

Spring 5-12-2011

# Faulkner, Freud, and the Holy Family: The Portrayal of the Joseph Figure in Light in August

Richard Boland  
*Seton Hall University*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.shu.edu/dissertations>



Part of the [American Literature Commons](#), and the [Religion Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Boland, Richard, "Faulkner, Freud, and the Holy Family: The Portrayal of the Joseph Figure in Light in August" (2011). *Seton Hall University Dissertations and Theses (ETDs)*. 16.  
<http://scholarship.shu.edu/dissertations/16>

Faulkner, Freud, and the Holy Family:  
The Portrayal of the Joseph Figure in *Light in August*

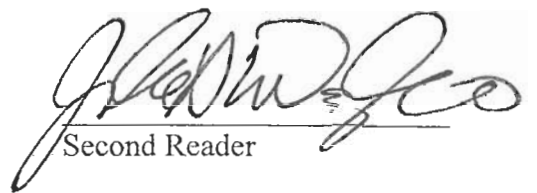
Richard Boland

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Master of Arts  
Department of English,  
Seton Hall University

5/12/2011



Thesis Mentor



Second Reader

### Abstract:

This project sets out to explore the function of the Joseph figure as well as the motif of the Holy Family in William Faulkner's *Light in August*. The motif of the Holy Family is best illustrated through a Freudian reading of the novel, ultimately framing the novel through a psychoanalytical understanding of both the family and also sexuality. The roles Joe Christmas plays in the novel is the primary focus of this paper as his shift from Joseph figure to authoritarian member of the Hebrew Bible and his shift from patriarch to powerless man allows Byron Bunch to function as a replacement Joseph reminiscent of the New Testament in the structure of the Holy Family. Faulkner's use of the motif of the Holy Family illustrates good's triumph over evil in the novel and also reinforces the New Testament's ideal concept of redemption. Lena serves as the perfect embodiment of both of these concepts as her character is able to overcome the "evil" obstacles Christmas sets before her and she is also quite literally given a second chance as mother. At the close of the novel she is no longer the single and traveling pregnant mother, but she is a mother of a child with an adopted father that cares about and for his newfound family. Rather than illustrate a dysfunctional family throughout the novel, Faulkner allows the family structure to slowly develop into the ideal and loving family through the use of the motif of the Holy Family, subsequently emphasizing the triumph of good over evil.

Rick Boland

Masters Thesis

Dr. Balkun

17 April 2011

*Faulkner, Freud, and the Holy Family: The Portrayal of the Joseph Figure in "Light in August"*

Much of the scholarship devoted to William Faulkner's *Light in August* is focused on the protagonist of the story, Joe Christmas. For decades, critics have written about Christmas as being the proverbial Christ figure within the novel. What has not been addressed, however, is the fact that the motif of the Holy Family in its entirety informs the novel. This motif has remained relatively unexplored, but it offers readers a new take on a piece of literature. The combination of Lena Grove as Mary, Christmas as Joseph, and Byron Bunch as the replacement Joseph form an interesting family dynamic, especially when read in conjunction with a psychoanalytic understanding of the family and a typological reading of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. That is, Christmas is the pivotal character that undergoes several transformations in the novel as Faulkner slowly works through various permutations of the Freudian concept of the family romance until he arrives at the ideal version of the family: Lena and Byron.

*Light in August* offers one of the most explicit connections between a character and the figure of Christ in twentieth-century American Literature. Joe Christmas, the protagonist of the novel, has been considered by many to be a quintessential Christ figure due in large part to his surname (Christmas), his initials (JC), the fact that he was found by the orphanage on Christmas Day, and also as a result of his metaphorical crucifixion at the hands of Percy Grimm. Critics have largely focused on the irony of reading Joe Christmas as a Christ figure as he is a "morally

ambiguous” character (Hauck 498). Some have argued that in depicting Christmas as morally ambiguous, Faulkner does not allow him to reach his full embodiment of the Christ figure until Percy Grimm kills him, which functions as a metaphorical crucifixion (Spenko 253). Christ was not a “morally ambiguous” figure; rather, he followed a clear-cut moral path that Christmas fails to acknowledge even exists. When read in conjunction with one another, Richard Hauck’s “The Comic Christ and the Modern Reader” and James Spenko’s “The Death of Joe Christmas and the Power of Words” reveal a telling truth about Christmas: he is essentially an incomplete Christ figure due to his lack of any clear moral and ethical standing. In fact, Christmas does *not* function only as a Christ figure; rather, he functions as a Joseph figure as well as an embodiment of the patriarchs in the Hebrew Bible until his metaphorical crucifixion.

A similar construction between a character in Faulkner’s novel and the Holy Family is explored in Irene Visser’s “Faulkner’s Medicant Madonna: The Light of *Light in August*.” Visser explores the concept of Lena Grove as Mary, arguing that as one of Faulkner’s most serene characters, Lena functions in much the same way as Mary does in the Bible. Lena is a traveling mother and she is also carrying the figurative Christ child, as illustrated by the fact that Christmas’s grandmother, Mrs. Hines, quite literally mistakes Lena’s child as being Christmas’s. This reading of the Mary figure is of key importance when developing the overarching idea of the motif of the Holy Family in the novel; however, as with the Christ motif, it is not an argument that has seen much in the way of development since its first appearance.

Sigmund Freud’s theory of the “family romance” has long served as a way to understand the family dynamic from a psychoanalytic perspective as well as playing a pivotal role in the understanding of the Holy Family in Faulkner’s *Light in August*. A Freudian reading of the family focuses on the importance of the child’s parents, as they are the source of nearly all of the

information that a child receives at a young age and during his or her developing years. Freud notes that there should be, however, a “liberation” from the parents’ authority during the course of a child’s development, as this marks the distinct juncture in time when a child assumes his or her own identity and concept of self (237). That is, there must be a point in time where the child is no longer governed by the rules and regulations of the parents but rather rules over him or her self.

A large portion of Freud’s argument hinges upon the affection shown towards the child by the parents and the affection that a child then shows towards others. He notes that:

There are only too many occasions on which a child is slighted, or at least *feels* he has been slighted, on which he feels he is not receiving the whole of his parents’ love, and most of all, on which he feels regrets at having to share it with brothers and sisters. His sense that his own affection is not being fully reciprocated then finds a vent in the idea, often consciously recollected later from early childhood, of being a step-child or an adopted child. (237-8) A child believes that a full reciprocation of love is needed in order to feel completely accepted by his or her family. In the case of Joe Christmas, this reciprocation was never present. The closest thing Christmas has to parents are the nutritionist at the orphanage, Ms. Atkins, the orphanage’s matron, and the McEacherns. However, none of these characters shows any sort of love for Christmas and, as a result, he “is far more inclined to feel hostile impulses towards his father than his mother and has a far more intense desire to get free from *him* rather than from *her*” (Freud 238). This desire is clearly illustrated in Faulkner’s *Light in August* as Christmas exacts revenge upon Mr. McEachern for the years of religious punishments he inflicts upon him, while Christmas’

feelings towards Mrs. McEachern are ambivalent at best as illustrated through his lack of interaction with and also his lack of hatred towards her.

Sexuality is another component of Freud's "family romance," as he asserts that an understanding of sexuality is imparted to a child through his or her parents. Christmas lacks any true "parental" figure, and subsequently lacks any true understanding of sexuality. Freud writes that:

When presently the child comes to know the difference in the parts played by fathers and mothers in their sexual relations, and realizes that '*pater semper incertus esti*' while the mother is '*certissima*'<sup>1</sup>, the family romance undergoes a curious curtailment: it contents itself with exalting the child's father, but no longer casts any doubts on his maternal origin, which is regarded as something unalterable. This second (sexual) stage of family romance is actuated by another motive as well, which is absent in the first (asexual) stage. The child, having learnt about sexual process [vis-à-vis parents], tends to picture to himself erotic situations and relations. (239)

Freud's assertion regarding the exaltation of the father is of particular interest in relation to *Light in August*, since Christmas never exalts a man other than himself at any point in the novel, which is a result of the fact that he lacks any male paternal figure.

The mother's role is also of great importance in any psychoanalytical reading of a text, and Nancy Chodorow argues this in *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. Chodorow's understanding of the role of the mother is a fusion of both Freudian and Lacanian understandings of psychological development, as she posits that "During

---

<sup>1</sup> [There is an old legal tag: "paternity is always uncertain, maternity is most certain"] (Freud 239).



the early months, the child comes gradually to perceive the mother as separate and as ‘not-me’” (67), which is due to physical maturation as well as “repeated experiences of the mother’s departure” (67). When these two instances are fused together, the “beginning perception of its mother as separate, in conjunction with the infant’s inner experience of continuity in the midst of changing instances and events, forms the basis for its experience of a self” (67). While similar to Freud’s understanding, this slightly more nuanced view of a child’s development is evident in *Light in August*, specifically in Christmas’s lack of parental figures. Because Christmas lacks parental figures, he is unable to develop his own separate identity through interaction with his mother and/or father. Chodorow, Freud, and Lacan all emphasize the importance of the mirror-stage in a child’s development of his or her own identity through interacting with his or her parents; however, Christmas is unable to perceive his own identity through interactions with a parental figure and therefore he lacks “complete” development. The mirror-stage hinges upon the concept that a child not only recognizes his or her own face in a mirror, but is also able to differentiate between his or her face and his or her parents’ faces (Lacan 1123). When the mirror-stage is not successfully maneuvered, children lack an understanding of the personal boundaries established through interaction with his or her parents and are more likely to develop social problems.

Chodorow goes on to explain the “importance” of the nuclear family in relation to a child’s development, arguing that “a father plays a central role in the differentiation for the child. Because he is so involved with the child’s mother, his role in the child’s later defensive identifications – identification with his power or closeness to the child’s mother, for instance – is also crucial... The father also enables more firm differentiation of objects” (71). That is, the father allows the child to develop a defense mechanism that is directed towards protecting its

mother. Faulkner's Christmas is never allowed to develop this defense mechanism, and he subsequently does not have a defensive reaction towards his maternal figures, much less his sexual partners. Rather, he has a violent response to them.

The typical Southern family structure in Faulkner's time was that of the patriarchal nuclear family (Vance 427). While the family structure was traditionally patriarchal, it should be noted that the primary means of advancing a given family's social status was through allowing one's daughter to "marry up" in social standing, though it was rather unlikely (Vance 427). There was also an emphasis on kinship. The southern perception of kinship focuses on family ties, as illustrated by Rupert Vance's "Regional Family Patterns: The Southern Family." Vance writes, "... family was the core of Southern society; within its bounds everything worthwhile took place" (426). He goes on to explain that there was a great emphasis put on maintaining one's family ties, as not only did it create a great sense of pride but it also allowed for slight social mobility if one family member was able to obtain a job of higher status (Vance 426). The emphasis placed on familial ties and common ancestry resounds throughout *Light in August*, particularly when considering the way that the Holy Family functions in the novel. The lack of kinship as delineated by bloodlines allows the characters involved in the Holy Family motif to develop their own ethical and moral understanding. That is, each character is able to develop a unique set of ethical values due to the fact that they are not overtly influenced by one another. While Lena is "missing" for a large portion of the text, her ideological and ethical views remain ingrained in the context of the novel as Byron embodies them throughout the duration of Faulkner's work.

W.J. Cash's classic study of southern life, *The Mind of the South*, sheds light upon the social stigmas of the south, several of which Faulkner alludes to in *Light in August*. Cash

classifies the “basic Southerner” as “an exceedingly simple fellow – a backcountry pioneer farmer or the immediate descendant of such a farmer. A man, indeed, who, because of one, two, or more generations in the backcountry was an even more uncomplex sort than the original immigrants from Europe. In some respects, perhaps as simple a type as Western civilization has produced in modern times” (29). Cash also alludes to the importance the South places on genealogy: “From tracing themselves to the Roll of Battle Abbey, to Scotch and Irish kings, and to German emperors, many Southerners turned ultimately, in all seriousness and complete faith, to carrying their line back to such mythical personages as Brutus, the eponymous founder of Britain, and Scotia...” (124-5). Cash illustrates the importance placed on the “prevalence of standards of honor” (125) in the South, which are concepts that Faulkner deals with at length in *Light in August*. This is also a concept that coincides with Freud’s “family romance,” as the southern concern with being of nobility parallels the desire to be of higher birth and subsequently higher social standing.

These ideas about family, kinship, and status can be seen in the novel when examining Lena Grove. Lena is of the utmost importance to the development of the motif of the Holy Family in the novel. She is arguably the most pure and innocent character in *Light in August*, as her physical description and her biblical connotations suggest; as such, it is fitting that she represents Mary. Lena’s connection to the biblical Mary begins with the fact that Lena is also a traveling mother. She begins her journey on foot, only to be helped by several people along the way. This in and of itself is a striking parallel with Mary, as she also relies very heavily upon the kindness of others to reach her final destination. It is also important to note that no other female character in the novel can function in quite the same way as Lena since they are all “tainted” in some way: Bobbie Allen is a prostitute, Joanna Burden is focused solely on sexual relationships,

Ms. Atkins is sexually active while single, and Mrs. McEachern plays an evil feminine compliment to Mr. McEachern. Irene Visser argues that “while Joe Christmas is tragically scarred by the traumatic experiences of his formative years, Lena is completely – and mysteriously – free from childhood traumas” (39). This, however, is not completely accurate. While on the surface Lena may appear trauma free, she is actually far from it. Few critics have examined who the father of Lena’s child is; most simply assume it is Lucas Burch, also known as Joe Brown. This assumption overlooks one key element that is alluded to at the very beginning of the novel. Lucas *does not* impregnate Lena; rather, her own father impregnates her. Faulkner has illustrated this in interviews, such as the one conducted by *The Heavenly Herald*, the church bulletin published by St. Peter’s, the parish Faulkner joined before his death. This brief excerpt from the interview points to such a conclusion:

HH: You write: “He [McKinley, Lena’s brother] called her a whore. He accused the right man (young bachelors, or sawdust Casanovas anyway, were even fewer in number than families) but she would not admit it, though the man had departed six months ago.”

WF: Doesn’t say that McKinley “identified” the “father,” does it? Just “accused the right man,” correct? That could mean a lot of things ... You should look closer at these three sentences at the top of page 3: “For almost half of every year the sister-in-law was either lying or recovering. During this time Lena did all the housework and took care of the other children. Later she told herself, ‘I reckon that’s why I got one so quick myself.’”

HH: [Gasp] Are you suggesting Lena was the victim of incest?

WF: I'm surprised literary analysts haven't devoted more energy to [it] ... Incest was certainly a dark secret in many Southern towns back in the 1930s.  
(Bevis 220)

The fact that Lena was a victim of incest quite literally puts her into the role of Mary, as the patriarchal father figure of her family in fact impregnated her just as Mary was impregnated by *the* patriarchal figure of Christianity.

Visser argues that Lena functions as a representative for Mary in the novel since she is limited to acts of "good," as her "holiness": "... resides in her almost instinctive spirituality; a natural serenity and innate 'holiness' is in sharp contrast to the world of violence of Faulkner's South in *Light in August*" (Visser 40). That is, Visser's description of Lena further casts the "holy" light upon her character. Even though she is single and pregnant, Lena does not live her life as a typical shamed Southern woman would; rather, she embraces the role and seeks to live off others' kindness. Lena's "holiness" is reinforced by her freedom from sin. While she is a victim of incest, at no point in the novel does she sin through her own free will. She in fact strives throughout the novel to avoid sin and from being associated with sin at all costs. She is also completely willing to accept her role as single woman, not seeking to deceive anyone regarding her status as a pregnant unmarried woman, which was frowned upon in the south at that time. Her lack of any "evil" or negative traits suggests that she functions not only in the role of Mary but also as the archetypal mother figure. Due to the fact that Lena is a force for good and is inextricably pure of heart, she never comes into direct contact with Joe Christmas. She is the only true embodiment of "good" in the novel, and as such she is able to transcend Christmas's moral and ethical ambiguities and establish her own concrete and cohesive moral and ethical values, such as respect for one's elders, an emphasis on pacifism, and an explicit

understanding of sexuality as an act of sin. It is important to note that Lena both opens and closes the novel, subsequently creating a framework for Christmas to work within. By framing the novel with acts of good and generosity, such as the Armstids' picking up Lena while she is traveling and giving her room and board, and also at the end of the novel when the unnamed furniture dealer picks up Byron, Lena, and her child, Faulkner allows both Lena's kindness – as well as the kindness she inspires from others – to shine through. Mr. and Mrs. Armstid's actions toward Lena are among the most generous of the novel, and Lena's reaction to these actions does not go unnoticed. Mr. Armstid ultimately gives her a meal and a place to stay for the night, but it is Lena's conversation with Mrs. Armstid that frames the novel with Lena's kind actions. Even after traveling by foot while pregnant, Lena attempts to help around the house. While it seems an inconsequential aspect of everyday life, it is important to realize that Lena is offering this service while pregnant. Ultimately her offer of kindness presents the framework within which her character will become an agent of good. In the final scene of the novel, Lena is presented with another act of good will as a furniture salesman picks up her, Byron, and her child. It is important to note that the furniture salesman immediately realizes that the child is not Byron's, which reinforces the Freudian concept of the adopted father and subsequently reiterates the motif of the Holy Family within the novel. These acts of kindness not only frame her as Mary but also reinforce her purity as she spurns Byron's advances.

Lena's primary purpose in the novel is to act as an agent of good, and subsequently of God. Faulkner depicts Lena as a hardworking and domesticated woman, therefore putting her into the structure of the family referred to by both Cash and Vance. This depiction fuses the concepts of the Holy Family and the family romance, as she is at once functioning as Mary and also as a traditional maternal figure. Lena is also portrayed as one of the more moldable

characters of the novel, as her character develops very slowly throughout the text. This is due in large part to the fact that, much like Mary in the bible, Lena is only physically present in a limited number of sections in the novel. That is, just as Mary frames Christ's life, *Light in August* is framed by Lena, her caring actions, and the caring actions of others. This illustrates her stability within the social system as well as her constant biblical connection. The stability of her character further allows her play as a foil for Joe Christmas's evil character, as she does not undergo the same moral and ethical transformations that Christmas does. Her character maintains a religious path, whereas all other characters diverge from that path at one point or another in the novel, including the overtly religious characters of Reverend Hightower and Byron Bunch.

Lena's role as Mary figure reaches its apex when her child is born. The parallels between the birth of her figurative Christ child and the actual Christ child are clearly present as the situations and locations are nearly exact parallels for one another. As illustrated, Lena is the traveling mother; however, she stops her travels to find Joe Brown (whom she knows as Lucas Burch) and to give birth. Her child is born in the dilapidated cabin that Christmas and Brown once occupied together, which is symbolic of the manger in Bethlehem. The parallel between the two locales is furthered when considering that there was a stable directly next to the cabin where Byron housed his mule and where Christmas would sleep some nights to avoid the scent of women. Additionally, the child is delivered without a doctor being present which further aligns the two women.

Faulkner makes an oblique reference to Lena's involvement within the motif of the Holy Family rather early in the novel. While talking to Mr. and Mrs. Armstid, Lena says, "I reckon a family ought to all be together when a chap comes. Specially the first one. I reckon the Lord

will see to that” (Faulkner 21). This direct reference to the family structure, particularly when applied to her role within the Holy Family, clearly has religious implications within the novel. First, the Holy Family itself is alluded to, as she makes mention of the importance placed on the nuclear structure (or in her case the complete lack thereof) of the family. Additionally, it focuses on the importance of the first (and in this case, only) child, subsequently paralleling the Christ child. Lastly, this quote illustrates that she is fully aware of her own position within society as a single and pregnant woman; moreover, she is aware of the stigma associated with that position. No one believes that she will find Lucas Burch, and in fact she doesn’t. She finds the “reborn” Burch, who has taken on the identity of Joe Brown. Faulkner’s commentary on the nuclear family mirrors that of Cash, Chodorow, and Freud as there is a great emphasis placed on the presence of the father figure. The role of the patriarchal father figure is two-fold in *Light in August* as Joe Christmas takes on the role of a patriarchal figure in the Hebrew Bible (albeit not in direct relation to Lena) and Byron Bunch takes on the role of the fatherly Joseph figure of the New Testament.

In fact, Joe Christmas has long been analyzed as a Christ figure due in large part to the explicit connection to Christ through his surname, Christmas, and his initials, JC. Additionally, Christmas was found on the doorstep of the orphanage on Christmas day, hence his name. Another rather explicit link Christmas shares with Christ is his physical complexion. Christ would not have been the Caucasian man that he is largely considered to have been, but rather he would have been of a slightly darker complexion, similar to that of a light skinned biracial man like Christmas.

Christmas’s mixed race categorizes him as Other in the novel, and subsequently removes him from any possible positive interaction with other characters. As he is limited to explicitly



negative interactions with other characters in the novel, his character is portrayed as one that is far more in line with the traditional “black and white” ethics of the Hebrew Bible. What Joe Gibbs has not taken into consideration in his article “Joe Christmas: Faulkner’s Savage Innocent,” however, is the way in which Christmas’s physical appearance mirrors that of Christ. That is, the fact that the two of them have a strikingly similar skin tone and overall complexion has largely gone unnoticed by scholars. Gibbs’s article highlights the importance of the racial dimensions of the novel. That is, the way in which Christmas’s mixed race either allows, or perhaps more importantly, does not allow him to make conscious choices in the same way that a white man would, since his options are severely limited by his racial complexion. Gibbs illustrates his point rather succinctly when he states that “... Christmas, who is both white and black and hence neither, since each condition contradicts but [also] negates the other; which makes him a negative, a response, incomplete and uncertain, to the world around him; makes him a hole in the center of the whole he can escape only by death” (331). Christmas is an open or empty space within the social construction of perceived race. This forces him to make explicitly negative and violent choices.

While many scholars focus on Christmas’s surname, few acknowledge his given name: Joseph. This is a clear connection to the biblical Joseph, especially when considering that Christmas works in a wood mill and Joseph was supposed to be a carpenter. As illustrated, Christmas begins the novel functioning as a Joseph figure. This is seen when considering that Christmas is also preparing wood in a mill, which is the same profession of a less crassly metaphorical carpenter played by Byron Bunch. Christmas’s social standing, however, is also of key importance as he is not only employed at a mill, but he is also a bootlegger. While the first trait mentioned (his employment at the mill) aligns him with Joseph, his subsequent shift to

patriarch becomes more apparent when considering that he skirts the law and illegally sells alcohol. The patriarchs of the Hebrew Bible were men who frequently and openly disobeyed certain social “suggestions,” such as the way to punish women for infidelity and drinking in excess, and Christmas’s subsequent actions further align him with them.

As discussed, the motif of the Holy Family within the novel hinges upon the understanding of the Mary, Joseph, and Christ figures. As illustrated, Lena exhibits characteristics and attributes traditionally associated with the Virgin Mary. The Joseph figure, however, is better understood when viewing the character of Joe Christmas not as Christ figure but rather as a Joseph figure; more specifically, Christmas is a Joseph figure that eventually morphs into a character that coincides with the traditional patriarch of the Hebrew Bible. At the beginning of the novel, Christmas is portrayed as a figure attuned to the traditional values of the New Testament; that is, his initial portrayal mirrors that of a man more concerned with family values and is also quite literally aligned with Joseph through his occupation as wood worker. However, as the novel progresses, he becomes more like a figure of the Hebrew Bible through the way his actions and beliefs parallel those of the aforementioned patriarchs, specifically Judah, as he functions as an avenging angel bringing justice to those deserving of it.

Michael S. Berger observes that sexuality in the Hebrew Bible was drawn from “the first couple eat[ing] from forbidden fruit, with the consequence that they sense, for the first time sexual shame (Gen. 3:7). Painful childbirth, female sexual passion, and male domination of the female are all presented as punishment for the woman’s submission to temptation and her insistence that her husband join her in the sin” (2). In addition, Ester Fuchs notes that the patriarchy of the Hebrew Bible “legislates and authorizes the political supremacy of men over women” (7), which is a concept clearly mirrored by Christmas in the novel. Because Christmas

lacks any true identity, he uses force in order to have a given amount of power. The force that Christmas utilizes is better understood as a Marxist reification of power, since his position in society yields him no *physical* power; however, his positions as both patriarch and Joseph figure do. In fact, it is the force and power he slowly exerts over others that marks the shift from gentle Joseph to an aggressive and violent patriarch.

The first instance of Christmas asserting violence and power in the novel does not occur until he has an altercation with Joe Brown, who had recently discovered that Christmas was having an affair with Joanna Burden and was prepared to use that information as blackmail. Brown was intoxicated and Christmas “found [Brown’s] collar and hauled him out from beneath the cot and raised Brown’s head and began to strike him with his flat hand, short, vicious, and hard, until Brown ceased laughing” (Faulkner 103). While this is not an instance of violence directed toward a woman, it does pertain to a woman. Through his actions, Christmas asserts himself not as a kind and moral Joseph figure, but rather as a retaliatory, hostile, and violent patriarch. This is a concept that is furthered when analyzing Christmas’s relationship with Joanna Burden.

The fact that Christmas is of mixed race leads to a lack of perceived identity on Christmas’s part. He cannot identify himself as white, nor can he identify himself as black, and subsequently he cannot identify himself as anything at all. This is clearly problematic for Christmas, as his perceived identity is that of an Italian American rather than as biracial. Joe Brown repeatedly calls Christmas a “yellowbellied wop” (Faulkner 275) and refuses to believe that Christmas is part African American. In fact, all characters within the novel (including Christmas himself for quite some time) refuse to believe Christmas when he tells them that he is of African American descent. Christmas tells Bobbie Allen that “[he] got some nigger blood in

[him],” and she proceeds to respond by saying “You’re lying ... I don’t believe it” (Faulkner 196-7). People in the novel do not want to accept his actual racial makeup as this would mean they are confronted with the realization that they have to accept their own racial bigotry. The complete lack of identity leads to his relative position of powerlessness, as the two are inextricably linked. Christmas actually uses his lack of a definite racial identity as a means of asserting power over women as he occasionally tells prostitutes that he is African American after they have sex in an attempt to avoid having to pay them. While it rarely works, Christmas still uses his ambiguous racial identity to his advantage, attempting to reify power through his perceived racial identity since if he is perceived as black women will assume he does not have the ability to pay them, and they may also be so disgusted that they have just had sex with a black man that they will throw him out. This aligns Christmas with the patriarchs as he is forcing people to see unpleasant sides of themselves and others (in this case race and bigotry) and make difficult decisions. His sexual actions further align him with the patriarchs as he is quite literally paralleling the sexual desires and afflictions of the patriarch Joseph and unnamed patriarch in the Book of Revelation. The Testament of Joseph explicitly deals with insatiable sexual desire and the social problems such desire leads to (violence, rivalry, and greed), while the Book of Revelation focuses on the concept of sex as a “violent” sin.

The Testament of Judah focuses on concepts such as courage, monetary greed, and sexuality, and Christmas embodies all three of these traits (albeit in a negative and “evil” way) at some point within the novel. The patriarchs put an emphasis on greed, sexuality, lust, anger, and lying. This is seen when examining the Testament of Rubin, which is concerned with lust and sexuality and also the Testament of Judah which pertains to greed, anger, and lying. A direct link between Christmas and the patriarchs is seen in the Testament of Judah as it is written that

“And now, I command you, my children, not to love money, nor to gaze upon the beauty of women; because for the sake of money and beauty I was led astray” (17:1). This is a direct parallel to Christmas as he *did* love money and *was* tempted by women, both of which lead him to sin. When read in conjunction with both Freud’s “family romances” and Faulkner’s *Light in August*, the connection between Judah and Christmas is impossible to ignore. Freud posits that children long to be members of a royal family, and Judah was told he would become a king, or the ultimate patriarchal figure in any given society. Judah alludes to the fact that he had sex with Tamar after drinking wine, and Tamar was married to another man. This essentially aligns her with property according to the patriarchal understanding of marriage. In a similar fashion, Christmas has sex with women who “belong” to other men. Until he becomes involved in a sexual relationship with Joanna Burden, all of his sexual encounters are with women who are prostitutes or women who are quite literally the “property” of another man.

Christmas has an aversion to all Christian religions, and his violent reaction to others’ authority further places him in the realm of the patriarchs. It is important to note that the patriarchal aversion mentioned is to *authority*, not to religion. Christmas’s aversion, however, is to the authority derived *from* religion, and is therefore directed towards religion. Christmas’s aversion to religion begins early on in the novel when he is adopted by the McEacherns. Specifically, it begins when Simon McEachern forces him to learn the Presbyterian catechism. McEachern has a particularly violent side to him, which is illustrated when Christmas fails to memorize the catechism:

Then the boy stood, his trousers collapsed about his feet, his legs revealed beneath his shirt. He stood, slight and erect. When the strap fell he did not flinch, no quiver passed over his face. He was looking straight ahead, with a rapt, calm

expression like a monk in a picture. McEachern began to strike methodically, with slow and deliberate force, still without heat or anger. It would have been hard to say which face was more rapt, more calm, more convinced.

He struck ten times, then he stopped. (Faulkner 151-2)

This is in essence a “scourging” that Christmas endures which serves to illustrate the origin of his distrust of religion and also of men claiming to be “holy.” The biblical connotation of the name “Simon” is of great importance when considering Christmas to be a patriarchal figure, since the given name “Simon” quite literally means to hear the word of God. While McEachern hears the word of God, he fails to actually heed it, and he is subsequently placed on similar ethical and moral grounds as Christmas. That is, he has a jaded ethical and moral understanding of his actions and the actions of others.

McEachern’s religious zealotry is what fuels Christmas’s distrust of and anger towards religion. McEachern makes a point of telling the matron at the orphanage that Christmas will “grow up to fear God and abhor idleness and vanity despite his origin” (Faulkner 143). It is clear from the first time the reader encounters McEachern that the two opposing masculine forces (McEachern and Christmas) will be polar opposites on the religious spectrum, since one has lived his life obeying commands while the other has never truly been aware of God’s presence, much less attempted to find Him. Christmas even alludes to his “religious hatred” (Faulkner 184) when discussing that he only saw women at church on Sunday, which was one of the reasons he disliked going to church. That is, to Christmas, church had overtly sexual connotations that he did not know how to respond to due to the fact that McEachern failed to function as a fatherly figure during Christmas’s development. McEachern’s “fathering” begins to develop the idea of the Holy Family even further, since he is given the role of the father within

the novel's family romance. As illustrated, this motif assigns a very specific role to the father, most notably as a sexual teacher through habitual reinforcement of gestures and signifiers toward the mother. Christmas, however, did not have a chance to learn from these opportunities specifically because McEachern did not engage in sexual practices. That is to say, McEachern's primary fault within the Freudian concept of the "family romance" is that he did not "teach" Christmas how to react when he encounters sexuality, and therefore he reacts violently. Not only does this align McEachern within the Freudian concept of the family but it also subsequently aligns Christmas with the patriarchy of the Hebrew Bible, as sexuality outside of procreation was considered to be taboo. While virginity was prized, sexuality as a whole was considered foreign and strange (Blumenthal 20). This is especially important considering that all of the women Christmas encounters are *not* virgins; they are, in fact, an embodiment of the polar opposite of virginity. They are not virginal nor are they pure, but rather they represent the only type of women that Christmas is able to have a relationship with until he meets Joanna Burden.

Christmas's repeated violent encounters with others serve to reinforce his role as a patriarchal figure, and his reaction to sexuality effectively asserts his authority over women. His first encounter with sexuality occurs at a very young age when he is in the orphanage. Christmas was five years old when he hid in the dietician's room after eating toothpaste, only to find the dietician and a man named Charlie having sex in her room. This first encounter frames the entirety of his intimate encounters due in large part to the verbal exchange between the two adults in the room where Christmas is hiding. The dietician is saying "No! No! Not here. Not now. They'll catch us. Somebody will – No, Charley. Please! ... No, Charley! Charley, please! Please, Charley! ... I'm scared! Hurry! Hurry!" (Faulkner 121). Clearly Ms. Atkins is less than a willing participant in the engagement, and even at a young age Christmas is aware of this.

Christmas proceeds to vomit, subsequently exposing his hiding place behind the curtain. She then punishes Christmas for witnessing her sins; however, “it never occurred to [the dietician] that he believed that he was the one who had been taken in sin” (Faulkner 123). That is, Christmas believed he was in the wrong for witnessing a sexual act, which creates a reference point for all future sexual encounters he will have. It should be noted that even at this young age, Christmas knows he has witnessed something that is wrong, or something that is perceived as being a sin. This fact alludes to the connection between Christmas and Joseph, as both men become unwitting participants in dramas in which they are merely viewers rather than actors. That is, neither man is able to assert control in this instance. This is a very scarring event for Christmas, and truly shapes his understanding (or lack thereof) of sexuality. As Freud notes there is an “infantile amnesia” in which one is shaped by traumatic events from childhood; the child is not able to recall such events as the mind blocks them out (“Three Essays on Sexuality” 174). So while Christmas is heavily influenced by the events that take place in the room, he does not remember, much less understand, why he has reacted the way he has. Notably, Christmas’s childhood sexual inhibitions were stunted, but the reader is not aware of any oral or phallic stage in his sexual development. Rather, the reader is only confronted with the traditional Oedipal complex, as Christmas has developed a deeply seeded hate and contempt for his stepfather. Specifically, Christmas has a delayed Oedipal complex, since it does not mature during the usual timeframe of two and a half to six years of age (Rashkow 45). Rather, Christmas develops this complex between fourteen and seventeen years of age when he finally discovers sexuality and, more specifically, the sex’s respective roles in procreation.

Christmas’s hatred for his stepfather can further be viewed as Freudian in the way in which he invokes the role of the father in the family romance. Due to the fact that McEachern is



not a complete father figure and is quite literally an “adopted father,” he becomes a literal embodiment of the Freudian concept of the displaced father (“Family Romance” 237). This idea centers on the concept that the child does not receive enough attention from his family members, and the child then assumes he or she is adopted. Christmas, however, quite literally *is* adopted and therefore he cannot be separated from this instance of the family romance.

The role the adoptive father plays is an important one in considering the way the Holy Family motif is constructed within the novel as a whole. Joseph quite literally *is* an adoptive father, and subsequently has no biological ties to the child Jesus he ultimately fathers. A similar parallel is seen between McEachern and Christmas, as McEachern does not have biological ties to Christmas and yet he is the driving formative force that shapes the man Christmas becomes. This again returns to the southern concept of kinship, as the two men do not share a common background, much less a common ancestor. This ultimately allows Christmas to become further displaced from the family structure he is placed in as there is not a literal kinship tie between the two men.

Christmas and McEachern’s dysfunctional family dynamic reaches its apex when McEachern confronts Christmas at the barn while at a dance with Bobbie Allen. In chapter nineteen, McEachern discovers that Christmas has been sneaking out and finds Christmas and Bobbie at a dance together. McEachern immediately calls out to Bobbie, “Away, Jezebel! ... Away, Harlot!” (Faulkner 204). The name Jezebel, which McEachern gives to Bobbie, has profound significance for a biblical reading of the novel. Jezebel is mentioned in the Book of Revelation, and it is said that she is a false prophetess who teaches and seduces men (2:20-23). This name serves several purposes, as it emphasizes McEachern’s religious zealotry and also illustrates the fact that Bobbie is a sexual teacher. Additionally in this scene, Christmas murders

his stepfather, subsequently asserting himself as the patriarch of the family as he punishes McEachern for his sins. Not only is the biblical connection significant but the comparison of the false prophetess Jezebel and the prostitute Bobbie Allen also allows for a deeper character analysis. The concept of Bobbie Allen as sexual teacher makes Christmas's naïveté more apparent and also further illustrates McEachern's shortcomings as a fatherly figure. Faulkner writes that Christmas "... will have to remember. To let her show me what to do and how to do it and when. To not let her find out that I don't know, that I will have to find out from her" (186). This clearly shows that Christmas himself considers Bobbie to be a sexual teacher, which subsequently further removes McEachern from the fatherly role. His removal from this role is due to the fact that he cannot and did not function as sexual educator.

Bobbie essentially acts as a prophetess and Christmas's relationship with her marks the beginning of his transition from Joseph figure to patriarch. Faulkner makes a reference to the potential for this relationship to destroy Christmas when he writes, "They stood there, two shadows facing one another. More than a year later, remembering that night, he said, suddenly knowing *It was like she was waiting for me to hit her*" (Faulkner 187). This quote serves to illustrate the prophetic nature of their first meeting since after Christmas kills McEachern he *does* attempt to hit her; she was simply waiting for the opportunity to arise to exploit Christmas and take his money. After Christmas sees Bobbie for the first time, McEachern tells him, "I'll have you remember that place. There are places in this world where a man may go but a boy, a youth of your age, may not. That is one of them. Maybe you should never have gone there. But you must see such so you will know what to avoid and shun" (Faulkner 175). McEachern is well aware of the corruption surrounding Max and Mame's restaurant where Bobbie works, and he also understands that the restaurant is a front for a prostitution ring. His warning ultimately goes

unheeded as Christmas returns to the diner in order to talk to Bobbie alone. She acts as both a prophetess and agent of destruction in a far more apparent way as well, since her actions bring Christmas into the realm of the white man, which ultimately further alienates and angers him. After trying to pay for a cup of coffee at the diner, Joe Christmas is told to “go back to the farm” and that “Maybe [he] can make a girl there without a nickel” (Faulkner 183). This comment ultimately leads to the foundation of Christmas and Bobbie’s relationship, resulting in his downfall. Her explicit sexuality clearly aligns her with Jezebel, and she is also a very manipulative woman who gets Christmas to reflect on the fact that “[he] committed murder for her. [He] even stole for her” (Faulkner 217). That Christmas, who at this point of the novel has entered his transformation from Joseph figure to patriarch, is able to reflect on his sinful actions for her benefit suggests that he has begun the transformation through his violence directed toward his adopted family.

The violence Christmas directs toward his adopted family reaches its apex when Christmas murders McEachern. According to the narrator, Christmas looked at McEachern’s face and saw that “it was the face of Satan, which he knew well. And when, staring at the face, he walked steadily toward it with his hand still raised, very likely he walked toward it in the furious and dreamlike exaltation of a martyr who had already been absolved, into the descending chair which Joe swung at his head, and into nothingness” (Faulkner 205). This instance of violence pushes Christmas beyond the boundaries of patriarchy and into the realm of lawless man. This instance of violence illustrates the way Christmas reacts to the disrespect McEachern showed to Bobbie Allen, further aligning him with the patriarchs as he is punishing McEachern for his trespasses towards both himself and also Bobbie. Christmas makes the transition from a

relatively mild-mannered potential Joseph figure to a force for justice in the novel when he sets out to play the role of active jurist and becomes the embodiment of justice itself.

His **second** sexual encounter is with a prostitute whom he beats into submission in front of his friends. Christmas does not perceive sex to be a sin at this point in his life, which is a direct contrast to his earlier understanding of sexual activity as a sin. Faulkner writes, "... he did not even think of it as a sin until he thought of the man who would be waiting for him at home [McEachern], since to fourteen the paramount sin would be to be publicly convicted of virginity" (Faulkner 156). After this initial realization, Christmas becomes violent with her:

He was moving, because his foot touched her. Then it touched her again because he kicked her. He kicked her hard, kicking into and through a choked wail of *surprise and fear*. She began to scream, he jerking her up, clutching her by the arm, hitting at her with wide, wild blows, striking at the voice perhaps ... She scuttling, screaming. They trampled and swayed, striking at whatever hand or body touched, until they all went down in a mass, he underneath. Yet he still struggled, fighting, *weeping*. (Faulkner 156-7, emphasis added)

This encounter inverts the role he played during his first sexual encounter. Rather than being the terrified child in the corner, Christmas takes on the active role of dominator, subsequently reinforcing his position as a patriarch of the Hebrew Bible as he becomes a man seeking justice for society's shortcomings.

Rather than having sexual relations with the prostitute and becoming as low as the member of society he sets out to punish, he beats her due in large part to his natural aversion to women through his complete lack of social interaction with them. Christmas constantly seeks male and/or animal companionship to avoid the feminine. Faulkner suggests that Christmas is

slightly more than misogynistic; he, in fact, hates women. Christmas goes so far as to sleep in horse barns because "... they are not women. Even a mare horse is a kind of man" (Faulkner 109). The fact that Christmas is constantly seeking non-female companionship illustrates that he lacked any true development in his childhood, development which is fundamental to forming one's identity.

Christmas's third encounter with sexuality occurs while he is still living with the McEacherns as a seventeen-year-old boy. When he goes into the city with Mr. McEachern, he encounters Bobbie Allen, a waitress at the diner. What he does not know at the time is that Bobbie Allen is actually a prostitute. Bobbie is clearly symbolic of womanhood, which is something that Christmas quite literally has no knowledge of. Considering the Calvinist and Puritanical influences of *Light in August*, the lack of any sexual knowledge becomes more understandable as Calvinism and Puritanism consider "sexuality [to be] the chief sign of man's fallen nature" (Douglas 39). It is important to note that the McEacherns do not have children themselves, which further illustrates the lack of any sexual knowledge or desire in their household. This results in Christmas's violent confrontations with sex and sexuality, most notably when he encounters the prostitute as a teenager, and also when Bobbie Allen is menstruating. Christmas does not know what is happening, much less why.

One of the most striking parallels between religion and sexually-driven violence is seen in Christmas's relationship with Joanna Burden. While to many their relationship seems to focus on the overtly sexual, upon a deeper examination it becomes clear that there is a certain religious undertone to their relationship. While this is clear when considering Christmas to be the patriarchal figure representative of the Hebrew Bible, it becomes impossible to ignore when considering his violent reactions to Burden's combination of religion and sexuality. Burden had

been Christmas's lover for years; however, she had largely kept religion out of the discussion until he refuses her offer to go to school. Her turn towards religion is rather sudden, and is marked by the decline of their sexual relations with one another. The following excerpt is her drastic turn towards religion and her subsequent death:

'It's over now,' he thought, not yet taking up the folded paper. 'It will be like it was before now. No more talking about niggers and babies. She has come around. She has worn the other out, seen that she was getting nowhere. She sees now that what she wants, needs, is a man. She wants a man by night; what he does by daylight does not matter'. (Faulkner 273)

This serves to illustrate that Burden is about to reach menopause, and will no longer be able to be a viable sexual partner for Christmas. Because of this, she seeks children and a more intimate relationship with him through parenthood and marriage. Christmas, however, is simply interested in the physical aspect of their relationship.

Byron Bunch is the most overlooked and underappreciated character in Faulkner's *Light in August* due in large part to how small a role he plays in the novel. While his literal role in the novel is rather small, his character plays the role of Lena's complement; that is, he is the only male character in the novel that is completely "good." Just as Lena plays opposite Christmas, Byron also plays as his moral and ethical male opposite. Byron is unable to do anything but good deeds and, similarly to Lena, his good deeds go unnoticed. This allows him to develop into a truly selfless man who cares about others more than he cares about himself. Many critics have noted the religious motif in Faulkner's novel, but subsequently neglect Byron and argue that he plays a minor role at best in the formation of religious motifs. When considering the Holy Family, however, he plays a major role.

Just as Christmas is aligned with the biblical Joseph through his woodwork, Byron is aligned with Joseph in a similar manner. Byron's connection, however, is slightly more explicit due to the fact that he continues working at the mill and actually enjoys what he's doing. It is also important to note that mill jobs were notoriously difficult to come by during and immediately following the Great Depression, and the fact that Byron was able not only to keep his job but work overtime illustrates the fact that he is more than simply another worker. Byron is cast as a dependable and honest worker, which is the complete opposite of Christmas (West 9).

*Light in August* was originally copyrighted in 1932, three years after the beginning of the Great Depression. Cash notes that even prior to the beginning of the Great Depression, Southern mills were struggling. He writes that "... the masters of the Southern mills responded [to a drop in demand] in characteristic fashion – in the only fashion, indeed, that they ever had known – by proceeding to take the difference out of their employees in one way or another. Wage cuts became common ... and shut-downs grew more frequent" (344). Considering that the primary work environment in Faulkner's *Light in August* is a cutting mill, the connection Cash draws between supply, demand, and payment is very important. The mill in *Light in August* sees a very high turnaround rate in its employees, which signifies that there is little pay at the mill and also that there are higher paying jobs available. In the novel, Byron Bunch is the only person working at the mill when the reader is introduced to Lena's character.

Byron plays a unique role in the novel, as he functions as the male foil for Christmas. He plays into:

The thematic tension ... [between] the values of Doc Hines, Simon McEachern, Joanna Burden, and ultimately Joe Christmas, may be termed negative because their effects in action are misery, destruction, death; and the other, largely the

values of Lena Grove and Byron Bunch, may be termed positive because these result in happiness, constructiveness, promotion of life. (Frazier 418)

The tension in the ethical and moral values between characters is attributed to the polarity in the values that each given character embodies; however, Byron's role is of the utmost importance. He is not only playing the opposite of Christmas and the subsequent complement to Lena but he also embodies the values of the archetypal Joseph of the New Testament. The values Byron embodies are that of an upright and religious man; he goes to church every Sunday and also leads the choir. However, Byron has a noticeable attachment to Lena that ultimately causes him to question those beliefs, most notably at the novel's conclusion when he attempts to sleep in the same area as Lena but is told to sleep elsewhere.

Byron Bunch is the polar opposite of Christmas in nearly every possible way. Christmas takes pride in asserting his dominance over women through physicality, whereas Byron focuses on supporting women. Byron's humility and kind spirit ultimately allow him to function as the Joseph figure, subsequently replacing Christmas within the construct of the Holy Family. This not only allows for the motif to develop fully, but it allows the motif to work on a more elevated level within the novel as he is literally functioning as an adoptive father whereas Christmas was merely a surrogate and distant father. Of the three distinct plots within the novel, Byron and Lena's plot is by far the most reminiscent of the New Testament. Not only is the traveling mother about to give birth, but also she has found a man to play the role of adoptive father for her child.

Unlike Christmas, Byron is also an explicitly religious man. He spends his free time at the mill working overtime, and when he has finished his days at the mill, rather than proceed home he goes in search of a spiritual fix. This is attained through his relationship with Reverend



Gail Hightower, a disgraced minister with a fixation on traditional patriarchal values and a nostalgia for kinship ties. Byron's relationship with Hightower develops from a very early stage in the novel when Byron is depicted as slowly trudging towards a rural church at which Hightower is the minister. Their friendship offers a deeper insight into Byron's character, as Hightower is a man of much wisdom but very few words when not in the pulpit. Hightower is described as needing to be "a more dependable kind of man, the kind of man a minister should be instead of being born about thirty years after the only day he seemed to have ever lived in – that day when his grandfather was shot from the galloping horse" (Faulkner 62). Byron "... rides thirty miles into the country and spends Sunday leading the choir in a country church - a service which lasts all day long. Then some time around midnight he saddles the mule again and rides back to Jefferson at a steady, all night jog. And on Monday morning, in his clean overalls and shirt he will be on hand at the mill when the whistle blows" (Faulkner 48). This dedication to both Hightower and also the church further illustrates Byron's religious qualities and his subsequent connotations. The fact that Hightower's life revolves around one singular day parallels Byron's life to a great extent, as Byron's life revolves around the day that he meets Lena at the mill.

It is important to note that Byron falls in love with Lena the very moment he sees her. It is not simply a physical infatuation, but rather something deeper. That is, Byron's love for Lena functions as the only "true love" within the novel, which further casts him in the role of Joseph as this love parallels that of Joseph and Mary. They meet when Lena is looking for Lucas Burch. When she arrives at the mill, Faulkner writes "then Byron fell in love. He fell in love contrary to all the tradition of his austere and jealous country raising which demands in the object physical inviolability" (Faulkner 49). Faulkner's portrayal of a forbidden love illustrates a key concept as

Byron is in love with a pregnant, single woman, which is in direct contrast to everything his religion stands for. While some will argue that this portrays him in a non-Calvinistic light, the fact of the matter is that rather than illustrate the negative aspects of this relationship, Faulkner focuses on the positives as Lena will now have someone to care for her.

When it comes to functioning as a Joseph figure, Byron places an explicit value on the nuclear family. He goes so far as to physically fight Joe Brown after he deserts Lena for the second time in the novel, and the two fight rather lopsidedly:

Byron speaks directly behind him: 'Get up onto your feet.' It does not last long. Byron knew that it was not going to. But he did not hesitate. He just crept up until he could see the other, where he stopped, looking at the crouching and unwarned figure. 'You're bigger than me,' Byron thought. 'But I don't care. You've had every other advantage of me. And I don't care about that neither. You've done thrown away twice inside of nine months what I aint had in thirtyfive years, And now I'm going to get the hell beat out of me and I don't care about that, neither.'

(Faulkner 439)

This section illustrates Byron's true protective nature. Rather than simply depicting the fight, Faulkner allows the reader to gain further insight into what makes Byron understand his role within the relationships in the novel. That is, the reader comes to understand just what makes Byron function on a parallel level with Lena and on an opposite level as Christmas and Brown. The fight itself lasts less than two minutes and results in Byron being badly beaten, lying on the ground nearly senseless, bloodied, and broken (Faulkner 439). His pride, however, remains intact. In fact, it is his pride that allows him to function precisely as the figure that he does within the novel, since without having a certain degree of pride regarding his "catch" of Lena,

Byron stands for nothing at all. He would not have a woman or child; rather, he would simply function as another minor character in *Light in August*. The novel closes with a lasting image of Byron, Lena, and child sitting next to each other while heading deeper into Tennessee, and Lena offers a closing line that mirrors one of her opening sentiments: “My my. A body does get around. Here we aint been coming from Alabama but two months, and now it’s already Tennessee” (Faulkner 507).

The motif of the Holy Family in William Faulkner’s *Light in August* is a concept that has not received as much attention as it deserves. It involves a complex system of characters and values that are not simply apparent at the surface level, but must be examined on a deeper and more personal level. When considering this motif, it is essential to approach it through a Freudian psychoanalytical lens as it allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the family dynamic within both the novel and also within the motif itself. Freud’s concept of the family romance allows the reader to see a complex psychological development unfold as well as allowing the parental role (or lack thereof) within the novel to be explored. In Christmas’s case, he lacks any parental figure to aid in the development of his identity. This ultimately results in his lack of both a perceived self-identity as well as a lack of perceived racial identity, as he himself is unsure as to his racial makeup for a considerable portion of his life.

Using the motif of the Holy Family allows the religious aspects of *Light in August* to be understood in a more cohesive manner. That is, it allows a reading beyond simply proving Christmas to be a Christ figure. As illustrated, he is a far more dynamic character and has multiple functions (Christ, Joseph, and patriarchal figures) within the novel. Nancy Chodorow and Sigmund Freud’s understandings of sexuality and the family help to frame the importance of the Holy Family within the novel and ultimately illustrate the way in which the motif is formed

through McEachern's lack of parenting and Christmas's subsequent reactions. Additionally, considering the motif of the Holy Family allows Byron and Lena to be seen as more dynamic characters in otherwise dated readings of the novel. Faulkner's use of the motif of the Holy Family illustrates good's triumph over evil in the novel and also reinforces the New Testament's ideal concept of redemption. Lena serves as the perfect embodiment of both of these concepts as her character is able to overcome the "evil" obstacles Christmas sets before her and she is also quite literally given a second chance as mother. At the close of the novel she is no longer the single and traveling pregnant mother, but she is a mother of a child with an adopted father that cares about and for his newfound family. Rather than illustrate a dysfunctional family throughout the novel, Faulkner allows the family structure to slowly develop into the ideal and loving family through the use of the motif of the Holy Family, subsequently emphasizing the triumph of good over evil.

#### Works Cited

- Berger, Michael S. "Marriage, Sex, and Family in the Jewish Tradition: A Historical Overview." *Marriage, Sex, and Family in Judaism*. ed. Michael J. Broyde. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005. Print.
- Bevis, Charlie. "Faulkner Reveals the Real Father of Lena's Baby in *Light in August*." *Explicator* 66.4 (2008): 219-221. Web. 2 April 2011.
- Blumenthal, David R. "The Images of Women in the Hebrew Bible." *Marriage, Sex, and Family in Judaism*. ed. Michael J. Broyde. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005. Print.
- Cash, J.W. *The Mind of the South*. New York: A Knopf Press, 1941. Print.

- Chodorow, Nancy. *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. Berkeley: UP California, 1978. Print.
- Douglas, Harold J and Robert Daniel. "Faulkner's Southern Puritanism." *Religious Perspectives in Faulkner's Fiction: Yoknapatawpha and Beyond*. Ed. J Robert Barth. Notre Dame: UP Notre Dame, 1972. 1-14. Print.
- Faulkner, William. *Light in August*. New York: Vintage International, 1990. Print.
- Freud, Sigmund S. "Family Romances." *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume IX (1906-1908): Jensen's 'Gradiva' and Other Works*. Bressani, 2010. Web. 28 March 2011.
- "Three Essays on Sexuality." *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* trans. James Strachey Vol. 7, London: Hogarth Press, 1953. Print.
- Fuchs, Esther. *Sexual Politics in the Biblical Narrative: Reading the Hebrew Bible as a Woman*. Sheffield, England: Sheffield Press, 2000. Print.
- Gibb, Robert. "Joe Christmas: Faulkner's Savage Innocent." *Journal of Evolutionary Psychology* 9.3-4 (1988): 331-40. Web. 28 March 2011.
- Hauck, Richard B. "The Comic Christ and the Modern Reader." *College English*. 31.5 (1970): 498-506. Web. 25 March 2011.
- Newsom, Carol A. "Woman and the Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom: A Study of Proverbs 1-9." *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*. ed. Peggy L. Day. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989. 142-160. Print.
- Rashkow, Ilona. "Sexuality in the Hebrew Bible." *Psychology and the Bible: A New Way to Read the Scriptures, From Freud to Kohut* ed. J. Harold Ellens and Wayne G. Rollins, Vol. 1, London: Praeger Perspectives, 2004. 33-74. Print.

- Spenko, James Leo. "The Death of Joe Christmas and the Power of Words." *Twentieth Century Literature*. 28.3 (1982): 252-268. Web. 25 March 2011.
- Vance, Rupert B. "Regional Family Patterns: The Southern Family." *The American Journal of Sociology*. 53.6 (1948): 426-429. Web. 20 April 2011.
- Visser, Irene. "Faulkner's Medicant Madonna: The Light of *Light in August*." *Literature & Theology: An International Journal of Religion, Theory, and Culture*. 18.1 (2004): 38-48. Web. 25 March 2011.
- West, Ray B. Jr. and Faulkner Fox. "Faulkner's *Light in August*: A View of Tragedy." *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*. 1.1 (1960): 5-12. Web. 20 April 2011.
- Yee, Gayle A. *Poor Banished Children of Eve: Women as Evil in the Hebrew Bible*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003. Print.