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“The Developed India: Challenges and Opportunities”

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**The Role of Languages, Literature and Social Sciences in
Addressing the Global Contemporary Issues**

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Racial Identity Crisis in William Faulkner's *Light in August*

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Abstract:

In *Light in August* race is the most important theme. This also refers to the question of racial identity, the problem of a biracial identity, and the problem of southern racism. Joe Christmas is the main character that represents the theme. Though he looks white, he believes that he has some unknown amount of black blood. It means he has a mixed blood in him. It also means one of parents is black. Throughout the novel, this is an important problem for Christmas. He is sometimes so disgusted by blackness that he beats a prostitute for her willingness to sleep with a black man, and at other times he lives in black communities and tries to absorb the "blackness" of those around him. He tries to establish a sense of belonging to the blacks. He is both ashamed and proud of his black ancestry. He always feels a need to tell others about his racial heritage. He himself admits that his desire to come to terms with his racial identity has completely shaped his life. He tells Joanna that if he is not partially black, he has wasted a lot of time of his life.

Key Words: Racial Identity, Southern racism, black blood, blackness, black ancestry etc.

The novel is about the question Christmas's racial identity crisis. It is about whether it is a necessary result of his biracial origin, or whether it necessary result of the society's definitions of race. Gavin Stevens imagines Christmas's white and black bloods as literally distinct from one other, and a conflict with each other. Christmas is not really happy to stay in black society, but he knows that he is in danger as long as he lives in white society. He feels as if he is always being forced out and thus he ultimately feels that he is isolated in both the white and black societies. Christmas is not really happy to stay in black societies. Christmas is also at the center of the problem of southern racism. This also relates to the questions of identity. For almost all of the three years that Christmas lives in Jefferson, the town defines him as a white man and thus although he is a bit of an enigma, he is allowed to live in peace. Once Burch tells the town that Christmas has black blood, the town's definition of Christmas changes completely. Thus communal knowledge and communal assumptions creates the rules and boundaries by which characters are forced to live. The main action in the book takes place about seventy-five years after liberation from slavery. Yet many of the social customs of the antebellum South (south before the civil war-1860-1865) are still intact. Doc Hines is not punished for cold-blooded murder because his victim was partially black. Christmas's guilt in the case of Joanna's murder because he is partially black, and he is lynched because he slept with a white woman. Christmas's death by lynching is a complex issue. Although there is suspense over whether the people of Jefferson or the people of Mottstown will lynch Christmas in the end neither town is interested in pursuing it. Christmas's lynching takes place at the hands of one man, and those who witness it are horrified.

Like many of Faulkner's novels, the theme of female sexuality has an important place in *Light in August*. Each of the unmarried female characters in the novel displays a significant amount of sexuality. Bobbie Allen is a prostitute; Lena Grove and Milly Hines both have children out of wedlock, and Miss Atkins and Joanna Burden both participate in highly sexualized relationships. All of those characters are practically defined by their sexuality, and yet they have very little else in common.

Joe Christmas's youthful perception of female sexuality is very strange. He is physically repulsed by the idea of menstruation, and he is disturbed by the idea of a vulgar woman. He even imagines the virgin female as a beautiful urn. John Christmas goes beyond his early obsession with female purity. Although he is at first surprised and sad to learn that Bobbie Allen is a prostitute, he adjusts to the idea quickly, and spends much of his adult life sleeping with other prostitutes. Yet Christmas never seems to completely accepts female

sexuality, therefore he prefers prostitutes. Whereas Joanna Burden's uncontrolled sexuality is shocking compared to her public image, the prostitutes Christmas sleeps with do not surprise us. Milly Hines faces a hard fate for her sexual acts. She has sex out of wedlock, and her father kills her lover essentially causing her tragic death. Lena Grove, on the other hand, who is the most prominent female character in the novel, is affected very little by her sexual behavior. Although Lena gets pregnant and has to leave home, her pregnancy makes her to travel the south. Although these characters tell that she is unmarried, even though that treats her harshly for it actually shows her great kindness. Thus *Light in August* does not necessarily treat female sexuality as a cause of tragedy. Although the social customs of the community certainly do not easily accept an unmarried mother, Lena's story makes it clear that the south can be more forgiving of female sexuality in certain circumstances.

In the novel, social justice plays an important role in the racist south. The novel is full of many moral crimes and the legal murder. We find prostitution, assault, robbery, neglect etc. Therefore a possibility of justice is significant. However justice becomes a problem when it is given out more in relation to race than to guilt. Christmas is guilty of murder beyond that for which he is accused. And yet we are not sure of what punishment he should face, for no one who committed any crime against father, and caused his mother to die. He tormented the young Christmas, and yet although people know of his guilt he faces no punishment. Christmas's death draws our attention to this fact. In the old south any if a black man commits a crime against a black woman; he is lynched by the society. According to the rules of south, Christmas must face death as a proper punishment. But Christmas's lynching as a punishment for his crime creates doubt about social justice. It makes a true justice impossible.

The connection between the past and the present is an important theme in the novel. This issue arises with most of the major characters at the same point, and also with respect to Reverend Gail Hightower. With Hightower, the past is rooted in his family history. According to a former slave of the family, Hightower's grandfather killed hundreds of Yankee soldiers in the civil war. Hightower is not obsessed with his grandfather's legend because he is nostalgic for the antebellum south, or because he never got the chance to show his bravery and valor in battle. Hightower is a lover of peace. He is perhaps the least prejudiced character in the story because he was born into a house full of ghosts: an aged father, a dying mother, and a servant obsessed with the past. The young Hightower found the stories of his grandfather to be more alive than his actual parents, and so felt a deep connection to his ancestor's legendary death. There is some irony in this, because Hightower's grandfather died when he was looting a cage of chicken, and Hightower enjoys believing that the person who shot him was the wife of a confederate soldier protecting her chicken cage. This shows the absurdity of the excessive pride over familial histories. The actions in the south are not at all grand, because people take a racist pride in their past and also because it shows yearning for the culture of slavery.

Violence is the one of the more disturbing themes of *Light in August*. Joe Christmas as certainly at the center of this violence. While he usually causes violence, in the past he is the victim. These scenes are all the more disturbing because Christmas is a young child, and violence is present in some form in almost every scene from his childhood. Instead of love and kindness, he experiences pain and coldness. These early experiences make Christmas more violent later in life. The continuity between the violence against Christmas and the violence he commits suggests that violence produces violence. Christmas is so hardened to violence by the time he is eight that he cannot accept kindness from Mrs. Mc. Eachern, because to do so would force him to become soft. Thus it makes Mr. Mc. Eachern's beatings all the more painful. Mc. Eachern's violence imposed in the name of religion does not make it any better. In fact, the close between Mc. Eachern's violent punishments and Christmas's violent behavior as an adult shows the dangers inherent in such stringent organized religion. Mc. Eachern's violence towards Christmas in some way creates Christmas's violent tendencies. MacEachern's Presbyterianism is at the root of Christmas's later violence. Christmas violence is also closely tied to sexuality and hatred of women and their unpredictability and forms his confusion about his own racial identity. The most disturbing act of violence described in the novel is also closely tied to race and sexuality, but it is not committed by Christmas. Percy Grimm shoots Christmas five times, and then, while he

is still alive, castrates him with a butcher knife. This warped lynching reflects the racist and misogynistic sexual codes of the antebellum South. All of the violence in the novel seems to reaches climax in this moment. In this way all the violence seems to emerge from the racial violence of the old south.

Conclusion:

The novel is about the question Christmas's racial identity crisis. It is about whether it is a necessary result of his biracial origin, or whether it necessary result of the society's definitions of race. Gavin Stevens imagines Christmas's white and black bloods as literally distinct from one other, and a conflict with each other. Christmas is not really happy to stay in black society, but he knows that he is in danger as long as he lives in white society. He feels as if he is always being forced out and thus he ultimately feels that he is isolated in both the white and black societies. Christmas is not really happy to stay in black societies. Christmas is also at the center of the problem of southern racism. This also relates to the questions of identity. For almost all of the three years that Christmas lives in Jefferson, the town defines him as a white man and thus although he is a bit of an enigma, he is allowed to live in peace.

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