



PROJECT MUSE®

Vision's Immanence

Lurie, Peter

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

Lurie, Peter.

Vision's Immanence: Faulkner, Film, and the Popular Imagination.

Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004.

Project MUSE., <a href="

<https://muse.jhu.edu/>.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/60332>



“Get Me a Nigger”

Mystery, Surveillance, and Joe Christmas’s Spectral Identity

Faulkner introduces Joe Christmas to *Light in August* through the appraising eyes of other characters. Appearing unexpectedly at the mill one day, Joe stands before Byron Bunch and the other workers until they notice him. They do not stop their work, “yet there was not a man in the shed who was not . . . watching the stranger in his soiled city clothes” (422). Following this initial glance, the men take in enough of an impression of Christmas to decide that he deserves to be “run through the planer” in order to take the “arrogant and baleful” look off his face (421). What is also clear in Joe’s introduction is the fact that his way of carrying himself is a performance offered as a spectacle for public scrutiny and judgment. “[T]hat’s a pretty risky look for a man to wear on his face in public,” says one of the workers. “He might forget and use it somewhere where somebody won’t like it” (421)—which, of course, he already has. In his earliest appearance, in both *Jefferson* and in the novel, Joe’s presence is an affront to the other characters that inspires contempt and mistrust, and that, as the foreman suggests, provokes a violent response. Even before his actions, Joe appears to those who look at him to merit punishing.

That Joe is introduced through the scrutinizing look of a group of white men is instructive, as is the implicit connection between that act of looking and its attendant action of violent discipline. Faulkner renders that act visible—that is, he shows readers the men’s act of looking at Christmas. Like several passages and other parts of the book, this scene also provokes the reader’s own act of looking at Joe. As the novel’s subsequent action and Faulkner’s structuring of it make clear, Joe is defined by his position as the object of the gaze—of various characters, but more subtly and pervasively, of readers as well. Like the men at the planing mill, we are positioned by and within the novel so as to wield a surveilling, domineering, and, ultimately, a punishing look, one that addresses itself to Christmas and at the same time secures our position external to the novel’s events. Throughout the novel we are positioned as looking *at* and, most often, looking *for* Christmas in an implicitly violent way.¹

In the following pages, I argue that the process of searching for and surveilling Christmas is analogous to an experience that Faulkner’s readers’ had already had well before the appearance of the book. As a result of treatments of race in many popular depictions of African Americans, as well as of a southern ideology that saw blackness as a threat, readers of *Light in August* had come to assume black guilt and to take the need for its violent suppression and punishment as a matter of course. 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. That Christmas’s identity is not in fact black or even necessarily racially mixed is part of the novel’s rhetoric. So too are the ways Joe Christmas’s race plays on readers’ expectations. Preconceptions on the part of people in Jefferson and on the part of readers about black behavior had figured in earlier writing and films; *Light in August* points to those sources both within the world of the novel and outside it. It is those assumptions about African Americans, and not their connection to “real behavior,” or to real blacks, that Faulkner’s novel mobilizes and examines.

In the process of doing so, however, the novel produces, perhaps unwittingly, several of the same surveillance practices and ways of conceiving race that it exposes. Joe Christmas, as we will see, is relentlessly the object of a range of controlling and observing glances. As the recipient of a look that is most often specified as white and male, as well as of Jefferson’s collective and imagi-

nary vision, Christmas is a clear example of the way the figure of the black man is seized upon as a spectacle in southern social praxis as well as in popular forms such as the romance, popular fiction, and the cinema.

In the imagined rape of Joanna Burden and in the town's conviction about his race, Joe embodies the white community's fears about black licentiousness, a hysteria that asserted itself outside of the novel in the need for white control of African-American men and in popular cultural depictions of blacks as lustful or savage. In addition to revealing these overlapping and mutually dependent types of looks, the novel offers examples of Joe's interpellation that construct his identity in the reflected light of a certain idea of race. The interpellating gaze appears in various guises: in Percy Grimm as a representative of the apparatus of state power; in the carceral, objectifying eye of the orphanage and Doc Hines; and in specific examples of then-contemporary popular culture such as commercial fiction or pulp magazines.

In addition to these instances, Faulkner involves the reader in the novel's sustained act of looking at Joe. Through Faulkner's use of generic strategies, most notably those of the mystery or detective story, readers are drawn into the narrative process of "looking for" Christmas and thus are implicated in the text's construction of him as surveilled, gazed upon, or "policed." Displaying the fervid and chimerical social vision of the crowd at the fire at Joanna Burden's and revealing its "cinematic" belief in the myth of the black rapist, Faulkner elsewhere encourages readers to view Joe like the sensationalized and "spectralized" figures of film. More pointedly, Joe Christmas evokes specific behaviors and characteristics of African Americans that informed representations of them in early cinema, notably and above all in D. W. Griffith's influential epic, *The Birth of a Nation*. Encouraging readers to take part in the activity of aestheticizing and visualizing, Faulkner also keeps readers detached from Joe's tragedy at the novel's end. An unintentional outcome of these strategies is that *Light in August* produces a particularly troubling effect, which, in its production of a false comfort for readers and a liberal "freedom" from the narrative's violent and suppressive events, is unique to the novel form and to Faulkner's novelistic practice with this book especially.

Romance, Film, and the Spectacle of Black Rape

In the novel's second chapter, the men at the planing mill notice smoke coming from what they correctly assume to be a fire at Joanna Burden's house. At

work on a Saturday, as they are accustomed to being, they regard the fire as a legitimate motive to stop work early. Byron, the other men assume, will also leave work early to enjoy what appears as a largely escapist pleasure: "'I reckon Byron'll quit too, today,' they said. 'With a free fire to watch'" (434). Byron does not quit, however, and so with this exception the men travel eagerly out to the Burden place to see the "free fire," a source of entertainment and distraction.

Once at Joanna's, along with the other townspeople, the men engage in an act of collective vision directed at both the fire and, when it dies, at the man they assume is responsible for it: an African American whom the sheriff's deputy produces from the surrounding cabins. "They were gathering now about the sheriff and the deputy and the negro, with avid eyes upon which the sheer prolongation of empty flames had begun to pall, with faces identical one with another. It was as if all their individual five senses had become one organ of looking, like an apotheosis" (614). This passage emphasizes the role of visual experience—the five senses changing to "one organ of looking"—as it describes the object of the townspeople's looking as well as the assumption of the apprehended "negro's" guilt.

The "apotheosis" of collective sight that the fire and the apprehended man furnish may well be compared to another source of visual pleasure, one whose popularity was contemporary with *Light in August* and that the novel elsewhere references. Like the cinema, the fire plays the role for the town of distraction from the deadening routine of work. Faulkner's language likens the role of the fire to a visual, sensational display that, also like film, includes a dimension of fantasy and projected longing. Once Joanna's body is discovered, Faulkner indicates the prurient element to the crowd's interest in the crime:

Among them [were] the casual Yankees and the poor whites and even the southerners who had lived for a while in the north, who 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. The sheriff came up and looked himself once and then sent the body away, hiding the poor thing from the eyes. (611)

Aware of the crowd's caustic voyeurism and its fixation on Joanna's body, the sheriff has it removed. In addition to this emphasis on vision, Faulkner's account of the crowd further suggests a cinematic quality as it traces the townspeople's attitude toward the murder. Faulkner deliberately points to the different forms that attitude takes, moving from the crowd's "knowledge" of the

rape through a less firm “belief” to, finally and most revealingly, the basis for conviction in longing and “hope.” In Faulkner’s account of it, the crowd’s reaction reveals its basis in projections of unconscious feelings and desires as well as in fears about unbridled black lust. This process was crucial to the way early cinema both produced and relied upon a “projected,” ideologized sense of race. In this scene Faulkner suggests that what matters more in the crowd’s reaction to Joanna’s murder is not what exactly took place but what the townspeople imagine occurred. Like the operations of the cinema, and in particular certain examples of film that informed Faulkner’s novel, watching the fire provides an opportunity for projections of imaginary conceptions of the murder as well as of social reality. The ravishing of white innocence by black lust was a particularly forceful element of the southern imagination and, as we will see, of early film.²

Well before Faulkner wrote *Light in August*, the figure of the violent and threatening Negro played a forceful role in both southern and national attitudes about race. Pervasive throughout popular culture, many of those attitudes were crystallized and exploited by D. W. Griffith in his wildly influential *Birth of a Nation*, a film that I suggest bears a strong relationship to aspects of Faulkner’s novel.³ The movie’s characters and imagery, though they made a significant impact, themselves drew on a myth of black sexuality and unbridled lust that had its basis in earlier cultural manifestations of southern ideology. Critical accounts of the structure of the romance, for instance, pay careful attention to the genre’s use of the myth of black sexual aggression and an attendant emphasis on the agency of the look. Miranda Burgess sees the romance genre, with its insistence on the absolute purity and innocence of the southern lady, as the source for the racist myth of black potency and, by extension, for whites’ fear and their need for social control: “In the antebellum historical romance . . . the heroine was the ‘Southern lady’ or plantation mistress, simultaneously constructed to be absolutely pure and absolutely helpless. . . . But the lady’s purity also required the sexualization of black bodies—the male as a threat to her purity, justifying the control of black male bodies” (“Watching Jefferson Watching,” 96). Because of its investment in black *and* white men’s common wielding of the desiring look, Burgess argues, the romance gave rise to ever more repressive social practices: “The conjunction of the two male looks . . . necessitates the control of the black man by the white man. . . . Hence the genre of romance is inseparable from notions of surveillance and the controlling gaze” (96–97).⁴

Drawn from southern social practice and cultural belief, the threat posed by

black men to white women had seen several popular cultural manifestations before Faulkner’s novel. In *Birth of a Nation*, for instance, the former slave Gus’s fatal pursuit of Flora Cameron presented an image of blackness at its most “bestial”; similarly, the mulatto Silas Lynch’s consuming lust for Elsie Stoneman corresponded to whites’ worst fears about interracial marriage.⁵ To southerners, the mulatto most insidiously manifested the threat of blackness, and other film versions of the sinister or tragic mulatto had already appeared in the period before Griffith’s film. *The Debt* (1912) and *In Slavery Days* and *The Octoroon*, both from 1913, played on notions of the mulatto’s “tainting” with black blood.⁶ Above all, depictions of the mulatto exposed white anxiety over the prospect of miscegenation, a fear that infused Griffith’s film and that Faulkner exposes in various ways in *Light in August* (and even more shattering in *Absalom, Absalom!*).

Joe Christmas’s threat to Jefferson and his presumed rape of Joanna are directly traceable to the received notions of blackness that appear in Griffith’s film in Silas and, particularly, in the would-be rapist Gus. Just as the Jefferson crowd assumes of Joanna’s “Negro” murderer, Griffith shows Gus as violently attracted to white women. Though Gus does not succeed in assaulting Flora (she jumps from a cliff to her death before he can reach her), his story is connected to Christmas’s because of both characters’ presumed sexual longing, as well as their experience of being castrated for an act of sexual transgression.⁷ Several scenes from *Birth* show black lust and the longing for interracial marriage as one of the overreaching political goals of northern approaches to Reconstruction as well as, ultimately, the cause for redress by the southern Ku Klux Klan. Indeed, it was the film’s ideology of white female purity under threat by newly empowered freed slaves that, Griffith believed, provided the necessary unity of northern and southern whites. Other aspects of Griffith’s film emphasized black aggression, evident in the confrontations between freed blacks and the Camerons that contributed to another stereotype, the “black buck,” that was to have an impact on future film depictions of African Americans. *Broken Chains* (1916), another early feature, played on the same image of blacks as murderous and aggressive that had appeared in *Birth of a Nation*. A series of films from the 1920s about the “savage” African, including *West of Zanzibar* (1928) and *Diamond Handcuffs* (1928) drew on the stereotype of black brutishness.⁸ *Fair and Equal*, an ironically titled movie made in 1915 but not released until 1925, depicted the same themes of racial intermarriage and black sexual violence as had *Birth*.⁹

The Popular Cultural Negro

While these examples of early cinema included negative stereotypes, the precedent for the dark or disturbing black presence that Christmas resembles began well before Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, or even before the medium of film. Thomas Nelson Page, in stories like "Marse Chan" (which appeared in the *Century Magazine* in 1883 and earned him a national reputation) and his novels such as *Red Rock* (1898) and *Burial of the Guns* (1894), contributed to the rise of the Old South myth, in particular the notion of the difference between pacified, "loyal" slaves and more upstart or violent African Americans. Page also contributed to disenfranchisement campaigns in the South¹⁰ and showed a mentality similar to that evinced by Griffith when he wrote in 1905 of the "ignorant and brutal young Negro," whose longing for racial equality meant simply "the opportunity to enjoy . . . the privilege of cohabiting with white women" (*The Negro: The Southerner's Problem*, 112-13). Leslie Fiedler points to the threat of black violence and rebellion and its basis in a late-nineteenth-century form of popular culture: "Down through the history of the minstrel show, a black-faced Sambo (smeared with burnt cork, whether Negro or white, into the grotesque semblance of the archetypal nigger) tries to exorcise with high-jinks and ritual jokes the threat of black rebellion and the sense of guilt which secretly demands it as penance and purge" ("The Blackness of Darkness," 89). In addition to appearing in minstrelsy, menacing, violent blacks figured as a central part of *Birth of a Nation's* source: Thomas Dixon's widely read and virulently racist novel *The Clansman*.¹¹ Dixon's novel, a book that Faulkner knew from childhood, was a popular success that showed readers black and mixed-race characters that pandered to their worst fears.

In addition to evoking earlier popular conceptions, Joe's alternately sexual and brutal involvement with Joanna also followed patterns of depicting African Americans that appeared in fiction of the same period in which Faulkner wrote *Light in August*. In particular, Christmas resembles the image of the more specifically urban type common in the Harlem school of the twenties. *Nigger Heaven*, published in 1926 and enormously successful, epitomized the stereotyping of blacks in commercial fiction.¹² Carl Van Vechten's portrait of the street Negro drew on ideas of black exoticism; like Faulkner's text, in different fashion, it also emphasized the notion of blackness as spectacle. In a description of one of the novel's heroes, Anatole Longfellow, walking down Seventh Avenue, Van Vechten writes, "He wore a tight-fitting suit of shepherd's plaid which thoroughly revealed his lithe, sinewy figure to all who gazed upon

him, *and all gazed*” (3; emphasis added). Longfellow’s “lithe” body and his alias, the “Silent Creeper,” further suggest the mysterious, stealthy presence of African Americans that Faulkner uses in his descriptions of Joe (evident, for instance, in the passage depicting Joe climbing the rope from his window at McEachern’s “with the shadowlike agility of a cat” [524].) Though displaced into a southern and rural context, Joe Christmas seems drawn from Van Vechten’s account of the urban black.¹³ Van Vechten’s novel, published six years before *Light in August*, showed the potential for a white author to capitalize on the literary market by producing racial stereotypes. It is this stereotyping that, in turn, Faulkner’s novel both exposes and critiques.

Faulkner’s choice of the supposed murder weapon further suggests an urban and popular cultural backdrop for Joe. As several examples demonstrate, the razor was the typical weapon of choice in popular depictions, if not in actual cases, of black violence. In *Nigger Heaven* the African-American character Mary thinks of the razor as a “Negro” weapon: “She recalled what she had once been told . . . that Negroes never premeditate murder; their murders are committed under the reign of passion. . . . Negroes use the instruments that deal death swiftly: knives, razors, pistols” (90). Hoke Perkins discusses the razor as a weapon in several of Faulkner’s novels, and he establishes its centrality in popular narrative when he describes Faulkner’s use of it as “a way of bonding the high with the low” (“‘Ah Just Cant Quit Thinkin’” 226).¹⁴ The image of the razor as a “black” weapon was also a part of late-nineteenth-century commercial art. J. Stanley Lymon cites a postcard from 1897 depicting a black wedding; the caption under the drawing reads, “Check yo Razor at de do” (“Black Stereotypes Reflected in Popular Culture,” 111). Lymon also points to lyrics from popular songs, one of which refers to four “items” commonly found together: “A watermelon, a razor, a chicken, and a coon” (111).¹⁵ Along with Joe’s “soiled city clothes” noticed by the workers at the mill (422), his supposed use of the razor in the murder, and his ubiquitous raked hat (421, 545, 565), Joe’s fifteen-year wandering along an endless street that delivers him to Jefferson further establishes his association with the urban milieu of popular culture and fiction.¹⁶

Christmas’s Mass-Cultural Identity

In addition to evoking sources outside it, events within *Light in August* also refer to popular cultural models in constructing Joe. Significantly, several of them reveal the way Christmas’s sense of self is conditioned by his encounter

with commercial culture. On the day Joanna is killed, Joe is described reading a detective magazine in the forest. Sitting in a clearing with his back against a tree, Joe reads “a magazine of that type whose covers bear either pictures of young women in underclothes or pictures of men in the act of shooting one another with pistols” (479–80). That the description of the magazine sounds like the cover of an issue of *Black Mask* (or *Spicy Detective* or *Spicy Mystery*) is suggestive.¹⁷ In the first place, it connects Joe’s potential act of murder directly to the representations of crime depicted in magazine fiction: on the same day he reads the magazine, Joe, we are led to believe, uses the razor to slice off Joanna’s head. The reference here to a pulp magazine also offers an instance of Joe’s interpellating by the dominant culture and its manifestation in a mass-cultural “gaze.”¹⁸ The effect of Joe’s reading on his state of mind is clear. He proceeds intently, calmly, “reading the magazine straight through as though it were a novel (480).¹⁹ Giving himself up to the spell of reading, he

turned the pages in steady progression, though now and then he would seem to linger upon one page, one line, perhaps one word. He would not look up then. He would not even move, apparently arrested and held immobile by a single word which had perhaps not yet impacted, his whole being suspended by the single trivial combination of letters in quiet and sunny space. (481)

The narrator indicates that Joe’s identity, his “whole being” is somehow “impacted” by his reading the crime magazine. As an extension of his reading, then, the murder is made to appear as Joe’s acting out a role he takes up following his internalizing of images in popular cultural sources²⁰—much as he appears to do with others’ perceptions of him as black. Joe’s motives are perhaps not readily attributable to the nefarious influence of a burgeoning and sensationalistic popular culture. At the same time, however, there is more in Faulkner’s language in this scene to suggest at least an indirect connection between Christmas’s reading and the crime. As he pauses and looks into the “sunshot leaves,” Christmas speculates on an as-yet-unnamed act: “‘Maybe I have already done it,’ he thought. ‘Maybe it is no longer now waiting to be done’” (481).

Accompanying that sense of fatality is a curious but suggestive passage. After Christmas muses that “‘it is no longer waiting to be done,’” Faulkner’s narrator fashions a tableau. “It seemed to him that he could see the yellow day opening peacefully on before him, like a corridor, an arras, into a still chiar-

oscuro without urgency. It seemed to him that as he sat there the yellow day contemplated him drowsily" (481). Looking ahead into the day, Christmas sees a long, corridor-like projection of light that leads to a photographic image. Describing that image, Faulkner uses a term from painting ("chiaroscuro"), but as well from filmic *mise-en-scène*. What Joe sees himself entering, and what Faulkner's language evokes, is a cinematic still. Also significant in this passage and its language is the way Joe is looked at, or "contemplated" by the day. In its emphasis on Joe's position as scrutinized, the passage strongly emphasizes his status as an object of the look—and of a particularly disembodied stare at that. As in the scene of Temple Drake undressing at Goodwin's in *Sanctuary*, Joe is here described in ways that suggest his awareness of being seen as well as the ways in which such seeing constitutes his identity. Like Temple, the "apparatus" or presence by which Joe feels watched is the collective popular cultural gaze, constructed by magazines of the type he reads in the forest. Imagining himself as the object of an anonymous look, Christmas gives himself over to its agency.²¹

The action of Joe's being looked at and its role in contributing to his identity in fact occurs throughout the novel. Starting with his earliest memories of Hines and of the dietician, Christmas is aware of others' acts of looking at him. That such a process constitutes his identity is clear in a moment early in his life that reveals Joe's thinking about Hines's constant scrutiny: "With more vocabulary but not more age he might have thought *That is why I am different from the others: because he is watching me all the time* He accepted it" (501). As with Joe's passivity in the forest scene, here he is shown "accepting" the organizing, identity-conferring agency of Hines's stare. That interpellating, observant eye pursues Joe through his youth, and it is generally figured as all-seeing and maleficent. Later in his youth, returning to the McEachern house the night after his encounter with the African-American woman in the shed, Joe sees a light in the kitchen. "He went on, crossing . . . toward the kitchen light. It seemed to watch him, biding and threatening, like an eye" (516). Throughout the novel Faulkner's language is insistent on Joe's specular, objectified status. This is perhaps nowhere clearer than in moments when the language conspires to depict Joe as alone and isolated but also, at the same time, "accompanied," visualized, or seen. On the night Joanna is killed, in the period between when he reads the magazine in the forest and when he returns to Joanna's, Joe wanders the streets of Jefferson. Describing him, Faulkner emphasizes the action of gazing:

He went on, passing still between the homes of white people, from street lamp to street lamp, the heavy shadows of oak and maple leaves sliding like scraps of black velvet across his white shirt. Nothing can look quite as lonely as a big man going along an empty street. Yet though he was not large, not tall, he contrived somehow to look more lonely than a lone telephone pole in the middle of a desert. In the wide, empty, shadow brooded street he looked like a phantom, a spirit, strayed out of its own world, and lost. (482)

This passage is notable for its emphasis on the act of looking. There is someone, that is, who is insistently present at this moment to see Joe, to note how lonely or how much like a phantom or spirit he “looked.” While all descriptions of character are furnished for readers’ acts of visualizing, they are not routinely, self-consciously identified as such. Faulkner’s language here refers to the presence of an unwavering, pervasive gaze, one that adduces not only to the reader but, through the focalizing strategy of the prose, to a presence internal to the narrative. We have seen Joe’s awareness of being looked at by the workers at the mill, by his environment in the forest scene, and by watchful gazes such as Hines’s that constitute his identity as “different” (an assessment that seems confirmed by the narrator’s description of Joe as alien, “strayed out of its own world”). Here that gaze displaces itself into the language of the text.

It is also significant that this passage occurs immediately after the narrator takes note of the presence in Jefferson of the cinema: “At seven o’clock [Joe] would have passed people, white and black, going toward the square and the picture show” (482). The description of Joe walking in the street earlier in the evening draws attention to his shirt’s white surface and the “sliding” of dark shapes or shadows across it; as such it approximates the movie screen and the play of light and shadow on it. Represented by Faulkner’s language as like the screen image, and regarded by the narrating “eye” of the authorial voice, Joe is figured here as an object of a gaze that is both authoritative and cinematic (we might say authoritative *because* cinematic).²² Dwelling on Joe’s image, the passage offers a likeness of characters’ appearance in film, one that, as we will see, also derives from Joe’s phantom-like presence. Alongside both the reference to the picture show and the suggestions in this section of the images of the cinema, Faulkner’s prose evokes the all-pervasive, interpellating gaze of the dominant culture that stares at Joe and that considers him unclassifiable or “different” as well as phantasmal and threatening.²³

Joe’s Spectralizing

In light of these emphases on the act of looking, it is significant that in our first direct encounter with Joe we do not completely see him. Chapter 5 begins in an atmosphere of darkness, one that only deepens and that takes on further shades of (mass-cultural) menace as it progresses. “It was after midnight,” the chapter begins. “Though Christmas had been in bed for two hours, he was not yet asleep. He heard Brown before he saw him” (474). Unlike his appearance at the mill or later in Byron’s narrating of his story, Christmas is not presented here through others’ perceptions of him. Referred to directly by the narrator, Christmas is “present” in the narrative in a way he has not been to that point. He’s not much more visible, however: shrouded in darkness, he can neither see nor be seen. In the action that follows, he silences a drunken Brown by beating him, coldly and repeatedly (“he struck Brown again with those hard, slow, measured blows, as if he were meting them out by count” [474]). Joe’s threatening aspect only increases when, in the next moment, Faulkner makes another gesture toward the charged, oddly reified murder weapon—the razor, with its connotations of black violence pulled from commercial culture. “Without removing his left hand from Brown’s face he could reach with his right across to his cot, to his pillow beneath which lay his razor with its five inch blade. But he did not do it. Perhaps thinking had gone far enough and dark enough to tell him *This is not the right one*” (475). Appearing in the novel directly for the first time, Christmas is thoroughly constructed as a murderous and dangerous figure. Through Faulkner’s cryptic references, hinting at the murder which has yet to take place (“*This is not the right one*”), he is presented at the outset as a likely criminal.

Christmas is also offered as another in a sequence of images of black or “black-like” characters that, as we have seen, readers had encountered in various mass-cultural representations. Their resemblance to *Light in August* is enhanced by Faulkner’s descriptive method in scenes like this with Joe. In his depiction of Christmas here, Faulkner is careful to keep the details of his appearance hidden. There is no external description of his face or body, so Christmas appears—and remains—a shadowy, vague entity, less a fully realized physical presence than a textual trace or cipher. At the outset of his story Christmas is a construction, that is, whom Faulkner encourages readers to *not* see or know definitively, but rather to associate with representations of the type of character he resembles. As chapter 5 ends, we are required to suspend our

witnessing of Joe's movements. Breaking away from Christmas's approach to Joanna's house, Faulkner opens a broad gap in which readers spend subsequent chapters anticipating the completion of the action, a gap filled not only with the wandering, fugitive presence of Joe Christmas but with readers' received, stereotypical and popular vision of the menacing Negro. That Faulkner declines to clearly delimit Joe's appearance contributes to his ghostly presence, an impression that allows him not only to "haunt" those precincts of the novel in which he does not directly appear, but as well to blend with readers' conceptions of blacks that blur beyond the edges of the novel.

Other aspects of the way Faulkner narrates Joe's story contribute to what I describe as its filmic and associative effect. One narrative method that gives this impression involves the way Christmas's actions or movement extend beyond the parameters of what is ordinarily understood as the discreteness of the "event." Events in Joe's narration, that is, are not limited to a self-contained narrative or spatial unit.²⁴ This occurs, for instance, in the passage following Joe's beating by Max and the stranger he discovers in Bobbie's room. After getting up and drinking a bottle of whiskey, Joe makes his way out of the room where he has been lying and then out of the house. "He stepped from the dark porch, into the moonlight, and with his bloody head and his empty stomach hot, savage, and courageous with whiskey, he entered the street which was to run for fifteen years" (563). This "event" of Joe's leaving the house outruns itself, expanding beyond the act of stepping into the street and into indeterminate regions of space and time. Becoming phantasmagoric in its fluidity, this passage depicts Joe in such a way that his presence becomes impermanent and "de-realized," and so further cinematized for readers and their filmic conception of Joe, particularly of him as a threat.

In addition to his affinity with the filmic stereotypes we have seen, Joe's "spectral" movement in moments like these further contributes to his resemblance to the spectralized figures of cinema. And his de-materialized body and movement extend from this passage: "The whiskey died away in time and was renewed and died again, but the street ran on. From that night the thousand streets ran as one street, with imperceptible corners and changes of scene, broken by intervals of begged and stolen rides . . ." (563). Faulkner's method in these places adds to Joe's vague, otherworldly presence, contributing to a conception of Joe as a figure for cinematic method.²⁵ Like other moments of Faulkner's text that recall film, though, these passages serve a critical and objectifying end. That is, they allow us to recognize their similarity to film and,

significantly, to recognize the notions of blackness that attended film images generally and those in movies like *Birth of a Nation*.

Surveillance and the Stagings of Mystery

Joe’s haunting, shadowy presence produces much of the novel’s disquieting force, at the same time establishing its resemblance to, and reflection on, practices of popular media like film. In addition, Christmas’s “spectralizing” also contributes to what I offer as the novel’s other main narrative strategy for depicting him. From the point when he first appears as an inscrutable, unknown presence at the mill, through his interaction with Brown and his subsequent disappearance from the narrative, Christmas is steadfastly looked for, anticipated, “sought,” or imagined. Introducing Christmas into the novel in this way—a technique that, as we will see, deliberately plays on conventions of the mystery plot—Faulkner provides an exercise for readers of surveillance or watching. Conspicuously absent (as an adult) from the narrative when Faulkner makes his long forays into Christmas’s past, or when he diverts the narrative into Hightower’s or Joanna’s backgrounds, Christmas exerts a powerful hold on readers’ imagination as well as a consistent pull on their attention or readerly “gaze.” Even when not present, Christmas incites the reader’s desire to “catch” or see him.

One of the ways the novel engenders this desire is through its use of generic strategies. Among the monumental works of Faulkner’s high modernism, notable for its density and formal play, *Light in August* also makes use of violent and sensational elements like murder, dismemberment, and policing. As well as challenging readers intellectually, that is, the novel actively draws them into its potboiler story and operates as an exercise in detection and pursuit. Joe is offered as the supposed perpetrator of a crime we hear of from the novel’s outset and the resolution—and punishment—of which we spend the rest of the narrative anticipating. The fire that appears at the end of the first chapter hints at the violence that has occurred before the novel opens. Though Faulkner doesn’t completely explain events, we fully expect to return to that violence and to discover its causes. The earliest direct hint of Joanna’s death appears in the text a short time later when one of the men at the mill remarks, “‘I don’t remember anything out that way big enough to make all that smoke except that Burden house,” to which another responds, “Maybe that’s what it is . . . My pappy says he can remember how fifty years ago folks said it ought to be

burned, and with a little human fat meat to start it good" (434). Closer to the truth of events than they know, the men initiate a crime story that produces a likely suspect.²⁶

This generic detective-story quality takes its clearest shape in chapter 4, when Byron reveals to Hightower the facts of the murder. Through a calculated strategy, Faulkner defers the revelation of Joanna's death for several pages, hinting first, through Byron's faltering narration, at Christmas's and Brown's involvement in the fire. In Byron's manner of narrating, Faulkner combines a revelation of the murder with an emphasis on Christmas's assumed race. Piquing Hightower's curiosity with several variations on "you had not heard yet" or "you aint heard yet" (456, 464), Byron prompts both a keen interest in the details of the murder and a firm connection between Christmas and the fire. That Faulkner intends for readers to pick up the thread of Christmas's connection to the fire is clear in Hightower's elliptical response. "'Oh,'" he says. "'The house that burned yesterday. But I don't see any connection between—Whose house was it? I saw the smoke, myself, and asked a passing negro, but he didn't know'" (455–56). Though Christmas is not the "passing negro" Hightower encountered, Faulkner deliberately includes him to draw readers' attention to the racial identity of the criminal. And although Hightower does not yet know the nature of the events at the fire, the reader has begun to—and wants to know more. The mystery plot, as several critics have called it, has been initiated.²⁷ Readers will wait several chapters to arrive at its full conclusion, though, experiencing first a complicated set of deferrals and expectations. The next chapter, chapter 5, begins with a hint of narrative revelation, introducing us to Christmas only to leave him when he approaches Joanna's house and, we gather, is about to commit the murder. Following the break after chapter 5, which ends with Joe's darkly prophetic refrain "*Something is going to happen. Something is going to happen to me*" (486), but with no further information about the murder, readers spend another five chapters and more than a hundred pages before we "see" Christmas again in the context of the Joanna narrative, and longer than that before we return to the actual crime (in chapter 12).

This elaborate structure deliberately keeps us guessing about the murder. There is a crucial difference to *Light in August's* version of the mystery though. We do not read Joe's story for the ending in the sense of an ordinary detective or crime novel; we know who is responsible for the fire—or rather, we believe we do—as well as who produces what other maleficence the novel's atmo-

sphere and its narrative workings lead us to expect. If our reading act is not fully driven by a need to "know" as it is in classical detective or mystery narratives, it is nonetheless compelled by something more chilling: an anticipatory unease about the nature of what will occur, both to the victim of the novel's violence and to the criminal.²⁸ This unsettling, "prospective" aspect of Christmas is implied in his earliest appearance in the novel, in which it is clear that something fatal attaches to him. After Christmas arrives at the mill and is hired, the men take note of his "foreign sounding" name. For Byron at least, it sounds like a warning:

It seemed to him that none of them had looked especially at the stranger until they heard his name. But as soon as they heard it, it was as though there was something in the sound of it that was trying to tell them what to expect; that he carried with him his own inescapable warning, like a flower its scent or a rattlesnake its rattle. Only none of them had sense enough to recognize it. (422)

As Faulkner conveys it, there is a sense of urgency about Christmas's appearance, a warning "if other men can only read it in time." Faulkner's language, in its inversion of the flower's scent to a warning of danger, enhances the sense of events as unnatural or foreboding that we expect from Christmas's story. Joe Christmas's name connotes as well a pending martyrdom that the events of the novel will both require and explain. As Carolyn Porter puts it, "By virtue of his name . . . Christmas cannot be a minor character, so the reader adjusts his expectations to encompass the possibility of tragedy" (*Seeing and Being*, 244). The "inescapable warning" that Byron attributes to Christmas's name, if lost on the men at the mill, can hardly be lost on readers. The interest Christmas generates at the novel's start, then, carries with it the sense of suspense that surfaces in all mystery stories and on which Faulkner's novel, like others of its genre, depends.²⁹

In addition to its practices of mystery or detective fiction, *Light in August* seeks to grip its readers through strategies that reveal Faulkner's willingness to use other popular cultural pleasures and structures of thought. At the same moment that the novel first reveals Joe's mixed-race identity, for instance, it also sensationalizes the crime. In the scene at Hightower's in which Byron relates the events of the murder, he establishes both Joe's potential mixed-race status and the crime's lurid nature. In doing so, he implies that the two facts are related. Joanna Burden was not only murdered, Byron reports, but decapitated. In addition to this grisly fact, Byron's narration includes the detail that

the man who discovered her body failed to prevent her head from separating grotesquely from Joanna's body. After pausing significantly (and dramatically) for emphasis, Byron indicates, "And he said that what he was scared of happened. Because the cover fell open and she was laying on her side, facing one way, and her head was turned clean around like she was looking behind her" (466).

As Faulkner presents the crime, its sensational aspect appears necessarily linked to its racial dimension. The detail of Joanna's severed head arrives in the text, that is, only *after* Byron reveals to Hightower what to him is the most important aspect of the story. At the start of his narration he states, "I knowed you had not heard yet. I knowed it would be for me to tell you." He then cautions Hightower: "'About Christmas. About yesterday and Christmas. Christmas is part nigger'" (464). That Joe's racial identity precedes any details of the story suggests the importance it plays in Byron's and the town's consciousness. That importance was also, Faulkner understood, present in the consciousness of readers. Scenarios of narrating and listening proliferate in this section of the novel, "stagings" of the act of storytelling that treat, repeatedly, the detail of Christmas's race as the linchpin or high point of their narrative. Highlighting the scenario of narration, Faulkner points to readers' own act of reading or listening to the story of the murder. In so doing, he also emphasizes what, to its listeners, are its most salient elements.³⁰ Hightower sweats and anguishes over Byron's telling; sitting rapt and immobile, he performs the spell-bound state that the murder story effects on all its audiences (464–72). The narrative of a murder of a white woman by a black man, the novel signals in these moments, is a particularly compelling story.

In Joe Brown's narrative of the crime he also provides a clear indication of the story's allure. After his apprehension by the sheriff, realizing that he himself is a suspect in the case, Brown resorts to what he knows will command his audience's attention. Relating this part of the story to Hightower, Byron explains:

"I reckon he was desperate by then. . . . Because they said it was like he had been saving what he told them next for just such a time as this. Like he had knowed that if it come to a pinch, this would save him . . . 'That's right,' he says. 'Go on. Accuse me. Accuse the white man that's trying to help you with what he knows. Accuse the white man and let the nigger go free. . . .'"

'Nigger?' the sheriff said. 'Nigger?'

'It's like he knew he had them then.'" (470)

Byron, of course, is right. Brown does "have" the audience, indicated by the fact that the sheriff immediately suspends his questioning of Brown and sends for the bloodhounds with which to search for Christmas. Faulkner too, though, has succeeded in capturing *his* audience's interest. With his insertion of race into an already sensationalized crime, he makes use of a stereotype by which readers of the novel will be fascinated and drawn in, like Brown's audience for his story. In framing the story of the crime with both Byron's and Brown's narrating, Faulkner highlights the reception of the sensationalized murder story. Hightower's tortured but enthralled attention and the town's outrage at Brown's story (like earlier at the fire) offer models for readers' own responsiveness and fascination. Operating reflexively, these scenarios of storytelling and spectacle also point to readers' investment in the story's sensational elements and their taste for racially exploitative narrative.³¹

In this manner, Faulkner implicates readers in a particular kind of narrative pleasure.³² As we have seen, this experience had, before *Light in August's* publication, contributed to the popularity of cultural forms such as mysteries, early films, and other racially inflected novels. Having been led from the story's beginning to expect an act of violence to attach to Joe, we are structurally bound into some of the same reactions and expectations as those evident in Faulkner's various representations of the crowd.³³ One moment in the novel clearly reveals this structural effect as well as the place in it of stereotypical roles such as the violent or threatening black. Late on the night of the murder, Joe is walking down the road from Joanna's when he stops two teenagers in a car. Immediately, the young man and woman are terrified. "[The] two young faces seemed to float like two softcolored and aghast balloons, the nearer one, the girl's, backshrunken in a soft, wide horror" (608). After Joe asks them for a ride, "They said nothing at all, looking at him with that still and curious horror" (608). After "the girl began to make a choked wailing sound," her companion warns her not to give them and their alarm away. The episode suggests the way Joe "automatically" instills fear in the people he encounters. This suggestion is misleading, however. For it is not until after the teenagers drop him off that the text reveals the source of their fear: the gun Joe carried without even knowing it was in his hand (610). Without this knowledge, our reading of the episode and of Joe's "fearsome" appearance follow from the text's construction of a particular way of looking at him.³⁴ Withholding the knowledge of the gun, Faulkner forces readers to see Joe here as do the teenagers and the community: as a menacing, violent Other.³⁵

Light in August and the Police

Important to the novel's presentation of Joe as a racialized and generic threat is, in addition to the violence associated with him, his apparent inscrutability. At the center of a mystery and crime narrative, Faulkner offers a figure notable for his ambiguity and for other characters' inability to know who he is. What is curious, and ultimately revealing, about that lack of knowledge is the way it seems to infect not only the book's characters but its narrator as well. In the second chapter, for instance, Faulkner's narration deliberately constructs an aura of mystery around Christmas, one that functions to incite readers' desire for knowledge. One of the principal means for doing this pivots on the text's construction of a realm of secrecy that surrounds Joe and that seemingly exists beyond even the narrative's ability to trace or "know" him.

After opening with Byron Bunch's focalized narration of Christmas's first appearance at the mill, the chapter gives way to a more ostensibly omniscient narration that furnishes information about Christmas, Joe Brown, and the other men: "[Christmas] quit one Saturday night, without warning, after almost three years. It was Brown informed them that Christmas had quit. Some of the other workers were family men and some were bachelors and they were of different ages and they led a catholic variety of lives" (428). Rather than maintain this omniscience, however, in its next section the narration switches back to presenting a more limited version of events as seen through the eyes of Byron and the other men. Soon after we learn of Christmas leaving the mill, the chapter reveals that the other men suspect Christmas and Brown of bootlegging. At least, they suspect Brown; Christmas's involvement remains uncertain.

"That's what Brown is doing. I dont know about Christmas. I wouldn't swear to it. But Brown aint going to be far away from where Christmas is at . . ."

"That's a fact," another said. "Whether Christmas is in it or not, I reckon we aint going to know." (430)

The text, however, does "know" about Christmas's involvement in the bootlegging. And it could easily indicate as much, given the ease with which it has furnished information about when he quit, who reported his quitting, the other men's "catholic variety of lives," and so on. Not doing so, however, plays a significant role in the text's construction of Christmas. For it confers an atmosphere of secrecy around him that contributes to the novel's generic quality, a manufactured uncertainty that continues though the next pages—and that we

see comes to afflict the narrator as well as the characters. After reporting that Brown too has quit the mill, the narrator describes him and Christmas driving through town in the new car. "Now and then Christmas would be with him, but not often. And it is now no secret what they were doing. It is a byword among young men and even boys that whiskey can be bought from Brown almost on sight, and the town is just waiting for him to get caught, to produce from his raincoat and offer to sell it to an undercover man. They still do not know for certain if Christmas is connected with it" (432). Though it is "no secret" what Christmas and Brown are doing, the text maintains its ambivalence about precisely the nature of Christmas's (unlike Brown's) doings.

Here we also find the explicit construction of the text's policing and surveilling knowledge, its diegetic "undercover man" that could easily catch the clumsy and obvious Brown but, supposedly, does not know "for certain" if Christmas is involved in bootlegging. In moments such as these, the novel invites readers, along with its representatives of the law, to take up the activity of policing, producing a structure of thought that is on the lookout for criminal activity and that takes Joe as its principal object. Earlier we find a seemingly deliberate construction of mystery around Christmas's activities. Using Byron's consciousness as a point of departure, the narrator establishes a difference between what Byron knew of Christmas when he first appeared at the mill, and what he comes to know later about his business selling liquor. "This is not what Byron knows now [three years later]. This is just what he heard then, what he heard and watched as it came to his knowledge. None of them knew then where Christmas lived and what he was actually doing behind the veil, the screen, of his negro's job at the mill" (424). No one involved in Joe's story, it seems—the townspeople, the narrator, or the reader—knows Christmas's activities definitively. The reader, however, is "onto" him. Constructed as another surveilling force in the narrative, like the town's undercover detective, we already have our suspicions raised about Christmas and his activities behind the "screen" of his job at the mill—activities which, we will not be surprised to learn, appear far more dangerous and lethal than his operation of bootlegging.

The text's willingness to invoke but then question its own omniscience points up a crucial element in *Light in August's* racial workings. In these operations, Faulkner's novel produces a specific ideological effect, one that has been elaborately detailed, and radically questioned, by D. A. Miller in his study, *The Novel and the Police*. Key to Miller's thinking about the novel form and

omniscience are elements that are highly relevant to Faulkner's novel: self-disciplining, social organization, and control. Like many of the characters Miller treats, but more importantly, like the novelistic *function* Miller discusses, Christmas reveals the way *Light in August* relies on a reader's ongoing activity of policing. In textual operations such as those surrounding Christmas, *Light in August* performs in a manner that Miller says is peculiar to the novel form. Making a distinction of power between knowing or seeing on the one hand, and "doing" on the other, Miller's Foucaultian perspective explains the novel genre's effort to conceal its controlling elements such as omniscience. "Power, of course, might seem precisely what the convention of omniscient narration foregoes. Omniscient narration may typically know all, but it can hardly *do* all. . . . Yet by now the gesture of disowning power should seem to define the basic move of a familiar power play, in which the name of power is given over to one agency in order that the function of power may be less visibly retained by the other" (25). Importantly, in appearing to limit and thereby conceal their own omniscience, novels generate the impression for readers that omniscience is not complete—in the world outside of the novel as well as the world within it. As a result, readers are encouraged (falsely, Miller argues) to believe that there is a social space free from surveillance and the normalizing gaze (162). Such a belief allows readers the fantasy that they themselves inhabit that space and thus escape the probing eye of political and social organizing, extensions for Miller of efforts at social control. "As it forwards its story of social discipline, the narrative also advances the novel's omniscient world. It is frequently hard to distinguish the omniscience from the social control it parallels" (27).

Positing information about Christmas, only to then reveal the limits on what it can say or "know" about him, Faulkner's text thus fashions an appearance of an omniscience that is incomplete. The immediate and simpler consequence of this is that readers assume the knowledge about Christmas that the narration is reluctant to give them; not willing to be duped, we become the superior detective or "undercover man" who, without the text confirming them, arrives at several conclusions about Christmas's actions.

The second and subtler operation that the text performs here is to hide its own surveilling knowledge. Through such operations, *Light in August* performs like other novels that endeavor to pass off or hide their panoptic and surveilling capacity. As Miller suggests, however, this power is nevertheless all-encompassing.³⁶ Though the disclosure of Christmas's character or his motives

is far from complete, at certain points readers are encouraged to see his actions as criminal; such moments give the appearance of the text's full omniscience or "knowledge." This occurs as the result of various pieces of "evidence" (the razor, Joanna's gun, the drums of whiskey Christmas cuts open in the forest, etc). At the novel's outset, however, the text seems unable to furnish clear information about Christmas's doings. Seemingly innocent of its full policing powers, the text implicates the reader in its surveilling operations and masks its own (and thereby also readers') ability to "know." Masking its power in this way, the novel allows its readers, who nevertheless become deeply involved in the policing effort, to assume a similar innocence toward their efforts to pursue or "see" Christmas. The constructed "non-knowledge" on the narrative's part demonstrated here ultimately contributes to one of the novel's deeper effects: its readers' presumption of innocence and detachment from the narrative's violence, in particular its eventual subjugating of Christmas and others.³⁷

Prior to its violent outcome and Christmas's apprehending, however, and after several scenes that imply his guilt, Christmas remains "at large," having committed the murder, we're led to believe, and leaving a trail of indications of his involvement in it. Accordingly, once the crime story commences, the novel introduces its other, more explicit representative of police power. Embodied in the person of Sheriff Watt Kennedy, that power initially appears supreme. Kennedy's appearance in the narrative and in the text acts as a signal moment in the novel's drama of omniscience and detection. For the reader's act of looking at (and for) Joe, and the role in both activities of received and stereotyped notions of blackness, is dramatized in the episode of Kennedy's investigation.

Faulkner's handling of this section of the novel is intriguing. Initially his manner of narrating the scene proceeds along conventional lines, describing the fire and the onlookers and, in typically omniscient manner, registering the characters' thoughts and responses. (It is here that we see the crowd's assumptions about Joanna's murder and hoped-for rape.) This omniscience is also evident in the passage's account of Kennedy's mounting frustration with the situation as the narrative moves readily into his state of mind: "The sheriff also stared at the flames with exasperation and astonishment, since there was no scene to investigate. He was not yet thinking of himself as having been frustrated by a human agent. It was the fire. It seemed to him that the fire had been selfborn for that end and purpose" (613). Unaccustomed to being deterred by a

“human agent,” particularly a criminal one, Kennedy turns his anger, we’re told, on the fire, a nonhuman, genuinely uncontrollable element.

Following that temporary moment of frustration, however, Kennedy acts. Using an investigative power and omniscience that parallels that of the text, Kennedy asks a deputy about who is living in the surroundings. As if to parody the all-pervasive power of omniscience as well as its corollary in Kennedy, though, at this explicit moment of investigation the text shows a notable break in its workings.

“Who lived in that cabin?” [Kennedy asks.]

“I didn’t know anybody did” the deputy said. “Niggers, I reckon. She might have had niggers living in the house with her, from what I have heard . . .”

“Get me a nigger,” the sheriff said. The deputy and two or three others got him a nigger. “Who’s been living in that cabin?” the sheriff said. (613)

In its pat, simplistic repetition of the sheriff’s order, the narrator’s account of the action here draws attention to its seemingly unreal (and faintly absurd) sequence of events. Appearing abruptly and immediately, the sought-for “nigger” fulfills Kennedy’s command unrealistically, by novelistic terms, and as if by fiat. The unlikeliness of this action seems all the greater in light of the fact that two pages earlier Faulkner’s narrator indicates how difficult it would be for a deputy to discover anyone—black or white—in these surroundings: “This was a region of negro cabins and gutted and outworn fields out of which a corporal’s guard of detectives could not have combed ten people, man woman or child” (611).

Until the response to Kennedy’s command, events had been described realistically. We find, for instance, detailed description of the crowd watching the fire as well as of objects like the fire engine that arrives at the scene (“It was new, painted red, with gilt trim and a handpower siren and a bell gold in color” [611]). Both of the text’s discursive modes in this section—omniscience and realism—falter in the exchange between Kennedy and the deputy, however. Out of his frustration with circumstances, Kennedy responds automatically—but in a manner that Faulkner’s text marks as such. His knee-jerk reaction to the fact that “there was no scene to investigate” is to “find a nigger.” Obliging, the text does. But the effect of its manner of doing so is to signal the deputy’s immediate, reflexive response to Kennedy’s order as *unreal*, producing a break in the text’s otherwise realist operations.

The deputy’s response also draws attention to the play of omniscience,

offering a correlation between the way the narrative readily offers characters' thoughts and, just as readily, locates and seizes on a suspect. Kennedy's and the text's efficacy here in producing a "nigger" is instructive. For it serves Faulkner's larger interest in this scene and in the novel generally: exposing the habit of thought that takes black guilt as a matter of course. Importantly, it is also reflexive, pointing readers back to their to own activity of surveilling as well as to their willingness, like Kennedy's, to find an object for their looking through the novel's invocation of the popular cultural "Negro," as through Faulkner's manipulation of the mystery genre. That operation is one that the text puts into play in its opening chapters and repeats in its depiction of policing here, producing a search for "knowledge" that in both cases, Faulkner reveals, attaches itself only too readily to the African American.³⁸

The Interiorized Carceral Gaze

Though the episode with Kennedy reveals the text's willingness to both invoke and question its own omniscience, other sections of the novel are more circumspect—and therefore more troubling—in their uses of surveilling. We have seen those passages that provide information about Joe's activities while refraining from naming them, the result of which is that readers perform the act of labeling him guilty. In such moments of masking its omniscience, the novel also conceals its narrative's ongoing effort to identify or know Christmas, efforts which, in turn, more fully implicate the reader in the novel's policing activity. This process of tracing begins early in the novel, in fact, and its covert nature is evident in depictions of the earliest periods of Joe's life. Faulkner's narration of Joe's childhood at the orphanage, for instance, produces several effects of silent, anonymous, but ultimately oppressive monitoring. In a clear example of one of them, the description of the orphanage is notable both for its carceral overtones and its optical metaphor.

Knows remembers believes a corridor in a big long garbled cold echoing building of dark red brick sootbleakened by more chimneys than its own, set in a grassless cinderstrewnpacked compound surrounded by smoking factory purlieus and enclosed by a ten foot steel-and-wire fence like a penitentiary or a zoo, where in random erratic surges, with sparrowlike childtrebling, orphans in identical and uniform blue denim in and out of remembering but in knowing constant as the bleak walls, the bleak windows where in rain soot from the yearly adjacenting chimneys streaked like black tears. (487)

Despite its imagistic quality, Faulkner's prose in this passage reveals much about the facility where Joe is housed. Though darkened and blurred by "tears," the eyes/windows of the orphanage cast a constant unwavering gaze on the orphans below, an impression furthered by the suggestion of animals looked at by spectators in a zoo or inmates guarded in a prison. It seems hardly necessary to point out that at the earliest point in his childhood that the novel gives us, Christmas is placed within an institution and social machinery that serves a normalizing function of discipline. The orphans' "identical and uniform blue denim" and their enclosure within a prison-like environment is only the outward manifestation of a circumstance that, as subsequent events in the orphanage prove, is concerned with establishing a homogenized social order.³⁹ Hines's appearance in the narrative a short time later only confirms the role of the orphanage in maintaining a disciplining, monitory action.

Readers as well, through an elaborate device on Faulkner's part, are drawn into the orphanage's invisible and monitoring center. In a textual operation that occurs in the paragraph following the orphanage's description, we are secured in a position within both the constructed space of the building and, I would argue, the interiorized "space" of the narrative. In addition to the ongoing surveilling position that we come to occupy as readers of the novel's mystery, it is this constructed space of internal surveilling that deepens the novel's work of making readers into monitors. Following his impressionistic but external description of the orphanage, Faulkner moves immediately (and rather effortlessly) to its inside and to an account of a very young Joe. "In the quiet and empty corridor, during the quiet hour of early afternoon, he was like a shadow, small even for five years, sober and quiet as a shadow" (487). Again we find Joe's presence rendered in the vague, phantom-like language that characterizes him generally. Yet unlike other passages depicting Joe as an adult, Christmas here is ultimately detectable: "Another in the corridor could not have said just when and where he vanished, into what door, what room. But there was no else in the corridor at this hour" (487). No one, that is, besides the narrator—and the reader. Vacating the space of the orphanage and the corridor of other characters, Faulkner nevertheless "fills" it with the narrator's presence and gaze. Doing so effects the reader's ability, along with the omniscient narrator's, to know to where Joe has vanished, "into what door, what room." Following him from this furtive glimpse in the abandoned hallway, the reader is taken into the dietician's closet, a space constructed as private but to which we have privileged access. As the episode with the dietician ensues,

Faulkner furnishes several details that complete the sense of Joe occupying a hidden, yet secretly accessible space. Crouching among her shoes and “suspended soft womangarments,” Joe overhears the sounds of scuffling feet, the dietician’s hurried warnings, and, importantly, “the turn of the key in the door” (488).

Granted access to the locked bedroom, as we were to the abandoned corridor, the reader is ushered into the orphanage’s innermost reaches. Aligned with the centralized, panoptic power of the institution, readers are thus able to watch Joe even, or especially, when he thinks he is not being seen. Faulkner makes this breakdown of Joe’s presumed “invisible” position explicit, of course, in the next pages, when the dietician discovers him. Following her discovery of Joe, she solicits help from Hines, the novel’s supreme figure of violent and watchful disciplining. As she says, “‘You’ve been watching him too,’” (492), a statement that only hints at the extent and malevolence of Hines’s gaze (evident most unsettlingly in his return to the narrative in Mottstown to witness Christmas’s execution). Readers too, however, have already been structured into the activity of monitoring Joe by the alignment between the gazes of the narrator, the dietician, and Hines. We are also positioned with what has been called the “institutional gaze,” that is, one maintained by carceral institutions such as the orphanage, factory, or prison and that, like the panoptic view Faulkner here describes, turns inward.⁴⁰ As the dietician says to Hines, “‘You never sit here [in his chair] except when the children are outdoors. But as soon as they come out, you bring this chair here to the door and sit in it where you can watch them’” (493). When Hines is “inside,” in the orphanage’s private spaces, we may assume he performs his normalizing and fanatical vigil. As the dietician indicates, Hines follows the children outside only to maintain it. Institutions like the orphanage and its embodiment in Hines, then, perform an action that is repeated in the narrator’s acts of monitoring events that take place within its walls—an activity that Faulkner’s text, in turn, requires of its readers.

That the description of the orphanage in *Light in August* resembles that of the Court of Chancery in *Bleak House* seems hardly incidental.⁴¹ For the orphanage sections of Faulkner’s novel introduce a range of issues about Joe’s childhood and about his “place” both in the novel and in the society it depicts that share many of the concerns of Dickens’s fiction.⁴² Key to this aspect of *Light in August* is the question of Joe’s social place, represented by his difficulty belonging to any family. In his analyses of *Bleak House* and of *Oliver Twist*,

D. A. Miller points to the relationship between the establishment of carceral institutions and the breakdown of traditional family norms. "After all, what brought carceral institutions into being in the first place were lapses in proper management of the family: in its failure to constitute itself (the problem of illegitimate or orphaned children and the institutional solution of founding hospitals and baby farms)" (*The Novel and the Police*, 59). Readers of Dickens come to sense (falsely, Miller argues) a feeling of their own freedom from carceral and normative constraints, a feeling structured into the experience of reading him. "The often ferocious architecture that immured the inmates of a carceral institution seemed to immure the operations practiced on them there as well, and the thick, spiked walls, the multiple gateways, the attendants and the administrators that assured the confinement of those within seemed equally to provide for the protectedness of those without, including most pertinently the novelist and his readers" (58).

It is a similar "protection" for its readers that, ultimately, *Light in August's* regulating and panoptic operations will ensure. In Miller's view, the protectedness that privileges the family's workings and associates the subject's freedom with it merely switched the agency of surveillance and control from carceral physical institutions to families: "The topic of the carceral in Dickens . . . works to secure the effect of difference between, on the one hand, a confined, institutional space in which power is violently exercised on collectivized subjects, and on the other, a space of 'liberal society,' generally determined as a free, private, and individual domain and practically specified as the family" (59). That semblance of freedom and privacy, Miller indicates, nevertheless requires the subject's submission.⁴³

It is in such familial and domestic efforts to contain Joe that *Light in August* shows the continuity of the carceral work of the institution begun at the orphanage. Joe Christmas is a character who, as all of *Light in August* testifies, cannot belong to any definition of the "family." As the sections of the novel set in the orphanage as well as the history of his adoption by McEachern and the story of the Hineses at the end of the novel make clear, Joe's plight is, above all, solitary. Questions of belonging and social identity vex him throughout his life, a problematic struggle for family that is initiated by his rejection by Hines. As such, Joe's story illustrates the way the failure to belong to the family, identified in the novel as both the nuclear Christian family (and epitomized, if ironically, by Byron, Lena, and her child) and the social community represented by Jefferson (or even by the African-American community that Christ-

mas also fails to join), results in ever more strenuous and violent efforts to discipline the subject. The preoccupation in *Light in August* with watching or surveilling Christmas begins with practices put into play when he is quite young and in the orphanage, but it extends to social pressures exerted outside of the carceral institution—by families and social ordering—that are just as coercive as those within it.

The Limits of Observation: Christmas’s Aestheticizing

The outcome of the efforts at disciplining Joe is made pointedly clear at the novel’s end. Having run away from his adopted family, the McEacherns, and refusing what he sees as another institutional form of subjugation (Joanna Burden’s efforts to educate him at the Negro college), in the final chapters Joe seems to give up resisting. He allows himself to be captured on the street in Mottstown, and though he flees the law again, it is clear that Christmas is resigned to his fate. Giving himself over to the state apparatus and its representative in another policing eye, Christmas experiences the full weight of his society’s disciplining practices. Disturbingly, the text’s manner of depicting that discipline—as with the orphanage—places readers in the same position as those exercising it.

One of the novel’s final invocations of the gaze involves Christmas’s executioner, Percy Grimm. On the day before Christmas escapes and on which Grimm mounts his vigil—organized, ostensibly, in order to maintain civic order—a rumor spreads through Jefferson about a pending decision on Christmas’s case by a special Grand Jury. Though until this point Grimm’s squad has lacked conviction about their role in the affair, the evoking of an unseen but watchful authority helps assure them. “About the square it was already known that the special Grand Jury would meet tomorrow. Somehow the very sound of the two words with their evocation secret and irrevocable and something of a hidden and unsleeping and omnipotent eye watching the doings of men, began to reassure Grimm’s men in their own makebelieve” (736). The notion of an invisible authority “watching the doings of men” here is consoling, reassuring the men that their “makebelieve” martial and policing games are supported by a larger state power. (As the day goes on and Grimm’s notoriety grows, people in town assume that he is a “[s]pecial officer sent by the governor” [737].) In the light of my earlier discussion of the ways in which the town’s collective fantasy resembles the experience of cinema, it is significant that Grimm mounts his

vigil at the same time of night “as the picture show emptied” (736). Without the movies to organize and direct the townspeople’s gaze, Grimm and his civilian patrol serve as a substitute. The alliance here is troubling. For as I have suggested, readers too have been involved in several sustained acts of “watching.” In particular, as we have noted, they engage in a protracted political surveillance of Joe as well as in a popular cultural habit of vision. Our activity of looking, then, shares something with that of the policing eyes of Grimm or of the townspeople, as they displace their own acts of gazing (at Christmas and at the picture show) to him.

In addition, our own act of “looking,” not only at only Christmas but at the novel generally, resembles the omnipotent eye of the Grand Jury. Its way of overseeing all “the doings of men” is similar, that is, to our overseeing the novel’s events. For the narrative and scopic reach of *Light in August*, incorporating multiple story lines, perspectives, and temporal registers, is among the broadest and most encompassing of Faulkner’s novels. In its constant ability to shift focus, to move back in time through often extensive flashbacks (as with Joe’s childhood and upbringing) or to begin a new narrative line (as with Hightower’s training at the seminary, Joanna’s family history, or even Grimm’s and the furniture salesman’s backgrounds), the novel gives the impression of a narrative reach that is seemingly inexhaustible. Anything and everything can be covered by the narrative’s constantly alternating and active modernist “gaze.” Searching for Christmas as the novel’s mystery format encourages, and anticipating his punishment or tragedy as the novel’s opening prescribes, readers perform an act of looking at and integrating events that resembles Faulkner’s reference at the novel’s end to a punishing, encompassing, all-seeing law, “watching the doings of men.” As such, our perspective is aligned with the law’s or with its manifestation in Percy Grimm and the novel’s other representatives of policing.

As Faulkner’s reference to the picture show suggests, however, Grimm’s and the town’s treatment of Christmas also recalls cinematic acts of looking and the fantasies sustaining them. We have already seen the way the crowd at Joanna’s fire demonstrates a fantastic, spectatorial habit of thought about race and sexual violence. Like the townspeople’s attitudes about black rape, Grimm’s final act of castrating Christmas similarly reveals a white racist hysteria and follows a popular cultural model. Faulkner’s treatment of Percy Grimm suggests a specific filmic and historical allusion. Like the ending of *Light in August*, the original version of *Birth of a Nation* included a scene of the purported

rapist Gus being castrated by one of the Klansmen. Though excised in later versions of the film, this scene epitomized the fear of black sexuality that the film both pandered to and produced.⁴⁴ Although this scene was cut from later versions of the movie, Faulkner’s novel explicitly includes the act of castrating Christmas, as well as Grimm’s pathological belief in the racist myth of black potency that we’ve seen subtended popular models. Declaring “Now you’ll let white women alone, even in hell,” (742), Grimm voices the belief that Griffith’s film both drew on and promulgated.⁴⁵

Unlike *Birth of a Nation*, Faulkner’s novel attempts to critique the racist hysteria evident in acts of vigilantism through its depiction of Grimm and the Jefferson crowd. The force of this critique inheres in Faulkner’s willingness to implicate his text and his readers in its several acts of objectification and aestheticizing as well as to reveal to readers those attitudes and habits of thought. At the same time, however, Faulkner’s effort at critique is compromised. This is one reason why the ending of the novel is so particularly unsettling. Having participated in the textual formation of Joe as an object of observation, we have, by the point at which Grimm pursues him, also participated in the imagining of him as a menacing threat. Effectively, then, our own attitudes are bound into Grimm’s chase and the book’s outcome. Judith Wittenberg refers to the novel’s willingness to expose its own and the reader’s use of received notions of blackness in a way that speaks to this point about the reader and Grimm: “[W]hile the novel clearly exposes (in order to indict) the pernicious (though virtually inevitable) effects of the prevailing codes, its structure and other aspects of the narrative method to some degree subtly participate in the process of ‘framing’ [Christmas]” (“Race in *Light in August*,” 153). These “pernicious” and “inevitable” effects of the prevailing code include the racist hysteria that drives Grimm, and they pertain to the social terms with which the novel’s community struggles to define Joe. They also, however, as Wittenberg suggests, apply to readers’ efforts to understand or to “know” who Christmas is: what she refers to as “the process of framing.”

I would argue that the process of framing and fixing, manifested in the reader’s desire to know Christmas, is produced by the narrative as well as by what readers bring to their experience with it. Because Christmas remains stubbornly resistant to efforts to place him, including his own, he prompts the impulse to label and identify him all the more. As a result, readers too participate in the categorizing effort.⁴⁶ James Snead also remarks on this tendency, indicating that “like Jefferson, readers seem compelled to supply anything that

makes Christmas significant, even what is not in the text. It is as revealing as it is embarrassing to consider how many readers fall into the same racist mentality as Jefferson" (*Figures of Division*, 88). Drawing on some, but by no means all of the sources for racial typing by evoking images from popular culture, Faulkner encourages readers to fashion their own (stereotypical) definition for who Joe is.

Moreover, our own desire to follow the story, even without our knowing it, produces a coercive impulse that exercises itself over Christmas's body. Snead claims that "the town wishes to capture and confine Joe's meaning more than his actual body" (89). Though Snead separates the recoverable "meaning" of Joe as a person in Jefferson, or as a character in a novel, from his carceral, disciplined body, I would submit that they are in fact more closely connected. For by the end of the novel, the homologies between the reader and the town and between Joe's "meaning" and his body are, effectively, complete. Considered in light of what we see in Joe's death and the position of the reader in regard to it, as well as in the short span of text that follows, questions about what "coercion effects" the novel produces seem applicable to both Joe's body and to his meaning.

This is nowhere clearer than at the moment of Christmas's dying. Looking down on his bleeding and disfigured body, we are positioned with the men who stand above Christmas and for whom, as for us, Christmas's death is "apotheosized."⁴⁷ Reading of the way the "black blood seemed to rush like a released breath. It seemed to rush out of his pale body like the rush of sparks from a rising rocket," we see an image of Christmas dying that is supposed to "rise soaring into their memories forever and ever. They are not to lose it, in whatever peaceful valleys, beside whatever placid and reassuring streams of old age . . . they will contemplate old disasters and newer hopes" (743). Faulkner's language gives the impression of Christmas dying as a highly wrought, vividly striking image—an impression that, while attributed to the onlookers in the scene, clearly registers for readers as well. Despite this vividness, however—or in a way, because of it—we, along with the "they" of this passage, see Christmas's death as an aestheticized, and therefore distanced, event. It is this distancing that provides the passage with its crucial aspect of affect, or more importantly, its lack thereof. In their position vis-à-vis Christmas's death, readers experience something of its (perhaps unintended) effect of calmness or soothing; we are not shocked or viscerally affected by the violence because we are separated from it by a particularly imagistic prose. Unlike a more graphic

depiction of Christmas’s wounding, one that might inscribe visceral, nerve-stimulating (and thus threatening) shocks to the reader’s body, novelistic practices such as those Faulkner uses here inculcate in readers a sense of security and even perverse comfort in the face of a violent act.

D. A. Miller’s discussion of what he calls the “sensation novel” helps clarify my point about the “non-affect” of Faulkner’s depiction of Christmas dying. Unlike the distancing effects we see with Christmas’s death, “the sensation novel . . . produces repeated and undeniable evidence—‘on the nerves’—that we are perturbed by what we are watching. We remain unseen, of course, but not untouched: our bodies are rocked by the same ‘positive personal shocks’ as the characters’ are said to be” (*The Novel and the Police*, 162–63). Because none of the characters in Christmas’s death scene are described as experiencing “shocks,” including and especially Christmas himself (despite his mutilation), the scene produces what I see as a decidedly unphysical response on the part of both characters and readers. Even Christmas’s inexplicable silence, which envelops the entire scene, including the sound of the siren that “pass[es] out of the realm of hearing,” contributes to the passage’s abstract and unreal quality.⁴⁸ Readers may well remember “it,” the image of Christmas dying, along with the characters in the scene. Yet they will not identify with it or register it as an experience of pain. As with other events in the narrative, we as subjects “see” the novel perform the act of Joe’s murder; unlike Joe, we never feel ourselves to be those events’ violated, objectified victims.

This effect of aestheticizing and “sealing off” readers from Christmas in his death scene does much to distance them from an otherwise shattering event. It also reveals a more general aspect of Faulkner’s novel. The conclusion of the narrative and its “search” for Joe, like that of other novels that depict an exercise of social ordering, fashions a supposedly comfortable and thereby powerful place for readers. Positioned outside of several acts of violence committed on social subjects who, like Joe, are deemed “different” by the Jefferson community, readers are protected from feeling the full weight of those violations. Miller’s argument about this aspect of novels has particular relevance in light of Faulkner’s active soliciting of readers’ involvement in the plot, as well as that plot’s various acts of physical and social violence. Though we take part in the narrative’s ongoing activity of watching and detecting Joe, the tendency of *Light in August* to conceal its own panoptic power, like that of other novels, results in the readers’ comfort in feeling that they are not involved in such aggressive acts of correction and policing. More importantly, because of our

position constructed as “external” to these events, we are not vulnerable to their being visited upon us. In an extended passage, Miller describes novelistic actions that are uncomfortably close to those Faulkner’s text performs repeatedly, in particular those that extend the initially violating act of looking:

Novel reading takes for granted the existence of a space in which the reading subject remains safe from the surveillance, suspicion, reading, and rape of others. Yet this privacy is always specified as the freedom to read about characters who oversee, suspect, read, and rape one another. It is not just that, strictly private subjects, we read about violated, objectified subjects but that, in the very act of reading about them, we contribute largely to constituting them as such. We enjoy our privacy in the act of watching privacy being violated, in the act of watching that is already itself a violation of privacy. Our most intense identification with characters never blinds us to our ontological privilege over them: they will never be reading about *us*. It is built into the structure of the Novel that every reader must realize the fantasy of the liberal subject, who imagines himself free from the surveillance that he nonetheless sees operating everywhere around him. (162)

In its willingness to point to characters’ acts of watching Joe or of Joe watching himself, as well as moments such as the town’s reassurance at the thought of the overseeing state apparatus, Faulkner’s novel foregrounds the activity of looking. In so doing, it also implies that activity’s violent or suppressive nature. Readers’ acts of looking upon violated subjects, particularly upon characters who, like Joe, are defined as marginal and therefore in need of “discipline,” occur throughout the novel. Punctuating its action are suggestions and instances of beating, rape, murder, and mutilation. Joanna may not have been raped before she was killed (we cannot know), but the townspeople imagine that she was; Hightower, early in his life in Jefferson, is beaten unconscious and tied to a tree in the woods because of a perception that he is gay; the “nigger” whom Kennedy interrogates at the fire scene is whipped; Joe beats and kicks the black woman whom his friends have already assaulted sexually; he nearly beats to death the prostitute who fails to respond to his announcement that he is black. Finally, and most obviously, Joe himself is repeatedly and viciously attacked (by the white and black men he challenges on his fifteen-year journey), whipped (by McEachern), beaten (by Max), and lastly, murdered and mutilated by Percy Grimm. Though we are witness to all of these acts, we are maintained in a position of “innocence” outside of them and from

which we are, so we imagine, safe from a role in their perpetrating. As Miller suggests in the above quotation, performing the act of watching allows us the liberal fantasy that we ourselves are not violated or surveilled.

Most importantly for my consideration, Faulkner racializes this situation. Following Miller's account of the creation by novelists of the reader's "liberal subject position," it is crucial to indicate the way in which, in the case of *Light in August*, the reader of the novel is effectively coded as white in a world in which whites watch bad things happen to various "others." This is one of the determining properties and—alarming—“pleasures” of Faulkner's novel. Witness to repeated acts of brutality, all of which move ineluctably toward Joe's execution, we are made secure in the knowledge that such acts will never be performed upon us. Possessed of an all-encompassing knowledge and, additionally, of a clearly defined subject position from which to integrate the novel's disparate elements, we remain at a safe remove from them. We know or are encouraged to believe we will never be haunted by the existential anxiety that damns Joe and that contributes to his confusion and his crime. We know, furthermore, that we enjoy a freedom from the effects and violations that the novel exercises on its several victims, each of which are “outsiders” to the community of Jefferson.⁴⁹ Though Faulkner's text is critical of that community, it nevertheless places readers on the “inside” of the circle the community forms, “looking” with them at Christmas, Joanna, Hightower, and the novel's African Americans.

There is one other outsider to the community of Jefferson. In her very immunity from violence and violation, however, and in her apparent mobility and freedom, Lena Grove offers a final reflection on the novel's treatment of Joe. For in Lena's and Byron's open-ended traveling at the novel's end, we find a clear contrast to the violent “fixing” to which Christmas, throughout the novel, is subjected. Roaming the countryside and aided by people they encounter like the furniture salesman, Lena and Byron are allowed to wander freely. Even Lena's socially transgressive circumstances as a single mother traveling with a man who is not her husband do not, in the end, prohibit her mobility. Faulkner ends *Light in August*, that is, on a particularly optimistic note, as well as through the comic framing of the furniture dealer's narrative. And he does so with a scenario that, unlike the ending of Joe's narrative, clearly invites readers' identification. After disappearing from the carriage on which he and Lena have been traveling, Byron doggedly tells Lena when he rejoins her, “I done come too far to quit now’”—to which she amiably responds,

“‘Aint nobody never said for you to quit’” (774). Encouraged in this way by Lena to continue with her in her journeying, Byron, we understand, will never quit. Nor, as the salesman indicates, will Lena. “[S]he had got along all right this far, with folks taking good care of her. And so I think she had just made up her mind to travel a little further and see as much as she could’” (774).

As will, by implication, the novel’s readers. Setting off to an unknown future, Lena will continue to enjoy the kindness of strangers and Byron’s solicitude. Gesturing toward an open and potentially limitless road for his couple, Faulkner’s ending also proffers readers an enticing prospect. “‘My, my. A body does get around,’” concludes Lena serenely in the book’s last line. In the case of Lena and Byron, a body does get around. She will be free to move and, to a surprising degree, to define herself as she wishes. Readers too, especially the novel’s white-coded, liberal subjects, are manifestly able to “get around,” free of both textual operations and socializing stigmas that seek to situate, objectify, or define them. Through the book’s open-ended conclusion especially, they are encouraged to share Lena’s liberating sense of motion.

Other bodies in the novel’s world, however, particularly Christmas’s, do not get around. Despite his fifteen-year wandering and generic, mysterious elusiveness, Christmas is rigorously fixed from the start of the novel within a collective social gaze that includes all the characters he encounters and, through various textual strategies, the reader as well. Faulkner’s text indicates this frankly in a number of instances, a fact that Lena’s coda serves to emphasize. In addition, Joe evokes the mass-cultural image of “Negro” that he resembles and that is also “watched” by the anonymous spectators, readers, and consumers outside of the novel. Black bodies, mulatto bodies—suspected or distrusted bodies like Joe’s—fall, for the other characters in the novel and for its readers, under the rigid classifying systems of a racially obsessed southern society or bear the weight of expectations generated by a pervasive and stereotyping mass culture. Scrutinized, surveyed, violated, and entered—yet at the same time spectralized, imaged, de-realized, and aestheticized—Joe Christmas’s body, throughout the novel but especially and inevitably at his death, remains frighteningly still.