she signifies, a female sexuality assignment to black women. Widmaier notes that, "the body of Joanna [is that of] a white woman coded as black" (34). This is accomplished through Joanna's exclusion from the white community of Jefferson and her acceptance into the black community where "she marks herself, in the eyes of the Southern community, as black" (Widmaier 34). It is in these wild sexual encounters, which include role-playing and exhibitionism, that their sexual relationship becomes "implicated in the abject sexuality assigned to black women" (Widmaier 34). And, according to Sills, it is in this phase that Joanna becomes the "aggressor" (Sills). Sills maintains that Joanna is not always the aggressor and that she too is victimized. However, there is never a time, excluding the event of her murder, that she does not have control over Joe, whether through her sexual or racial performance. To say that Joe had the power to victimize her would provide him with a kind of agency that he longs to possess but never truly does, even in his rape of Joanna. As Joanna and Joe sink into the "black abyss," Joe realizes that "he could not escape" (*LA* 260). That which he cannot

escape is not the relationship with Joe but the realization that all things black repel him and yet are inextricably linked to him.

The third phase is the culmination of their relationship and, through Joanna's actions, ends with her death. The issue that arises during this phase is most specifically the reoccurring issue of miscegenation. Joanna wants a baby, Joe's baby. She also wants Joe to attend an school for African Americans and take over her work with poor Southern blacks. Joe is repulsed by these ideas. First, Joe knows that if he surrenders to Joanna he will "deny all the thirty years that I have lived to make me what I chose to be" (*LA* 265). Furthermore, to Joanna, a child signifies her rebellion against Southern culture and the harshly segregated heritage in which she has grown up. She tells Joe, "A full measure. Even to a bastard negro child" describing her thoughts about the child she believes herself to be carrying (*LA* 266). Joe's fear is heightened with the realization that Joanna wants to marry him and he feels a "kind of impotent rage" waiting for her to make her move. Joanna's believed pregnancy, however, is simply the onset of menopause, which, once she realizes this, strips her of the sexual power she holds over Joe. "Joanna's menopause is the catalyst that threatens Joe's manhood by denying it and threatens his identity by sublimating it to her prerogative" (Sills). However, what is truly at the heart of this section is Joanna's attempt to force Joe to fully admit to being black. Joe is content to use his possible blackness to oppress and subjugate others, such as black women, but not to allow white, women or men, to dominate and subjugate him, which is what will happen if Joe lives as a black man in the Jim Crow South.

Because Joe can "pass" for white, his admission (to Joanna, his other lovers and white men) of blackness takes on deeper significance. He has made a conscious decision

to reveal his abjectness to the dominant social group, who will react negatively, in an attempt to expel the abject within himself through white society's violent reaction and repulsion to blackness. When Joe provokes white men into calling him "nigger" in order to fight them (*LA* 225), he is doing so in order to assert his masculinity through physical prowess. We also have already seen Joe's (attempted) rape of Joanna in the beginning of their relationship. Joe rapes Joanna to assert his power as a "black" male over her as a pure white female. However, she does not react according to the binary laws that govern Southern society. The next night, Joe "mounts" Joanna's staircase again, angered by her lack of femininity during the first rape scene, thinking, "'I'll show you! I'll show the bitch!'" (*LA* 236). Joanna surrenders to Joe and allows him to assert his black masculine power over her – or at least allows him to believe that he has done so – because Joe reflects later that "At least I have made a woman out of her at last Now She hates me. I have taught her that at least" (*LA* 236).

This brief scene does two things. It shows Joe's fulfillment of the myth of the black rapist – a role that he takes on earlier in his life with numerous prostitutes who he refuses to pay by telling them he is black, thereby turning the sex act into a rape by depriving it of economic/monetary value. Joe, described in the second chapter as "rootless," chooses to realize his masculinity through the modes allowed to black men, whom he at once relates to and despises for that relation. Also, the scene is one of many between Joe and Joanna that highlight the fluidity of gender within their relationship and within the characters themselves. It is, again, the lack of boundaries that cause Joe's problems. He cannot function within the binary society in which he lives, he seeks to

expel that which makes him the Other, and yet he cannot function in a society without those boundaries either.

By Joe's acceptance of the black rapist motif, Joe is also accepting the punishment allotted to those men by white society – lynching and castration. The importance of discussing Joe's castration is directly related to this exploration of black masculinity in that castration, in this instance, was a way for white men to dehumanize, and more importantly, emasculate black males. In fact, this action also adds to the white masculine prowess, giving the acting white male “the symbolic and sexual power they themselves had previously ascribed to black masculinity” (Abdur-Rahman 187). For some critics, lynching and castration functions as a “communal rape of black manhood,” as it surely does for Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman, author of “White Disavowal, Black Enfranchisement, and the Homoerotic in William Faulkner's *Light in August*.” We see this most clearly in Joe's murder. Furthermore, “the performative quality of Joe Christmas's blackness is evident not only in his iteration of certain behavioral norms of blackness but also in his susceptibility to the violence generally reserved for black people” (Abdur-Rahman 178).

The allusions to blackness abound in Faulkner's description of Joe, locating him closer and closer within the black population through his death. There is a “shadow” (*LA* 464) around Joe's mouth and, of course, the blood rushing from his loins the novel also describes as black (*LA* 465). As Abdur-Rahman correctly notes, “the black blood that rushes from his body like a released breath, or new life, signifies that murder and mutilation have finally situated Christmas firmly within a proper – that is victimized and subordinate – black racial identity” (188). Therefore, the act of castration not only strips

Joe of his hard-won black masculinity but also strips him of all whiteness as well. By castrating Joe, a murderer and rapist, those involved, such as Percy, have denied the miscegenated nature of Joe's ethnicity and gender, enacting their binary system of governing human identity with extreme brutality.

This turns Joe into a symbol of blackness and a sign of the danger of miscegenation for white Southern culture. Indeed, all African-Americans, according to Abdur-Rahman:

May be taken in general as a miscegenated group not only because of their mixed racial genealogies resulting from rampant interracial rape during and after slavery but also because of the inevitable cultural admixture resulting from the African American presence in America since its founding. (179)

Therefore, miscegenation is something that cannot be escaped, even with binaries in place. This inescapable aspect to the looming threat of *métissage* and miscegenation is something feared both by Joe, for the instability which this brings to his identity, and white society, for the threat to white power that has been so carefully constructed in this dichotomous society.

The only means of escape Joe has is death. He cannot simply leave Jefferson/the segregated South because he has stepped beyond the boundaries allotted to him by having sex with and murdering Joanna Burden. He must be punished. Therefore, Joe surrenders. But this surrender happens well before Joe's murder. It happens when he is on the run after trading his shoes for some brogans that he got from a black woman. Joe reflects on the irony of the wearing the brogans, thinking:

He could see himself being hunted by white men at last into the black abyss which had been waiting, trying, for thirty years to drown him and into which now and at last he had actually entered, bearing now upon his ankles the definite and ineradicable gauge of its upward moving. (*LA* 331)

For Joe, the brogans symbolize blackness, the same blackness he has sought to expel through violence since he was fourteen years old. He realizes not that it is not on the outside but within him. It is during Joe's escape from jail that he understands what he always wanted, grayness, "becoming one with loneliness and quiet that has never known fury or despair" (*LA* 331). It is at this point that Joe decides to surrender, in so doing he is rejecting the black masculinity and the role assigned to him by white society, without rejecting his identity as a miscegenated being.

Joe comes to understand that he "remained a foreigner to the very immutable laws which the earth must obey" (*LA* 338). And these laws are the binary codes of white/black, male/female. Therefore, as the "black tide creeping up his legs, moving upward from his feet upward as death moves," (*LA* 339), Joe does not react with violence. Indeed, there is no reason to. Joe understands that he cannot live within this society but must obey the rules. For that obedience to occur, he must claim it the only way he can, by being castrated like a black rapist. This is why, in a minister's kitchen, he does not fire his loaded gun at the white men, frothing with rage, who want nothing more than to lynch a "nigger." He does not fight against the young Percy Grimm who, with a butcher knife, screams, "Now you'll let white women alone, even in hell" (*LA* 464). Instead, Joe gazes upwards with "peaceful and unfathomable and unbearable eyes" soaring into the memories of the white men who surround him (*LA* 464-5). In this action, Joe becomes an

emblem for the (feared) repercussions of miscegenation and the blurring of gender lines within white Southern society. By witnessing Joe's murder and castration, these men know, through memory, that the effects of an integrated South are destruction and death. Furthermore, as Joe's body turns pale white from a massive blood loss and is surrounded by black blood, Percy – a correlative for the Jim Crow South – effectively segregates the identity of Joe into its original state of black and/versus white, which negates Joe's unified (creolized) consciousness which only became so unified during his time on the run.

Faulkner's novel, then, can be viewed as a warning to all miscegenated beings and all people seeking creolization. Safe cohabitation cannot occur until the binaries that segregate are destroyed. Joe's hatred of blacks is partly due to his internalization of "the values of a society that scorns blacks, but also because he suspects and fears that he may be one of them, similarly, then, he may repudate women not only because he has assimilated the values of the society that disdains women, but also because he fears he may be, in some way, like them" (Fowler 156). Also, his repudation of the Other outside of himself is a projection of the hatred of self that he has carried with him since he was five years old, hiding in a closet. In order to satiate his need for power, Joe accepts whatever kind of masculine performance that will allow him to gain that power, no matter how revolting it is to him. And while Joe does not become a complete creole, he still comes to terms with the blackness and femininity within. For, to be a creole, Joe would have to accept not only his blackness but also his whiteness. And at the time of Joe's murder, this is not possible within this society. However, Joe's eventual acceptance of his "gray" identity can be seen as his final acceptance of both his whiteness and

blackness. He has come to terms with the *métissage* within. However, the Jim Crow South could not and would not be able to accept this creolized identity and consciousness for many years. It is for this reason that Joe's death can be interpreted in salvific terms, not because he is saving others, but because he is saving a part of himself that white society has deemed abject, that he has fought against for so long and finally learned to accept the dangerous and horrific state of miscegenation.

Works Cited

- Abdur-Rahman, Aliyyah I. "White Disavowal, Black Enfranchisement, and the Homoerotic in William Faulkner's *Light in August*." *The Faulkner Journal* (Fall 2006/Spring 2007): 176-192.
- Bush, Laura. "A Very American Power Struggle." *The Mississippi Quarterly* 51.3. Summer 1998: 483-501.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Faulkner, William. *Light in August*. New York: Vintage Books, 1959.
- Fowler, Doreen. "Joe Christmas and Womanshenegro." *Faulkner and Women*, eds. Doreen Fowler and Ann J. Abadie. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1986. pp. 144-161.
- Glissant, Edouard. *Faulkner Mississippi*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: an Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia UP, 1982.
- Loichot, Valérie. *Orphan Narratives*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007.
- Mercer, Kobena. *Welcome to the Jungle*. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Nelson, Lisa K. "Masculinity, Menace, and American Mythologies in Faulkner's Anti-Heroes." *The Faulkner Journal*, 19.2 (Spring 2004): 49-68.
- Sills, Caryl. "Patterns of Victimization in *Light in August*." *Mosaic: a Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 38.2. June 2005: 163-180. *ProQuest Research Library*. Stetson University. duPont-Ball Lib., 14 Feb. 2008 <<http://www.proquest.com>>.

Watson, Jay. "Overdoing Masculinity in *Light in August*; or; Joe Christmas and the Gender Guard." *The Faulkner Journal* (Fall 1993/Spring 1994): 149-177.

Widmaier, Beth. "Black Female Absence and the Construction of White Womanhood in Faulkner's *Light in August*." *The Faulkner Journal* 16.3 Fall 200/2001: 23-39.