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Mississippi Quarterly, Volume 64, Numbers 3-4, Summer-Fall 2011, pp. 393-407
(Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mss.2011.0003>



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Framing Joe Christmas: Vision and Detection in *Light in August*

“Well, sir, here’s to plain speaking and clear understanding.”

—The Fat Man in *The Maltese Falcon*

OVER HALFWAY THROUGH *LIGHT IN AUGUST*, READERS ARE FINALLY shown the startling image from which the mystery’s events have flowed, the brutally murdered and bloody corpse of Joanna Burden, displayed on a bed sheet before a burning mansion for the gathering crowd to see. The narrator describes the spectacular quality of the scene and foregrounds the power of the image to fascinate and freeze onlookers in their tracks: “those who crowded to look down at the body on the sheet [were stunned] with that static and childlike amaze with which adults contemplate their own inescapable portraits” (287-88). The scene performs as a type of *memento mori*, the sprawled corpse a violent sign of the inevitable death awaiting us all, but the sheer brutality of her murder as well as her shocking display on the bed sheet provokes distinct responses from its audience as they stand transfixed and immobile before the disturbing vision. The narrator, hovering above and outside the frame of the narrative action, lingers over the swelling crowd, informing us that their “dull and static amaze” was “brought down from the old fetid caves where knowing began, as though, like death, they had never seen fire before” (288).

As visual theorists such as Norman Bryson and Hal Foster have noted,¹ this type of visual experience signals a kind of ocular stupor where the collective gaze looks blindly at the world, its vision not blocked or returned but temporarily co-opted and frozen, unable to comprehend the visual field before it. After all, for all the crowd’s intense staring in this extended scene, readers only get the specific details about Joanna’s corpse from Byron Bunch, whose short description

¹See Bryson’s *Vision and Painting* for an accessible sampler of approaches to various visual systems and gazes and their varied effects on viewers. Foster’s *Vision and Visuality* provides a bevy of approaches to the problems of historical and contextualized vision throughout the history of the visual arts.

allows us to see the body more clearly: “she was laying on her side, facing one way, and her head was turned clean around like she was looking behind her” (92). But while the crowd obviously observes this grotesque scene they cannot speak of it themselves. It is as if the trauma of witnessing the visual spectacle has positioned them temporarily in a space outside of language, beyond cognition, and within this disconcerting gap between vision and knowledge the narrator rises to fill the lack.

Exploring the role of the visual in *Light in August* leads to a discussion of its role as a means of potential knowledge and as a narrative tool of power and obfuscation. To open this discussion, I cite the visually arresting scene of Joanna’s corpse on display for a variety of reasons, but primarily because it foregrounds the interplay between vision and knowledge, and because it exposes the narrator’s role as an “arranger”² who shapes episodes of visual consumption through framing devices such as the rectangular bed sheet. As Faulknerians know, nearly all of Faulkner’s writing is in some way bound to issues of mystery and detection, of solving crimes (moral or legal), of at least attempting to come to terms with the unsolvable and the vagaries of time, change, and despair. Viewing *Light in August* through the lens of the mystery or detective genre reveals a shared fascination with vision and visibility, with seeing and being seen, with spectatorship and surveillance, with visual systems and strategies of representation that perform as (sometimes) spurious models of knowledge. As many scholars have noted, the detective story offered a form elastic enough to allow for infinite repetition and variation but one which frequently relied on the primacy of vision to see beyond surfaces—finding the “smoking gun” or the elusive “eyewitness”—as a key to solving “the perfect murder.”

Critical assessments of the literary form of the detective genre provide further parallels and often read like discussions of Faulknerian form. David Lehman, for instance, offers a compelling definition of the detective story, especially for an analysis of the visual politics of *Light in August*. For Lehman, the genre is unique in that “the narrative line flows backward, from effect to cause, causing the reader to become a participant or co-conspirator, since one is continually asked to guess at the meaning of events and to extrapolate an entire scenario from a

²I take the term “arranger” from James Joyce studies, where the concept is applied to the narrative voice guiding readers through the labyrinthine events of *Ulysses*.

handful of clues" (xviii). This mystery places readers in a dependant position, grasping for hints and seeking direction from an "authority figure" (sometimes the police, but most often the detective figure) who often may or may not be involved in the crime itself. Although these narratives feature a variety of authority figures, from eccentric masterminds such as Sherlock Holmes and Nero Wolfe to hard-boiled gumshoes such as Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe, these purveyors of "ratiocination" are celebrated for their ocular acumen, their tendency to see what others cannot, their ability to penetrate mysteries, lead us toward understanding, and solve the crime as a "private eye." And yet, like any modernist worth his salt, Faulkner does not write traditional mysteries or novels of detection but uses the form as a means of challenging and subverting the genre and its sometimes unqualified claims of truth-hunting and restoring order after a rupture in the social structure. I use the Fat Man's comment from *The Maltese Falcon* as an ironic entrance into an interrogation of *Light in August*'s visual field, for in this novel of detection "plain speaking and clear understanding" are the last things readers will find.

In *Light in August*, Faulkner employs a dazzling array of visual motifs and scenes culled from a range of aesthetic styles and historical periods.³ In fact, much of the confusion and mystery in *Light in August* is generated through Faulkner's strategic use of visuality and the manipulation of visual codes that shape the text's reliance on a model of the seen and the unseen, the physically perceived and the persuasively perceived. As M. J. Burgess has discussed in "Watching (Jefferson) Watching," the novel's "numerous scenes of image-making, viewing, and naming . . . absorb readers only to confront them with their own seducibility" (111). These visual strategies deliberately create ambiguity surrounding the narrative events, and in this interpretive space readers are led by the narrator/arranger to convict Christmas of a crime which he may not have committed. Stephen Meats has discussed this point, that Christmas is innocent, in "Who Killed Joanna Burden?," where he claims that the evidence in the novel proves nothing conclusively, and that Joe

³As many scholars have noted, the visual styles of *Light in August* form an impressive list of Faulkner's education in art, not only in Modernism but also in Renaissance, Baroque, and Medieval art. See, for example, Eileen Bender, R. G. Collins, and, most recently, Jeffrey Stayton.

Brown is her likely murderer, not Christmas. A quick look at this evidence shows that he may be right.

Take the crime scene, for example. From a forensic point of view, there is no physical evidence at all. Christmas could not have set the fire because he had already left Jefferson by that time. The narrator suggests that it may have been Lucas Burch/Joe Brown who caused the blaze but we cannot be sure if it was or what his motive would have been. The murder weapon, apparently a razor, perhaps (most likely?) Christmas's razor, is never found. The "smoking gun" in this novel never smokes; it misfires and becomes only a misleading piece of false evidence later discovered by bumbling deputies. And, as we all know, the blood from such a violent murder with the head almost completely severed would have coated both victim and murderer: Christmas is seen several times after he leaves the Burden house, most notably during his raging in the church pulpit, but there is never any mention of blood stains on his clothes.⁴ These are some of the more crucial visual clues that readers disregard or blindly overlook in the novel. In fact, Faulkner's continuous probing of the seen and unseen components of narrative vision is an indictment of the town's socialized vision—and one which may also implicate readers as well—a way of looking that does not see, one that does not need visible evidence, but one which is nevertheless completely sure in its knowledge of the unseen.

Since vision is so largely mediated and compromised in *Light in August*, the question arises: Why do so many readers automatically convict Joe Christmas of Joanna's murder without even the slightest hint of actual evidence? Initial answers may be obvious and multiple. Readers assume Christmas did it because everyone else in the novel does, including perhaps Christmas himself. Many readers assume Christmas is guilty because he runs from the scene of the crime, racing through the

⁴Christmas is seen several times after the time of Joanna's murder and there is never any mention of blood—only of his being "muddy" and "unshaven." In fact, his raging at the church is a framed message for the novel's compromised visuality, for Christmas is not only clean of any blood from the murder, but he is also repeatedly referred to as "a white man" (322-25). However, these details do not necessarily exonerate Christmas of the murder because of Faulkner's penchant for using "clean cuttings," as in Rider's slashing in *Go Down, Moses*, where "not even the first jet of blood touched his hand or arm" (149). Faulkner's knowledge of razor cuts may come into question here, but the effect in *Light in August* is to heighten the ambiguity and mystery surrounding the murder.

darkened woods in a frenzied state, bloodhounds on his trail. Only criminals run, they say. These same readers tend to see Christmas's appearance on the streets of Mottstown in broad daylight as admission of his guilt and his desire for punishment for committing such a brutal crime. Other readers take Gavin Stevens's story as a purely factual account of his conversation with Christmas and Mrs. Hines in the jail cell, overlooking the racist binary of the white blood/black blood motif that underpins his entire conception of the event which Stevens himself never witnessed.⁵ Perhaps the most damning evidence against Christmas is his presence at the crime scene with the apparent murder weapon, the razor, which he places significantly "unopened" on the table when he lights the lamp in the darkened bedroom. And yet, it is Joanna who has the pistol, Joanna who has previously uttered her death wish, Joanna who pulls the trigger on an unarmed man.

In *Light in August*, the problem is that vision is often myopic at best, specious and condemning at worst. No one witnesses the crucial event, the murder of Joanna, but the town—and readers—act as if they have, quickly moving to name Christmas as the perpetrator but without anything but circumstantial evidence to justify their suspicions. Faulkner interrogates this type of visual power throughout the novel, but especially in charged visual scenes such as the murder and the crowd's viewing of Joanna's body and the burning mansion. The act of looking into a fire is traditionally symbolic of visual wisdom, the flickering shapes themselves memento moris of the beauty and brevity of life and of a return to elemental spirit. And yet the crowd's interest in watching the fire is merely entertainment and escapist fantasy where they deliberately choose to "see" the opposite because, as the narrator significantly puts it, "the other made nice believing" (289). But crimes of murder and arson are not solved by "believing," but by facts and evidence, and in *Light in August*, reason is co-opted by the narrator/arranger who shapes an account where there is only one possible killer and only one possible motive. As the narrator tells it, the crowd "believed aloud that it was an anonymous negro crime committed not by a negro but by Negro and who knew, believed, and hoped that she had been ravished too; at least once before her throat was cut and at least once afterward" (288).

⁵For an extended discussion of Gavin Stevens's role in the crime drama, see Watson, especially pages 93-96.

The visual field in *Light in August* is replete with such misleading and deceptive surfaces, where images, phrases, speculations, innuendos, and actions are repeated in a stunningly complex narrative structure that keeps the reader guessing and further increases dependence on the narrator/arranger for clues to the mystery. Faulkner's use of visibility is crucial for the narration's performance because it is primarily through images—or their lack—that the narrator “frames” Christmas in the reader's mind. Readers are taken in by this deceptive visibility in part because the narrator's role mimics that of the detective or private eye—one who sees more clearly and shows us the clues that may solve the crime—but whose evidence remains sketchy at best. Readers look to the narrator for answers in this crime drama and they believe what they are told—or shown—in part because of the narration's seeming fidelity to nineteenth-century novelistic conventions⁶ where, as Manfred Jahn has discussed, “the narrator is the functional agent who verbalizes the story's nonverbal matter, edits the verbal matter, manages the exposition, decides what is to be told in what sequence, and establishes communication with the [reader]” (96). Gerard Genette has called this convention “zero focalization,” or vision from behind (or above), because the narrator tells more than any of the characters know, and this is especially important for the narrator's strategy in the gap-riddled and arranged text of *Light in August*.

Unlike Faulkner's previous novels such as *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*, which featured fragmented first-person narratives with their attendant biases, misperceptions, and inner turmoils, in *Light in August* readers are taken in by the narrator's seemingly objective stance which implicitly promises to solve the murder by the novel's end by gradually revealing the salient details and arranging them in a (somewhat convincing) persuasive pattern of cause and effect.⁷ Faulkner

⁶Michael Millgate has discussed this aspect of the novel, how it displays “a much closer approximation to the techniques and progressions of ‘conventional’ fiction,” and that it has “an essential affinity with the major traditions of the nineteenth-century novel and especially with the work of Hardy and Dickens” (124).

⁷It should be noted, though, that the narrator's authority in arranging this causation pattern is complicated by the use of qualifiers throughout the novel, a tactic that adds even more ambiguity to the text. According to the concordance, Faulkner uses the words “maybe” 134 times and “perhaps” 165 times. Such indeterminacy is built into the narration of *Light in August* and casts further doubt upon the limits of the narrator's knowledge and the veracity of his tale-telling.

knew the power of arrangement and the suggestiveness of focal points as he explained during his class conferences at the University of Virginia in 1957: "Unless a book follows a simple direct line such as a story of adventure, it becomes a series of pieces. It's a good deal like dressing a showcase window. It takes a certain amount of judgment and taste to arrange the different pieces in the most effective place in juxtaposition to one another" (*FU*45). This strategy places the narrator in a position of supreme visual power and control, a position crucial for his arrangement of the reader's experience in *Light in August*. By ostensibly removing himself from the narrative, the narrator/arranger is free to work in a type of invisibility, an "unseen-ness," that imbues his structuring of events and framed passages with even more persuasive appeal because of the reader's unquestioning belief in the "objective" narration. Often referred to as a "bird's eye" view or an "Olympian perspective," readers stay above the action, observing from a seat of power, well above the fray. More importantly, they are unaware that their vision is not "natural," but constructed.

Faulkner hints at this type of unquestioned authoritative vision by using a series of framing techniques that highlight scenes and images for the reader's consumption. Many of these framed scenes depict images of Christmas in unusual or suspect poses. When readers first see Christmas, for example, they see him framed through the eyes of other workers at the sawmill, a socialized vision that projects a white male gaze upon the new hire. Each character smugly assumes to know Christmas based on surface appearances viewed from a position of visual power: "The others pointed. The new man was standing alone down at the sawdust pile. His shovel was beside him, and he stood in the same garments of yesterday, with the arrogant hat, smoking a cigarette" (34). Their pointing, a device Faulkner appropriated from classical painting, isolates Christmas as an object of fascination, and their discursive framing—each worker adds another layer of verbal interpretation—marks Christmas as a dangerous outsider, a potential threat to the community whose presence demands constant surveillance.

Claude Gandelman's discussion of the pointing finger in pre-quattrocento painting is helpful in seeing this device as a frame, a visual speech act that fuses optics and narration. This "gesture of demonstration," according to Gandelman, "is rhetorical, directed toward the spectator. It is an appeal signal, inviting the spectator to look in a

specific direction or at a specific object inside the representation” (14). The narrator uses the pointing finger many times throughout *Light in August*, perhaps none as important as the episodes that show Doc Hines’s relentless pointing at Joe in the Orphanage, and the wagon driver’s whip at the conclusion of Chapter One showing Lena (and the reader) the burning mansion on the outskirts of town. Symbolically and formally speaking, these scenes “finger” Joe as the morally corrupt murderer the narrator makes him out to be.

This type of framing finds expression in many ways in the novel, whether other characters are pointing or looking at Christmas or not. The narrator repeatedly frames Christmas in a series of boundary structures such as windows, doors, mirrors, ponds—even pools of light—that mark him as a visual cipher to be read, always within the context of the murder he has supposedly committed or will commit in the future. As Mary Ann Caws has argued, frames are essential modernist structures, bracketing off perceptions and framing insides and outsides in a constant shifting of focus and emphasis. For Caws, frames give us a handle on what we are looking at, “for what is set apart as denser in stylistic effect or heightened tension than the rest is read as more significant” (10). Moreover, these framed images offer readers

highly charged moments or scenes [that] are the bearers of meaning and intensity, the conveyors of revelation and insight. They are themselves what they contain, being pictures on the wall of the text. . . . they force our deeper understanding of the unity and the ultimate meaning *of what we are led to contemplate and reflect upon*, in a pause or a delay or a tableau, . . . even as we are swept along in the narrative flow. (8, emphasis added)

I emphasize this passage precisely because it is this unexamined and blindly accepted reception paradigm that Faulkner critiques through the lens of vision in *Light in August*. Readers are repeatedly shown framed images of Christmas that perform as “pictures on the wall of the text,” and these images are what readers “contemplate and reflect upon” as they move through the constructed narrative of an unsolved murder. In this regard, the narrator merely poses as a third-person omniscience; in reality, his utterances and repeated framings of Christmas in the narrative suggest that he is a highly compromised tale teller, one perhaps as complicit in the criminal framing of Joe Christmas as the outraged townsmen in the crowd.

Let's look at a few of these framed passages, beginning with the narrator's obsessive use of windows in *Light in August* because this framing device offers a further interrogation of the novel's representation of visual knowledge.⁸ The window has long been a staple motif in the history of art and in philosophical metaphors of the mind. If not exactly a *tabula rasa*, the window has always performed as a sign for vision and knowledge—as in the adage “Seeing is believing”—by positing a subjective viewer and an objective scene to be observed through the space-less filter of the pane. Windows are different from doors and other framing devices because, as William Blissett has discussed, “the window is a threshold of perception, not of action. You hesitate and decide at a doorway; you glance or gaze through a window The perceiver remains *here*, but *there* opens out to him in imagination and futurity” (5). In *Light in August*, the narrator uses the window frame for a variety of narrative functions, each one implicated in the framing of Christmas as murderer, even in scenes where he is not physically present, as in the evening ethical debates of Byron Bunch and Gail Hightower. These conversations revolve around philosophical and moral dilemmas associated with both Lena Grove and Joe Christmas, although significantly there is nothing beyond the pane but symbolic darkness and the tedious whine of insects.

In these scenes the narrator uses the window to frame the two interlocuters' (and the reader's) lack of knowledge, for while they occupy a symbolic position of potential insight they remain oblivious to such an opportunity and remain “in the dark” regarding Joanna's murder, believing what they have heard about the crime, not seen. In the visual logic of the narrative, these window scenes are bricked up and block perception and insight, and in combination with Bunch and Hightower's speculative conversations, perform as visual and linguistic frames that keep the idea in the reader's mind that Christmas is the likely murderer.

In other scenes, the narrator uses the window as a type of surveillance and labeling device—one that doesn't frame lack of knowledge but ostensibly its opposite—visible proof of “objective reality.” These frames,

⁸For more on Faulkner's use of windows and other architectural structures, see Noel Polk's masterful study, *Children of the Dark House*. Polk discusses the psychic and emotional dimensions associated with characters who leave and return through windows, and that it is “a transgressive act that puts them at odds with all that the 'house' represents of law and moral prohibition” (31).

though, seem to insinuate guilt and shape the reader's perception, a strategy that undermines the realism which they desire to frame. For instance, Christmas's youth is seen from a variety of perspectives and through a series of boundary frames such as the pointing finger and the window. These youthful episodes are arranged in just such a way as to promote the idea that Christmas is inherently a compromised and potentially dangerous person. The boy's nightly escapades are framed by the window from which he escapes the McEachern home, and the narrator spends a lavish amount of time describing Joe's slow descent from the darkened window down the side of the house past the sleeping foster-parents. These scenes are rendered in darkness and emphasize stealth and other willful qualities, and with suggestive comments like Joe's talent for slipping out "with the shadowlike agility of a cat" (170), the narrator shapes reader's perceptions, the criminal pose suggesting the archetypes of the "rebellious child" and "the thief in the night."

The narrator's use of doors as frames is another way readers are conditioned to see Joe in a specific way. For instance, Joe's punishment for not learning the Presbyterian catechism is framed through the barn door, a boundary structure that directs the reader's gaze and foregrounds Joe as one compromised by sin. Gandelman argues that doors, "like pointing fingers, are performatives, gaze-directing devices" that frame liminality as signs of passage (36). "Passage," of course, suggests the crossing of a threshold or circumscribed space, a symbolic entering by a person into a new phase of life. In this scene, though, readers are made aware that Joe is not entering into a new phase of Christian life, and by rejecting its tenets he is willfully acquiescing to its opposite. Even as McEachern continues to whip and humiliate the boy, the narrator insinuates that Joe deserves this type of corporeal punishment and that his resistance to learning indicates Joe's future life as a violent criminal wrapped in deceit and sinfulness.⁹ Other door frames offer similar readings regarding liminality—the space that Joe occupies in the text—and further frame him as a desperate young man who lives on the fringes of society and therefore cannot be trusted. One would not have

⁹Although during this passage Joe's stoicism is linked to monastic virtues—"like a monk in a picture" (149)—more often Joe is described by the narrator as evil, with many references to "Satan" attaching themselves to his character as the narrative continues. This type of labeling is akin to that of the workers at the mill in Chapter Two where Joe is first introduced and where he is described as "a rattlesnake."

to look hard to find a multitude of such frames in the novel, perhaps none as important as Christmas's departure from "the final door" at Max and Bobbie's place, before stepping into "the street which was to run for fifteen years" (223).

Such framing devices are common in *Light in August*. As Peter Lurie has argued, readers are conditioned from the outset to see Christmas as a potential criminal: "The act of looking both for and at black men in a certain manner—as a threat to white women and as a spur to white male control—presumes the kind of violent and sexual acts for which Christmas is ultimately, but at least in part wrongly, punished" (69). Another example of the narrator's framing of Christmas is the scene of him standing in the road with the pistol shortly after the murder. He is literally framed in the twin pools of light projecting from the approaching car, but the narrator does not tell the reader he is armed, only that "his right hand [was] lifted full in the glare" of the car's lights (283). What follows is a four-page ride of terror for the young couple where the reader shares their fear, regarding Christmas as a violent murderer who means them harm. And yet, when we come to the end of the passage we are told that Christmas was unaware that he was holding the pistol, and that all he had wanted from them was a ride. The couple's vision, already challenged by darkness, is also spurious, for they focus on a code of details to reach an incorrect conclusion, and more importantly, they help to shape the reader's vision of Joe's criminality through their own distorted and racialized gaze.

The narrator's rendering of the murder scene is another example of the framing of Joe Christmas, for it is this passage that characters never see but of which the reader is given a glimpse. Significantly, the vehicle of vision in this episode is the symbolically loaded lamp which Joanna asks Joe to light in the darkness. When he strikes the match, readers are shown a scene which the narrator describes from Joe's point of view, making Joe the seeing subject and Joanna the object of the male gaze: "She was sitting up in the bed, her back against the headboard. Over her nightdress she wore a shawl drawn down across her breast. Her arms were folded upon the shawl, her hands hidden from sight" (282). After Joe refuses her requests for prayer, the narrator shows Joanna's "arms unfold and her right hand come forth from beneath the shawl. It held an old style, single action, cap-and-ball revolver almost as long and heavier than a small rifle" (282). In this scene, the narrator employs a detailed

realist vision, the eye of power seeing objects displayed in space before it, and yet Christmas isn't looking at the scene in front of him but rather at the wall where he sees a shadow theater enacting the event in a different visual space: "But the shadow of it and of her arm and hand on the wall did not waver at all, the shadow of both monstrous, the cocked hammer monstrous, back-hooked and viciously poised like the arched head of a snake" (282).

We must remember, though, that it's the narrator who uses the metaphor of the snake, not Joe. This is an important consideration, for the question as to why Joe would not be looking at Joanna when she cocks the old revolver becomes somewhat more intelligible if we see the narrator as hedging in the scene and throwing the focus on Christmas as an intimate of evil rather than describing what actually happens. It's a brilliant move of writerly suspense, but it is more than just that. By shifting the focus not only away from the scene in a dramatic cut, but by also leaving the reader with the twinned images of Christmas's looking at the snake, the narrator has framed Christmas as the murderer without the reader's ever seeing him actually kill Joanna.

What results from framing techniques such as those above is a type of mystery that resists clear resolution. We do find out later that the pistol misfires, and that Christmas believes Joanna had planned a murder-suicide—"For her and for me" (286)—but we cannot be sure, for this is Joe's speculation. What is more interesting is why Christmas is looking at the wall and not at Joanna herself, and why he would not move to protect himself. The narrator describes him as "watching the shadowed pistol on the wall; he was still watching when the cocked shadow of the hammer flicked away" (283). And then we are left in the dark, so to speak. Faulkner cuts from the scene and shows Christmas on the road in the glare of the approaching car lights, pistol in hand. The framing is obvious—we are meant to convict Joe without seeing him commit the murder, despite the fact that we have seen that Joanna was attempting to kill him. This is an important distinction since Faulkner is both highlighting the act of looking as a fundamental component of human knowledge and also undermining vision as noticeably faulty and fragmentary, a visual structure in which the reader is implicated as well.

The endgame of this interrogation of vision is that readers tend to accept Christmas's guilt without supporting evidence, much like the crowd viewing Joanna's body. The narrator, through his arrangement of

visual scenes, has made sure of that. Did Christmas kill Joanna? We don't know for sure. If he did, was it in self-defense? If it was and he used the razor, why does he take her pistol? If Christmas is looking at the shadows on the wall because he himself wants to die, then why does he run for a week trying to stay alive? If Joanna had her own death wish, is Joe morally culpable for satisfying her wishes? These are questions that the text refuses to definitively answer,¹⁰ and Faulkner's use of double vision in the novel, especially in the murder scene, is meant to foreground the difficulties of seeing and knowing the most crucial events that determine human lives. More importantly, the novel suggests that we do not even *want* to see or think about such events.

The final chapters drive home this point even more fully. Christmas's death is repeated twice, once through a somewhat racialized version told by Gavin Stevens and then by the narrator who describes Percy Grimm's violent castration and murder inside Hightower's dark house. As Lurie has argued, both instances effectively "seal off" the reader's relationship with Christmas, smooth over the inconsistencies regarding the murder and the punishment, and release them from their vicarious participation in the framing and slaughter of a (perhaps) innocent man as the narrator turns his attention to Lena Grove in the final chapter, as she travels with Byron Bunch and the furniture repairman. The success of this "happy ending" has been debated, but one thing it does for certain is to keep Christmas out of sight and out of mind as readers focus on Lena and the open road ahead.

This final chapter, of course, matches the first chapter's epic thrust and provides a frame for the entire novel. But this is one of its more intriguing aspects, for framing in this novel works on both figural and literal levels. Joe may indeed be "framed" by the narrator for the murder of Joanna Burden, but in many ways it is both the town and the reader who are on trial here. Forgetting about Joe is a moral crime Faulkner suggests, but one which is taken lightly—the important thing is to get out and get away from alternative points of view, to fall passively back into visual codes based on power and authority and a world filled with light and specious reason, and the reader seems to fall for this escape rather easily. In *Light in August*, Faulkner's interrogation of the detective narrative reveals a crisis of epistemology where fact,

¹⁰John N. Duvall argues that even if Christmas had committed the murder, there would be several legal strategies to employ in mitigating the alleged act (101-22).

perception, and belief collide under the fractured lens of vision, where truth remains illusory. Through the use of his narrator/arranger—the “private eye” who leads others astray—Faulkner suggests that our cultural vision is selfishly myopic at best, criminally blind at worst, and for all of our knowledge and humanity we can never be certain that we really see what we are looking at.

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