Light in August

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF WILLIAM FAULKNER

William Faulkner was one of four brothers who grew up in Oxford, Mississippi. He received a thorough education at home from both his mother and his nanny, Canny Barr, and was an excellent student at school. He was named after his grandfather, a Civil War hero named William Clark Falkner. (Indeed, Faulkner was actually born "Falkner," but changed his name after a typesetter misspelled it and Faulkner decided to go along with it.) Faulkner began writing in his teens, although he at first found it difficult to get his work published. He attended the University of Mississippi but did not do well and dropped out after three semesters. He moved to New Orleans and published his first novel, *Soldier's Pay*, in 1926. He married Estelle Oldham in 1929, the same year he began writing one of his most famous works, *As I Lay Dying*. Faulkner's success as a writer was mixed during his lifetime. Although he achieved much acclaim and won the Nobel Prize in Literature, some publishers and critics were hostile to his experimental style, and he struggled to maintain financial security. He suffered from alcoholism, and died at the age of 64 following a heart attack.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Light in August is set around the same time it was written, 1932. As such, the major historical events relevant to the novel are the aftermath of slavery, the Civil War, and the First World War, as well as the Great Depression, Prohibition, and the beginning of the Jim Crow Era. All of these events are manifest in *Light in August*; for example, the prevalence of violence and moral transgression in the novel can be seen as a product of the ongoing legacy of slavery, the Civil War, and the First World War. The obsession with Joe Christmas's ambiguous racialization, meanwhile, is part of the effort to (re)assert strict racial categories, segregation, and oppression following the brief moment of hope and freedom that took place during the Reconstruction era. Indeed, the lynching of Christmas represents the staggering number of lynchings that took place during this period, as white rage and resentment against black freedom resulted in horrific violence. (Mississippi, where the novel is set, had the highest rate of lynchings of any state.)

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The two main genres into which *Light in August* falls are modernism and Southern Gothic literature. As such, it is similar to other books in the Southern Gothic tradition, such as Carson McCullers' *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, which also addresses the theme of outcasts and misfits in the South. The works of other Southern Gothic writers Truman Capote and Flannery O'Connor, meanwhile, depict grotesque violence in a similar way to *Light in August*. At the same time, Faulkner was also influenced by modernist writers based in Europe, such as James Joyce, author of *Ulysses*. *Light in August* also bears similarities to Jean Toomer's *Cane*, another novel that explores race and the small-town South through the genre of modernism.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Light in August
- **When Written:** 1932
- **Where Written:** Lafayette County, Mississippi
- **When Published:** 1932
- **Literary Period:** American Modernist Period
- **Genre:** Southern Gothic novel, American Modernist novel
- **Setting:** Jefferson, Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi (fictionalized version of Lafayette County, Mississippi)
- **Climax:** Joes Christmas kills Joanna; Grimm kills Christmas
- **Antagonist:** Joe Christmas, Mr. Hines
- **Point of View:** Third person narrator

EXTRA CREDIT

Recurring Fiction. Yoknapatawpha County, where *Light in August* is takes place, is a fictional county where Faulkner set many of his novels.

Ideological Uncertainty. *Light in August* was initially embraced by the Nazi regime, who saw it as supportive of white supremacy and rural conservatism. However, the regime then had a shift in opinion and banned the book.

PLOT SUMMARY

Lena Grove, a pregnant and unmarried young woman, is traveling barefoot from Alabama to Mississippi. On the journey she encounters two men, Winterbottom and Armistid; Armistid offers her a ride and then invites her to stay the night at his house. Lena explains that she is looking for the father of her child, Lucas Burch, who left Alabama and promised to send for her but seemingly never did. She is confident that she will find him and that the family will be reunited by the time the baby comes. Armistid's wife, Martha, takes pity on Lena and gives her the money she's been saving up from selling eggs. The next day,

Lena arrives in the town of Jefferson and sees a **house** burning in the distance.

Byron Bunch, a worker in the Jefferson planing mill, recalls when a stranger showed up and began working at the mill. The stranger seemed to come from nowhere, and had the odd name of Joe Christmas. Soon Christmas moves into a "negro cabin" on the property of the middle-aged white "spinster" Joanna Burden. Shortly after, another newcomer to Jefferson and the planing mill, Joe Brown, moves into the cabin as well. Brown starts running a business selling bootleg whisky, and people suspect Christmas is involved too.

Byron has worked at the planing mill for seven years, although his only friend in Jefferson is the disgraced minister Rev. Gail Hightower. When Lena arrives in Jefferson, she finds Byron at the planing mill, having been told he was Lucas (in reality, there was a mix-up due to the similarity of the two men's last names, Bunch and Burch). Byron falls in love with Lena, and agrees to help her find Lucas. However, they quickly realize that Lucas is actually Joe Brown, and that he's been living under this fake name.

Hightower fell from grace due to the actions of his wife, Mrs. Hightower, who had an affair with another man and ended up dying in Memphis (it is unclear whether this was murder, an accident, or suicide). Following this scandal, Hightower was pressured into resigning as a minister and leaving Jefferson. Although he resigned, he refused to leave the town, even after being violently intimidated by the KKK. Eventually everyone forgot about the scandal and left Hightower alone to lead a reclusive life.

Hightower and Byron discuss the burning house, which is Joanna's. Byron helps Lena gain lodging at Mrs. Beard's boarding house, where he also lives. It then emerges that Joanna's dead body was found in the house with the head almost completely sawed off. Her nephew in the North offers a reward of $1000 for whoever finds the murderer. At this point, Brown tells the sheriff that Christmas killed Joanna and that he once confessed to Brown that he's black (though he passes as white).

Meanwhile, Christmas is in a wild, restless mood, and keeps telling himself that he had to kill Joanna because she started praying over him. The narrative then jumps back in time to Christmas's childhood, when he was only five years old and living in an orphanage. The live-in dietician and janitor in the orphanage despised Christmas and were desperately waiting for the moment when the truth of his racial identity would be revealed. One day the janitor abducts Christmas and brings him to an orphanage for black children, but the police retrieve him and bring him back to the white orphanage.

Shortly after, Christmas is adopted by a severe, fanatically religious man named McEachern. When Christmas is 8, McEachern beats him viciously for failing to memorize his catechism. McEachern's wife Mrs. McEachern is much kinder to Christmas, secretly bringing him food and trying to protect him from her husband's punishments, but Christmas adamantly rejects her kindness.

At 17, Joe meets a young woman, Bobbie, who works as a waitress at a dingy restaurant in town (which is actually a brothel). He develops a crush on her but doesn't speak to her until a year later, when he is 18. After awkward initial reactions, the two begin dating. After they have sex for a few weeks, Christmas reveals that he has black heritage, but Bobbie doesn't believe him. Christmas steals money from Mrs. McEachern to buy Bobbie gifts. Eventually Christmas learns that Bobbie is a sex worker; at first he is horrified and slaps her, but afterward he keeps seeing her, and starts calling her his "whore." One day, Christmas and Bobbie are at a dance when McEachern shows up and starts threatening them. Christmas strikes his adoptive father with a chair, seemingly killing him.

Christmas goes home to take more money; while there he sees a worried Mrs. McEachern but does not tell her what happened to her husband, instead only laughing cruelly. He brings Bobbie the money, saying he assumed that they would now get married, but Bobbie screams that Joe is a "n____ son of a bitch." A stranger who is also in the house knocks out Christmas, and when Christmas comes to, Bobbie is gone.

Christmas spends 15 years living in different parts of the country (and in Mexico), sometimes as a black man and sometimes as white. While in Chicago and Detroit he completely integrates into black communities and tries to expel the whiteness from him, although he is not successful. He arrives in Jefferson at the age of 33, and meets Joanna after he trespasses into her house and eats food in her kitchen. Instead of being angry, Joanna welcomes him; soon after the pair begin a sexual relationship, and Christmas moves into the cabin on Joanna's property.

Joanna tells Christmas the story of her family. Her grandfather, Calvin Burden, Sr., was born in New Hampshire but ran away from home at the age of 12. He was an abolitionist who killed a man during an argument about slavery. His son, Nathaniel, inherited his father's hatred of slavery. At the age of 14 Nathaniel also ran away. He married a Mexican woman named Juana and had a son, Calvin, Jr. Both Calvins ended up being killed in Jefferson by a Confederate soldier who was a former slaveholder in an argument about black enfranchisement. The fact that both Calvins are buried in Jefferson led Nathaniel and Joanna to stay in the area despite the fact that they have never been welcome there.

Christmas and Joanna's relationship was at first passionate, but as time goes on and Joanna gets older—and, it is implied, goes through menopause—she becomes more conservative and religious. This infuriates Christmas, who does not want to marry her or have children with her. One day, when Joanna repeatedly asks Christmas to pray with her, he ends up killing

her (although this exact moment is not described in the novel, leaving it slightly ambiguous what happened).

Before long, the people of Jefferson discover that Joanna's house is on fire and find her body inside. People begin to speculate over who killed her, with many believing that it must have been a black person. After Brown gives his statement to the sheriff, a manhunt begins searching for Christmas.

Byron decides to bring Lena to live in the cabin on Joanna's property, because it is the closest thing Brown has as a home to give her. (Neither Byron nor Lena have yet been in contact with Brown, who is currently fixated on getting the reward money for catching Christmas.) Hightower warns Byron about trying to insert himself in between Lena and Brown.

A black man rushes to the sheriff and tells him that Christmas has just entered a black church in Mottstown (the next town over from Jefferson) and threatened the minister before attacking one of the congregants, fracturing his skull. The sheriff quickly goes off in pursuit of Christmas, who has by now not eaten or slept for several days.

There is an elderly couple living in Mottstown by the name of Mr. and Mrs. Hines. People in the town regard them as strange. When Mr. Hines sees Christmas being held captive by a group of men in Mottstown, he has a kind of fit, demanding that Christmas be lynched. Mrs. Hines arrives and calms her husband down. She tries to visit Christmas in jail, but only manages to catch a brief glimpse of him as he is being taken away to the Jefferson jail by the Jefferson sheriff.

The next day, Byron brings Mr. and Mrs. Hines to Hightower's house. They explain that Christmas is their grandson, the child of their daughter, Milly, and a Mexican man who Mr. Hines was convinced was black. Due to this conviction, Mr. Hines tried to get Milly to have an abortion, and after failing in that, stole the baby as soon as it was born and brought it to an orphanage. He then took a job as a janitor at the orphanage to keep an eye on the child, while telling Milly and Mrs. Hines that he was dead. (It is thus revealed here that the janitor who abducted Christmas was Mr. Hines.)

Mrs. Hines explains that she doesn't intend to stop Christmas from being punished if he truly committed the murder, but she wants him to die in a "decent," legal way, rather than being lynched. Byron asks Hightower to provide an alibi for Christmas, saying that he was with him during the night of the murder. Hightower is furious at this request and refuses.

The next morning, Lena goes into labor and Byron asks Hightower to tend to her while Byron fetches the doctor (years ago, Hightower successfully helped a local black woman give birth using information from a book). Hightower goes to the cabin and helps Lena deliver the baby. Mrs. Hines is there too and holds the baby, who she keeps calling "Joey" while calling Lena "Milly."

Byron tells the sheriff about the Lena/Brown saga and the sheriff assigns his deputy, Burford, to forcefully bring Brown to see Lena and his newborn son. Byron then rides off, intending to leave Jefferson for good. When Brown sees Lena lying in the cabin with the baby, he is shocked, and soon makes another run for it. He finds a local black man and scribbles a note to the sheriff, asking the sheriff to give the man the reward money so he can bring it to Brown.

The District Attorney, Gavin Stevens, who has been presiding over the Grand Jury in charge of Christmas's trial, tells a friend of his the story about Christmas's final hours. Christmas managed to escape jail and went to Hightower's house, probably because Mrs. Hines had told him that Hightower would save him. However, a local fanatically patriotic man named Percy Grimm found Christmas in Hightower's house and lynched him.

The penultimate chapter tells the story of Hightower's family. His grandfather was a Confederate Civil War hero who was idolized within Hightower's household, particularly by Hightower's nanny, Cinthy, who had formerly been enslaved by his grandfather. Hightower's father was the total opposite of his grandfather: he was a teetotaler abolitionist who was first a minister and then a doctor after the Civil War. Hightower has always been obsessed with the past, and particularly with his grandfather, to a point that it has actually interfered with his ability to live a normal life. The chapter ends with Hightower in a dramatic reverie in which he possibly dies.

In the final chapter, a furniture seller describes picking up a man, woman, and child, who are soon revealed to be Byron, Lena, and her baby. They are ostensibly still looking for Lucas, and catch a ride with the furniture seller, that night sleeping in his truck. During the night, the furniture seller hears Byron trying to get into the truck with Lena and being gently rejected. Byron then disappears for a bit but eventually comes back, saying he's come too far to give up now. The furniture seller comments that it doesn't seem as if Lena is actually searching for anything, but is rather just determined to stay on her endless journey.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Joe Christmas – Joe Christmas is the main character in the novel, serving as both protagonist and antagonist. Born to a mother (Milly) who had a fling with a Mexican man whom her father, Mr. Hines, suspected of being black, Christmas was taken to an orphanage by Hines on Christmas Eve (which is how he got his name). Christmas is then adopted by a cruel, fanatically religious man named McEachern and his kind wife. McEachern abusively forces Christianity on Christmas, thereby instilling a lifelong hatred of religion in him. After having a fling with a sex worker named Bobbie, who he initially believes is just

a waitress, Christmas strikes McEachern with a chair, presumably killing him, and goes on a long journey of living in different places under different racial identities. Perpetually troubled by his traumatic past and his uncertain racial heritage, Christmas never feels like he belongs anywhere. He is also distrustful and cruel to others, frequently committing acts of remorseless violence, especially against women. After moving to Jefferson, Christmas strikes up a relationship with Joanna Burden and moves into the cabin on her property. When Joanna becomes religious, Christmas brutally kills her, burns down her **house**, and once again goes on the run. However, he does not take sufficient measures to hide himself—leading some to believe that he may *want* to be found—and ends up being shot and castrated by Percy Grimm.

Lena Grove – Lena Grove is a young woman from Alabama who becomes pregnant by Lucas Burch and later has his baby. Lucas leaves her and promises to send word for her to join him, but when no message arrives, she sets off by herself. This illustrates Lena's fearless, independent, yet also somewhat naïve personality. Throughout the book, she remains adamant that she will find Lucas and that they will be together, even in the face of mounting evidence to the contrary. She also refuses the advances of Byron, despite the fact that he is a far more kind, devoted, and responsible person than Lucas. Lena ends up in a kind of purgatory, unable to let go of her quest to find Lucas, even though the narrator comments that finding him is perhaps not even her real aim.

Lucas Burch / Joe Brown – Lucas is the father of Lena's child, whom she met while he was working at the planing mill in her hometown. Lucas is fun-loving but unintelligent, selfish, cruel, and immature. He is also a heavy drinker, and after moving to Jefferson, he sells bootleg whisky with Joe Christmas (with whom he lives in the cabin on Joanna's property). He also changes his name to Joe Brown, presumably to avoid being identified as the father of Lena's child. He becomes fixated on getting the $1,000 reward offered for finding Joanna's murderer and turns Christmas in in order to do so, but ruins his chances of receiving it after again running away from Lena and his newborn baby.

Byron Bunch – Byron is a loner who lives in Jefferson and works at the planing mill. He is hard-working, kind, and responsible, though withdrawn and timid. He is the only friend of Rev. Hightower, and regularly goes to visit Hightower at his house. He falls in love with Lena and helps her to find Lucas/Brown, even though it is obvious that Brown does not want to be with Lena and will not live up to the responsibility of fatherhood. Byron proposes to Lena but is turned down, yet he remains devoted to her anyway, which could be interpreted as either a selfless or a masochistic gesture (or perhaps both).

Joanna Burden – Joanna is a middle-aged, unmarried "spinster" who lives alone in a big **house** in Jefferson. Although she was born in the same house where she still lives, she is treated as a stranger and "enemy" by the white community in the town because her family were Northern abolitionists who moved to the area during Reconstruction. Joanna begins a sexual relationship with Christmas, revealing a passionate internal life beneath her cold, placid exterior. However, over time—and, it is indicated, after she goes through menopause—Joanna turns to religion. This infuriates Christmas, who kills her by sawing her head off.

Rev. Gail Hightower – Rev. Hightower is the disgraced former minister of the main church in Jefferson. His career was ruined when it was discovered that his wife, Mrs. Hightower, had been having an affair with a man in Memphis, and ended up dead. Hightower refused to leave Jefferson, which infuriated the townspeople, and at one point he was beaten up by the KKK. After the scandal faded, Hightower led a reclusive life, barely seeing anyone except Byron. He finds a renewed sense of purpose in helping Lena to give birth and attempts to save Christmas from being lynched, but is too late. Hightower's final fate is left ambiguous, although he ends the novel lost in a kind of rapture imagining his grandfather, who was a Confederate general.

Mr. Hines / The Janitor – Mr. Hines is Milly's father and Christmas's grandfather. He is cruel, violent, and obsessively religious, and after Milly becomes pregnant he tries to get her to have an abortion because he is convinced that the baby's father, who is Mexican, is black. Once Christmas is born, he abducts him and takes him to an orphanage, telling Milly and Mrs. Hines that he is dead. He then gets a job at the orphanage as a janitor in order to spy on Christmas. Years later, when Mr. Hines hears that Christmas has committed murder, he has a mental breakdown and tries to get Christmas lynched.

Mrs. Hines – Mrs. Hines is Milly's mother and Christmas's grandmother. A sweet, loving woman, she welcomed Christmas's birth and was devasted when Mr. Hines took him away. When she finds out that Christmas has been accused of murder, she makes an unsuccessful attempt to stop him being lynched. She is also present at the birth of Lena's baby, although she enters a kind of delirium and believes Lena is Milly and that the baby is Christmas.

Bobbie – Bobbie is a sex worker who works in a brothel in the nearest town to where Christmas and the McEacherns live. Though she is significantly older than he is, Christmas develops a crush on her and, after many months of torment, strikes up a relationship with her. Their relationship comes to an abrupt end after Christmas (presumably) kills McEachern.

Mrs. Hightower – The unnamed wife of Rev. Gail Hightower is already long dead by the time the main events of the novel take place. Before she died, she acted strangely, causing a scandal in Jefferson. It eventually transpired that she was having an affair with a man in Memphis, pretending to be married to him. She ended up dead, although it is not clear if this was an accident, murder, or suicide.

Calvin Burden, Sr. – Calvin is Joanna's grandfather. Born Calvin Burrington, he changed his name because he ran away from home before he was old enough to know how to spell Burrington and found Burden easier. A passionate abolitionist, he ends up being killed by a former slaveholder (along with his grandson, Calvin Jr.) in an argument about black enfranchisement.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Nathaniel Burden – Nathaniel is Calvin Sr.'s son and Joanna's father. Like his father, he is a fervent abolitionist who runs away from home as an adolescent. He marries a Mexican woman, Juana, with whom he has three children (including Calvin, Jr.), followed by Joanna with his unnamed second wife.

McEachern – McEachern is Christmas's cruel, fanatically religious, and repressive adoptive father. Christmas ends up striking him with a chair, seemingly killing him (although this is never confirmed).

Mrs. McEachern – Mrs. McEachern is Christmas's much kinder, gentler adoptive mother. She tries (in vain) to protect Christmas from McEachern's cruel treatment, but Christmas still rejects her kindness.

Percy Grimm – Percy Grimm is a young, fanatically patriotic and militaristic man living in Jefferson. When he learns about the rumors that Christmas killed Joanna, he organizes a vigilante army and ends up lynching Christmas himself.

McKinley Grove – McKinley is Lena's much older brother. Their parents are dead, so Lena lives with McKinley. He reacts cruelly to her pregnancy, and at this point Lena leaves home to go and find Lucas on her own.

Armistid – Lena encounters Armistid on her journey from Alabama to Jefferson. Taking pity on her, he offers her a ride and a place to stay for the night.

Winterbottom – Winterbottom is with Armistid when they encounter Lena walking alone along the road.

Martha Armistid – Martha is Armistid's wife. She is rather cold, but gives Lena the money she has saved up from selling eggs.

Mrs. Beard – Mrs. Beard runs the boarding house where Byron lives.

The Sheriff – The Jefferson sheriff oversees the manhunt following the murder of Joanna.

The Dietician – The dietician is a young woman who lives and works at the orphanage where Christmas grows up.

Mame – Mame is a woman who works at the brothel with Bobbie and who also lives with her.

Max – Max owns the owner of the brothel where Bobbie works, and lives with her and Mame.

Calvin Burden, Jr. – Calvin Jr. is Joanna's half-brother. He is killed along with his grandfather (Calvin Sr.) in an argument about black enfranchisement at the age of only 20.

Juana – Juana, who is Mexican, is Nathaniel's first wife and the mother of Calvin, Jr. Joanna is named after her.

Burford – Burford is the deputy sheriff.

Milly Hines – Milly is the daughter of Mr. Hines and Mrs. Hines. She gets pregnant with Christmas when she is young, although her father steals the baby before she even has a chance to check whether or not he is alive.

Gavin Stevens – Gavin Stevens is the District Attorney in Jefferson. He oversees the Grand Jury, and gives an interpretation of Christmas's final days to a visiting friend.

Cinthy – Cinthy is the name of the (formerly) enslaved woman who helped raise Hightower, and told him stories about his grandfather, who was a Civil War hero.

Buck – The marshal in Jefferson.

Brother Bedenberry – The minister at a black church in Jefferson who is threatened by Christmas.

Roz – A congregant at a black church in Jefferson who is brutally beaten by Christmas.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

RACE, GENDER, AND TRANSGRESSION

Light in August is set in the fictional town of Jefferson, Mississippi, at the beginning of the Jim Crow era, and chronicles white people's intense anxiety about preserving white supremacy during this period of transition. Many of the characters in the novel are desperate to uphold race as a fixed and essential quality, yet other characters, like Joe Christmas—who believes he has black ancestry yet passes as white—show that race is actually an arbitrary invention. Meanwhile, the meaning of gender is also in flux during this period, and many of the characters betray a similar hysteria about changing gender roles, particularly female sexuality. Indeed, the novel shows that anxieties about racial and gender transgression are inherently intertwined, as racism is deeply rooted in fears about gender and sexuality—particularly the fear of white women having sex with black men.

The novel ultimately shows that the attempt to uphold strict gender/racial roles and categories is doomed because these categories are arbitrary inventions, which makes it inevitable that real people will transgress them. Indeed, insisting on

policing gender and racial categories will only lead to more chaos and brutality, as is shown by the many gruesome murders and other acts of violence that take place in the novel. The novel indicates that it is better to accept and forgive supposed transgressions, as Byron Bunch does at the end of the narrative when he takes care of Lena and her baby despite the fact that the child is not his.

Of the many acts of transgression in the novel, the sexual relationship between Joanna and Joe is the most scandalous, in part because it involves both racial *and* gender transgression. Although in Jefferson Joe lives as a white man, he believes that he has black ancestry and at other points in his life has identified as black and lived within black communities. This racial flexibility is itself very scandalous, and makes his relationship with Joanna, who is white, horrifying to a community in which sexual relations between black men and white women are the greatest taboo.

Through Joanna and Joe's relationship, the novel shows that race and gender/sexual categories—and thus race and gender/sexual transgression—are intimately intertwined. After the two start sleeping together, Joe observes: "My God… it was like I was the woman and she was the man." This gender reversal mimics the inversion of racial identities the pair represent. Joe may be a black man yet passes as white, whereas Joanna is a white woman whose sympathy toward black people and family history of abolitionism lead others to call her a "N____ lover."

Joanna and Joe's relationship indicates that acts of sexual transgression lead to more forms of transgression. Not only are the couple engaged in a racially/sexually scandalous relationship, but Joe is also involved in an illegal bootlegging operation with Joe Brown, while the two live inside a cabin on Joanna's property. Each of these acts violates the norms of the society in which they live. The fact that Joanna and Joe's relationship eventually leads to Joe murdering Joanna—after she tries to force him to pray with her—again confirms the notion that acts of racial/gender transgression lead to violation of other social norms and rules. It also seems to confirm the racist view espoused at the time that black men posed a violent threat to white women.

At the same time, one can also interpret the novel as showing that the existence of strict racial and gender categories in the first place makes transgression (and violence) inevitable. Contrary to the beliefs of the book's racist characters, Joe does not murder Joanna because he is black (indeed, it is never confirmed that he even has black ancestry, and throughout most of the novel he lives as a white man). Instead, he kills her due to the trauma and resentment he has incurred from living in such a strict, repressive society, which has left him feeling frustrated, isolated, and vengeful.

The storyline about Lena's baby further shows that rigid social categories inevitably lead to transgression. In the world of the novel, it is seen as shameful for a woman to have a child alone—even if it is because, as in Lena's case, the child's father has abandoned her. Armistad articulates the warped thinking behind this prejudice when he observes that women who have children out of wedlock are trying to leave the "woman race" and become part of the "man race." This shows that having a child alone is perceived as an act of gender transgression akin to acts of racial transgression such as passing or interracial sex.

Yet the book makes it painfully clear that Lena is not responsible for this act of "transgression," as she was abandoned by the father of her child (Lucas Burch, who later renames himself Joe Brown). Furthermore, when Lucas leaves, Lena is left with no opportunities to redeem herself. Her decision to seek Lucas out on foot is seen as strange and scandalous. Lena is stuck in an impossible situation: abandoned by Lucas, she is condemned both for having a child alone *and* for trying to find her child's father.

In this sense, the book emphasizes that rigid social categories of race and gender make transgression inevitable. It also shows that such acts of transgression tend to accumulate, often culminating in violence and chaos. Attempting to police race and gender categories as well as other social norms will lead to a society that is *more* broken and violent, not less. Instead, it is better not to enforce such categories and norms so rigidly, as Byron Bunch does when he accepts and cares for Lena despite her being pregnant with the child of another man.

FREEDOM, DISCIPLINE, AND VIOLENCE

Freedom is a very important concept in *Light in August*. This is unsurprising, considering that the novel is set in a society still reeling from the relatively recent abolition of slavery, and one governed by strict social norms. While many of the characters seem to possess an intense desire for freedom, others seek to curtail freedom—whether their own or someone else's. Some characters do this by enforcing the strict social codes designed to limit the freedom of black people and white women. Others turn to faith, attempting to suppress their own impulses through religious devotion. However, few of these attempts to suppress freedom are entirely successful. Ultimately, the novel shows that the human desire for freedom is irrepressible, but that it is also dangerous, as it can lead to cruel, brutal behavior.

In some ways, the novel presents a positive view of freedom. For those whose actions have been constricted by the legacy of slavery, the emerging Jim Crow laws, and the unwritten laws of racism and sexism, freedom is extremely important—the ultimate luxury and object of desire.

Moreover, through the use of nature metaphors, the novel suggests that freedom is the natural state for mankind. At the beginning of the novel, Lena's journey on foot to find Lucas, the father of her child, is described as follows: "She went out of sight up the road: swollen, slow, deliberate, unhurried and

tireless as augmenting afternoon itself." Here Lena's radical assertion of freedom—although scandalous to those around her—is shown to be as ordinary and natural as the afternoon. Similar language appears when Byron Bunch is described as "just living on the country, like a locust." The freedom that both Byron and Lena exhibit is a peaceful form of existence, a way of being in harmony with their natural impulses and with the world around them.

However, at other moments in the book freedom is portrayed in a much more dangerous and disturbing light—particularly through the many acts of violence that appear across the narrative. In order to understand the prominence of violence in *Light in August* and its relationship to freedom, it is important to consider the historical context of the time and place in which the book is set. In 1932, the rural South was still recovering from the aftermath of slavery and the Civil War. During Reconstruction, efforts to compensate and support newly freed black people clashed with the vicious white supremacist beliefs that still ruled the South, and this led to gruesome outbreaks of violence. Meanwhile, the First World War provided another shocking reminder of the brutality of which humanity was capable.

Modernist works of literature such as *Light in August* grapple with the bleak side of human freedom revealed by violence, war, and destruction. Violence is everywhere in the novel, including the murders of Mr. McEachern, Joanna Burden, and others, the burning down of **Joanna's house**, and the lynching of Joe Christmas. This gives the impression that too often, humans tend to abuse the freedom we possess, using it to harm others.

This depiction of the abuse of freedom might indicate that humanity needs discipline in order to escape violence and chaos. However, the novel portrays discipline in a disturbing light too. Racial violence such as lynching is carried out in the name of curtailing the supposed threat of black male violence. However, in reality this threat is an invention used to excuse white supremacist violence and the ongoing oppression of black people. While some of the characters in the novel use their freedom to enact violence, others—and particularly black characters—find that they are violently prevented from exercising their freedom in the first place.

The close relationship between social control and violence is further developed through the novel's depiction of religion. Rather than being a way of existing in peace and harmony with the world, religion is portrayed as a disturbingly violent and oppressive force. This is shown most emphatically through the passages describing Joe Christmas's early life with his strictly religious adoptive family, the McEacherns. Joe's father, Mr. McEachern, turns to violence as a way of disciplining Joe. For example, when Joe is only eight, Mr. McEachern whips him with a belt in order to force him to learn the catechism. Not only does this show that violence is often used as a force of social control, but it also serves as another reminder of the cyclical nature of violence. Traumatized by his violent upbringing, Joe comes to despise religion, and when Joanna becomes devout and asks Joe to pray with her, he kills her.

Overall, therefore, the novel indicates the bleak idea that neither freedom nor discipline are reliable ways to escape violence—indeed, both freedom and discipline are more often ways to *enact* violence.

NAMES AND IDENTITY

Names are very important in *Light in August*. More than simply a way of identifying a person, they convey information about that person's characteristics. This suggests that people's personalities are predetermined from the moment that they are given their name (or inherit it, in the case of surnames). At the same time, many of the characters in the novel change their names, usually as a way to reinvent themselves and escape their pasts. In a way, this conflicts with the idea that names reveal the qualities of a person, because if names carry this kind of meaning, then it is not possible to simply shrug them off and assume a different identity. As a result, names become a way in which the novel shows that attempts to escape one's past tend to be doomed. Changing one's identity is not as easy as changing one's name.

The novel is very explicit about the idea that names betray a person's characteristics and fate. This is first expressed via the character of Byron Bunch: "And that was the first time Byron remembered that he had ever thought how a man's name, which is supposed to be just the sound for who he is, can be somehow an augur of what he will do, if other men can only read the meaning in time." As this quotation indicates, names give an indication of a person's destiny, but not in a way that is necessarily obvious. It can be a challenge to "read the meaning" of a name.

Throughout the novel, the characters repeatedly notice something unusual or noteworthy about a person's name without being able to specifically figure out what this means. For example, Byron observes to Lena that Joe Brown "does seem a little kind of too quick and too easy for a natural name, somehow." This suggests that Byron has (correctly) observed that Joe Brown is not Joe's given name. However, Byron does not actually come to this conclusion, instead simply remarking that the name is odd. Similarly, many of the characters remark that Joe Christmas's surname is strange, especially for a white man. However, none of them take the (again, correct) next step of concluding that Joe might in fact not be white at all.

In other cases, the characters fail to notice the meaning of names entirely. This is particularly true when it comes to the way in which names link two people together. The three main pairs of people linked by their names are Joe Christmas and Joe Brown, Joe Christmas and Joanna Burden, and Joe Brown/

Lucas Burch and Byron Bunch. In each of these pairs, the characters are closely associated with one another in some way, while at the same time being opposites, foils, or rivals. The linking of these names highlights an uncomfortable and unsustainable connection between each person, wherein only one can survive the pair. However, the characters fail to properly notice and understand this phenomenon, and thus the cycle of one pair beating or destroying the other repeats itself.

Through its depiction of many characters who change their names, the novel questions whether it is actually possible to change one's identity and escape one's past. In many cases, characters change their names in order to absolve themselves of past transgressions or to commit transgressions without being caught. This is true of Lucas Burch/Joe Brown, who changes his name after abandoning Lena and his unborn child, and also of Gail Hightower's wife and her lover, who register "as man and wife, under a fictitious name" in order to avoid being caught as adulterers.

Another motivation for changing one's name can be an attempt to rebel against one's past or family. For example, Joe Christmas changes his name from McEachern in order to sever all ties with his adoptive family. Meanwhile, Joanna's grandfather, Calvin Burden, changed his surname from "Burrington" because he ran away from home before he learned to spell Burrington and so chose something simpler. This change of name thus symbolizes Calvin's rebellion and his decision (which is highly similar to Joe's) to reject his family background. His choice of "Burden" is also telling, as he goes on to be an abolitionist troublemaker who is indeed seen as a "burden" by the white Southerners he lives among. This indicates that changing one's name can be a way of having agency over one's fate. However, it is unclear whether this agency was intentional, as (at least according to the story Joanna tells) the reason Calvin chose "Burden" was because it was a simplification of "Burrington."

Overall, names are an important way in which the novel explores themes of fate, identity, and the inescapability of the past. The frequency with which characters change their names shows that the desire to change one's identity and escape one's past is highly common. And while changing one's name is not a surefire way to reinvent oneself, the limitations of people's ability to properly read the meaning of names does allow certain characters to escape into anonymity and commit transgressions without being caught.

STRANGERS, OUTCASTS, AND BELONGING

The most important characters in *Light in August* are all strangers or outcasts in some way. This becomes particularly pronounced due to the novel's setting of Jefferson, Mississippi, a small town where belonging and conformity are highly prized. Yet while the strangers and outcasts in the novel are often villainized for the fact that they don't belong, in reality their presence exposes that the veneer of conformity and belonging in Jefferson is actually an illusion. The painful tensions and divisions that exist between members of the Jefferson community mean that everyone ends up alienated from each other, no matter how much they strive to conform.

The importance of strangers and outcasts is introduced by Lena Grove, the first character to whom the reader is introduced, who acts as a framing device. Lena arrives in Jefferson as both a stranger and an outcast. Barefoot, pregnant, and abandoned by her unborn child's father, Lena shocks and baffles those she encounters on her journey to Jefferson. Her behavior is seen as inappropriate, and the reactions of those she meets suggests that Jefferson is a place where strangers and outcasts are uncommon, and where everyone conforms to the community's norms.

However, the use of Lena as a framing device is actually misleading in this way. Jefferson is a community that likes to think of itself as coherent and conformist, but in reality, it is filled with strangers and outcasts.

The prevalence of strangers and outcasts in Jefferson shows that a person can be considered a "stranger" even in the community in which they were born. This becomes especially clear through Joanna Burden, who is described as follows: "She has lived in the house since she was born, yet she is still a stranger, a foreigner whose people moved in from the North during Reconstruction." Later, Joanna says of herself: "They hated us here. We were Yankees. Foreigners. Worse than foreigners: enemies."

These quotations show that the intensity of hatred white Southerners feel toward Northerners dooms Joanna to forever be an outsider in her own hometown. They also indicate that making Joanna feel like a stranger is a way of punishing her (and her family) for the transgression of supporting black people. Of course, the treatment Joanna receives is only a shadow of the kind of vitriol and alienation black people endure in the South. Although black Southerners were, like Joanna, born in the area and do not know another home, they too are treated as "foreigners" and "enemies," permanently outcast from society by whites.

At the same time, to argue that black people are only or straightforwardly treated as strangers is too simplistic. Part of the resentment white Southerners felt to Northern "strangers" like Joanna's family rested in white Southerners' sense of ownership of black people. Still clinging to the social system of slavery, these Southerners felt that black people "belonged" to them and to the South, and that it was a violation for Northerners to arrive and attempt to support or influence black people.

The strange position of black people who are simultaneously treated as both strangers/outcasts and native/belonging to the South is further explored through Joe Christmas. Joe uses his identity as a "stranger" in Jefferson in order to pass as white. When Joe Brown decides to out Christmas as black, Brown declares: "Fooled for three years. Calling him a foreigner for three years, when soon as I watched him three days I knew he wasn't no more a foreigner than I am." Intriguingly, Brown argues that Christmas belongs to Jefferson/the South as much as he, a white man, does, and that this is evidence that Christmas is black. The strange logic here highlights the confusing, paradoxical position of black people who are treated as both strangers and natives to places like Jefferson.

Meanwhile, Joe Christmas's own trajectory further confirms how race, and particularly uncertain racial identity, can hinder feelings of belonging. Raised by a white adoptive family, Christmas became convinced that he had black ancestry and decided to live in a black community, "shun[ning]" white people. The narrator explains that he wanted "to expel from himself the white blood and the white thinking and being." However, this plan does not work, and Joe remains isolated and outcast. The narrator comments: "He thought that it was loneliness which he was trying to escape and not himself." This quotation indicates that Joe is doomed to be a permanent stranger and outcast because the racist society in which he lives distorts and corrupts a sense of belonging. Joe's uncertainty over his racial identity prohibits him from feeling a sense of belonging anywhere; yet even if he was certain that he was black, he would still be treated as a stranger and outcast by white society. In this sense, Joe's story confirms the idea that belonging and conformity are nothing more than an illusion. The tensions and divisions between people in communities like Jefferson—particularly those caused by race—alienate people from each other in such an extreme way that true belonging becomes impossible.

HAUNTING AND THE PAST

In *Light in August*, the past is not truly past, but instead a very present, powerful, and sinister aspect of life in Jefferson. This is an important trope of Southern Gothic literature, which uses haunting and repetition to depict a region still gripped by the brutal trauma of genocide, slavery, and the Civil War. By depicting the past as something that returns through haunting and repetition, *Light in August* highlights the futility of attempting to escape the past—whether one's individual background or broader historical events.

One of the main ways in which the novel explores the return and ongoing presence of the past is through its unusual narrative structure. Rather than being told in chronological order, the narrative continually circles back to flashbacks and backstories. These returns to the past are not always clearly marked, which at times leaves the reader uncertain whether a section of the narrative is taking place in the past or present. This has the effect of making the past *seem* present, such that past events are as real and significant as the actions that take place in the main period of the novel.

The novel's use of flashbacks also highlights the impossibility of escaping one's past. When Joe Christmas flees his adoptive family, he hopes to reinvent himself and escape the trauma of his childhood. However, the novel's lengthy section describing his childhood shows that this attempt to escape the past has proven entirely impossible. Joe's past will always be part of him in the present, something he can never truly escape.

The idea that the past cannot be shaken off is further confirmed by the repeated actions and events that occur throughout the novel. One of the most dramatic examples of these is the double murders Christmas commits. (While it is never confirmed that Christmas was the person who killed Joanna, the similarity between Joanna's death and Christmas's presumed murder of his adoptive father, Mr. McEachern, strongly indicates that Christmas is Joanna's murderer.) Indeed, Joanna's murder is a repetition in a double sense: it echoes both the murder of McEachern *and* the murder of Joanna's father and grandfather. These links make Joanna's murder seem almost inevitable, as if she was fated to be killed by the events of the past.

Both Joanna and Gail Hightower express the belief that their lives are predetermined by the actions of their ancestors. Gail is gripped by an obsession with his grandfather, a Confederate soldier, whose actions appear to have cursed Gail in the present. Indeed, at a different point in the novel Joanna's father explicitly articulates the idea that white people are cursed by the crimes of their ancestors: "A race doomed and cursed to be forever and ever a part of the white race's doom and curse for its sins. Remember that. His doom and his curse. Forever and ever. Mine. Your mother's. Yours, even though you are a child. The curse of every white child that ever was born and that ever will be born."

This quotation again highlights the idea that the past is inescapable, and that it predetermines (and dooms) the lives of those living in the present. Joanna's father's words indicate that white people in particular will only be free of this "curse" if they somehow atone for the sins of their ancestors. However, the novel shows that those who attempt to do so—including Joanna's father himself—usually just end up punished by other white people, often through murder.

This confirms even more strongly that the past is truly inescapable. Although it is arguably still important to attempt to atone for the sins of one's ancestors, in *Light in August* there is no chance of absolving oneself from the curse of the past.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

JOANNA'S HOUSE

The major symbol in *Light in August* is the house where Joanna Burden lives alone in Jefferson. Joanna is descended from multiple generations of Northern abolitionists who have lived in Jefferson for a long time, and yet who were treated as "strangers" and "enemies" due to their sympathy for black people. This remains true for Joanna even though she was born in Jefferson and has never lived anywhere else. The house where Joanna was born and continues to live thus represents her status as an outsider in her own hometown. Moreover, it also significant due to the scandal of Joanna living there alone. As an unmarried "spinster," Joanna is automatically outcast from mainstream Jefferson society, yet is also treated with suspicion due to the fact that she lives by herself. As a young, unnamed black boy explains, she is safe in the house because the local black people look after her—a further source of scandal.

The social transgression denoted by the house is intensified when Joe Christmas (and later Joe Brown) moves into the cabin on Joanna's property. Christmas and Joanna's unconventional and scandalous romantic relationship is symbolized by the fact that Christmas lives on the property but not in the house. The ways he enters the house become significant and highly charged—first only through the kitchen (which places Christmas in the symbolic role of a black servant or slave), and then according to particular instructions Joanna sets out for him. In a way, Christmas's crossing the threshold of entering the house is a kind of sexual metaphor, and Joanna's specification of how he does this highlights the level of control she has over their relationship, which according to the strict gender codes of the time is deemed unnatural.

The novel indicates that this transgression is doomed to result in a chaotic climax. This takes place when Christmas brutally murders Joanna inside the house and then sets the house on fire. The fire burns for a long time, attracting crowds, and the glow from the flames is one of the meanings of the "light in August" mentioned in the book's title. The destruction of the house via fire represents the desire to purge the evidence of transgressions. However, as the book makes clear, such purging is never really possible because the past is never really gone, but rather lingers with a haunting presence.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *Light in August* published in 1990.

Chapter 2 Quotes

He did not look like a professional hobo in his professional rags, but there was something definitely rootless about him, as though no town nor city was his, no street, no walls, no square of earth his home. And that he carried this knowledge with him always as though it were a banner, with a quality ruthless, lonely, and almost proud.

Related Characters: Joe Christmas

Related Themes:

Page Number: 31-32

Explanation and Analysis

The book has opened with Lena Grove's journey to Jefferson to find the father of her child, Lucas Burch. Once she arrives in Jefferson, the narrative switches to focus on Byron Bunch, who is remembering the arrival of a stranger three years ago. The stranger was wearing dirty clothes; here he is described as looking like he comes from nowhere. The phrase "as though no town nor city was his" emphasizes the lack of *belonging* evident in the stranger's appearance. Not only did the stranger look homeless (both in an immediate and more profound sense), but he seemed "almost proud" of it.

This is a key piece of information: as readers will learn later, the man described here is Joe Christmas, a character who remains a "stranger" throughout the novel despite settling in Jefferson. Over and over, the novel shows that the world is populated with "strangers" who can live in a given place for decades and yet remain outsiders who are not seen to belong.

"His name is Christmas," he said.

"His name is what?" one said.

"Christmas."

"Is he a foreigner?"

"Did you ever hear of a white man named Christmas?" the foreman said.

"I never heard of nobody a-tall named it," the other said.

And that was the first time Byron remembered that he had ever thought how a man's name, which is supposed to be just the sound for who he is, can be somehow an augur of what he will do, if other men can only read the meaning in time.

Related Characters: Byron Bunch, Joe Christmas

Related Themes:

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

Byron Bunch is recalling the day three years ago when Joe Christmas arrived at the Jefferson planing mill. The men find Christmas's appearance and expression strange, and in this passage comment on his unusual surname. To one of the men, Christmas's name makes him seem like a "foreigner." This is telling, because it shows how people in Jefferson treat anything unfamiliar as foreign to the small community where they are from. However, the next man's reply indicates that "foreigner" might not necessarily mean someone not from Jefferson, but rather someone who is not white. This shows how belonging works along racially exclusionary lines.

Byron's observation that names can give crucial information about a person becomes a very important idea in the novel, as each of the main characters' names provide hints about that character's personality and destiny. Yet as Byron observes, the meaning of a name is not always superficially obvious. This means that readers—just like Byron himself—must work to interpret names correctly if they hope to know their true meaning.

She has lived in the house since she was born, yet she is still a stranger, a foreigner whose people moved in from the North during Reconstruction.

Related Characters: Joanna Burden

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

After they both arrive as strangers in Jefferson and take jobs in the planing mill, Joe Christmas and Joe Brown become friends. They eventually both leave their jobs at the mill, and seem to be running an illegal bootlegging operation. Both Brown and Christmas live in an old "negro cabin" on the property of Joanna Burden. In this passage, the narrator describes that Joanna has lived in Jefferson for years, but that she is still considered a foreigner because her family were Northerners who moved to Jefferson during Reconstruction. This detail indicates that the Burdens were part of the wave of Northerners who came to the South (often with government funding) to help support the newly freed black population, for example by teaching in black schools.

White Southerners tended to deeply resent these people, who they saw as interlopers and "carpetbaggers." Many whites in the South were furious about emancipation and even more furious that white Northerners would come and disrupt the supposedly harmonious and natural relations between white and black people in the South. Of course, in reality these relations were anything but harmonious—instead they represented centuries of torture, oppression, and slow genocide. Nonetheless, white Southerners remained deeply resentful of people like Joanna's family, and refused to let them integrate into their communities.

Yes, ma'am. Joe Brown. But I reckon that may be his right name. Because when you think of a fellow named Joe Brown, you think of a bigmouthed fellow that's always laughing and talking loud. And so I reckon that is his right name, even if Joe Brown does seem a little kind of too quick and too easy for a natural name, somehow.

Related Characters: Byron Bunch (speaker), Lucas Burch / Joe Brown, Lena Grove

Related Themes:

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

Lena arrives at the Jefferson planing mill, having been told she would find Lucas Burch there. However, it turns out the people who led her there thought she was looking for Byron *Bunch*. Lena and Byron then discuss Joanna's house, which is burning in the distance; Byron explains that Joanna lives there alone, but that Joe Christmas and Joe Brown live in a cabin on the property. Here Byron comments that Joe Brown's name seems almost *too* "quick" and "easy" to be Brown's real name, even though it suits him very well. This hints at the fact that Brown's real name is actually Lucas Burch, and that he adopted the new name in order to avoid being identified as the man who got Lena pregnant.

Byron's comments indicate that people who name themselves understandably choose a name that suits their characters far more than those who retain the name they

were given at birth. At the same time, this passage also illustrates the limits of the human ability to read names. Byron can just about tell that there is something suspicious about Brown's name, but isn't able to properly understand what this is, and ends up accepting that Brown must be his real name.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ A man will talk about how he'd like to escape from living folks. But it's the dead folks that do him the damage. It's the dead ones that lay quiet in one place and don't try to hold him, that he can't escape from.

Related Characters: Rev. Gail Hightower (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 75

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has explained the backstory of Rev. Gail Hightower, who was once the minister of Jefferson's main church, but was forced to resign after his wife had an affair and died (possibly by suicide). Now Hightower—like Byron—lives a reclusive life. Yet in this passage, he tells Byron that he thinks people are mistaken to withdraw from living people, because it is actually the dead they should be afraid of. Of all the characters in the novel, Hightower is the one most obviously haunted by the past.

In an immediate sense, his life has been ruined by his wife's transgressions, and thus her ghost continues to "haunt" his existence in the present. Yet later in the novel it's revealed that it is not just his wife, but also his ancestors—and particularly his grandfather, who was a Confederate Civil War hero—who haunt Hightower in the present. Indeed, he remains so gripped by his obsession with the past that his life remains completely stalled in the present.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ '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. Accuse the white and let the nigger run.'

[…]

'The folks in this town is so smart. Fooled for three years. Calling him a foreigner for three years, when soon as I watched him three days I knew he wasn't no more a foreigner than I am. I knew before he even told me himself.'

Related Characters: Lucas Burch / Joe Brown (speaker), The Sheriff, Joe Christmas

Related Themes:

Page Number: 97-98

Explanation and Analysis

The day that Joanna's house begins to burn, Joe Brown appears in town at 8 pm, raving about Joanna and Christmas's relationship and accusing Christmas of murdering Joanna. The sheriff is suspicious of Brown's account, pointing out that his story implies that Brown waited three hours without reporting the fire. In response, Brown immediately starts calling Christmas a "n____" in order to absolve himself of any suspicions and point the blame entirely at Christmas. (He has not yet explained that Christmas revealed to him that he thinks he had black ancestry, although he does so shortly after this quote.)

Brown's statement here conveys two ideas regarding race. The first is that the criminal justice system is so skewed by anti-black racism that simply identifying Christmas as black criminalizes him and absolves Brown of suspicion. As Brown indicates, the idea that the authorities would "accuse [a] white man" while letting a black man go is seen as so naturally ridiculous and abhorrent that it is essentially unimaginable. The other key idea Brown expresses is the fact that black people are excluded from white society and yet are not seen as "foreigners" as such. Brown implies that by persuading people that he was a foreigner, Christmas was able to pass for white. Of course, in a way black people in Jefferson are treated as foreigners *within* the community—yet paradoxically, they are also seen as belonging to the South. In this sense, they are outsiders from within.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ "Christmas. A heathenish name. Sacrilege. I will change that."

"That will be your legal right," the matron said. "We are not interested in what they are called, but in how they are treated."

But the stranger was not listening to anyone anymore than he was talking to anyone. "From now on his name will be McEachern."

"That will be suitable," the matron said. "To give him your name."

"He will eat my bread and he will observe my religion," the stranger said. "Why should he not bear my name?"

The child was not listening. He was not bothered. He did not especially care, anymore than if the man had said the day was hot when it was not hot. He didn't even bother to say to himself *My name aint McEachern. My name is Christmas* There was no need to bother about that yet. There was plenty of time.

"Why not, indeed?" the matron said.

Related Characters: McEachern (speaker), Joe Christmas

Related Themes:

Page Number: 144-145

Explanation and Analysis

After the janitor kidnaps Joe and takes him to a black orphanage, the police bring Joe back to his previous orphanage. Shortly after this, he is adopted by Mr. McEachern, a deeply religious man who promises that he will teach Joe to work hard and fear God. Before leaving the orphanage, McEachern comments that Joe's surname, Christmas, is sacreligious, and that he intends to change Joe's name to McEachern. In a different context, this could be a kind, welcoming gesture, intended to make Joe feel like a part of the McEachern family. However, as McEachern's cold, harsh tone indicates, it is in fact more of a mode of discipline, forcing Joe to conform to McEachern's fanatically religious lifestyle.

Chapter 8 Quotes

❝ "You noticed my skin, my hair," waiting for her to answer, his hand slow on her body.

She whispered also. "Yes. I thought maybe you were a foreigner. That you never come from around here."

"It's different from that, even. More than just a foreigner. You can't guess."

"What? How more different?"

"Guess."

Related Characters: Bobbie, Joe Christmas (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 196

Explanation and Analysis

At the age of 18, Joe starts dating a waitress he meets in town named Bobbie. One day after they have sex, they lie together, talking. Joe tells Bobbie about the incident with the black girl in the shed years ago. Then, in the midst of their moment of intimacy, Joe asks Bobbie if she's noticed something "different" about his skin and hair, preparing to tell her the secret that he has black heritage. Once again, this passage illustrates the strange relation black people in the South have to the category of "foreigner." Bobbie guesses that Joe is not from the area, but Joe says he is "more than *just* a foreigner," indicating that blackness involves being "foreign" but also something different, or more.

Joe's decision to reveal the secret of his racial identity in this moment highlights the strange and somewhat tragic nature of his feelings about his race. On one level, it is moving that he feels close enough to Bobbie to be vulnerable and reveal the secret that he has carried with him all his life. At the same time, the tone of Joe's voice in this passage is almost goading, as if he is fishing for a dramatic reaction from Bobbie. Of course, at the time the idea of a white woman like Bobbie having sex with a black man is extremely scandalous. It is almost as if Joe is daring her to be disgusted or horrified by the secret truth that the "white" man she slept with is actually black.

Chapter 10 Quotes

❝ And always, sooner or later, the street ran through cities, through an identical and well nigh interchangeable section of cities without remembered names, where beneath the dark and equivocal and symbolical archways of midnight he bedded with the women and paid them when he had the money, and when he did not have it he bedded anyway and then told them that he was a negro. For a while it worked; that was while he was still in the south. It was quite simple, quite easy. Usually all he risked was a cursing from the woman and the matron of the house, though now and then he was beaten unconscious by other patrons, to waken later in the street or in the jail.

Related Characters: Joe Christmas

Related Themes:

Page Number: 224

Explanation and Analysis

After (presumably) killing his adoptive father McEachern and being rejected by Bobbie, Christmas sets out for a 15-year-long period of moving around before finally coming back to the South. During these 15 years he lives in Oklahoma, Missouri, Mexico, Chicago, and Detroit. He works as a laborer in agriculture or oil, and is even in the army for four months before deserting. He sleeps with women and pays them if he has money. If he doesn't, he tells them that he is black after they have sex. This passage describes the two forms of reaction to this revelation.

On one hand, there is something almost admirable about the radical freedom Christmas enacts in this period. Rather than bowing to racist pressure to hide his racial identity, he strategically reveals it, even if this means risking being beaten up. At the same time, there is also a clear element of cruelty in the way that Christmas uses the revelation to deliberately avoid paying sex workers. Overall, this passage demonstrates Christmas's status as a continual outsider, someone who will never belong anywhere he travels.

❝ He now lived as man and wife with a woman who resembled an ebony carving. At night he would lie in bed beside her, sleepless, beginning to breathe deep and hard. He would do it deliberately, feeling, even watching, his white chest arch deeper and deeper within his ribcage, trying to breathe into himself the dark odor, the dark and inscrutable thinking and being of negroes, with each suspiration trying to expel from himself the white blood and the white thinking and being. And all the while his nostrils at the odor which he was trying to make his own would whiten and tauten, his whole being writhe and strain with physical outrage and spiritual denial.

He thought that it was loneliness which he was trying to escape and not himself.

Related Characters: Joe Christmas

Related Themes:

Page Number: 225-226

Explanation and Analysis

While Christmas is in Chicago and Detroit he lives as a black man in black communities. This passage describes his relationship with his lover at the time, a dark-skinned black woman, with whom he lives "as man and wife." The quotation indicates that rather than seeing the woman for who she is, Christmas views her as a vehicle through which he aims to embrace his own blackness and rid himself of whiteness. This instrumentalizing attitude is clearly selfish and unethical. Moreover, Christmas's ideas about blackness are evidently influenced by racist notions that black people are primitive and "inscrutable." Moreover, his attempt to rid himself of whiteness and "loneliness" is doomed, because these things are built into him. Christmas is thus left profoundly alienated from himself.

Chapter 11 Quotes

❝ They hated us here. We were Yankees. Foreigners. Worse than foreigners: enemies. Carpet baggers. And it— the War— still too close for even the ones that got whipped to be very sensible. Stirring up the negroes to murder and rape, they called it. Threatening white supremacy.

Related Characters: Joanna Burden (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 249

Explanation and Analysis

After a few months of not speaking, Christmas finds Joanna waiting for him in his cabin. She starts talking, explaining her family story. She is descended from multiple generations of abolitionists, and both her grandfather and brother were killed by an ex-slaveholder during an argument over black enfranchisement. Here, she explains how her family was never accepted by the white community in Jefferson, and was in fact viciously condemned of being "enemies" who infiltrated the town in order to disturb the white supremacist social order that had existed in the area for centuries.

Joanna's words illustrate how "foreigner" and "enemy" are interchangeable categories in the mindset of a conservative, close-minded community like Jefferson. She also highlights the perverse logic of white people who fear that those who support black people are "stirring up the negroes to murder and rape." In reality, it is white people who have been murdering and raping people ever since the first enslaved Africans were brought to the Americas. Yet through an act of projection, white people position *themselves* as the victims of violence committed by black people.

Remember this. Your grandfather and brother are lying there, murdered not by one white man but by the curse which God put on a whole race before your grandfather or your brother or me or you were even thought of. A race doomed and cursed to be forever and ever a part of the white race's doom and curse for its sins. Remember that. His doom and his curse. Forever and ever. Mine. Your mother's. Yours, even though you are a child. The curse of every white child that ever was born and that ever will be born.

Related Characters: Nathaniel Burden (speaker), Calvin Burden, Sr., Calvin Burden, Jr., Joanna Burden

Related Themes:

Page Number: 252

Explanation and Analysis

Joanna has been telling Christmas the story of her family, including the deaths of her grandfather and brother at the hands of an ex-slaveholder. She has explained that her family was always despised in Jefferson, but that her father never left because his father and son were buried there. Here she recalls a speech her father gave her about the "doom and curse" white people inherit due to the sins of their race. This speech highlights that even abolitionists had bizarre and problematic views about race.

One could read Nathaniel's words generously and say that they show he takes seriously the enormous crimes white people have inflicted on black people in a way that few white people did at the time. He emphasizes that all white people share responsibility for the harms inflicted on black people, even if any individual white person (such as a child like Joanna) had not directly inflicted any harm. At the same time, Nathaniel's speech nonetheless implies that the suffering of black people was the result of God's will, even as it was also the responsibility of white people who inflicted it. This shows how abolitionists often confused racist, pro-slavery ideology with their anti-racist impulses.

Chapter 13 Quotes

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. It seemed to him that that by and because of which he had had ancestors long enough to come himself to be, had allied itself with crime.

Related Characters: The Sheriff

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 290

Explanation and Analysis

The site of Joanna's house burning draws a large crowd of local people, who are entranced by the spectacle. Everyone is wondering who is guilty of Joanna's murder. Yet when the sheriff stares at the fire, he momentarily forgets that it was the work of an actual person. As this passage shows, he instead thinks of it as natural, fated occurrence. This quotation thus illustrates the novel's point about the way that the past influences the present. The powerful impact that the past has on the present means that events can seem predestined to the point that they are not the work of a "human agent," but by some forces far greater than any individual person.

Chapter 15 Quotes

The town looked upon them both as being a little touched—lonely, gray in color, a little smaller than most other men and women, as if they belonged to a different race, species—even though for the next five or six years after the man appeared to have come to Mottstown to settle down for good in the small house where his wife lived, people hired him to do various odd jobs which they considered within his strength.

Related Characters: Mrs. Hines, Mr. Hines / The Janitor

Related Themes:

Page Number: 341

Explanation and Analysis

Having spent a week on the run after killing Joanna, Christmas catches a ride on a wagon to Mottstown, the next town over from Jefferson. The beginning of Chapter 15 describes an elderly couple who have lived in Mottstown for 30 years named Mr. and Mrs. Hines. In this chapter, the narrator explains that despite the length of time they have lived in the town, Mr. and Mrs. Hines are still treated as strangers. This connects them to other characters in the book, such as Christmas, Joanna, and Hightower, who are considered strangers, foreigners, or outcasts in the communities they call home. Once again, readers also see how being a stranger or outcast is racialized. Even though

Mr. and Mrs. Hines are white, their outsider status means that people interpret them as "a different race," which is in turn equated to being of "a different species."

❝ Halliday saw him and ran up and grabbed him and said, 'Aint your name Christmas?' and the nigger said that it was. He never denied it. He never did anything. He never acted like either a nigger or a white man. That was it. That was what made the folks so mad. For him to be a murderer and all dressed up and walking the town like he dared them to touch him, when he ought to have been skulking and hiding in the woods, muddy and dirty and running. It was like he never even knew he was a murderer, let alone a nigger too.

Related Characters: Joe Christmas

Related Themes:

Page Number: 350

Explanation and Analysis

Christmas has been captured in Mottstown, and by nightfall all the residents of the town are gossiping about him and the day's events. This quotation is taken from a long passage in which an unnamed woman tells the story of Christmas's capture. She expresses horror at the fact that Christmas was walking around Mottstown so openly, and that he did not deny his identity when asked. Throughout the description of Christmas's fleeing, capture, escape, and murder, various characters comment that it is as if Christmas *wanted* to be captured and even killed based on the way he acted.

The woman's comparison between Christmas's blasé attitude toward his fugitive status and his indeterminate race is telling. In her mind, being black and being a criminal are closely related categories, and she is offended by the idea that Christmas is not ashamed of his membership of either of them. Furthermore, the idea of racial ambiguity is seen as an inherently suspicious, duplicitous mode of being.

Chapter 18 Quotes

❝ "I dont want to visit nobody here. I'm a stranger here."

"You'd be strange anywhere you was at," the deputy said. "Even at home. Come on."

Related Characters: Burford, Lucas Burch / Joe Brown (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 426

Explanation and Analysis

With the assistance of Hightower and Mrs. Hines, Lena has given birth to her baby. Following the birth, Byron arranges for Burford to take Brown to see Lena and his child, and then rides out of Jefferson, heading for Memphis. However, on the way Byron sees a man running, and realizes that it is Brown. The narrative then jumps back slightly in time to the scene of Burford fetching Brown from jail to go and see Lena. In this exchange, Brown protests having to go for the visit, even though he hasn't yet been told who he is visiting yet.

Burford replies by reiterating one of the book's key messages: that some people are strangers wherever they are, "even at home." Of course, Burford changes "stranger" to "strange," highlighting the connection between these two concepts. In a place like Jefferson, anyone who is different is treated as a stranger, even if they actually come from there.

Chapter 19 Quotes

❝ The black blood drove him first to the negro cabin. And then the white blood drove him out of there, as it was the black blood which snatched up the pistol and the white blood which would not let him fire it. And it was the white blood which sent him to the minister, which rising in him for the last and final time, sent him against all reason and all reality, into the embrace of a chimaera, a blind faith in something read in a printed Book. Then I believe that the white blood deserted him for the moment. Just a second, a flicker, allowing the black to rise in its final moment and make him turn upon that on which he had postulated his hope of salvation. It was the black blood which swept him by his own desire beyond the aid of any man, swept him up into that ecstasy out of a black jungle where life has already ceased before the heart stops and death is desire and fulfillment. And then the black blood failed him again, as it must have in crises all his life.

Related Characters: Gavin Stevens (speaker), Joe Christmas

Related Themes:

Page Number: 449

Explanation and Analysis

Having presided over the Grand Jury, the District Attorney,

Gavin Stevens, has been telling a visiting friend all about Joe Christmas's story. He has explained how Mrs. Hines visited Christmas in jail, and likely advised him that Hightower would help him. Christmas then managed to escape and flee. Here, Stevens provides his own bizarre interpretation of Christmas's final moments. He presents Christmas as being driven by two warring impulses, one originating in his "white blood" and one in his "black blood."

Stevens's words illuminate the nonsensical ideas about race held during this period. Because people insisted on believing that racial categories were strict and essential, people of mixed race heritage, like Christmas, were seen as having two entirely different beings trapped in the same body. The irony of this is that most people in the US, regardless of how they racially identified (and *were* identified), actually had mixed race heritage. Furthermore, we now know that the belief that race is a biological reality—let alone one that forces a person to act in certain ways—is nothing more than a racist fiction.

Chapter 20 Quotes

❝ That son grew to manhood among phantoms, and side by side with a ghost.

Related Characters: Rev. Gail Hightower

Related Themes:

Page Number: 474

Explanation and Analysis

After Christmas is castrated and killed by Percy Grimm, the narrative shifts to describing Hightower's family. Hightower's grandfather was a slaveholding lawyer, while his father was an abolitionist minister-turned-doctor. Father and son were opposites in almost every way, although they both served in the Civil War. In this quotation, the narrator claims that Hightower grew up among "phantoms"—referring to his father, mother, and the formerly enslaved woman who lived with them, Cinthy—and a "ghost"—his grandfather.

The use of these two terms suggests a closer kinship between the living and dead than one might already assume to be the case. The word "phantom" in this context suggests a form of existence closely related to being a ghost. Put simply, phantoms are ghosts who haven't died yet. While readers may be unused to thinking about living people in this way, the close tie between phantoms and ghosts is arguably a more accurate reflection of the relationship between the living and the dead than how society conventionally conceptualizes them.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

Lena Grove has been walking for almost a month, and has journeyed all the way from Alabama to Mississippi on foot. It is the farthest away from home she has ever been. Before her parents died, she used to go into town with her father and would also not wear shoes then, instead placing them wrapped in a piece of paper beside her in the wagon. Shortly before arriving in town she would request that her father let her out so she could walk. Although she never told him this, the reason why she did so was because she wanted the townspeople to have the impression that she lived in the town too.

The opening of the novel provides some important information about Lena. The fact that as a young woman she has been brave enough to travel so far alone indicates that she has a fearless, free-spirited character. Moreover, the detail about her childhood trips to town indicates that she seeks a sense of belonging, and perhaps dreams of escaping rural life for a more exciting, urban existence.

Before her father passed away, he told Lena and her brother, McKinley, to go to Doane's Mill, where McKinley found work. When Lena and McKinley first arrived, there were five other families living there. McKinley is 20 years older than Lena. His wife seemed to always be pregnant or giving birth, and Lena helped with the housework and childcare. Lena believes performing these duties are part of why she became pregnant so quickly herself.

Lena comes from a somewhat difficult background, due to the deaths of her parents. Her labor supporting McKinley's wife shows that she is hard-working and experienced for a young woman; at the same time, her belief that this work helped her become pregnant so quickly suggests that she is a little unintelligent or naïve.

When McKinley found out Lena was pregnant, he called her a "whore." The father of her baby, Lucas Burch, left town six months before, although Lena remains convinced that he will come back for her. However, she nonetheless decides to flee McKinley's house through a window, taking a small bundle of belongings and 35¢. She walks for a long time, then stops to sit in a ditch and rest. She hears a wagon approaching and thinks about seeing Lucas again once she gets to Jefferson.

Lena's abandonment by both Lucas and McKinley shows how harshly women are punished for sexual transgressions in the world of the novel. Despite being left completely powerless, however, Lena optimistically sets off to find Lucas herself, an act that shows both courage and naivety.

Two men who saw Lena walk past, Winterbottom and Armistid, wonder aloud how she became pregnant and marvel at the fact that she is travelling on foot. Armistid has come to make on offer on a cultivator that Winterbottom is selling. However, he fails to negotiate the price he wants, and begins driving his wagon home. He passes Lena, sitting in the ditch with no shoes on, and offers her a ride. He notices that she isn't wearing a wedding ring, and is shocked to hear that she's come all the way from Alabama.

In her own quiet way, Lena is significantly disturbing the norms of the world in which the novel is set. Not only is she unmarried and pregnant, but she moves freely through the world seemingly oblivious or indifferent to the judgment of others. This sense of freedom (and also vulnerability) is represented by her bare feet.

Lena tells Armistid that she has come to find Lucas Burch, and that people she has met on the journey have been kind to her. She says she is confident that she will find Lucas. After they ride for a while, Lena goes to get out, but Armistid tells her they are still 12 miles away from Jefferson and offers for her to stay at his house. He says he will drive her into town the next morning. Armistid thinks about how when women get married or "get into trouble" (get pregnant) without being married, they decide to leave the "woman race" and join the "man race." This is why women have started engaging in male habits like taking snuff, and why they are now agitating to get the vote.

Armistid's thoughts about women reflect a general anxiety about changing social norms during this period. Following the First World War, categories of race and gender became more unstable in many countries. International campaigns for women's suffrage went hand-in-hand with cultural shifts wherein young women began partaking in activities (such as drinking and taking snuff) that were considered "improper" for their gender.

Armistid's wife Martha is inside the house. She has birthed five children in six years, and has a "cold, harsh, irascible face." Armistid explains that Lena has come from Alabama hoping to find Lucas Burch, who she has heard is working at the planing mill in Jefferson. Martha implies that Lena is naïve for believing she will find Lucas, and sarcastically comments that he'll surely be waiting "with the house all furnished and all."

Both Martha and McKinley's wife show the fate that awaits most women in the world of the novel: birthing many children and being trapped in a lifetime of intense, never-ending domestic labor. Considering that Lena is pregnant, this is likely the future that awaits her too, but for now she is exercising her freedom while she still can.

Martha grumbles, "You durn men." Lena offers to help Martha with the cooking, but Martha refuses. She asks if Lena is married to Lucas, and Lena admits that she isn't. She accidentally lets slip that Lucas left shortly after finding out that she was pregnant, and then explains that he did not warn her he had to leave because he didn't want to worry her. The foreman at Doane's Mill resented Lucas because he was "young and full of life." Although at first she was worried about being pregnant without having his last name, eventually Lena gave Lucas her blessing to go. Since he left, she has been too focused on preparing for the baby to arrive to care about what people think of her marriage status.

It is becoming more and more clear that Lena has an overly trusting view of Lucas. This is a stark contrast to the pessimism of Martha, who seems resentful of her husband and men in general. Lena's mention of the fact that she doesn't have Lucas's last name is an early indication of the importance of names in the novel. Throughout the narrative, names provide key information about who a person is. In Lena's case, her name betrays her scandalous transgression of social norms.

Lena says she is sure Lucas sent for her, but that his message "got lost on the way." This is why she decided to eventually set off on the journey herself, without having heard from him. She didn't know where he had gone, but found out he was at the Jefferson planing mill by asking strangers. She has faith that God will ensure their family is reunited in time for the baby's arrival. Later that night, Martha retrieves money she has saved up from selling eggs. She tells Armistid to give Lena the money and drive her to Varner's store in the morning.

Martha may not be a warm person, but she feels sympathy for Lena—so much so that she is willing to give up the savings she has earned from selling eggs in order to help her. This is significant, because unlike men, women like Martha do not have proper access to their own income. Instead, they make money from little side jobs like selling eggs.

The next morning Armistid and Lena eat a breakfast Martha has cooked for them before they set off again. When Armistid gives Lena the money from Martha, she tries to refuse, but Armistid insists and says she might need it. Martha is nowhere to be seen, so Lena tells Armistid to say goodbye for her. They drive to the store, where Armistid asks around for someone willing to give Lena a ride the rest of the way to Jefferson. He tells Lena that she is welcome to stay at his house again if she passes back through, but she assures him it won't be necessary.

Neither Armistid nor Martha are particularly warm people, but the kindness they show Lena indicates that they have good principles. Moreover, this goodness sets them apart from many of the other characters in the novel, who are overtly judgmental and cruel. Rather than blaming Lena for her situation—as many others would do in a society so fearful of female sexuality—they take pity on her.

After Armistid leaves, Lena tells her story to Varner, the storeowner. Varner comments that Lucas, like other men, has fled from his duty, but Lena doesn't seem to hear him. Lena buys a can of sardines from the store, and is soon after offered a ride into Jefferson in another wagon.

Lena's faith and optimism are so strong that when people express doubt that she will be reunited with Lucas, she doesn't even hear them. This is moving but also worrying, as it shows how vulnerable she is, and illustrates how Lucas took advantage of her in the first place.

Lena asks the man driving the wagon if he knows Lucas Burch. The driver says he doesn't, and asks why Lena was allowed to come to Jefferson alone. Lena replies that her parents are dead and that she "just decided to come on." She offers the driver some of her cheese, crackers, and sardines, but he refuses, so she eats alone. While she is eating, she experiences a sharp spasm in her stomach, and thinks she must be having twins. They arrive in Jefferson, and the driver points to a **house** burning in the distance.

This passage shows how the death of Lena's parents (and, ironically, her lack of husband) afford her a greater level of freedom than most women. She can make decisions for herself, rather than having to wait for the approval of a male authority. Meanwhile, the house burning in the distance is an ominous sign of what awaits in Jefferson.

CHAPTER 2

Byron Bunch recalls a Friday morning three years ago, when a stranger wearing dirty clothes arrived at the planing mill in Jefferson. The stranger seemed to come from nowhere, and seemed to be "almost proud" of this fact. The millworkers were suspicious of the man's strange, haughty expression; however, the foreman gave him a job. Later, someone mentioned that the man's name was Christmas, which everyone agreed was odd. For the first time, it occurred to Byron that a person's name can reveal a great deal about who they are and what they will do—as long as one interprets the name correctly.

The passage in which Christmas is introduced provides several key pieces of information about his character. Firstly, he—like Lena—is defined as a stranger and misfit, someone who doesn't belong in Jefferson. Secondly, he has an unusual name, which intensifies the impression that he is a strange figure who does not belong in Jefferson.

At lunchtime, Byron sat down with his lunch pail and saw Christmas nearby, smoking. Christmas's flesh was the color of "dead parchment." Byron asked if Christmas was going to take a break and offered him some food, but Christmas rudely refused, asking how much they paid for overtime. Even after six months of working at the mill, Christmas still never spoke to anyone. No one knew where he lived. The job he was given at the mill was a "negro's job."

Although no concrete information has been given yet about Christmas's race, there are already clues that it might be ambiguous or significant somehow. First of all, he is given a black worker's job despite (presumably) being white; furthermore, the detail about the color of his skin suggests there is something unusual about him in a society that expects people to be entirely black or white.

Later, many of the local men will admit to having bought illicit whisky from Christmas, meeting him in the woods near Joanna Burden's old colonial plantation house. However, they did not know that he was living in a "negro cabin" on the property of the unmarried, middle-aged woman Joanna. About six months ago, another stranger showed up at the mill, and was assigned to work in the sawdust pile with Christmas. He had a "weakly handsome face" and a scar near his mouth. Nobody cared what the man's name was, where he was from, or where he was housed—people felt that he was just "living on the country, like a locust." His name was Joe Brown. He gambled his first week's pay and lost it all.

Already, readers can see that Joe Brown and Joe Christmas are paired characters in some way. Not only do they have the same first name, but they both arrive in Jefferson as strangers around the same time. Both have mysterious pasts, and both are involved in illicit activities (selling bootleg liquor and gambling, respectively).

Brown kept gambling and at another point supposedly earned $60. He would laugh loudly while he worked. He and Christmas became friends, and could be seen together in town on Saturday nights. Everyone expected Brown to quit first, but it is actually Christmas who does so first. Brown usually arrived to work on Monday unshaven and in a boisterous mood, which the other workers find shameful. On the morning Christmas quits, though, Brown is sullen and doesn't say anything.

In a town like Jefferson, not much cause is needed to be suspicious of someone. Anytime someone appears to act differently or against the expectations of the community, they are regarded as suspect. This homogeneity and nosiness is a key aspect of the more malicious side of Jefferson.

Brown and Christmas have somehow bought a car, and the other workers expect that Brown will quit soon too. The workers mentioned to Byron that anyone could buy a pint of whisky from them any Saturday night as long as they knew the password. The next day, Brown complained about "slaving all day like a durn n____" at the mill. He got into an argument with the foreman, who pointed out that no one was forcing Brown to stay at the mill. Shortly after this Brown left, never to return.

Brown and Christmas are running a bootleg whisky operation together, and this is how they both got rich so quickly. During this period, the Great Depression meant that it was basically impossible to get rich at all doing labor at the planing mill—yet Prohibition allowed huge profits to be made from the illegal sale of alcohol.

By this point everyone knows that Brown is running an illegal bootlegging operation; people are still not sure whether Christmas is involved, although they suspect he is. The two men live together in the cabin on Joanna's property. Joanna was born in Jefferson, but is considered a "foreigner" because her family were Northerners who moved to the South during Reconstruction. Joanna is considered a "lover of negroes." Her grandfather and brother were both killed by a former slaveholder during a dispute about black enfranchisement. This history makes her relationship with the people of Jefferson strained.

Joanna's story reinforces the book's thematic consideration of transgression, outcasts, and the past. The "transgressions" of abolitionism and supporting black people doom Joanna's family to be seen as outcasts forever, even though some of them were born in Jefferson. This story also illustrates how the past continues to haunt people in the present, determining the course of their lives.

Byron has worked at the planing mill for seven years. He chooses to work on Saturdays, and people imagine that this is because he gets overtime pay, although no one knows for sure. Byron is a mystery; the only person in town who knows him well is Rev. Gail Hightower, who was once a minister at one of the main churches in the area. Only Hightower knows that every Sunday, Byron travels 30 miles away to lead the choir at a country church. Byron lives at a boarding house run by a woman named Mrs. Beard. Hightower is a "fifty-year-old outcast" who lives in a shabby house.

Here the story introduces even more outcasts. Both Byron and Rev. Gail Hightower are isolated figures, connected only to one another. Their bleak living situations further intensify this sense of isolation, suggesting that they are both forgotten or excluded from mainstream Jefferson society.

One day, Byron unexpectedly falls in love. It is Saturday afternoon, and Byron is alone at the mill. The **house** in the distance is still burning. Lena Grove approaches, and he can see the disappointment on her face when she sees him. She says: "You aint him." She adds that she was told she would find Lucas Burch here, and Byron explains that he is called Byron Bunch. He says that he knows everyone in town, and that there is no one called Lucas Burch. Lena sighs and sits down, mentioning that she has come all the way from Alabama.

Lena finds Byron due to the mistaken belief that he is Lucas (based on their similar last names), and this case of mistaken identity immediately pairs Byron and Lucas as another set of twinned characters. While Lena experiences this confusion as a disappointment, for Byron it is romantic, the beginning of him falling in love with Lena.

Byron helps make Lena more comfortable, and they discuss the burning **house** in the distance. Byron explains that Joanna lives there by herself, and that she is a "Yankee" who is sympathetic to black people, treating them as if they were white. He adds that two men live on the property, Joe Brown and Joe Christmas. Lena comments that Christmas is a funny name, and Byron says Joe Brown's name probably is Joe Brown, even though it's "a little… too easy for a natural name, somehow."

Byron's introduction of the main characters in the novel to Lena also serves as an introduction to the reader. This is one of many times in the novel where a particular character serves as a framing device, providing information about the enclosed community of Jefferson to both another character and the reader.

Lena suddenly grows serious, and asks Byron what Joe Brown does for a living. Byron says he has heard rumors, but doesn't repeat them. However, Lena insists, and Byron says that he is rumored to be selling whisky. He also says there is a rumor that one night when Brown was drunk, he almost revealed a big secret that Christmas doesn't want people to know. Lena asks Byron to describe Brown's appearance, asking if he has a little scar near his mouth. Byron is mortified, wishing he hadn't said anything.

At this moment Lena's naivety appears to melt away. Where before she ignored information pointing to the reality of what has happened to Lucas/Brown—that he has abandoned her—here she instantly and intuitively recognizes that Brown is Lucas, despite the fact that Byron did not actually give much information about him.

CHAPTER 3

Hightower sits in his study, where he can look out onto the street through the window. He can see the large sign, which he calls his "monument." Hightower made the sign after realizing that he would have to make money somehow. Before he lost his job at the church, he used to send regular donations to an "institution for delinquent girls" in Memphis. Telling the institution that he could only send half of his usual amount from then on was the worst moment of his life. The sign lists the services Hightower used to offer for money: art lessons, photo printing, and Christmas cards. All this business has now dried up.

This passage introduces Hightower as a tragic, troubled, but fundamentally good person. His life has clearly taken a terrible turn, and the sign that still stands offering services that no one wants symbolizes Hightower's exclusion from Jefferson and his lack of purpose. The fact that he felt so anguished about being unable to send full donations to the institution shows that he wants to feel useful to others.

The townspeople gossip about Hightower, saying that his wife Mrs. Hightower "went bad on him" and ended up getting killed in Memphis. Hightower was forced to resign as a minister but for some unknown reason couldn't leave Jefferson. The townspeople tried to force him to go, as they were worried about the consequences of the scandal on the church's reputation. The fact that Hightower refused to leave is also seen as scandalous. The townspeople are at least relieved that the street on which Hightower lives, which used to be the main street in Jefferson, now no longer retains that status, so he is somewhat hidden from the community.

Hightower's condemnation and exclusion from Jefferson society show how a person's past transgressions can haunt them for the rest of their lives. It is still unclear whether Hightower bears any responsibility for his wife's death, or whether he is shunned purely for having a "bad" wife who failed to live up to norms of propriety and respectability.

Hightower is known to do his own housework; people believe no one else has been inside his house in 25 years. When Byron first moved to Jefferson, the sign offering Hightower's various services intrigued him. He heard that Hightower arrived in Jefferson in a kind of rapture, obsessed with the past, and particularly his grandfather, who had been a Confederate cavalryman killed in the Civil War. Indeed, he seemed to care far more about this than about religion.

Hightower's obsession with the past corresponds to the preoccupation with the past exhibited by all the characters in Jefferson and the book in general. At the same time, Hightower is marked as having a particular fixation with his own family history to the point that is actually detrimental to his life and work.

Hightower's neighbors often overheard Mrs. Hightower sobbing; sometimes she even failed to show up at her husband's church services. She disappeared for days at a time, and was once seen by a Jefferson woman going into a hotel in Memphis. Then one day, she attacked Hightower while he was preaching, hysterically screaming. The church elders raised money to send her to a sanatorium. Once she returned, she seemed better. The congregation "forgave her," but they did not forget about her trips to Memphis.

The story of Hightower's wife shows how judgment and discipline can be imposed in the form of false concern. The members of the congregation act as if they are worried about Mrs. Hightower's health, when in reality they are horrified by how her behavior violates the expectations of a minister's wife, and wish to discipline her.

Then one day, the people of Jefferson found out that Mrs. Hightower had either jumped or fallen out of a hotel window in Memphis and died. There had been a drunk man in the room with her. It turned out he and Mrs. Hightower were registered as married under a fake name. The story appeared in all the newspapers, and reporters showed up to Hightower's next service, which horrified the congregation. However, Hightower simply ignored them. The next day he buried his wife's body himself. Everyone knew that he had been asked to resign and had refused, until the congregation refused to come to services in protest.

This passage illuminates a similarity between Hightower and Lena. Caught in the midst of scandal, both characters refuse to respond to the judgment and hysteria of others. Rather, they just continue to act according to their own principles or desires, which are mysterious and confusing to others.

Hightower finally agreed to resign. The congregation suddenly felt sorry for him, and raised some money to help him relocate. However, he then insisted on staying in Jefferson. Rumors sprang up that Hightower had insured his wife's life and then paid someone to kill her so he could gain the life insurance, although deep down "everyone knew that this was not so." Hightower kept the same black cook that he'd had when Mrs. Hightower was alive, but suddenly the townspeople got suspicious about the fact that he was spending all day at home alone with her. One night a group of "masked men" went to Hightower's house and demanded that he fire the cook. He refused, but the next day she decided to quit, saying he had asked her to do things "against God and nature."

The townspeople's inconsistent reactions to Hightower's plight show how fickle they are. They may occasionally feel moments of sympathy, but these never last long, and always end up in an attempt to punish Hightower for his perceived transgressions. Of course, it is important to note that the "masked men" (KKK) did not care about the wellbeing of the cook, but rather about strictly enforcing segregation.

Hightower eventually hired a black man as a cook, but a group of men (not wearing masks this time) grabbed and whipped the cook. They also threw a brick through Hightower's window with a note demanding that he leave, signed "K.K.K." The next day, Hightower was found tied to a tree, beaten unconscious. He refused to say who beat him, and still refused to leave. Eventually, the whole drama subsided, and Hightower was finally left alone. These days Hightower does his own housework, and sometimes his neighbors send him meals out of charity.

Hightower's decision not to identify the people who beat him is intriguing. Perhaps he feels some kind of loyalty to Jefferson, and this is part of the reason why he doesn't want to leave. On the other hand, perhaps his decision emerges out of his reclusive nature. Finally, it could be due to the knowledge that identifying the perpetrators would only bring more trouble. It is likely that most people in town are sympathetic to what they did.

Hightower reads a lot, on a great variety of subjects. He once helped a local black woman give birth using information from one of his books. Although the baby was born dead, when the doctor arrived, he approved of Hightower's efforts. However, rumors still circulated that Hightower had left the baby to die on purpose. Both Byron and Hightower live isolated, reclusive lives. Hightower asks Byron why he works on Saturdays, and Byron replies: "I don't know… that's just my life." Hightower observes that people tend to be willing to deal with their existing problems, but frightened of change. Similarly, people are more wary of the living than the dead, even though Hightower thinks the dead pose a greater threat.

It is clear that the people of Jefferson find Hightower to be somewhat automatically suspicious. Regardless of what he does, they are convinced that there is a sinister, unnatural, and immoral reason behind it. Once again, this shows how difficult it is to escape one's past actions and be judged according to how one behaves in the present.

Now, on Sunday night, Hightower sits at his desk. He can hear the sound of the church choir in the distance. Caught in the tail end of another rapturous moment thinking about his grandfather and the Civil War, he sees a "puny" man walking along the street. He is so surprised that he speaks aloud, saying that Byron Bunch is in town on Sunday night.

The end of this chapter hints that something has recently changed in Jefferson, such that the town's normal activities and routines have been interrupted. The disturbance of an established order is a key trope of the tradition of Southern Gothic literature.

CHAPTER 4

That same Sunday night, Byron tells Hightower about meeting Lena. They then discuss the burning **house**. Byron tells Hightower that Joe Brown and Joe Christmas lived in a cabin on the property, and that they used it as "headquarters" for their whisky business. Two weeks after Brown quit at the mill, he went downtown one Saturday night drunkenly bragging about a trip he and Christmas took to Memphis. The details are hazy ,but Byron heard that he said something about bringing alcohol from Memphis in the car, and Christmas having a pistol. While Brown was telling the story, Christmas arrived and slapped him, telling him to stop drunkenly bothering everyone.

Brown is clearly a foolish character who behaves in a dangerously irresponsible manner. Rather than making an effort to keep his and Christmas's bootlegging operation secret (or at least inconspicuous), he goes around town drunkenly bragging about it. Meanwhile, Christmas's rather extreme reaction indicates that there may be particular secrets he is worried Brown will reveal to others.

Byron then explains that Brown is the father of Lena's child. Hightower is stunned, but doesn't seem judgmental, "as though he were listening to the doings of people of a different race." Byron expresses his regret about having accidentally revealed that Brown is Lucas. Lena was going to go into town to find Brown, but at that point Byron decided to lie and say that Brown was busy at work. He was worried about Lena confronting Brown in the crowd of people who had gathered to watch Joanna's **house** burn.

Although he hardly knows her, Byron feels protective of Lena. This is obviously in part because he has fallen in love with her, yet it is also clear by this point that Byron is a kind, altruistic, and principled person. This puts him in stark opposition to Brown, who appears to have no moral principles whatsoever, and who acts in a way that is entirely selfish.

Byron is deeply distressed by the whole situation, which Hightower finds odd, because none of it is Byron's fault. Yet Byron feels responsible for the "evil" simply by virtue of having come across Lena by accident. Up until now, Byron has lived a life of "hard work and celibacy." He explains that he took Lena to the boarding house, and when they got there, she asked about the things local men were saying about the burning **house**. Byron replied that there were rumors Joanna was hurt in the fire, but that it's probably not anything serious. He was lying, and could not bring himself to look Lena in the eye.

This passage further emphasizes the contrast between Byron and Lucas/Brown. Where Lucas refuses to take responsibility for Lena's pregnancy—something for which he is very much responsible—Byron's sense of responsibility operates in a kind of overdrive.

Byron introduced Lena as "Mrs. Burch" to Mrs. Beard, and explained that Lena was waiting for her husband to meet her in town. He asked if she could stay one or two nights at the boarding house while she waited. Byron at first offered his room, but Mrs. Beard said she could put a cot in her own room for Lena to sleep on. Byron agreed, and later that night brought Lena to Mrs. Beard's room. Meanwhile, the townspeople continued to gossip feverishly about the burning **house**, Joanna, and the two Joes.

There is a malicious quality to the gossip raging in Jefferson at the moment. As has become clear, the townspeople do not have a lot of sympathy, particularly for those who are outcasts within the community. Gossiping about the house is thus a gleeful activity, wherein the townspeople delight in the misfortune of others.

Lena asked Byron if Hightower is still allowed to perform marriages—Byron now tells Hightower this while explaining the whole story of how he met Lena. Hightower says that he knows Byron is withholding something, and Byron admits that it's a secret about Christmas: he is part black. He continues to explain that the man who originally discovered that Joanna's **house** was burning saw that Brown—who was drunk—hadn't even noticed. The man then went inside the house and found Joanna's body, with the head cut almost entirely off.

It becomes clear that Byron's assurances to Lena that Joanna was not seriously hurt were completely false, another way in which Byron was trying to protect Lena. The reality is much darker than it initially appeared, as well as being far more scandalous (particularly the detail about Christmas having black heritage).

Byron continues his story to Hightower, explaining that Joanna's body was brought into town and her will was retrieved from the bank. The will listed a nephew in the North, and after hearing about what happened to Joanna, the nephew offered a $1,000 reward for the capture of her killer. Brown and Christmas were initially nowhere to be found. However, by 8 pm Brown appeared in town, acting "wild" and raving about Christmas and Joanna's relationship and accusing Christmas of killing her. He added that Christmas was "mad" and had previously threatened to kill him. After setting Joanna's **house** on fire, Christmas told Brown: "I've done it."

Byron is once again serving as a framing device, narrating recent events to Hightower, but also to the reader. On one hand, this means that the reader gains access to these events in a clear, explanatory way. However, it also creates a shroud of mystery around them, as Byron himself may not have completely accurate information, and may not be reporting this information completely truthfully to Hightower.

Interrogating Brown, the sheriff pointed out that according to Brown's own story, he waited three hours before reporting the fire. Brown objected to the idea that they would accuse him but "let the n___ run." The sheriff was confused, and Brown smugly declared that Christmas fooled everyone in Jefferson for three years, convincing them that he was a "foreigner" when in reality he was black. The marshal, Buck, warned Brown about the gravity of making such an accusation against a white man, even if he is a murderer. However, Brown insisted that Christmas has black heritage. He added that he waited to report the fire because he was scared.

This passage shows how Brown takes advantage of racism—and particularly the heavy bias against black people built into the criminal justice system—to excuse himself of any wrongdoing. Although (as the sheriff points out) Brown's story is somewhat flimsy, simply by saying that Christmas is black he is able to absolve himself of responsibility.

Buck commented that he "always thought there was something funny about that fellow [Christmas]." He then led Brown away, but told a nearby crowd of townspeople that Brown is not the murderer. Recounting all this to Hightower, Byron comments that he doesn't think Brown murdered Joanna, although he might have helped Christmas start the fire in order to cover up the crime. He also thinks Brown isn't going anywhere while he has the chance to receive the $1,000 reward. Byron hasn't told Lena any of this yet. He thinks that perhaps this is her chance to marry Lucas/Brown, or perhaps he will try to run from her again.

This passage shows that as much as Byron appears to have an informed perspective on the situation, many of his thoughts are simply speculation. He has no real way of knowing whether Christmas or Brown are guilty, and his naivety (and infatuation with Lena) is revealed at the end of the passage when he imagines that Lena and Brown might still get married.

CHAPTER 5

After midnight, Brown drunkenly stumbles into the room where Christmas is sleeping. Christmas panics about the noise Brown is making, but Brown laughs in response. He doesn't stop laughing until Christmas attacks him. Brown briefly passes out, but when he comes to, he starts laughing again. Christmas puts his hand over Brown's face and suffocates him. The two fight for a while, until Brown eventually agrees to be quiet. Christmas stops pressing so hard, but does not remove his hand. He feels convinced that "something is going to happen" to him, and that he is "going to do something." He considers killing Brown with a razor lying nearby, but does not do it.

The novel's atmosphere of mystery and confusion is heightened by the ways in which the narrative suddenly jumps from scene to scene, often without any explanation or introduction to the scene being described. Yet while this is somewhat bewildering, it also gives the reader insight into different aspects of the Jefferson community, such that one can see the events of the novel from many different angles.

Brown falls asleep, but Christmas cannot. Speaking aloud, he tells himself he killed Joanna because she started praying over him. He is furious that he was "tricked, fooled," because Joanna lied to him about her age and didn't explain that she was going through menopause (something Christmas did not even know existed). He thinks it's not her fault that "she got too old to be any good any more," but that she is to blame for having forced religion on him. He undresses and goes outside into the dark night, carrying a knife. A car goes past, and he shouts at the "White bastards" inside. He goes back into the cabin, puts on clothes, and goes out again, this time going to fall asleep in the nearby stable.

This is the first time that the reader witnesses firsthand evidence that Christmas is not fully white. Not only that, but he seems to feel alienated from and resentful of white people, even though he can pass as white himself. There is also evidence that Christmas killed Joanna, seemingly in an act of cold blooded cruelty. His fury about Joanna turning religious and going through menopause seem to be manifestations of a deep-rooted misogyny.

Christmas wakes feeling rested after only two hours of sleep. He sees Brown through the window, and thinks about how angry Brown will be to wake up and find himself sober. It will probably only take him an hour to get drunk again. Going into the cabin, Christmas retrieves a magazine, his shaving materials, and a bar of soap, then leaves again. Christmas sits down; before he knows it he awakes, having accidentally fallen asleep again. He shaves and goes to buy some crackers and meat from the nearby grocery store. He eats while leaning against a tree and reading a magazine.

Christmas is acting in an erratic, haphazard way. It is very unclear what his plan is, or if he has one at all. He appears to be acting with some level of intention and purpose, but is also behaving almost suspiciously normally. Considering that he has just killed someone, it seems strange that he is bothering to shave, buy food from the store, and read a magazine.

Reading the magazine, Christmas finds himself distracted. He thinks: "Maybe I have already done it… maybe it is no longer waiting to be done." He tells himself that he only wanted some peace, and reiterates that Joanna should not have prayed over him. He digs a small ditch and pours out tins of whisky into it, trying to cover the smell with earth. It does not work. At 7 that evening, he eats dinner at a restaurant in town.

Christmas has a strange conceptualization of both time and his own agency. He doesn't seem to know whether or not he has "done it"—presumably meaning murdered Joanna. This paragraph suggests that he spent so long thinking about killing her that he can't believe that it is actually done, and doesn't remember actively doing it.

At 9 pm, Christmas goes and stands outside the barbershop and watches Brown through the window. When Brown sees him, Christmas keeps walking through the empty streets into Freedman Town, the black quarter of Jefferson. He finds the sensation of walking through this area intense, feeling that the bodies of the black people around him are "enclosing" on him, and that they are speaking a language he doesn't understand. He looks at the cabins where these people live, observing that they are "shaped blackly out of blackness." He can hear the voices of black women and thinks that it is as if he and all men have been "returned to the lightless hot wet primogenitive Female."

Christmas's behavior in this passage reveals his racist hostility toward black people—but this is of course complicated by the fact that Christmas himself apparently has black heritage. His specific thoughts, particularly the bizarre observation about black women, show how anti-black racism and misogyny combine to produce a strange, terrifying impact on Christmas's psyche.

Disturbed, Christmas runs back to the white part of town, his heart beating fast. Once he is assured that the black part of town is behind him, he feels calmer. He stares at a group of four white people sitting on their porches, playing cards. He thinks: "That's all I wanted… that don't seem like a whole lot to ask." He passes a group of black men and women, and curses at them. Disturbed, he wonders: "What in the hell is the matter with me?" He stays outside until the clock strikes midnight, then sets off for the burning **house**.

The contrast between Christmas's reactions to the white and black groups of people is telling. He sees the white group as aspirational, yet is also bitter about being excluded from this community and way of life. Meanwhile, his violent reaction to the group of black people he passes further illustrates his racism, which is perhaps also internalized and self-directed.

CHAPTER 6

This chapter begins with a reflection on the nature of memory. The narrator argues that "memory believes before knowing remembers," and then describes a cold, grim building surrounded by factories. The building is housed within a 10-foot-tall fence, such that it resembles a prison or zoo. It is in fact an orphanage, where all the children wear identical uniforms. At five years old, Joe Christmas—a resident of the orphanage—is "like a shadow." He has recently discovered the sweet pink toothpaste used by "the dietician," which he enjoys secretly eating.

This jump back in time to Christmas's childhood is revealingly bleak. Despite—or perhaps due to—being enclosed in a community, five-year-old Joe is still not a part of that community, but rather exists like a shadow, not fully present or noticeable. The image of a shadow also has racialized connotations, and suggests that Joe may be an outcast because of his black heritage.

Joe is in the dietician's room eating the toothpaste when she comes in with a young man named Charley, an intern at the county hospital. Joe hides behind a curtain and hears the dietician and the man having sex, although he doesn't understand that this is what is happening. As she says "I'm scared! Hurry!" Joe eats a bit of toothpaste that he now doesn't even want, and immediately feels it coming back up. He throws up, and the dietician finds him behind the curtain and grabs him, angrily accusing him of spying on her and calling him a "little n____ bastard!"

The dietician is one of many (mostly female) characters who are not named despite having a fairly prominent role in the book. This lack of naming could be seen as somewhat dehumanizing. Witnessing the dietician secretly having an affair with Charley before throwing up and being discovered likely instills in Joe an association between sex, physical disgust, and violent punishment.

The dietician, who is 27, believes that Joe understood what he saw in her bedroom and that he is planning to tell on her. She also thinks he is waiting to tell in order to prolong her agony. In reality, Joe thinks *he* is the one in trouble. Three days after the incident, the dietician confronts Joe and asks if he is going to tell, offering him a dollar in exchange for his silence. Joe wants it, but also doesn't believe that she is really willing to give it to him. Exasperated, the dietician shakes him, shouting: "Tell, then! You little n____ bastard!"

This scene shows how acts of cruelty sometimes emerge out of mutual misunderstanding. The dietician is terrified that Joe will tell someone about her *transgression, when in reality, as a vulnerable child Joe is afraid for himself (and does not even understand that he witnessed a sexual transgression in the first place). Of course, nothing excuses the dietician's racist attacks on a child, no matter her fears.*

The next day, the dietician loses her mind completely. She seems calm, although she has totally lost control of her actions. She approaches the janitor and says that she knows he hates Joe as well. The janitor, a "hard man," is only 45 but seems more like 60 or 65. They admit that they both know that Joe is secretly black, and that they realized this even before the other children started calling him "n____." The janitor started working at the orphanage around the same time baby Joe was discovered abandoned on the orphanage steps on Christmas Eve. He has been watching Joe for five years, waiting for the matron to find out the truth of his race. The janitor says the dietician must wait now too.

At least to some people, Joe still appears to pass for white, and it is not clear how the dietician and the janitor know the "truth" of his race. From this conversation, one can deduce that the other children in the orphanage initially thought Joe was white too, before realizing (or deciding) that he was actually of mixed racial heritage. That it is unimaginable for a black child to be in a white orphanage highlights the severity of segregation in the world of the novel.

When the dietician suggests that maybe they don't have to wait any longer, the janitor angrily replies that they do, calling her "womanfilth" and saying that her suffering is nothing compared to his. She replies that she's also always known that Joe is "part n____," then adds that as soon as people find out the truth of Joe's race, they will send him to an orphanage for black children.

The janitor is a strange, creepy character, who seems to take masochistic delight in the long years he's spent watching Joe and waiting for the truth of his race to be revealed. His words to the dietician indicate that he is not just extremely racist, but also sexist.

Later that night, the janitor comes to the dietician's door while she is undressed. Frightened, she tells him to wait, although he keeps slowly pushing the door open. When he enters, she realizes he has been watching her while she has fumbled to get dressed. They continue discussing Joe and what will happen to him if his blackness is discovered. The janitor looks around at the dietician's "womanroom" with its "womanpinksmelling"; he exclaims "Womanfilth" and leaves. Horrified, the dietician leaps to lock the door behind him.

The janitor's exclamation of "womanfilth" is just one of many moments in which characters express horror and disgust at women and female sexuality. The strange terms that appear in the narrative when he is in her room—"womanroom," "womanpinksmelling," and "womanfilth"—recall Christmas's thoughts about black women in the previous chapter.

The next morning both the janitor and Joe have disappeared. The police are called, and at this point the dietician tells the matron that Joe is black. The matron is stunned and says she doesn't believe it; the dietician explains that she believes the janitor kidnapped Joe due to the issue of Joe's race. A few days later, it emerges that the janitor took Joe to a black orphanage in Little Rock. The dietician comments that the janitor is crazy, but emphasizes that Joe does need to be in a black orphanage. The matron says that they must "place him" at once (meaning find Joe an adoptive family). She asks the dietician to hand her the file of current applicants.

The dietician and janitor's hysteria over Joe's race shows how anti-black racism causes white people to behave in totally bizarre ways. Not only do they believe it is a matter of utmost urgency that Joe be taken to a black orphanage, but the janitor is even willing to break the law and risk going to prison (or at least losing his job) to force this change to take place.

Joe wakes up to find himself being carried by an unknown man (the janitor). He remembers a girl he used to live with who one day disappeared, and thinks that she must have been taken as he is being taken now. Joe now recognizes the man carrying him; although he doesn't know his name, he knows that the man "hates and fears" him. Having taken Joe from his bed, the man is now helping him put on his clothes. Joe does not see a difference between the black orphanage and the one where he previously lived. Still, he is not surprised when police arrive to take him and the man back.

As befits a 5-year-old's perspective, this passage is confusing, as Joe is taken away from his old orphanage and brought to a new one, before being taken back again. It is evident that Joe feels that he has no control or say when it comes to his own life, and doesn't even feel able to ask for an explanation of what is happening to him.

Back home at the old orphanage, the matron introduces Joe to a stern man with cold eyes and asks if he would like to go and live with "some nice people in the country." The man (McEachern) asks the matron if she really cannot tell him any more about Joe's heritage. She replies that Joe was left on the orphanage's doorstep on Christmas Eve, and that it is not a good idea to adopt in the first place if one is fixated on a child's heritage. McEachern assures the matron that he will take Joe to live with him and his wife, and that Joe will have a life free from "idleness and vanity."

Here it's revealed that Joe got his last name because he was left on the doorstep of the orphanage on Christmas eve. This lends a strong sense of tragedy to Joe's life. While Christmas is traditionally a holiday when families spend time together, in Joe's case it was the moment when he was separated from his birth family. Moreover, the fact that he was named after this tragic moment means that he is constantly reminded of it.

McEachern takes Joe home and tells him that he will soon learn to work hard and fear God. Before leaving the orphanage, McEachern had commented that Christmas was a "heathenish" surname and that he would change it to McEachern. The matron did not object, and neither did Joe, who did not yet know the trouble this name change would cause him.

More than once, the novel implies that changing one's name is a dangerous business. While it is tempting to reinvent oneself and leave the past behind, this is never really possible, which is why Joe's name change is foreboding.

CHAPTER 7

As an adult, Christmas has a clear memory of the day he "became a man." He is eight years old, and sitting inside his stark, clean room in the house of his adoptive parents. His clothes are stiff, and his shoes clumsily polished. McEachern has instructed him to learn the Presbyterian catechism. Joe fails to memorize it, and McEachern insists he didn't even try. McEachern gives Joe another hour. After half an hour, Mrs. McEachern stands in the doorway. She is a petite woman who looks much older than she is, and who is controlled by her "vigorous and ruthless husband." Mrs. McEachern leaves without saying anything.

After being adopted and leaving the orphanage, Joe's life has devolved into a grim, regimented existence. Everything in the house reflects McEachern's cold, strict manner, from Joe's stiff and uncomfortable clothes to Mrs. McEachern, who has been so thoroughly repressed by her husband that she no longer has much agency of her own.

After another half an hour McEachern returns and, having discovered that Joe still has not managed to memorize the catechism, he takes him out to the stable, making him bring the book with him. On the way Mrs. McEachern makes a weak effort to stop them, but they both ignore her. McEachern tells Joe to take off his pants, and he beats him with a leather belt. After ten strikes, he forces Joe to spend another hour memorizing.

This passage illustrates how religion, discipline, and violence were intimately intertwined in Christmas's upbringing. Christianity here emerges as a system of control and oppression rather than a positive mode of being in the world. This helps explain why Christmas developed such an intense hatred of religion and killed Joanna when she tried to pray over him.

Once again, Joe does not recite it—and won't speak at all—and McEachern beats him anther ten times. He repeats this process until Joe collapses, losing consciousness. Joe wakes up in his own bed, with McEachern sitting beside him. He tells Joe to get out of bed and kneel. McEachern prays, asking God to end Joe's stubbornness. He then gets up and gives Joe the catechism once again.

The extreme violence of Christmas's childhood gives a sense of how he himself came to be so cruel and violent as an adult. He never experienced any kind of love or care, even when being taught a religion that is supposed to be about God's love.

On Sunday, McEachern drives to a church three miles away, leaving Joe and Mrs. McEachern at home. Before leaving, McEachern does not eat breakfast, although he prays and asks God for forgiveness for "the necessity of eating" anyway. Neither Joe nor McEachern eat lunch or dinner either. Joe does not know why, but he feels oddly peaceful. He lies in bed with his hands crossed over himself as if he is a dead body in a coffin.

Through the character of McEachern, the novel explores how Protestantism encourages adherents to shun all desires and pleasures. In this rather extreme example, this even includes the necessity of eating food. Joe's sudden feeling of peace can be ascribed to the fact that denying his own need for food (and thus his dependence on the McEacherns) gives him a new sense of control.

Mrs. McEachern brings a plate of food to Joe in bed, but he says he isn't hungry. She assures him that her husband did not ask her to make it, at which point Joe sits up. He walks over and throws the food and dishes onto the floor, before getting back into bed. Mrs. McEachern then leaves. Joe is only eight years old at this point. It will take many years before the significance of this memory becomes apparent to him, when he remembers kneeling down to eat the food he dumped on the floor with his hands.

Joe attempts to show resistance to the cruelty of Mr. McEachern by rejecting the care of Mrs. McEachern. However, because he is only eight and thus essentially powerless, he can only act out through self-harm. The image of Joe eating the food he threw on the floor with his hands is heartbreaking, as it shows how alone and vulnerable he is.

One Saturday evening when he is fourteen, Joe stays out later than he is allowed. He will be whipped, but only because McEachern always whips him, regardless of whether he has done anything wrong. He is gathered with five other local boys outside a shed. A black girl is inside, and the boys have arranged to take "turns" with her. Joe goes inside. He immediately feels that there is something inside him that wants to get out. He can smell what he thinks of as "womanshenegro," and can just about make out her eyes glowing in the darkness. He can feel the girl's body and kicks her. She screams. They fight and Joe realizes that there are other people in there, other boys.

This passage provides a horrifying example of how, even though Joe is a young, vulnerable, and abused boy, as a white(-passing) person he still has almost limitless power over black people. Along with the other boys, he uses that power to abuse a girl, once again showing how cycles of abuse are perpetuated. However, it is not necessarily the case that the way Joe treats the girl is directly the result of his upbringing. The boys do not just harm her because they were harmed—they do it because they can.

Soon the boys forget about the girl altogether. One of them eventually tells Joe to stop hitting, saying that he can't beat all of them and that they don't want to fight him anyway. Eventually one pins him down, telling the others to leave. After the scuffle ends, the boys casually bid each other goodbye, telling Joe they will see him the next day at church.

This passage illustrates how senseless violence is braided into everyday life for Joe and the other boys. Yet it is also clear that Joe has a more aggressive, destructive personality than the others.

Back at home, Joe washes his face, which is cut and bruised from the fight. Seeing McEachern, Joe feels a strangely reassuring sense of familiarity about living with a man whose behavior is so predictable. He also thinks it's ironic that he is going to be punished considering he avoided the "cardinal sin" (sex) that he might have committed in the barn with the girl. McEachern asks Joe what he was fighting about, and Joe gives vague and evasive answers. McEachern asks if Joe has "been to a woman," and when Joe says he hasn't, McEachern believes him, saying that Joe has never lied to him before. That night, Joe decides to run away. However, he doesn't yet know that it is his body and the world that are the "cage."

At the beginning of this passage, it seems almost as if Joe has developed a kind of Stockholm syndrome, taking pleasure in (or at least tolerating) the fact that McEachern's abuse is familiar and predictable. However, by the end of the passage it's made clear that his spirit has not been broken yet—he still dreams of escaping and making a better life for himself.

When Joe is eighteen, McEachern notices that Joe's heifer is missing. Joe accidentally refers to the cow in the past tense, and McEachern is furious. The two of them set off to look for the cow. Joe points out that McEachern gave him the cow as a calf and that he raised her. McEachern replies that he did this to teach Joe about the responsibility of ownership. Joe admits that he sold the cow, again insisting that she belonged to him, so it was his right to sell her. McEachern agrees, and asks what price he got and what he did with the money.

This passage shows how cruel and counterintuitive McEachern's parenting is. He claims to give Joe the cow in order to teach him responsibility, but in reality it is just another way to control him and, ultimately, an excuse to punish him.

McEachern asks if Joe asked Mrs. McEachern to keep the money safe for him and Joe, lying, says yes. However, McEachern knows it is a lie, because he has seen the new suit Joe bought for himself with the money. McEachern angrily declares that Joe has committed every one of the gravest sins. He hits Joe twice. After the second time, Joe defiantly tells McEachern not to hit him again. Later, Mrs. McEachern claims that she bought the suit for Joe with her butter money. McEachern replies that she is an even worse liar than Joe and forces her to pray for forgiveness.

Here the reader sees that McEachern's cruelty extends not only to Joe, but also to his wife, who is kind enough to try and protect Joe, though even though this evidently a doomed endeavor. McEachern is clearly a megalomaniac who enjoys abusing the power he has over anyone in a weaker position than himself, and justifies this cruelty with religious piety.

Mrs. McEachern was kind to Joe from the moment he arrived at the house. That evening, now 12 years ago, she was waiting for him on the porch. She had practiced how she would lift him from the buggy and carry him into the house. At the time, Joe had never been held by a woman before. She washed his feet in a basin of warm water. This felt good, and Joe nervously waited for the moment when something bad would happen. Over the years she continued to care for him, secretly preparing him special dishes, and often (unsuccessfully) trying to keep him from being punished by redirecting blame to herself.

The description of Joe's arrival at the house highlights the drastic contrast between the care he received up until the point of being adopted and the care Mrs. McEachern attempts to provide for him. Before meeting her, he had never even been held by a woman before, a detail that highlights the disturbing lack of love in Joe's infancy and perhaps explains why he developed such intense brutality and misogyny later in life.

Sometimes Joe considers telling her the secret that he is black. This could serve as a "secret payment" for all the kind things she has surreptitiously done for him. He knows Mrs. McEachern's secrets, such as the fact that she keeps a small tin of money she has saved hidden from her husband. Ultimately, however, Joe hates and resents Mrs. McEachern's kindness, which he feels is a way to gain control over him. Even more than he hates the work, discipline, and violent punishment that make up life at the McEacherns' house, he despises "the woman" who shows him love.

Abuse has prevented Joe from being able to accept kindness. Although Mrs. McEachern has been consistently kind to him, he still distrusts her altruism because he thinks it must have sinister motives behind it. This illustrates how he has become damaged by a lifetime of ill treatment.

CHAPTER 8

Shortly after the incident with the cow, Joe puts on his new suit and sneaks out of the house in the middle of the night. He is planning to meet an unnamed woman (Bobbie) at a nearby schoolhouse, where a dance is taking place. Distressed, he is worried that he has missed her, as he was made late by waiting for Mrs. McEachern to fall asleep. While he is creeping out, he thinks he sees McEachern and almost wishes that McEachern could see him getting into the car and escaping.

Rather than being told in chronological order, the narrative constantly loops back to periods in the past. In this passage, the existing flashback is a framing device introducing another flashback. This narrative technique further emphasizes the idea that the past is not truly past, but weaved into the fabric of the present.

When Joe was 17, he met a petite woman (Bobbie) working as a waitress in a "small, dingy, back street restaurant." She is older than 30 years old, but to Joe she seems 17 like him. Her thin frame seems to betray an "inner corruption of the spirit itself." Joe is drawn to her because of her childlike smallness. They first meet during one of the trips to town Joe sometimes takes with McEachern. Rather reluctantly, McEachern takes Joe to a restaurant that does not advertise itself as such. In fact, it has no sign or any other indication of what kind of business it is.

The description of Bobbie is heavily misogynistic. Joe is attracted to her due to her physical vulnerability, and in spite of her age and "corruption." As will later be revealed, Bobbie is a sex worker, and thus the description of her being corrupted is yet another example of the stigmatization of female sexuality and, in this case, sex work. Although Joe does not realize this yet, the "restaurant" is actually a brothel.

Inside, Joe can also not see or smell any food. There is only a long bar with stools, and a group of men who look like they are in transit. Joe and McEachern eat a simple, plain meal, and as soon as they are done McEachern pays the woman (Mame) standing at the cigar counter and hurries them out. Afterward McEachern says that they had no business eating there, and that it is a place where men can go but boys of Joe's age shouldn't. He says that Joe should not go back—although he refuses to explain exactly why this is.

It is possible that McEachern did not realize that the restaurant was a brothel either, and that once he understood that this was the case he wanted to leave as soon as possible. At the same time, his comment that men can go to places like that but boys can't suggests he might have a more liberal attitude than one might expect. He might have also taken Joe there on purpose as a kind of warning, to show him the places he should avoid.

Six months pass, and Joe does not see the restaurant again. He thinks about it, but only abstractly, remembering the shape of the bar and the faces of the people inside. He remembers watching the men speak to the woman at the cigar counter, and being confused about what they could possibly be saying. He does not see Bobbie again until the spring. He is now 18, and has once again accompanied McEachern into town. McEachern goes to meet his lawyer, telling Joe he will be an hour. He gives Joe permission to "walk about and see the town," and hands him a coin.

Although Joe does not know or understand that the restaurant is a brothel, some semi-conscious part of him becomes fixated on it. To Joe, the brothel possibly represents the freedom, sensuality, and illicit activity forbidden at McEachern's house. On the other hand, the brothel also seems to fascinate Joe because of how grim and bleak it is.

Joe walks to the "restaurant" somewhat automatically, without thinking about what he is doing. The woman behind the cigar counter (Mame) is there again, as is proprietor of the restaurant (Max), sitting among the group of men and smoking. Joe feels self-conscious, convinced that everyone inside is watching him. Max calls "Bobbie," and, hearing this man's name, Joe is worried that the small waitress has been replaced by a male waiter. However, Bobbie then emerges to take his order, and he realizes that this is her name. He asks for coffee and pie, and when she lists the flavors of pie, he is so overwhelmed that he just says "Yes" instead of picking one.

What should be a normal and even fun aspect of growing up—developing a first crush—is a horribly strained experience for Joe. Considering the abuse he has suffered and the fact that the only other described interaction with a girl his age is a physical assault, it should not be surprising that this encounter with Bobbie is strange and difficult. It is of course also made more complicated by the fact that she is a sex worker in a brothel and he doesn't yet know it.

Though they are facing each other, Joe cannot even bring himself to look at Bobbie. He asks for coconut pie and then, realizing that he only has a dime, cancels the coffee. Bobbie takes it away and pretends that she made a mistake. He leaves the restaurant feeling miserable, thinking: "It's terrible to be young." From that point on he avoids going into town on Saturdays, making up excuses so he doesn't have to accompany McEachern. He throws himself into work. McEachern is pleased, although he remains convinced that Joe will relapse into "sloth and idleness again."

Joe's crush on Bobbie and his disappointment after her rejection of him are two of the most "normal" moments in his strange, horrifying childhood. Yet even they are haunted by the presence of McEachern's cruelty, and by Joe's correspondingly bleak and pessimistic view of life.

A month later, Joe comes back into town with McEachern, carrying a half dollar that Mrs. McEachern gave him. As soon as he is alone, he goes back to the "restaurant" to give a nickel for the coffee he never paid for. However, Max rudely dismisses him, telling him to "go back to the farm" where he might be able to get a girl for a nickel. The men sitting around laugh and Joe leaves, humiliated. However, Bobbie comes after him. He explains that he was worried that she paid for his coffee herself. She asks where he lives and what his name is. He introduces himself as Joe Christmas.

Max and the other men inside laugh at Joe because they believe he is trying to pay for a prostitute with the nickel, which is far too small a price. Joe is thus once again humiliated by his naivete. Meanwhile, Joe's decision to introduce himself as Joe Christmas, rather than McEachern, shows that he is taking control over his life and rejecting his adoptive family.

During Joe's childhood, he only saw girls at church and thus began to associate them with religion, which made him hate them. However, he still discussed girls with his male friends, and this is how he learned about things like sex and menstruation. At the time, Joe tried to construct an image of what periods were actually like. One Saturday, Joe pretended to go hunting with the other local boys as usual, but instead stayed behind and hid in the barn all day. The next Saturday he went hunting very early, before the boys were out. He shot a sheep, and while handling its still-warm carcass he almost threw up. However, he suppressed the impulse and, while touching the sheep's blood, "found that he could live with it."

Joe's fascination and revulsion with the female body is arguably normal, considering that he grows up in a conservative, religious world where everything to do with bodies and sexuality is repressed and concealed. On the other hand, his decision to shoot the sheep so he can feel its blood is bizarre and sinister. Indeed, it foreshadows the violence toward women he will commit later in the book.

Joe meets Bobbie again two days after he tried to pay her for his cup of coffee, sneaking out of the house in the dark. While he is waiting, he thinks about how desperate he is to hide the fact that he is a virgin from her. He waits for her for more than an hour before she finally appears. He explains that he had to wait for the McEacherns to fall asleep, and that he ran almost the whole five miles to her because he was worried about being late.

Joe's desperation not to be late for his meeting with Bobbie is moving, and shows he is still capable of being sweet and thoughtful. At the same time, the details provided at the beginning of this passage are ominous. Through associating girls with religion, Joe has become misogynistic. His kind treatment of Bobbie may be doomed not to last.

Bobbie explains that she lives with Mame and Max "from the restaurant." She laughs at the memory of Joe coming in, trying to pay for his coffee. She then says that she forgot what time of the month it is, and that she's actually sick, adding that it's getting late. Failing to understand, Joe asks if she has any medicine for her sickness, and Bobbie comments that he clearly hasn't "had a sweetheart" yet. She touches his arm, but he breaks away and walks off as fast as he can. He is not walking in the direction of home, but away from it. He goes into the woods and throws up.

Joe's innocence at first appears sweet, but after he rudely brushes Bobbie aside and goes to throw up in the woods, what initially seemed like innocence appears to actually be disturbing misogyny, or at the very least wounded pride.

They meet again the next Monday. Joe is carrying a rope, and leads Bobbie through the rural landscape. Her dress rips on a fence, and he ends up partially carrying her. Joe promises to buy her another dress, but she doesn't reply. Afterward Joe starts stealing money from Mrs. McEachern's secret tin and using it to buy presents for Bobbie. The narrator comments that "it is very possible" that no one ever told Joe to start giving Bobbie gifts, and that he did not even realize "he was paying with money for pleasure."

This passage reveals that Joe's relationship with Bobbie is transactional, although he likely doesn't realize that she is a sex worker or that he himself is a client. In a sense, this reveals how a conventional heterosexual relationship can resemble certain forms of sex work—yet be considered entirely normal by a society that outwardly condemns sex work.

Bobbie meets with Max, who derides her for sleeping with a poor farm boy. She assures Max that Joe pays her and that she is not doing it on Max's time. She asks if he's ever considered that she might actually like Joe. Mame joins, and also asks Bobbie if Joe is paying her. Although Bobbie repeats that he is, Mame laments that they brought Bobbie down from Memphis just for her to "give it away."

The cruel and dismissive way Max and Mame treat Bobbie shows that they do not even see her as a full person with her own desire and needs. Rather, they just see her as a way for them to make money.

After Joe buys Bobbie the first gift (a box of candy), she introduces him to Max and Mame. This time Joe gives his name as McEachern. Max mocks Joe, calling him "Romeo," but then offers him a drink "on the house." Joe timidly admits that he's never tried alcohol before. Max and Mame go out, leaving Joe and Bobbie alone. Bobbie undresses; it is the first time Joe has ever seen a fully naked woman, though he and Bobbie have been having sex for weeks now.

Joe's ongoing commitment to buying things for Bobbie seems to soften Max and Mame's attitude toward him a little. Of course, he is still unaware of the true nature of the situation. The fact that he goes so long without ever having seen Bobbie naked is a useful metaphor for his innocence and blindness to reality, and also the lack of true intimacy in their relationship thus far.

While they have sex, Joe keeps thinking: "Jesus. So this is it." After, they lie together talking. Bobbie explains that the first time they met she was on her period, and Joe tells her about the incident with the black girl in the shed years ago. He then asks if Bobbie has noticed his "skin" and "hair," before telling her that he thinks he has "some n____ blood in me." Bobbie is shocked and says he must be lying.

This sweet moment of intimacy between Bobbie and Joe is quickly ruined by the perverse racist logic of the time. Perhaps because he feels newly close to Bobbie, Joe feels the urge to confess the secret about his race—however, this ends up horrifying her.

The next week, after Joe steals another half dollar for Bobbie, Mrs. McEachern confronts him. She begins to say that she knows he probably needs more money than McEachern gives him, but Joe immediately denies that he has any need for money. The next week Joe earns $2 chopping wood for his neighbor and gives it to Bobbie. The couple begin having sex in her room a couple of times a week.

Once again, Joe refuses to accept any gesture of kindness from Mrs. McEachern, because he cannot handle it. He would rather have a cold and cruel relation to the world than allow himself any vulnerability, due to how much he was harmed in childhood.

One day, Bobbie doesn't show up at their usual meeting spot. Joe goes to her house and sees that there is a man in her room with her. He tries to tell himself that it's just Max, but at this point his naivete has evaporated: he knows that Bobbie is a sex worker. The next time they are supposed to meet he doesn't show up, nor the time after that. Eventually he does go to meet her, and as soon as he does, he hits her with no explanation. He finally knows what he refused to believe before, and he begins crying.

In this moment, the bubble of Joe's innocence is finally burst. The passage implies that there is an extent to which Joe knew all along that Bobbie was a sex worker, but refused to believe it. As such, this part of the novel explores how people create their own versions of reality that conform to how they want the world to be, and in doing so miss crucial signs that belie their false ideas.

Bobbie holds him, and the two of them sit down and talk. She explains that the "restaurant" is a brothel, and she sleeps with the men in there for money. She says she thought that Joe knew. Joe did not know, but even after this he keeps going back to Bobbie's house. He starts smoking and drinking with the other men at the brothel, and calls Bobbie "his whore." He takes her to dances in Max's car, carefully keeping this secret from McEachern.

Very quickly, Joe goes from an innocent and naïve boy to a somewhat cold, vulgar man. Although it may be seen as admirable that he doesn't leave Bobbie after discovering she is a sex worker, his subsequent treatment of her indicates that he doesn't really respect her as a person.

CHAPTER 9

McEachern lies in bed, unable to sleep. He is tormented because he can tell that the suit Joe bought with the cow money has been worn. He concludes that Joe must be sneaking out at night, wearing the suit and committing "lechery." McEachern himself has never committed this sin, and even avoids discussions of it. Nonetheless, he quickly develops an amazingly precise and correct intuition of what Joe has been up to lately. McEachern's bigotry functions as a kind of "clairvoyance."

The way McEachern thinks in this passage is decidedly paranoid, and thus one would probably expect him to come to the wrong conclusions—particularly considering that he knows so little of the world into which Joe has now descended. However, somewhat bizarrely, his paranoia actually gives him almost supernatural insight into the exact details of what Joe is doing.

Still in his slippers and nightshirt, McEachern gets his horse from the stable and rides to a building where he knows a dance is being held, although there is no rational way he could know that there would be a dance taking place here. He doesn't even bother to tie up his horse, instead going straight inside. Seeing Joe, McEachern runs toward him. Joe is dancing with Bobbie, who sees McEachern and immediately stops, frozen. McEachern attempts to banish Bobbie, calling her "Jezebel" and "harlot."

This passage further emphasizes the idea that McEachern is guided by a supernatural vision. (Indeed, a religious reading of the situation would interpret McEachern as being guided by the voice of God.) Note the similarity between the way McEachern behaves here—less an active agent and more compelled by some unseen force—and how Joe behaves immediately after killing Joanna.

McEachern tries to hit Joe, no longer seeing him as the child he has raised for years but rather as "Satan." Joe ducks and grabs a chair. He brings it crashing down onto McEachern, who descends into "nothingness." McEachern falls to the floor, seemingly asleep and looking quite peaceful. Joe pauses, still holding the chair, while Bobbie starts screaming at him, calling him a bastard and a son of a bitch.

The explosion of violence that takes place in this passage seems almost predestined (as does so much of the rest of the violence depicted in the novel). The extreme repression and discipline to which McEachern subjected Joe, as well as the intense passion and angst involved in Joe and Bobbie's relationship, comes to an explosive, destructive climax.

Joe shakes the chair at the people surrounding him, telling them to get back even though no one has approached him. He shouts that he told McEachern he would kill him one day. Finally throwing the chair to the ground, Joe runs after Bobbie, who is getting into a car. He tells her that she should head into town and that he will meet her soon, though he is not able to speak very clearly.

While it is not totally clear that McEachern has been killed, Joe obviously wanted to kill him, as shown by his triumphant exclamation that he always told McEachern he would kill him. This is notable because it foreshadows Joe's carelessness about getting caught for his crimes later in the novel.

Almost by instinct, Joe mounts McEachern's horse and heads home. As he is riding, he shouts: "I have done it! I told them I would!" Inside, Mrs. McEachern is awake. She asks what is going on, as she heard her husband get out and ride outside. Joe rudely replies that McEachern is at a dance, but is not dancing. He laughs and then runs upstairs. Mrs. McEachern follows him. Joe dumps the rest of the money out of the secret tin, telling Mrs. McEachern that he has been stealing the money rather than asking for it, because he was afraid Mrs. McEachern would give it to him if he asked.

Joe's reaction to Mrs. McEachern's concern—particularly the moment when he makes a cruel joke about McEachern being dead and then laughs—illuminates an incredibly sinister side of his character. While on one hand readers might sympathize with Joe's relief at having fought back against the man who abused him for so many years, the delight he takes in McEachern's murder is disturbing.

Joe rides into town. The horse is now so tired that it won't move. Joe gets off and begins beating it with a stick. Passing the corner where he and Bobbie used to meet, he thinks about how long ago that period of his life now seems to be. He goes to Bobbie's house, expecting her to be ready to run away with him. He is somehow convinced that she will be packed and ready to go, even though he never told her about this plan to leave together. However, he imagines that his intentions must have been obvious. He knocks on the door and no one answers.

Joe does not seem to have a secure grip on reality, though it is difficult to know if this a result of panic after his murder of McEachern or whether it is what prompted it. His naivety regarding the possibility of marrying Bobbie may seem harmless, but his overall detachment from reality could in fact prove very dangerous.

Eventually Max comes to the door and brings Joe inside, commenting: "Here's Romeo at last… the Beale Street Playboy." Joe has never heard of Beale Street, the district in Memphis that is a famous hub of black culture. Joe sees an enormous pile of suitcases, and wonders how he will be able to carry them all. He goes into Bobbie's room with her and Max. Inside, Bobbie is sitting on the bed next to a man Joe doesn't know. Bobbie is wearing a hat, and both of them are smoking. Although Joe's body is completely still, there is some part of him that is already "running."

Max's snarky invocation of Beale Street indicates that Bobbie has told him the secret of Joe's black heritage. At this point Joe himself is too oblivious to even understand the reference Max is making, a detail that highlights Joe's alienation from himself and his (possible) heritage.

Max asks Joe if McEachern is dead. Joe stammers in reply, suggesting that he doesn't even understand the words the men are saying. Joe tries to talk to Bobbie, but she ignores him. The stranger tells Joe to "quit stalling" and answer the question. Joe exclaims that he doesn't know if McEachern is dead, only that he hit him like he always promised he would. Max asks why Joe came to the house, and Joe splutters that he came to take Bobbie so they can get married. He shows them the money he brought from home. Bobbie starts shouting at him, cursing him for letting her treat him like a white man. Joe is shocked, thinking: "I committed murder for her. I even stole for her."

Here Joe learns one of the most painful lessons of his life: in the world in which he lives, race trumps everything. Although his logic of why Bobbie should be grateful to him is perverse and misguided (who would really be happy that someone committed murder for them?), it is also striking that the only thing Bobbie seems to care about is that Joe passed as white when in fact he was black. Note also how Joe considers stealing worse than his act of murdering McEachern—he does have some kind of code of honor, but one that justifies murder when he thinks the person deserves it.

Mame is now also in the room. She instructs someone to "take [Joe]," because soon the police will come looking for him. Bobbie is still screaming about Joe being a "n____ son of a bitch," lamenting that she slept with him for free and that now she might get into trouble with the police because of him. The stranger hits Joe twice and Joe falls to the ground, unable to move. He can hear the group of them talking, speculating about whether he is really black. Someone hits him again to gather his blood in order to see if it is black. The group of them then set off for Memphis, leaving Joe lying on the floor.

This scene encapsulates the bizarre racial terror that can be whipped up in a matter of seconds in this society. The idea that black people have black blood shows how misguided and delusional ideas of race are in the world of the novel.

CHAPTER 10

In a blur, Joe hears the voices of everyone leaving the house: Bobbie, Max, Mame, and the stranger. Before they go, they argue about whether they should take the money Joe brought for Bobbie, which is lying on the floor. Before Mame leaves, she takes a bank note from her stocking and tucks it into Joe's trousers. After they are gone, Joe cannot yet stand up and thus continues to lie there rather "peacefully." Eventually he stands up and looks at his severely bruised face in the mirror, but somehow doesn't feel any pain.

The unexpected act of kindness from Mame recalls the behavior of Mrs. McEachern. Throughout Joe's life, women occasionally show him mercy and affection that he (arguably) does not deserve. However, this never diminishes the hatred and resentment he feels toward women; indeed, these acts of kindness actually intensify Joe's misogyny.

Christmas finds an almost full bottle of whisky on a bureau, and drinks it all. Feeling "courageous" from the whisky, he then staggers out of the house and into the street, which will go on for "fifteen years." It will take him to Oklahoma, Missouri, Mexico, Chicago, Detroit, and only then back south to Mississippi. During this time, he works in oil towns, in wheat fields, and in the army, although he deserts after only four months and manages never to be caught. During this time, Christmas sleeps with women and pays them if he has money. Otherwise he tells them he's black, which usually freaks them out enough for them to immediately disappear. On only a few occasions does he end up "beaten unconscious."

The description of Christmas embarking on a journey that will go on for 15 years is rather poetic, and likens his trajectory to that of the hero of an epic poem. At the same time, there is also a sad, sinister side to Christmas's long journey, which in some ways will last forever. Never feeling that he belongs anywhere, he is doomed to move through the world as a constant stranger.

Eventually Christmas learned that there were actually some white women who would willingly have sex with a black man. Where he used to fight white men who called him black (even though he himself often goaded them into doing so), he now began fighting black men who called him white. During his time in Chicago and Detroit he lived in black communities, "shunning white people." He lived "as man and wife" with a dark-skinned black woman. He tried to expel the whiteness from himself, even as his body physically recoiled from this effort. Throughout this period, Christmas was trying to escape himself, which made the journey he was on "empty" and endless.

Christmas's inconsistent attitude to his own race might seem confusing, making it difficult to know how he really feels and identifies. However, readers can also see that his erratic behavior with regard to race is a necessary product of the hyper-segregated, racially hysterical society in which he lives. In a world where racial categories are seen to be self-evident and unambiguous, there is no room for someone like Christmas.

Christmas is 33 by the time he arrives in Mississippi, to a town whose name he doesn't care to know. He sees a big **house**, old and rather dilapidated, and decides to go there to ask for some food. Before approaching, he asks a young black boy about who lives there. The boy replies that it is Miss Burden, adding that there "aint no Mr. Burden." The boy explains that Miss Burden is neither old nor young and lives alone; when Christmas asks if she is afraid, the boy replies that "colored folks around here looks after her." The boy also informs Christmas that the next town is 30 miles away.

Perhaps Christmas is drawn to Joanna Burden because, like him, she does not entirely fit into the white or black world, but instead finds herself somewhere in between. This is not because Joanna herself is of mixed race, but rather because her family were abolitionists in an extremely racist, pro-slavery society. This meant that, like Christmas, they were shunned by white people while still not being perceived as black.

Christmas takes a nap in some shrubbery 100 yards away from the **house**, and at 10 pm he finally approaches it. He is surprised to find that the kitchen window is propped open with a stick, and climbs through it. He is moving not by his own volition, but as if he is being guided by another force. He eats something from a dish he cannot see in the darkness, not caring what it is. He is suddenly caught by a memory of waiting on the corner for Bobbie, whose name he has now forgotten.

This passage returns to the idea of fated or passive action. Once again, Christmas feels that he is not acting of his own volition when he enters Joanna's house, but rather is drawn there by an unknown force. Crucially, this force (sometimes framed as a form of intuition) is usually what leads characters to commit acts of violence or transgression.

Christmas now sees that the dish is fieldpeas cooked in molasses. He hears feet approaching, but does not move—he does not even stop eating. Joanna enters, wearing an old dressing gown and carrying a candle. She does not look scared, and Christmas thinks that she is probably not older than 30. She says: "If it is just food you want, you will find that."

It is crucial that Christmas and Joanna's relationship begins with an act of transgression, and particularly that this transgression involves Christmas trespassing in Joanna's house. Throughout the novel, the house represents Joanna's body/sexuality, and Christmas's uninvited entrance is thus, symbolically, a violation. At the same time, it is a violation that Joanna decides to welcome.

CHAPTER 11

When Christmas sees Joanna in daylight, he thinks she might actually be 35, although she later tells him she is 40. He becomes her lover, but they do not talk much, and sometimes Christmas feels that he doesn't "know her at all." He moves into the cabin on her property. He is surprised by the amount of correspondence she sends and receives, and soon learns that the letters are addressed to more than a dozen schools and colleges for black students across the South. She sometimes travels for a few days at a time to visit the schools. She has a black lawyer in Memphis who oversees her will and other affairs.

Joanna is a different genre of outcast, someone who—despite being of relatively high class status and wealth—chooses to live in opposition to the norms of her community. Thus far this decision has left her isolated within Jefferson. However, the arrival of another outcast—Christmas—allows her to establish an intimate connection with someone else for the first time.

Christmas only ever enters the **house** during the day to eat food Joanna prepares for him in the kitchen. At night, he comes in "like a thief." She was a virgin when they first had sex, and Christmas felt that her "surrender" to him was akin to the way a man would surrender. She spent so many years alone that it gave her the "strength and fortitude of a man." Stunned, he thinks: "My God… it was like I was the woman and she was the man."

Joanna and Christmas's bizarre dynamic suggests that the disruption of racial and gender categories inherent in their relationship has made them relate to each other in strange ways. Christmas's perception that their genders are reversed shows how race and gender are often intertwined categories; transgression of one may necessarily mean an inversion of the other.

That night, Christmas attempts to rape Joanna, which he thinks will "turn" her into a woman. Angrily, he thinks: "I'll show the bitch!" He expects her to run away from him, but in the end, she puts up no fight. Christmas nonetheless tries to satisfy himself by saying that he's "made a woman of her at last" and telling himself that she will hate him now. The next day he expects that she will kick him out, and intends to leave before she gets the chance to do so. He goes to leave, carrying his only possession—a razor—but finds himself walking toward Joanna's **house** instead.

Here Christmas tries to violently restore what he perceives to be an unnatural disturbance of the correct social order. His belief that raping Joanna will make a woman out of her shows that he associates femaleness with vulnerability, violation, and victimhood (and with a lack of desire for sex).

Christmas finds the main door of the **house** locked. The kitchen door remains unlocked, which he feels is an "insult." He looks at the food left out for him and thinks, furiously, "*Set out for the n____*." He hurls the dishes at the wall, delighting in saying the name of each dish as he throws it, "as if he was playing a game." The next day he takes the job at the planing mill. He waits for Joanna to "make the first sign" of reconciliation. One day, he sees her sitting outside in her backyard. Not for the first time, he feels convinced that she has no body under her clothes, and that they therefore cannot have had sex.

Christmas is resentful of the way in which the setup of his and Joanna's relationship seems to put him in the position of black servant or slave. At the same time, just as Joanna chose to read Christmas's attempted rape as something she actually wanted, Christmas feels furious about the way he is being treated and yet still waits eagerly for a sign of reconciliation from Joanna.

Spring and summer pass. Then, one evening in September, Christmas finds Joanna sitting on his cot in the cabin. He has never seen her hair before, because when he sees her outside in the daylight she is wearing a hat, and when they have sex it is too dark to see. He is surprised to see that there is no gray in it. Shocked, he thinks: "She's trying to be a woman and she don't know how." She talks to him properly for the first time, explaining that she is 41 and was born in the **house** where she still lives. She has never left Jefferson for more than six months, and when she does go away, she suffers from intense homesickness.

Christmas's observation that Joanna is "trying to be a woman" intriguingly suggests that gender is not something innate, but rather something that one has to learn to perform.

The next section of the novel recounts the story Joanna tells Christmas about her family. Her grandfather, Calvin Burden, was born in New Hampshire, the son of a minister named Nathaniel Burrington. He ran away from home at 12, before he could even write his name, moving to California and converting to Catholicism. After ten years he moves to Missouri and gets married. At this point he denies being Catholic and begins speaking out against slavery. He changes his name to Burden, because he finds it too difficult to write Burrington. He cannot read English, but can read Spanish due to having lived with Spanish-speaking priests in a monastery in California.

The story of Joanna's family brings together most of the novel's main themes: racial transgression, freedom and self-reinvention, the significance of names, strangers and outcasts, and—most of all—the inescapable grip of the past. Indeed, there is an extent to which the actions of Joanna's family in the past determine not only the course of her life, but many of the broader actions of the novel.

Calvin kills a man during an argument about slavery, and the Burden family leave Saint Louis, going west in order to "get away from Democrats." The family live in a small settlement, and Calvin spends most of his time ranting about politics and slavery. People usually do not respond, as it is rumored that he carries a gun. His wife dies, leaving him the sole parent of their three daughters and one son, Nathaniel. He urges that his children should hate two things, "hell and slaveholders." He saves most of his evangelizing about the evils of slavery for his own children, and beats them regularly.

This passage shows that being an abolitionist doesn't necessarily mean being opposed to violence and aggression. Indeed, violence was a vital tool of abolitionism, and—in the view of some historians—vital to bringing about the end of slavery. However, in Calvin's case, his violent disposition seems to be more of a character flaw than a calculated strategy for defeating slavery.

Nathaniel runs away from home at 14, spending time in Colorado, Mexico, and other places. Calvin doesn't see his son for sixteen years, though at one point word gets back to him that Nathaniel killed a Mexican during an argument about a stolen horse. Calvin also learns that Nathaniel now has a wife and daughter. Calvin and his three daughters move to the border between Kansas and Missouri, and it is at this point, in 1866, that Nathaniel returns home.

This passage reinforces the point that the actions of a person's ancestors determine how they behave, sometimes through exact imitation across the generations. Like his father, Nathaniel Burden runs away from home as a youth, gets married, and ends up killing someone in an argument.

When Nathaniel arrives back at his father's house, Calvin beats him with a strap, though he does so somewhat playfully. Nathaniel introduces Calvin to his wife, Juana, and their son, also called Calvin. That night, Calvin (Sr.) mutters about his grandson being black, although Juana is actually Spanish. He gives a speech about how black people were cursed because of the "sin of human bondage," but that through freedom they will become white again. He predicts that in a hundred years all black people will be white, and that at this point discrimination against them will end.

This passage reveals that even abolitionists tended to hold strange, racist ideas. Calvin despises slavery, yet believes that blackness is a curse that should be eradicated. This highlights how deeply ingrained anti-black racism is within the collective American psyche. While Calvin's ideas may seem crazy, they are in fact not too dissimilar from contemporary arguments that interracial couples will help solve racism.

Joanna now explains that Calvin (Jr.) was her half-brother. Nathaniel was her father, but Juana was not her mother. Both Calvins were killed by an ex-slaveholder turned Confederate soldier during an argument about black enfranchisement. Calvin Jr. was only 20. She explains that her grandfather and brother's graves were hidden, because otherwise local people would have dug up the bodies. She explains that people in Jefferson hate her family because they are "foreigners… threatening white supremacy."

The deaths of Calvin Jr. and Sr. in an argument seems almost predestined, considering the pattern of people being killed in arguments within the family. The strange result of this double murder was that it tied the Burden family to Jefferson, somewhere that they have never belonged and which has actually been highly hostile to them.

Joanna herself was born 14 years after her brother's death. Her mother was a woman from New Hampshire. After Juana died, Nathaniel wrote to his relatives in the North and asked for them to send a woman for him to marry. They did, and Nathaniel and Joanna's mother were married the same they day they met. Joanna thinks her father would have left Jefferson had it not been for the family members buried there. Now Nathaniel is buried there too.

This passage continues to explain how a group of "foreigners" and "enemies" came to call Jefferson their home. Nathaniel never develops a particular attachment to or affection for Jefferson, but ends up settling there due to the tragic circumstances of his father and son's deaths.

Calvin (Jr.) was born out of wedlock; Nathaniel and Juana didn't marry until he was 12. At the wedding, Calvin Sr. gave a long speech about slavery. Some years later, Nathaniel and Calvin Sr. got a commission from Washington to come to Jefferson and support the newly freed black population. The whole family moved there except Nathaniel's sisters. Joanna was the daughter of Nathaniel and his second wife, who had been sent to him from New Hampshire and whom he married the day they met. She was named after Calvin Jr.'s mother. When Joanna is young, Nathaniel gives her a speech about the "doom and curse" that all white people inherit as a result of the sins of their race.

Once again, this flashback is told in a non-chronological order: it's revealed that Nathaniel ended up stuck in Jefferson due to the Calvins' deaths before it's explained how and why he moved to Jefferson in the first place. Once again, this indicates that the past is never gone, but part of the present. This effect is heightened by the repetition of names in the Burden family. Across multiple generations, three names surface over and over, highlighting repetition and imitation across generations.

Joanna explains that she grew up around black people and never saw them as any different to her. However, after Nathaniel gave this speech, she began to see them as "a thing, a shadow in which I lived, we lived, all white people." She would cry and tell Nathaniel of her desperate desire to escape this "shadow," but he replied that it would be impossible. He told her that God cursed black people, but that white people cursed themselves through their treatment of black people. Christmas asks why Nathaniel never killed the slaveholder who murdered the Calvins, saying that that's what he would have done.

This passage demonstrates how the guilt felt by some abolitionists produced twisted ideas about race that perhaps did more harm than good. While Joanna grew up with a fairly normal relationship to the black community among whom she lived, her father's bizarre ideas about race ruined this relationship.

Christmas says that the only thing he knows about his parents is that one of them was part black. Joanna asks how Christmas knows that, and he admits that he isn't certain, adding that if it isn't true, he's "wasted a lot of time." Joanna says she thinks Nathaniel didn't kill the slaveholder because he was half French. Christmas is confused by this answer, and Joanna clarifies that she thinks Nathaniel understood what it meant to love the land where you come from, and to act according to its norms, as the slaveholder did.

Here for the first time the reader receives a proper explanation of Christmas's understanding of his own race. Christmas does not know that he has black heritage—he only believes that he does. However, in the extremely racist society in which he lives, even the hint that someone might be black can be enough to shun and indict them.

CHAPTER 12

At this point "the second phase began." Christmas spends his days at the planing mill imagining what Joanna is doing in an absent, almost mindless way. At night they tell each other the "trivial details" of their days, more as a ritual than a real form of communication. Sometimes, after supper and before Christmas goes to join Joanna in bed, he lingers and thinks: "This is not my life. I don't belong here." During the day, Joanna is cold and placid, but at night Christmas witnesses Joanna's wild and fearless desires, curiosities, and passions. She has "fits of jealous rage," which surprises Christmas, although he thinks it is more a performance than anything, like acting out a play.

For the first time, Christmas has developed a (relatively) stable, reciprocal intimate relationship with someone. He and Joanna have a passionate physical connection, a daily routine, and a level of trust that allows them to share secrets with one another. However, rather than feeling any relief or happiness, Christmas is repulsed by this new life.

Joanna has a love of secrecy and "intrigue," and she leave notes for Christmas instructing him to enter the **house** only at certain times or through certain ways. Sometimes she insists that they have sex outside, and he finds her with her clothes already ripped apart, in the grip of "nymphomania." Christmas feels that Joanna is completely "corrupted" now and starts feeling afraid of her, planning to move away. However, he is kept there by a mix of "curiosity, pessimism, and inertia." He feels that Joanna is actually two people, opposites who are at war with each other. He senses that she is becoming religious, and can see that she has "begun to get fat."

The detail about the notes reinforces the idea that the house is a metaphor for Joanna's body and sexuality. Meanwhile, Christmas's growing disgust at her reveals his deeply ingrained misogyny. Joanna is the only female character in the novel who has control and pleasure when it comes to her own sexuality, and Christmas is both horrified by and attracted to this.

In the "third phase," Christmas stays working at the planing mill but starts selling whisky on the side. Joanna begins to feel the "shadow of autumn" (meaning the onset of menopause and old age). She talks about having a child, as if she intuitively knows that it is now the very last chance for her to do so. The spark between her and Christmas is "dead," and on weekends he goes to see sex workers in Memphis. Joanna keeps talking about God, saying she is "not ready to pray yet" and asking God for more time. In September, she asks Christmas about having children, and he immediately refuses. He believes she is trying to "trick" him into marrying her.

Like Lucas/Brown, Christmas does not want to be "trapped" in a committed relationship, and fears that this will happen if he has a child with Joanna. His decision to go and see sex workers in Memphis highlights the greater level of freedom he has as a man to have sex outside of a relationship. Joanna is afforded no such opportunity.

In late December, Joanna tells Christmas that she is pregnant. He is convinced that she is lying and that she will request that they get married, but she doesn't. Instead she tells him now would be a good time to abandon her. Christmas keeps meaning to leave, but keeps putting it off. One day he finds a note from Joanna summoning him to the **house** that night. Without intending to, he prepares himself like a "bridegroom" and goes to join her. When he tries to have sex with her, she stops him and tells him he's "wasting [his] life." She then asks that he take over her business affairs, such as the correspondence and visits to the schools. She would be his secretary.

Christmas is extremely paranoid about being trapped by Joanna, even though she has repeatedly told him that he can go if he wants, and it is him who has not been able to bring himself to leave. Indeed, the fact that he dresses like a bridegroom suggests that there may be some unconscious part of him that actually wants to marry Joanna. For whatever reason, though, he cannot admit this to himself.

Christmas attempts to protest, but finds that he cannot provoke a response in her. At this point, Christmas has started living and working with Brown, who he considers "a fool." He becomes terrified that Brown will find out about his relationship with Joanna. He is ashamed for anyone to know about this, and also worries that it will give away the secret that he is black. Christmas then receives another note from Joanna, although he does not open it. While he is getting ready in the cabin, Brown comments that it looks like Christmas is going into town. Christmas denies that he is, but when he leaves, he says: "See you in the morning," mentally daring Brown to watch him go into Joanna's **house**.

It is now obvious that Christmas doesn't want to commit to Joanna because he is embarrassed to be with her. However, the source of this shame is unclear. Christmas is already an outcast, so there doesn't seem to be much of a risk of getting further shunned by the Jefferson community. Furthermore, Joanna is white, upper-class, and wealthy. However, she is also an outcast and an older "spinster," which is perhaps why Christmas feels embarrassed to be with her.

Christmas goes to the kitchen, where a plate is set for him, and puts the note down on the table, still without reading its contents. He eats in a slow, leisurely fashion, but is suddenly disturbed to see Brown's face staring at him. Brown is leaning against the doorframe, and makes a "gleeful," snarky comment of realization about Christmas' late night trips to the **house**. Christmas immediately hits him, and Brown protests, alarmed. Christmas hits him again and Brown flees, cursing and threatening him once he is a safe distance away.

Brown is a cowardly, foolish character, but he still represents a threat to Christmas. If the secret about Christmas's relationship with Joanna gets out, Christmas's (already far from ideal) reputation in Jefferson would be ruined. Furthermore, it may lead to the revelation of Christmas's other, much more serious secret: that of his racial identity.

Christmas goes back inside the kitchen, leaving the still unread note lying on the table. He goes upstairs and finds Joanna at work with her documents. She reveals a plan for him to go to one of the black colleges with which she's involved, after which he can go to Memphis and study law under her lawyer, Peebles. This way she can hand over all her business to him. Christmas is horrified by the idea of going to a "n____ college" and working with a "n____ lawyer." Joanna explains that this way, he can attend for free.

Christmas's relation to his own racial identity continues to be contradictory. At times he seems almost proud to be black, or at least to want other people to know about it. Recall that at one point, he even lived in a black community and embraced black culture. However, at this point he is furious and offended about the idea of going to a black college and working under a black lawyer.

Christmas tells Joanna to shut up and then comments that she is old and has gray hair. Immediately she hits him, and he hits her back, shouting that she is lying about being pregnant. He claims: "You're just worn out. You're not any good anymore." Joanna curls up on the bed and says it might be better if they were both dead. After this, Joanna stops making food for Christmas, and Christmas stops washing and changing his clothes before he goes to see her. One day Christmas goes to see her in the **house** and finds her praying. He is disturbed and tells her to stop, but she ignores him. Later, he mutters to himself, "I had to do it," even though he hasn't actually done anything yet.

Christmas seems to experience his life as predetermined, which of course accords with the general message of the book that the past determines the present. He narrates acts that have not happened yet as if they are already done ("I had to do it"), which both collapses the temporality of the novel and makes it seem as if he doesn't have any free will.

The next day Christmas finds Joanna praying again. She asks him to kneel down with her, telling him that he won't need to speak to God himself. She just wants him to "make the first move" of kneeling. When he continues to refuse, she asks that he at least stay and wait until she is done. After, Joanna asks him to put on the light, but he says they don't need light. He is holding a razor in his hand, although it is closed. He feels that his body is "walking away from him." Joanna once again tries to force him to pray with her. He again refuses. She unfolds her arms and Christmas sees that she is holding a revolver.

Christmas and Joanna's relationship has always been undercut by violence; even during their happiest time together, their passion involved a level of hostility and aggression toward each other. It is perhaps inevitable, therefore, that their union should end in violence as well.

The chapter jumps ahead to Christmas flagging down a ride with a boy and girl he doesn't know. They are in some kind of distress; the girl is wailing, and the boy tells her to be quiet. Christmas cannot even hear them, and has no idea that they are in a state of "desperate terror." He asks where they are going, and the boy gives the name of the next town over. The boy says he is going to take a shortcut, which Christmas if fine with. The girl reveals that they live in the area, and starts mentioning her father and brothers, before the boy puts his hand over her mouth.

The jump the narrative takes here means that readers don't know exactly what happens between Christmas and Joanna. Of course, it's clear from earlier in the novel that Joanna ends up dead, with her head almost cut off, and her house set on fire. However, the details of what actually takes place between the moment she tried to force Christmas to pray with her and the moment he flees remain deliberately opaque.

Christmas immediately asks to leave the car; when the girl panics, he assures them he is not going to hurt them. The car begins to drive away before Christmas is properly out, and as he stumbles something heavy hits him on the leg. He realizes it is the revolver, and that he has been holding it this entire time without realizing. It had been in his hand when he flagged down the car, and thus it suddenly becomes clear to him that this is why the girl was so terrified. He throws the gun into the bush, saying: "For her and for me."

Christmas has lost control of his actions and again become detached from reality. This recalls the moment just after he threw the chair at McEachern, connecting the two (likely) murders.

CHAPTER 13

As soon as Joanna's **house** is discovered to be on fire, people gather from all around to watch it burn. Some speculate that it was "an anonymous negro crime" committed by a black person who wanted to harm Joanna. They are convinced—are in fact to desperate to believe—that Joanna was raped, preferably once before her throat was cut and once after. The sheriff, a large man with a "benevolent" manner, takes one look at Joanna's body and quickly sends it away. The crowd of people stand watching the fire, many of them with guns in their pockets, desperately "canvass[ing] about for someone to crucify."

This passage explores the perverse fascination people have with crime, violence, and death, along with the dangerous inclination toward vigilante justice that was so prevalent in the South at the time. The townspeople's fantasies about Joanna being raped both before and after she was killed highlight white people's fixation on the (largely invented phenomenon) of black-on-white sexual violence and brutality.

These desires are frustrated, however, by the quiet and isolated life Joanna led. A murmur of excitement erupts through the crowd, with everyone wondering: "Who did it?" and "Is he still free?" The sheriff, meanwhile, feels that the fire was not caused by any one person but rather that it was an event predestined by history. The person who discovered the fire suddenly remembers that he saw a white man inside the house, and tells the sheriff this.

The novel emphatically shows how the past controls the events of the present, yet this in turn raises a profound ethical question about the nature of free will and responsibility. If things are fated to happen by history, does this mean that individual people are not totally responsible for their actions, and should be judged more leniently?

The witness adds that the white man stopped him from going upstairs, saying that he'd already looked and there was no one up there. The sheriff's deputy, Burford, says he doesn't know who lived in the cabin but that it was probably "n____s," and that it is surprising they didn't harm Joanna sooner. The sheriff calls for a black man in the crowd and asks who has been living in the cabin; the man replies that he doesn't know. The sheriff and the deputy bring the man to the cabin. The onlookers become curious, wondering if the man being questioned is guilty. The sheriff shoos them away. When Joanna was still alive, people passing her in the street would shout "n____ lover!"

It is obvious that the racism that exists in Jefferson profoundly hinders the process of criminal justice. Rather than being able to judge the situation in a clear-eyed way, everyone is misled and confused by their own extreme racial biases. This makes the murder of Joanna a particularly complicated case, because throughout her life she was condemned and shunned due to her sympathy for black people.

Once inside the cabin, the sheriff again asks the man who lived there, and the man again insists he doesn't know. Burford whips the man with a strap, but the man keeps insisting that he doesn't know. Eventually, the man admits that he has heard that two white men lived there, but that he doesn't know who they are and has never seen them. The sheriff is satisfied with that answer. Suddenly, a third man mentions that Brown and Christmas have been living there. He says that any man in Jefferson who drinks alcohol knows this information.

Another issue obstructing this case is the fact that it involves not only murder and sexual/racial transgression, but also another illicit activity: bootlegging. As the unnamed man points out, anyone in Jefferson who drinks alcohol will be aware of Christmas and Brown. However, few want to admit that they have partaken in this illegal activity, particularly in front of the sheriff.

Heading back to his office, the sheriff sees Lena climbing out of a wagon in the distance. When he gets to the office, the cashier from the bank is waiting for him, holding Joanna's will. It instructs that E. Peebles in Memphis and Nathaniel Burrington in New Hampshire should be contacted in the event of her death. The cashier comments that Peebles is a "n____ lawyer." The sheriff sends wires to Peebles and Burrington, and receives quick replies. Nathaniel (who is Joanna's nephew) offers a $1000 reward for the capture of the murderer.

During Joanna's life, no white people in Jefferson cared about her; she was cast out and shunned from the community. However, her death becomes the main focus of the town's attention, not least because of the substantial reward offered by her nephew.

That night, Brown shows up in the town square, wanting to talk to the sheriff. It is immediately obvious that he is trying to claim the $1000 reward. With brash confidence, he tells the sheriff: "I know who done it and when I get my reward, I'll tell." The sheriff responds that Brown will only get the reward if he *catches* the murderer. He takes Brown to the jail, even though he thinks this is not necessary, because as long as there is a chance of getting the reward, Brown will not be hard to find.

Brown is an enthusiastic informant and could prove useful because of his proximity to the crime. However, his fixation on getting the reward means that he is somewhat compromised. This illustrates how the practice of offering rewards can actually inhibit the execution of objective justice.

On Sunday morning, a search party consisting of about thirty or forty men and two dogs goes out to Joanna's house and the cabin. The dogs sniff around the cabin and bark excitedly. That night, a man and his son come into the sheriff's office. The son describes being stopped by a man carrying a gun. He says he took a detour to his own house, planning to get out and run for help, but before they reached the house the armed man demanded to be let out. He takes the sheriff and Burford to the spot where the man got out of the car, and they find the gun there. Burford observes that it is a Civil War-era gun. They search the area until dawn.

Christmas's lack of care in covering his tracks reveals a kind of recklessness. He doesn't appear to be worried about getting caught—in a perverse way, he might even want *to be captured.*

The weather has become stiflingly hot. Byron goes to meet Hightower and tells him that he is going to find a more peaceful, secluded place for Lena to stay, somewhere that can serve as a "kind of home." Hightower says that Lena must know by now that Brown is Lucas. Byron says he hasn't said anything after his initial revelation about the scar. However, he felt that she somehow knew already, even before he mentioned this. He says it is as if Lena has two completely oppositional thoughts at once: on one hand, she knows Lucas is a "scoundrel," but on the other, she has total faith that the family will be reunited and happy.

Recall that just as Byron believes Lena has two warring personalities within her, Christmas said the exact same thing about Joanna. This could be interpreted as an expression of the misogynistic idea that women are duplicitous and untrustworthy. However, one could also interpret it as a comment on the psychology of men in love—perhaps loving a woman causes the image of that woman to split in the mind of the man who loves her.

Hightower thinks Lena needs to go back to Alabama, but Byron isn't sure. He explains that Brown has been too "busy" to even realize that Lena is in Jefferson. The sheriff locked Brown in jail last night, but Brown irritated everyone so much by ceaselessly ranting about how he was going to be cheated out of the reward money that they let him out. In the morning, they took him off to join the search party with the dogs, and he kept ranting until the sheriff somehow managed to calm him down momentarily, possibly by threatening to put him back in jail.

It is a strange and almost darkly comic coincidence that Lena's quest to find Brown has coincided with the dramatic events of Joanna's murder. Lena's mission to reunite her family and give her baby a stable, normal environment seems pathetically misguided in the context of the events occurring in Jefferson at this moment.

In the end Brown started shouting again, this time about Christmas. He was once more taken to jail for the night, and then again taken out to help search with the dogs. Byron still isn't sure that Lena believes Brown is Lucas. He has kept it secret from her that Brown has been spending nights in jail. She tried to go and see Brown, but Byron told her he was busy with the sheriff. Lena remains determined to go to the cabin on Joanna's property, and Byron might let her go and stay there, because at least she will have some quiet.

Byron's desire to protect Lena is in one sense admirable, but at the same time, his attempt to shield her from reality and control her is perhaps a little patronizing, and likely doomed to fail. At a certain point, Lena is bound to learn the truth, and she may well resent Byron for keeping it from her. Indeed, she may come to believe—as Hightower does—that Byron is meddling because he wants to be with her himself.

Hightower does not think Lena will be safe out there alone. Byron insinuates that he could stay there to protect her, and predicts that Brown will "run" as soon as he finds Lena in the cabin. Hightower asks if that is what Byron is hoping Brown will do, and he warns Byron about getting in between "man and wife," but Byron points out that they aren't married yet. Byron then suggests that Brown might not run after all, particularly if he manages to get the reward money. Hightower advises Byron to leave Jefferson, and tells him that he is under the influence of the devil.

This passage emphasizes how news travels around Jefferson at high speed via gossip. While this means that everyone stays surprisingly up-to-date with the events taking place in town, it is also dangerous, as it can easily lead to misinformation and reckless action taken in response to that misinformation.

Hightower goes to the store, where the storeowner tells him that they've found the "n____" who killed Joanna. The storeowner comments that the man had not even had the sense to flee the county. The storeowner then explains that the murderer has not actually been caught yet, though his trail has been discovered, and the sheriff is using dogs to pursue him. Hightower is seemingly so stunned by this news that he tries to pay for his items twice, before stumbling out of the shop. As he walks away, he mutters to himself that he "bought immunity" and that he paid the price for it.

In a small community like Jefferson, it is as if everyone is implicated in crimes and other dramatic events that take place, even if they seemingly have nothing to do with them. Hightower has clearly been deeply affected by the news of the murderer, although it is not yet clear why.

That night, Hightower sees Byron outside his house, looking "completely changed." For the first time in his life, Byron seems bold and assured, and Hightower is convinced that he must have taken some kind of decisive action. When Byron enters the house, Hightower comments that it is the first time he has ever done so without stumbling on the front step. Hightower offers him a seat, but Byron says he won't be staying long.

Although the fate of Lena and her baby remain uncertain, the one positive thing to come out of this situation so far is that Byron has developed a new sense of confidence and purpose through helping Lena.

Byron explains that he fixed up the cabin for Lena, believing that she was entitled to have it because it is the closest thing to a home Brown will ever have. Lena is settled in now. Byron verbally anticipates the objections Hightower will raise, including the fact that the nearest person who could help if Lena goes into labor is a black woman. He argues that Lena will get better help from her than any white woman in Jefferson, who would judge her harshly for not being married to the father of her child.

From one perspective, readers might see Byron's meddling in Lena's life as movingly selfless and noble. However, it could also be seen as naïve. Brown is clearly not a good match for Lena, and is completely unprepared and unwilling to assume the responsibility of looking after his child. It is thus odd that Byron is taking such efforts to reunite them.

As he begins to speak about the plight of Lena's baby, who did not ask to be born into this particular situation, Byron becomes emotional. Instead of objecting to Byron's actions, Hightower tells him to immediately leave Jefferson, which he calls "this terrible, terrible place." Hightower explains that he has learned hope for the first time, and that it doesn't matter that it was Lena who inspired this—the hope itself is what counts.

Although Byron appears to be moved by sympathy for Lena's baby, in reality the source of his emotion is perhaps more likely to be his own heartache over his doomed love for Lena.

Hightower says that there are only two options for Byron now: "sin and marriage." He cannot advise that Byron chooses the sin, as this would ultimately lead Byron to resent both Hightower and Lena. He therefore wants Byron to flee the situation immediately. Hightower argues that every man becomes a cuckold when his partner has a child, even if the child is his. He says: "It is not fair that you should sacrifice yourself to a woman who has chosen once and now wishes to renege that choice." He then concludes that God didn't design marriage; women did.

Hightower's words at the end of this passage illuminate the harsh judgment to which women in the novel are subjected due to the misogyny of the time. It is obviously not Lena *who has reneged on her choice—if anything, she remains foolishly committed to Brown even as he makes it obvious that he does not want to be with her. However, Hightower is clearly projecting his own experience with his wife onto Lena.*

Hightower continues, saying that women like Lena can never make up their minds between people like Byron and people like Brown. Byron eventually concedes that Hightower might be right. Hightower offers Byron some bedclothes and advises him to speak to a doctor about Lena's imminent birth. Once Byron is gone, Hightower feels jealous of Byron's youth, and thinks about how he regrets getting out of the habit of praying. When he was young, he used to be afraid of darkness, until one day at the seminary when he suddenly realized he wasn't afraid anymore. He takes a book by Tennyson from his shelf and begins to read, thinking that "it is better than praying," like listening to a song in a language he "does not even need to not understand."

Recall from earlier that according to the congregation, Hightower was never actually very interested in religion. Instead, he was obsessed with the past, and particularly the story of his grandfather. It thus makes sense that he no longer prays, and may have lost his faith altogether. The confusing final sentence of this chapter, with its contradictory double negatives, gives a further sense of mystery to Hightower's feelings.

CHAPTER 14

Burford tells the sheriff that Lena is living in the cabin, and that Byron is sleeping in a tent nearby. He says that Lena recited her story to him as if it were a prepared speech, and then repeats that story to the sheriff. He says that Byron then took him outside and explained that Brown is the child's father, but that he has changed his name from Lucas Burch. Byron explained how Lena came all the way from Alabama on foot. He then explained that he is keeping the whole affair with Christmas, Brown, and Joanna secret from Lena, and that he had been intending to tell the sheriff about Lena when he got a chance.

Here the two main stories in the novel start to properly come together for the first time. Yet Byron's efforts to conceal the Christmas and Brown situation from Lena mean that Lena remains ignorant of the actual extent to which she is implicated in the story of Joanna's murder. Although it's possible, it seems unlikely that Lena would still want to marry someone involved in a murder and guilty of illegal bootlegging.

The sheriff suggests that they leave the whole thing alone for now, and that he's more focused on the "husband" Brown had in Jefferson (Christmas) than any wife he left behind in Alabama. Burford laughs, and comments on Brown's crazed desperation to get the $1000 reward.

Brown may have led a wayward life involving various sins and transgressions, but the only part that is interesting to the authorities is the murder of Joanna. Brown's abandonment of Lena is wrong, but not illegal.

At 3 am on Wednesday, a man comes to the sheriff directly from a service at the black church where he worships. He says that earlier yesterday evening, a white man entered carrying a gun and grabbed the throat of the minister, Brother Bedenberry. As soon as the congregation saw that the man who entered was not black, they began to scream. Chaos ensued; the women were shrieking that the man was the devil, while Brother Bedenberry unsuccessfully tried to subdue him.

Simply the presence of a white man in a black church is enough to inspire absolute terror in the congregants. Due to the intense segregation of places like Jefferson, the congregants would sooner believe it is the devil himself (or, more likely, a white person intent on violently terrorizing the congregation) than someone who has simply come to join the service.

After knocking Brother Bedenberry and several others aside, the white man (Christmas) climbed into the pulpit with his hands held aloft "like a preacher" and started shouting and cursing. At this point one of the congregants, a six-foot-tall man named Roz, tried to kill Christmas with a razor. The congregation did their best to overpower Roz, and eventually managed to drag him out of the church. At this point they realized that Christmas had escaped. The man speaking says that he rode straight to the sheriff from church. The man does not know that after this, Christmas fractured Roz's skull by hitting him with a bench leg, causing him to pass out.

The details in this part of the narrative get more and more confusing, due to the fact that they tend to be delivered via gossip and partial accounts. The man who tells the sheriff about Christmas coming into the church, for example, does not know that the man was Christmas, or that he is being hunted for the murder of Joanna.

As soon as he hit Roz, Christmas jumped out onto the dirt outside the church. He sees that the undergrowth below him "is full of negroes" and can feel their eyes looking around without seeing him. Standing against the wall of the church, he lights a cigarette and watches the witness ride off to tell the sheriff what happened. Christmas is standing against the wall, still holding the bench leg in one hand. Once he is finished with the cigarette, he throws it into the undergrowth, so that the search party there sees a lit cigarette butt flying as if from nowhere. No one sees Christmas run off.

Christmas seems to enjoy slyly taunting the group of people he has just terrorized. Although he is hiding around the side of the church, he does not make a serious effort to conceal himself, and the fact that he smokes a cigarette highlights his nonchalant attitude toward getting caught. Indeed, he seems to enjoy being so close to those trying to find him, while watching them have no idea where to search.

The sheriff arrives at the church at 8 am the next morning, with the dogs in tow. Immediately, they find a piece of paper which they soon see is a flattened, empty cigarette paper. On the paper are the words: "Didn't I tell you?" Brown, who is also there, immediately begins shouting, and the sheriff threatens to take him back to jail again. They find the man's footprints, and even some hand- and knee-prints from when he was kneeling in the soil. It's clear that it's the same person who murdered Joanna, and the search party are once again surprised by how little effort the murderer has gone to in order to cover his tracks.

Despite drawing so much attention to himself and having a full search party in pursuit of him, Christmas has strangely managed to elude capture thus far. In a sense, his lack of care over getting caught has caused so much confusion that it has actually helped him stay on the run. At the same time, the increasing suspense in this part of the novel suggests that the search for Christmas may soon come to a climactic end.

They follow the footprints, and realize that the murderer is likely in a "negro cabin" just ahead. The sheriff warns the search party to be careful, as the murderer has a gun. They surround the house, but only find a black woman and child inside (although the woman is wearing the murderer's shoes). They search a nearby cotton house and similarly find nothing, but can see from footprints that the murderer was there.

The fact that Christmas has fled through the black part of Jefferson may be taken by others as evidence of his racial identity. Particularly considering how desperate the white people in Jefferson are to believe that the murderer is black, everyone will be quick to believe that this is true of Christmas.

Christmas feels that he is being "hunted by white men at last into the black abyss which had been waiting, trying, for thirty years to drown him." Now he has succumbed to the abyss. He has barely slept since he entered the church on Wednesday and has not eaten since Friday. He has lost track of the days since he fled Joanna's **house**. At one point he knocked on the door of a cabin and asked the woman who answered what day it was, scaring her to death. At another point, he fell while running, and instead of getting up stayed asleep for six hours. At first he was unbearably hungry, but then the hunger faded, although he still forced himself to eat any rotten fruit he found.

In a sense, Christmas's experience on the run is an extreme version of the outsider status he has always possessed. Not only is he moving through the world in an anonymous, secretive way, but he no longer participates in even the most ordinary aspects of human existence, such as eating, sleeping, and keeping time.

Christmas comes across two young black children and asks what day it is, but they run away. He falls asleep by accident, and wakes to the sound of people riding past in a wagon. He thinks that they could have easily captured him, at which point he would have told them: "I am tired of running of having to carry my life like it was a basket of eggs." However, he is not captured, and sneaks back into the bushes. He then sees another wagon, and asks the black man driving it the same question. The man replies that it is Friday, and although the wagon driver offers him a ride, Christmas disappears into the woods again without even bothering to decline the offer.

This passage further emphasizes the idea that Christmas's experience on the run is a continuation of the 15-year journey he began after murdering McEachern. Indeed, it is no coincidence that this trajectory involves two murders, the first of which prompted Christmas to begin the journey, and the second of which escalated the intensity of his running to the point that his normal life totally dissolves.

By 12 pm, Christmas has walked eight miles. He sees yet another wagon; this time, the driver is going to Mottstown, the next town over from Jefferson, and Christmas decides to hitch a ride. When they arrive, Christmas thinks about how he has finally broken out of a circle in which he has been trapped all his life, and traveled farther in the past week than he has in the previous thirty years.

Notice the similarity between Christmas's observations about his own travel and Lena's similar thoughts at the beginning of the novel. Both characters journey without having a proper end destination in mind, and both marvel at how far they manage to go.

CHAPTER 15

There is an elderly white couple living in Mottstown who moved there thirty years ago. They live in poverty and "idleness" in the black neighborhood in town. Mr. Hines used to work in Memphis and come home to his wife on the weekends; he and Mrs. Hines are seen as strangers even though they have lived in the town for decades. The town views them as a little "touched" (crazy); Mr. Hines has a "crazed" look in his eyes, and they are smaller and grayer than most people, which makes people think of them as a "different race, species." Because they live among black people, the townspeople consider them to be "crazy on the subject of negroes" and wonder if they are Yankees.

There is an obvious parallel here between the Hines and the Burden family, who are both shunned due to their perceived Northern ways of interacting with black people. However, it is not actually made explicit in what way the Hines have a strange relationship with the black community.

Mr. Hines, who is also known as Uncle Doc, would speak grandly about Memphis as if he held an important role there. Believing he was crazy but ultimately harmless, the townspeople would humor him when he told these grandiose stories, while not taking them remotely seriously. Then one day he no longer had his job, although no one knows if he was fired or quit. After, people heard that he had started preaching at black churches across the county. One day, Mr. Hines is hanging around downtown Mottstown when he hears people shouting the name Christmas. One of the men shouting refers to Christmas as "that white n____ that did that killing up at Jefferson last week!"

Memphis looms large in the minds of the characters in the novel. In contrast to the small-town existence of Jefferson and Mottstown, Memphis signals greater wealth, power, and (in some cases) the looser morals of urban life—for example, when it comes to Christmas's decision to see sex workers in Memphis while he is still with Joanna.

A group of men are holding Christmas captive, and Hines dashes through the crowd, looks Christmas in the eye, and then shouts: "Kill the bastard!" Later, some of the men drive an exhausted Mr. Hines back to his house and tell Mrs. Hines the whole story of what happened. They notice that Mrs. Hines appears to have recognized the name Christmas, although she did not say so explicitly. Mr. Hines is so worn out from the excitement earlier that he looks practically dead. Alone in the house, Mrs. Hines is shaking uncontrollably. In a desperate voice, she asks her husband what he did with "Milly's baby."

Mr. Hines's hysterical calls for Christmas to be killed are the first signs of an extremely prevalent phenomenon in Mississippi during the time the novel is set: lynching. During this period, black people were lynched at staggering rates, often without having committed a crime. In this case, Christmas is actually accused of having committed the very worst crime in existence according to racist logic: killing a white woman.

That night, everyone in Mottstown discusses Christmas, many of them commenting that he did not look black—although none of them doubt that he is, and that he was "pretending" to be white while living in Jefferson. They are outraged that Christmas was walking around openly in Mottstown in daylight instead of cowering in secret, as murderers on the run are supposed to do. They are also offended by the fact that he "went into a white barbershop like a white man," and was not suspected of actually being black. After getting a shave and a haircut, Christmas bought new clothes, supposedly with money he stole from Joanna.

Part of the reason why no one questions the authenticity of Christmas's blackness despite the fact that he passes as white is because it is unimaginable to them that someone would fake having black ancestry. This makes Christmas unusual, not because he has *faked being black—he has reason to believe he has black ancestry even though he is uncertain—but because he has not tried to hide or forget this and keep living as a white man.*

Christmas kept walking around in the middle of town until someone asked him if his name was Christmas. He said it was, and at this point he was apprehended. It was in this moment that Mr. Hines saw Christmas and, after hearing his name, had some kind of fit, beating Christmas with his walking stick. Later, after having been taken home to his wife and then returning to town, he was seen standing on the street yelling that Christmas should be hanged immediately and offering to do it himself. He only stopped when Mrs. Hines arrived and told him to sit down. She was dressed up, and everyone was shocked by her presence; some had never seen her before.

To others in Mottstown, Mr. Hines probably seems like nothing more than an old and slightly crazy racist. Such characters would hardly have been a rarity in communities as violently racist as the one in which the novel is set. Yet Mrs. Hines's words earlier indicate that she and Mr. Hines may have a more personal connection to Christmas, and that Mr. Hines's fit is more than just a random racist outburst.

Mrs. Hines then went to the jail and asked to see Christmas. She was told she had to get the sheriff's permission, but when she tried to do so the deputy said he wasn't there, advising her that he may be at home resting after a chaotic week helping the Jefferson sheriff hunt for Christmas. In reality, the sheriff was back outside the jail, speaking to a mob of two hundred men and women and assuring them that "the n____ would get a quick and fair trial." He asks that they respect the law, and adds that if Christmas is properly convicted, the people of Mottstown will be entitled to the reward money. This seems to convince the crowd.

On the surface, the Mottstown sheriff is making an effort to ensure that Christmas's trial is "fair" and proceeds according to the law. However, this does not actually mean that there will be any justice. The law at the time was heavily biased against black people; juries, for example, could only be made up of white people. Meanwhile, even the sheriff's use of a slur to describe Christmas shows how heavily biased the whole system is.

Soon after, the Jefferson sheriff arrives and takes Christmas away in handcuffs, while the crowd watches and lets out a collective gasp. While he is being taken out, Mrs. Hines pushes through the crowd to get close to him. She doesn't say anything, just looks at him, as if she has dressed up and come into the center of town for the sole purpose of looking at Christmas for a brief moment. As soon as she has done this she turns around and leaves. Christmas, meanwhile, is driven off to Jefferson. Mr. and Mrs. Hines go to the garage and try to rent a car to drive to Jefferson, but it is more expensive than they can afford.

Mrs. Hines evidently feels a connection to Christmas, and the clues indicate that he might be "Milly's baby," although it hasn't yet been revealed who Milly is. The fact that Christmas was adopted and doesn't know his birth family further supports the sense that Mrs. Hines might be related to him.

Instead, Mrs. Hines and Mr. Hines sit in the town square outside the courthouse, not talking, until 6 pm. They then stand up and go eat at the train station café, asking the café owner what time the train to Jefferson leaves. He replies that it is not until 2 am, so they'd better take a car. Mr. and Mrs. Hines leave and go to sit in the waiting room. Mrs. Hines buys two tickets for the 2 am train. The man running the café is so confused that he thinks he must have misheard her. At this point, a crowd of people have assembled to watch the couple wait for the train. After dark, they see Mr. Hines shouting: "Bitchery and abomination!" while his wife tries to shush him.

Mr. and Mrs. Hines appear to be complete opposites. Mr. Hines is rabidly aggressive and is possibly suffering from a mental disorder. Mrs. Hines, meanwhile, is calm and timid. Despite the imbalance of force between them, she appears to have a degree of control over her husband, and is able to reign in his erratic behavior. In a way, their relationship is similar to that of the McEacherns, in which a kind wife was tyrannized by a brutal husband but also tried to minimize the harm he could do to others.

CHAPTER 16

Byron knocks on Hightower's door, but gets no response. He finds Hightower sleeping in a deck chair in his small backyard, his hands folded peacefully over a book. Hightower wakes up and, slightly bewildered, greets Byron. Byron immediately tells Hightower that they have caught Christmas in Mottstown. Hightower accuses Byron of having helped Brown betray Christmas, dooming Christmas to death. He mocks Byron, calling him "the guardian of public weal and morality." Then he begins to cry, saying he didn't mean to insult him. Byron mentions Christmas's grandmother, who was "lost for thirty years" but is now found.

Hightower's highly emotional outburst suggests that he is in the midst of a kind of breakdown. His mocking of Byron suggests that the whole Christmas incident is perhaps reminding him of his own fall from grace many years before. He seems to believe it is absurd for Byron to be acting as the guardian of Jefferson's morality. Byron is a deeply moral person, but he is also an outcast, and thus not someone bestowed with the authority to police the community's norms.

Waiting inside the house, Hightower listens to the gloomy music coming from church. He imagines the congregation walking into the church building, picturing exactly what they are doing. To him, the music contains the denial of pleasure that Protestantism demands, as well as the awful inescapability of history. He thinks about the people who will soon delight in "crucifying" Christmas. They cannot feel sympathy for Christmas because they do not feel it for themselves. He sees three people approach his gate, Byron and another man and woman. It is Mr. Hines and Mrs. Hines. Hightower thinks that they move mechanically, like puppets; Mr. Hines appears to be in a "coma."

This passage contains important reflections on the impact of Protestantism on the community depicted in the novel. Hightower believes that Protestant culture means that people repress their own desire for pleasure, and that this energy instead comes out in cruelty and violence. His thesis is certainly supported by the events of the novel thus far.

Byron introduces them and encourages them to explain their situation. Mrs. Hines begins to, but Mr. Hines interrupts with another exclamation of "Bitchery and abomination!" Byron then explains that Christmas is their grandson, and that Mr. Hines took Christmas away as soon as he was born, so that their daughter (Milly) never knew if her son was alive or dead. Mr. Hines interrupts, talking about himself in the third person and recalling how the other children used to call Christmas "n____." Byron then explains that back in Mottstown, Mr. Hines had been encouraging the crowd to lynch Christmas. Mrs. Hines has been trying to stop this happening.

The fact that Mr. Hines wants his own grandson lynched simply because he believes he is black reveals the horrifying severity of racism at the time. Yet while it may seem exaggerated or unbelievable, Mr. Hines's reaction actually represents a long history of similar behavior by white men. During slavery, white men regularly fathered (or grandfathered) black children who they then enslaved, tortured, and killed without remorse.

Mrs. Hines adds that Mr. Hines has been getting into trouble for fighting ever since she has known him, and that she believes the devil is in him. Mr. Hines starts ranting again about how the man who got Milly pregnant claimed to be Mexican, but that he knew he was really black. The man worked in a circus that passed through Arkansas, where the Hineses lived at the time. Mr. Hines ended up shooting him dead and bringing Milly back home, claiming: "My wife has bore me a whore." He smacked Milly and she fell to the floor. He tried to find a doctor who would give Milly an abortion, even beating up a doctor in another town in an attempt to force him to perform the procedure.

Again readers witness the triangulation of racism and sexism ruining the lives of the characters in the novel. Because Mr. Hines believes that Milly's lover is black (the fact that he claims to be Mexican links him to Juana and the history of Joanna's family), he becomes hysterical over the perceived act of racial and *sexual transgression that he believes has taken place. This empties him of any sympathy or love for his daughter or grandchild.*

When it was time for Milly to give birth, Mr. Hines refused to call a doctor despite his wife's pleas. When Mrs. Hines tried to go out for the doctor herself, Mr. Hines hit her with the barrel of his gun. Milly died in childbirth. When the baby was born, Mr. Hines lifted it up in the light and then disappeared. For a few months Mrs. Hines cared for the baby, who was named Joey, with no idea where her husband was.

As soon as Milly became pregnant by a man Mr. Hines decided was black, he was effectively dead to her anyway. The fact that he allowed her to die in childbirth rather than fetching a doctor shows how racism completely overpowered any love he had for his daughter.

When Mr. Hines returned, he kidnapped the baby and disappeared again. He eventually came back the next month and told her he was working in Memphis, and Mrs. Hines desperately hoped one day he would take her there with him to see Joey. She even sewed clothes for Joey, hoping one day they would get him back. After five years, Mr. Hines moved the family to Mottstown, and told his wife that Joey was dead. Mrs. Hines asked if he meant Joey was dead to him, or if he was literally dead. Mr. Hines replied that Joey was dead in every sense of the word.

The tragedy of Mrs. Hines's love for her grandchild is even more poignant due to the fact that Christmas grew up thinking he was unloved and alone in the world. In reality, he had a grandmother who loved him, yet who was separated from him due to the awful power of racism.

Mr. Hines then begins talking again in a half-crazed manner, speaking about God and the devil, describing himself (again in the third person) as God's "chosen instrument." He says that he took the baby to an orphanage and got a job there. The orphanage staff decided to call the baby Christmas; Mr. Hines believed God spoke to him and told him this name was sacrilegious. He says he put the word of God into the heads of the "innocent" white children in the orphanage, and watched as they started calling Christmas "n____." He mentions that the "fornications of a slut" (the dietician's affair with Charley) unexpectedly became part of God's plan for him.

Here it becomes clear that the janitor from the orphanage is Mr. Hines. The obsessive nature of Hines's racism is revealed by the fact that he made the effort to get a job at the orphanage and watch Christmas for years—not out of a sense of love, but of hatred. In this sense, racism destroyed Hines's life (as well as Christmas's), because he did not care about anything else. His whole life became maniacally devoted to surveilling Christmas and making sure others came to believe he was black.

When Christmas was finally taken away to be adopted, Hines heard the voice of God telling him that he had done his duty and could now go back to Mottstown. After a pause, Hightower asks what they want him to do. Slowly and timidly, Mrs. Hines asks if Christmas might be let out just for one day. Hightower becomes impatient and demands that she speak faster. Mrs. Hines continues that if she can just spend one day with Christmas, she will step aside and let him be punished. Hightower becomes incensed, asking if they want him to go plead guilty to the murder himself.

This is one of the moments in the novel where the narrative most obviously resembles a religious parable. Christmas is like Christ about to be crucified, and Mrs. Hines is Mary, desperate to get a final moment with her (grand)son before the execution that she is powerless to stop.

Byron points out that the only evidence anyone has that Christmas is guilty is Brown's statement. He suggests that Hightower could say that Christmas was with him that night, and that every time Brown saw Christmas going to Joanna's **house** he was actually coming to see Hightower. Byron thinks that the community would be prepared to believe this story, rather than the more scandalous truth that Christmas was having an affair with Joanna and then killed her. Hightower is so furious that he begins to shake. He shouts that he refuses, standing up and demanding that they get out of his house. Byron and the Hineses leave. After they go, Hightower collapses onto his desk.

Again, Hightower is not acting in a particularly Christian or ministerial way. He selfishly remains fixated on himself and the consequences of helping Christmas and Mrs. Hines on his own life. The fact that the narrative becomes a sort of religious parable in this moment further confirms that Hightower is neglecting his moral duty as a supposed Christian.

CHAPTER 17

Early the next morning, Monday, Lena's child is born. Byron goes to Hightower's house and finds Hightower asleep in bed. He wakes him, saying that Lena is in labor and that he is going to fetch a doctor. He asks if Hightower still has the book he used to deliver the black woman's child, in case he is too late bringing the doctor back. Byron then promises he will be as quick as he can and leaves. As he hurries away, Byron curses himself for not making arrangements with the doctor earlier. The doctor is an old man and moves slowly. He is annoyed at having been woken so early in the morning, and can't find the key to his car, though he refuses to let Byron smash the lock.

Just as Hightower appears to have abandoned all consideration for others and to be acting only in his own interests, he redeems himself by agreeing to go and help Lena give birth to the baby. In the world of the novel, the idea that a white man with no medical qualifications would help birth a child born to an unmarried mother is highly scandalous—yet something about Hightower's involvement is also strangely moving.

When Byron and the doctor arrive at the cabin, the birth has already taken place, and the doctor says that with Hightower there his presence was hardly needed. Mrs. Hines is there too, holding the newborn baby, and the doctor says he didn't know the whole family would be there, including grandparents. Mrs. Hines whispers to Byron that he can take care of "Milly" now, while she looks after "Joey." It suddenly occurs to Byron that he somehow never quite believed Lena was really pregnant, that she would actually have a baby. He'd refused to believe it because in his mind, Lena was a virgin. He now realizes that he will have to tell Brown, who until this point he hadn't even let himself believe was real.

Both Mrs. Hines and Byron are revealed to be in (or emerging from) the grip of delusional thinking. Mrs. Hines becomes convinced that Lena is her daughter, Milly, a detail that again emphasizes the haunting return of the past. Meanwhile, Byron is finally forced to confront the reality that Lena really was pregnant by another man. Although Byron is kinder than most of the other characters, he clearly has a level of sexist thinking that made him convince himself that Lena was a virgin because of his love for her.

Hightower heads home, feeling exhausted and slightly resenting Byron for the fact that he now has to walk the whole two miles home. Once there, he makes coffee, planning to go back to bed but knowing he will be unable to sleep. Then, in the midst of his loneliness, he feels a sudden surge of "triumph and pride." For the first time in 25 years, he has a sense of purpose. He takes a copy of *Henry IV* from his bookshelf and sits in his deck chair underneath the mulberry tree to read. He then goes back into the house, shaves, and puts on some nice clothes, thinking: "I must do this more often."

The birth of Lena's baby is the perfect example of a cloud that ends up having a silver lining. While the conservative values of the society in which the novel is set would dictate that the baby's birth is nothing more than a scandal and a tragedy and that Lena is "ruined" by it, it's made clear here that the birth can also be seen as a positively transformative event.

Hightower goes back to the cabin and finds Lena lying there alone with the baby. Byron has gone into town, and when Mrs. Hines realized this, she followed him. Lena admits that although she is grateful for Mrs. Hines's help, she is glad she is now gone, because she kept calling the baby Joey. Hightower asks what the baby's actual name is, and Lena replies that she has not named him yet. Hightower realizes that Lena has combed her hair and made up her face because she is waiting for Lucas to come. He tells her that Byron is "a good man," but that she should send him away. Lena replies that she has never tried to keep Byron with her in the first place.

Considering how important names are in the novel, readers should pay attention to the fact that Lena waits to name her baby. The most obvious explanation for this is that the baby's life—and Lena's own life—are still radically undetermined, and Lena does not know if Lucas will come back (and if he does, one can imagine that she will probably want him to name the baby). The unknown fate of the baby is reflected in his lack of name, which means that others can project an identity onto him.

Lena then reveals that five days ago Byron asked her to marry him, and she said no. She says she doesn't know where he is now, but that before he left, he said that the authorities would bring Lucas to see her that evening, checking that this was okay. Lena said it was, and Byron left without saying anything else. She then begins to cry, saying that she said no to him, and now will never see him again. Hightower goes to the planing mill and is informed that Byron quit his job there that morning. A man working there advises him that Byron is probably at the courthouse, explaining that the Grand Jury is meeting that day to convict the murderer.

This passage shows that Lena is evidently acting against her own desires to some degree in turning down Byron's marriage proposal. While she may be determined in her mission to reunite with Lucas, her tears indicate that she has also developed an attachment to Byron and fears losing him. She is caught between what she "should" do (reunite with the father of her child) and what she wants to do.

CHAPTER 18

Byron tries to see the sheriff, who is busy until noon with the Grand Jury. He stands by the courthouse, watching the men assembled to conduct Christmas's trial. Previously, he would have felt self-conscious about people seeing him there, and particularly the judgments they would pass regarding his involvement with Lena. He is calmed by the thought that he will soon leave Jefferson. He walks through the crowd of people, straight to the boarding house. He greets Mrs. Beard and tries to pay the rent for Lena's room, but she says it has already been paid. She predicts that Brown will get the $1000 reward and then marry Lena, and that Byron will then leave Jefferson. Byron agrees that he probably will.

In a way, the events that have recently taken place in Jefferson appear to have set Byron free. Where before he worried about other people's judgments, he now doesn't mind. Moreover, it's now revealed that he proposed to Lena, which indicates that he isn't repressing his own feelings to the extent that it may have initially appeared.

Byron then goes to the sheriff and explains the whole story about Lena and Brown, saying it's time for Brown to go see her. He says that he personally will probably travel up to Memphis, reflecting: "their aint nothing in these little towns." The sheriff replies that this sounds like a good idea for someone like Byron, who isn't weighed down by a family. He thinks Byron may indeed be better off there. The sheriff says that he will send Brown with his deputy to see Lena at 4 pm. Byron thanks him. The sheriff says he's sure Byron will be back sometime, because no one leaves Jefferson for good, and that he hopes the town can treat him better next time.

This passage illustrates the strange convergence between legal authority and ordinary social life. While it is clearly wrong that Brown abandoned Lena and his baby, it is still striking that the sheriff is brought in to force Brown to reunite with her. This highlights the legalistic way of thinking prevalent in Jefferson, even in matters as ambiguous as romance.

Byron rides off. He sees the sea for the first time, and is astonished by its look of emptiness. He thinks about how anonymous he is outside Jefferson, with no one knowing or caring who he is. However, he then sees a man running through the woods near where he is riding. At first he sits still, but then a force comes over him like a wind, compelling him to move. He knows the man is Brown, although he will not quite admit that to himself. Although he knows he cannot force Brown to marry Lena, and that he might not even catch him, he is determined to try.

For a moment, Byron has a moment of possible self-reinvention and freedom, as he leaves behind the claustrophobic community in Jefferson for the anonymous expansiveness of the outside world. However, his immediate encounter with Brown again emphasizes the impossibility of leaving the past behind.

Earlier, Burford came to get Brown from jail, telling him they were going to visit someone. Brown insisted he had no one to visit, as he was a "stranger" in Jefferson. Burford teases him by saying that he is about to get his "reward," telling him it is in his and Christmas's old cabin. When Brown enters and sees Lena lying in the cot with the baby, he freezes in shock. Brown begins making excuses about why he didn't call for her, but she just beckons him to come over and look at the baby. She asks him when they will start living together as a family, and he assures her it will be soon, just as soon as he gets his money.

There is something satisfying about witnessing Burford force Brown to see Lena while sarcastically calling this reunion a "reward" (of course, for most people, meeting their own child would be seen as a reward). At the same time, this reunion is clearly destined to end in disaster, as it is obvious that Brown does not want to be with Lena and has no interest in the baby.

Lena says she always knew she could depend on him. Brown starts talking about the "bastards" in Jefferson, saying that he has "enemies" who want to keep him from the money he earned. He tells her there is a man outside waiting for him and disappears without saying goodbye. At this moment, he runs. He covers almost two miles in twenty minutes, his body resembling that of a "fleeing animal." He finally slows down and sees a group of "negro cabins."

The news that he has a child barely makes an impact on Brown, who instead remains fixated on getting the money. Indeed, he is so obsessed with the reward that he loses all sense, forgetting that running away from Lena (and, by extension, Burford) will automatically be grounds for punishment and will likely disqualify him from receiving any of the money.

Approaching the cabins, Brown sees an old black woman sitting on a porch. Calling her "aunty," he stops and asks her if there's anyone around who will deliver a message to town for him, promising he'll pay a dollar. She is tentatively intrigued, although warns him that the only people in the cabin are her and two children, who are likely too young for the task. Brown then mentions that the message is for the sheriff, at which point the woman immediately refuses. She says she knows of a black man who visited the sheriff once and never came back. Brown walks away before she has even finished talking.

This passage shows that the extreme, brutal, and unjust behavior of law enforcement toward black people in this society makes even something like giving a message to the sheriff too dangerous for most black people to want to do. The old woman is clearly tempted by the money, but as soon as she hears that the task involves seeing the sheriff, she decides it is not worth it.

As Brown is walking away, the old woman shouts after him, saying she has found a young man who will go. Brown scribbles a misspelled note in which he asks the recipient to give his reward to the "barer" so it can be returned to him. Instead of signing it, he writes: "You no who." Brown gives the man $1, promising to give $5 if he is back within the hour. The old woman, who is still nearby, urges the young man to go quick. A few moments later, Byron comes across the young man and asks him to direct him to Brown.

Again, Brown's greed prevents him from seeing what is obviously true: he has lost his chance to get the reward. His childish signature "you no who" indicates that he is entirely lacking in the maturity necessary to provide for Lena and parent their child. Fortunately, Byron's arrival seems to suggest that justice of some sort may yet be restored.

Meanwhile, Brown is left alone and begins muttering to himself about his plight, and his worries that he won't receive the reward money. He feels that his life has come to resemble a game of chess, with everyone around him as pieces being moved by an invisible "Opponent." He thinks that if by some miracle the young man *does* return with his reward money, he won't believe it. He starts to laugh, and says that all he ever wanted was justice. Just then, Byron's voice comes from behind him, demanding that he stand up.

Perhaps due to the dramatic and unpredictable events that have all taken place recently, Brown appears to have lost his mind. This aligns him with many other characters, including Christmas, Hightower, and Mr. Hines, all of whom are driven to a kind of madness by the events in the novel. Indeed, this prevalence of madness can be read as a trope of Southern Gothic literature.

A fight immediately breaks out between the two men; it is over in two minutes. Byron is left lying alone in the grass, bleeding from the face. He hears the whistle of a nearby train and slowly stands up. Feeling dazed, he watches Brown emerge as if from nowhere and jump onto the moving train. Byron is stunned by the skill with which he does it, and concludes that he must have done it many times before. Slowly, Byron makes his way back down the route he came. He finds a wagon, hoping to hitch a ride back to Jefferson, and the wagon driver informs him that Christmas has been killed.

If this were a sentimental or moralistic novel, Byron would have likely won the fight, due to his superior moral character. However, in the starkly realistic world in which the novel is actually set, good things do not happen to good people and bad things to bad people. Instead, as in reality, there is little justice to be found.

CHAPTER 19

Christmas managed to escape from jail, but the hiding place he chose after getting out—Hightower's house—was such a strange choice that the townspeople say that he might as well have committed suicide. The District Attorney, a Harvard graduate from an old slaveholding Jefferson family, is named Gavin Stevens. On Monday night, a college friend of Stevens who is now a professor at a nearby university arrives in Jefferson. He sees Stevens talking to Mr. Hines and Mrs. Hines. He hands Mrs. Hines train tickets while discussing funeral arrangements with her.

Stevens's odd and sudden entrance into the narrative can be explained by the fact that he is yet another framing device. Through telling the story of what happened to Christmas to his professor friend, he also narrates it to the audience. As such, readers again receive a biased and limited view of the situation, and must make their own judgments about the "truth" of what happened.

After Mr. and Mrs. Hines get on the train, Stevens tells the professor (who is not named) the whole story. He speculates that Christmas sought shelter in Hightower's house because of his grandmother. Mrs. Hines did not expect that she could stop Christmas dying, but she wanted him to die in a "decent," legal way, rather than being lynched (which was what Mr. Hines wanted to do). Stevens then reflects that for the first time in her life, Mrs. Hines found someone—Hightower—to whom she could tell her story. He thinks that she probably told Christmas that "Hightower would save him" when she went to see him in jail.

It seems that, after having initially been opposed to the idea of helping Christmas, Hightower came around to it. This could be thanks to Mrs. Hines's persuasion, or—more likely—it is the result of the surge of purpose Hightower experienced after helping Lena give birth to her baby. After so many years of being isolated and purposeless, Hightower remembered what it was like to feel connected and useful to others, and wanted to keep helping.

Stevens thinks Christmas believed Mrs. Hines, and that this inspired him to run. He miraculously managed to break free despite being handcuffed, but at that point he had done "too much running" in life. All his life, Christmas had been running from himself, from his own actions. Stevens characterizes all Christmas's actions as being driven either by his "black blood" or his "white blood." Stevens argues that it was Christmas's white blood that sent him to Hightower's house, and his black blood that led him to grab the pistol and point it at Hightower. Yet his black blood then "failed him." Instead of killing the minister, he just struck him and then hid behind a table, where he was quickly shot to death.

Here readers receive the second part of the story begun by the man who ran from the church to see the sheriff. Thus the story of Christmas's demise comes together like pieces of a puzzle. At the same time, it is clear from Stevens's strange discussion of "white blood" and "black blood" that his account is skewed by bias.

The narrator then shifts to describe a young man living in Jefferson named Percy Grimm. He was born just too late to fight in the First World War, which he deeply resented. The first fight Grimm ever got into was with a soldier who had served in the war, and who said that the US was foolish to get involved and ally with France. Grimm was beaten by the man, but was proud of the scars he had gained. Thanks to the new civilian military act, Grimm is able to fulfil his dream of wearing a military uniform. He is a fiercely patriotic man, a white supremacist with fanatical reverence for the American military. On every national holiday, Grimm proudly strides about town in his uniform.

The sudden shift to focus on Percy Grimm is another bewildering moment, particularly considering that his fervent patriotism and militarism set him apart from the other characters in the novel. However, note that the legacy of war has been one of the most important themes of the book, even if it has been more in the background than the foreground. Both WWI and the Civil War continue to have a great impact on Jefferson.

By the time Christmas is brought back to Jefferson from Mottstown, Grimm has already been to see the commander of the local Post of the American Legion. He tells the commander that "it is the right of no civilian to sentence a man to death," and that as soldiers they must enforce this rule. The commander is skeptical, but Grimm is adamant, saying that as soldiers they must be the "first to state where we stand." The commander indicates that he won't stop Grimm, but that Grimm mustn't use his name. On the Saturday before Christmas's death, Grimm goes through Jefferson gathering men who have served in the military and "divided them into squads." He advises all of them to carry a gun.

Grimm wants to use his status as a "soldier" to commit a form of vigilante justice, which in the South during this era usually meant lynching. The strange logic he uses to justify this involves arguing that "civilians"—including the jury legally appointed to evaluate Christmas's guilt—do not have the right to execute people, only soldiers do. While on one level an excuse for megalomania, Grimm's reasoning shows how some people in the South lived as if they were still in a state of war, which in turn highlights the long afterlife of the Civil War.

Grimm goes to see the sheriff to ask for permission for the group of men to station themselves in the town square. The sheriff immediately refuses, telling Grimm that he and his men should not carry their guns around town, and Grimm pretends to accept this answer. However, later that night the sheriff arrives in the town square to find the group of men standing outside the courthouse and jail. The sheriff approaches Grimm and reluctantly says that Grimm can be his "special deputy," but that he is not permitted to show his gun to anyone. As the night goes on, most of Grimm's men end up going home.

As this passage shows, vigilante "justice" was a big problem in the South at the time. The power of people like Grimm and the mobs they lead means that even the sheriff has to capitulate to Grimm's desires, naming him "special deputy" when Grimm has done nothing to warrant this title.

Sunday is a calm, quiet day. Everyone knows that the Grand Jury will meet tomorrow, and the secrecy implied by the words "Grand Jury" makes Grimm's men even more convinced of their own "makebelieve." Most of the townspeople have quickly accepted the presence of Grimm and his men and even started to see Grimm as a kind of authority, and Grimm's men have been agitated to the point that "they might die for him, if the occasion rose." They come to believe that it is Grimm who is really in charge, not the sheriff

The story of Grimm and his made-up army shows how power and authority are inventions that only work because people choose to believe in them. It is remarkable—and frightening—how quickly Grimm positions himself as a rightful leader, and how quickly the townspeople accept him in this role.

On Monday, the day of the Grand Jury, Grimm's men wear their uniforms. The townspeople see Grimm walk past with his gun and comment that the sheriff has "no say" in what will happen that day. Grimm is inside the courthouse when he hears Burford fire his gun. While being walked across the town square, Christmas has fled, and chaos ensues. Grimm demands that the courthouse aide turn on the fire alarm in order to alert everyone that something has happened. He then steals a bicycle and zooms off, overtaking Burford. and manages to follow Christmas to a cluster of "negro cabins." Christmas, who is holding a gun, sees that Grimm has found him and manages to run off.

Now all the pieces of the puzzle come together to construct a depiction of Christmas's death. The fact that Christmas managed to flee in the first place is incredible considering how many people in Jefferson were aware of his detainment (including the makeshift army unit Grimm has assembled). As readers know, however, Christmas's many years of escaping punishment will soon end.

Now on foot, Grimm follows Christmas to Hightower's house, now accompanied by some of his men. When Grimm demands that Hightower reveal which room Christmas is in, Hightower begins to say that he was with Christmas on the night of the murder and that he is thus not guilty. Grimm is appalled by this. As if by intuition, he runs into another room and immediately begins shooting. Although he hits Christmas, he does not kill him; he then uses a butcher knife to castrate Christmas. Seeing this, one of Grimm's men vomits. At this point the life finally leaves Christmas's body.

The failure of Hightower's last-minute decision to provide an alibi for Christmas suggests that if Hightower had been less weak-willed and originally agreed to do it, things might have turned out differently. Meanwhile, Grimm's horrific lynching of Christmas is sadly reflective of many real incidents that occurred in towns like Jefferson during this period.

CHAPTER 20

Hightower's father was 50 when he was born, and his mother had by then been an "invalid" for 20 years. Hightower believed his mother's disability was due to the food rationing that occurred during the Civil War. Hightower's grandfather was a slaveholder but Hightower's father refused to consume anything that was made by slave labor. This meant that during the Civil War, the only food Hightower's mother ate was what she grew herself in her own little garden. When their neighbors offered them donations of food, Hightower's father insisted that they refuse, because this food was grown and prepared by slaves.

The story of Hightower's family echoes many of the family stories presented in the novel thus far, most notably that of the Burdens. However, where the Burdens were united in their difference and exclusion from Jefferson due to the question of abolition, in Hightower's case this division ran through the same family.

Hightower's father had been a minister, and when the Civil War began, he volunteered to go straight away, serving as a minister to the troops. Hightower remembers finding the uniform his father wore during the war in an old trunk as an eight-year-old child. Young Hightower was fascinated by the coat, but every time he looked at it, it made him sick. He would lose his appetite and not be able to sleep at night. He would ask the black woman who lived with the family, Cinthy, to tell him stories about his grandfather and how many Yankees he killed in the war. When he heard the stories, his heart would swell with pride.

Here readers witness the beginnings of Hightower's strange, paralyzing obsession with the past. In a way, one can interpret his fixation with the Civil War as being a particularly extreme manifestation of a similar issue suffered by all people in Jefferson. While other people may not be getting sick from their obsession with the Civil War, their lives are certainly haunted and determined by it.

Even when they lived together, Hightower's grandfather and his son were exact opposites. Hightower's father was rather serious and humorless, whereas his grandfather had a boisterous, vulgar spirit. Hightower's father cooked his own food and refused to drink alcohol, while the grandfather, a lawyer, loved whisky. When Hightower's father married, the grandfather gave his house to the newlywedded couple, but took the enslaved people who used to work there with him. He never stepped foot in the house again, although "he would have been welcome."

This passage contradicts the idea, first explored through the story of Joanna Burden's family, that people are fated to repeat the lives of the family members that come before them. Whereas Nathaniel and Calvin Burden end up having very similar life trajectories, Hightower's grandfather and father are almost comically opposed.

Hightower's father was an abolitionist before the word had even made its way from the North to the South. Serving as a minister in the Civil War changed him, and when he came back, he retrained as a doctor; his disabled wife was one of his first patients. Despite his fiercely principled nature, Hightower's father was a strangely self-contradictory person. He couldn't see the "paradox" in the fact that he was an abolitionist and had served in the Civil War on the Confederate side. This suggests that he was actually two entirely opposite people in one body.

Again, in this part of the narrative many of the tropes of the novel are recapitulated. One is the idea of being two people living in one body. Just as Christmas wants to be black and white at the same time, and Lena wants to be with Byron and Brown at the same time, Hightower's father was also caught between two completely paradoxical ways of being in the world.

The narrator describes Hightower as having grown up "among phantoms": his father, his mother, and an elderly black woman named Cinthy who had formerly been enslaved by Hightower's grandfather. Over the course of his life, Hightower forgot that he had ever seen his mother out of bed, and eventually came to think of her as not even possessing hands and feet. His father was "a stranger to both of them [his wife and son]… a foreigner… more than a stranger: an enemy." He smelled and sounded different to his wife and son.

While the narrator describes Hightower in particular has having grown up "among phantoms," this is clearly also true for everyone in the novel. No character is able to escape the past; many have the same names as their ancestors, and in most cases characters' actions are predetermined by what was done before them.

The third phantom, Cinthy, was taken away by Hightower's grandfather when he left the house. When Hightower's grandfather died, Cinthy at first refused to leave his house or believe he was dead. She waited for a year before coming to live with Hightower's father. When he insisted she was now free, she cursed freedom as the force that had killed Hightower's grandfather and declared: "Don't talk ter me erbout freedom." When he was a child, she would tell Hightower stories about his grandfather, the "ghost." Hightower never grew bored of these stories, and delighted in hearing that his grandfather had apparently killed hundreds of men.

As a character, Cinthy represents a stock figure with a charged history in depictions of slavery and its aftermath. During slavery and following abolition, fictions circulated around the South stating that black people liked being enslaved, felt loyalty to their "masters," and would choose to stay with slaveholders given the choice to leave. This was, of course, completely untrue. Yet characters like Cinthy serve to reinforce the fiction.

While Hightower was at seminary, he felt that he was called to Jefferson because this was where his grandfather died, and where his own life was stopped "twenty years before it was ever born." However, he never ended up telling the elders this story. This was all because he fell in the love with the daughter of one of the teachers. They left each other notes in a hollow tree for two years before they met face-to-face. She ended up being a rather serious and humorless person, and the first time they met in person, she talked about marriage in a way that was far more practical than romantic.

Hightower's fixation on his grandfather is somewhat difficult to understand, and almost appears to be a kind of mental illness. He feels deeply attached to his grandfather, so much so that that he believes his own life *ended when his grandfather killed—even though this took place two decades before he was born.*

They married immediately after Hightower graduated, and six months later moved to Jefferson. The passion was gone from their relationship, and on realizing this, Hightower observed somewhat neutrally: "That's the way it is. Marriage." On the train ride to Jefferson, Hightower sank into a kind of ecstatic delirium and began recounting aloud the stories Cinthy told him about his grandfather, at one point wondering if she'd invented them. According to her, after serving in the Civil War and killing many Yankee soldiers, Hightower's grandfather was himself killed for stealing chickens from his neighbor's henhouse.

As has been hinted before, Hightower's life has actually been stalled by his fixation with his grandfather. The moment when he was supposed to be emerging into adulthood and independence with his new wife, for example, was ruined by him descending into a rapture about his grandfather.

At this point Hightower's voice had grown high and loud in pitch, and his wife was begging him to be quiet, as he was attracting the attention of the other passengers. No one found out who shot his grandfather, he said; it was possibly a woman, and Hightower likes to think it was the wife of a Confederate soldier. Ignoring his wife's requests, Hightower observed that it is little wonder "that this world is peopled principally by the dead." Shortly after, the train arrived in Jefferson.

Hightower's statement about the world being "principally" populated by the dead is crucial. Through this claim, he reverses the idea that the dead are absent. Instead, he argues that they are a present part of the world population, and not only that, they are the majority, meaning they have a powerful impact on existence.

Back in the present, Hightower reflects on the trajectory of his life and wonders if he is to blame for wife's transgressions and eventual death. He feels a hint of forgiveness for himself because he was young at the time. He also concludes that every person has a right to destroy their own lives. However, Hightower is then gripped by a feeling of absolute horror, feeling that he is trapped in the trauma and violence of the past. He feels that he is surrounded by faces, "composite of all the faces which he has ever seen." He is convinced that he is dying and that he should pray. However, he cannot bring himself to try. He can hear the sounds of the Civil War.

In this surreal conclusion to the chapter, it is left to the reader to interpret what exactly is happening. There are hints that Hightower is dying, and is joining the community of the dead that he has spent so long thinking about during his life. He might be being visited by ghosts, and experiencing a powerful vision of the past. On the other hand, he could simply be losing his mind, finally succumbing to the obsessive grip of his fantasies about the past.

CHAPTER 21

There is a furniture dealer in east Mississippi who recently went to Tennessee to pick up some furniture. Arriving back home, he tells his wife about some passengers he picked up on the journey. He found them at a gas station; one was a young, beautiful woman holding a baby, and the other a plain man who explained that they weren't headed in any specific direction, but were instead just "looking around." The furniture dealer assumed they were married. He was confused by how a plain man like Byron had managed to marry a woman as beautiful as Lena. At the same time, he got the impression that Byron was "a good fellow," someone hard-working, honest, and dependable.

Once again, the narrative uses a framing device to (re)introduce Byron and Lena to the reader. This lends a layer of mystery to their story; while readers already have a lot of information about Byron and Lena's dynamic, the furniture dealer doesn't. By seeing their relationship through his eyes, readers might be led to reassess their conclusions about what is happening between them.

Lena kept saying that they came from Alabama, using the pronoun "we," although the driver soon realized she meant her and her baby. She explained that the baby was only three weeks old and had been born in Jefferson, where a man was recently lynched. On the way, the furniture dealer offered for Byron and Lena to sleep in the truck overnight. He noticed that there was something "funny and kind of strained" about Byron and his relationship to Lena. He then tells his wife that Byron and Lena weren't married, and that the baby was not Byron's. He learned that they were searching for the father of Lena's child, although they never mention his name. He also saw that Byron was desperate to do something that he wouldn't allow himself to do.

In some ways, this glimpse into Byron and Lena's life following the main events of the novel is frustrating. They appear to be stuck in a kind of purgatory, still pursuing a man (Lucas/Brown) who does not want to be found, and still forbidding themselves from doing what they actually want *to do—be together.*

That night, while the furniture dealer pretended to be asleep, he heard Byron try to get into the truck with Lena, and heard Lena gently refuse him. The furniture dealer felt a deep sense of second-hand embarrassment for Byron. He heard Byron walking off into the bushes, and in the morning, Byron was gone. Lena at first didn't say anything, but when the furniture seller said he had to keep going, she asked if she could keep riding with him, though she said she'd sit in the back of the truck. However, once they set off, it wasn't long before they found Byron waiting for them. He told Lena that they'd come too far for him to quit now. Lena said she'd never asked him to quit.

Even Byron's seemingly bold action of attempting to get into the truck with Lena does not really change anything. Instead, it is just an echo of the moment in which he previously asked her to marry him and was refused. Clearly, Lena remains attached to the dream of being with Lucas/Brown even though this is by now quite obviously neither possible nor desirable.

The furniture dealer believes that deep down Lena wasn't really looking for anyone, but was rather just "travelling" with no particular purpose. He thinks she had probably never been as far away from home as she was right then, and that she was putting off settling down because once she did, that would be it for the rest of her life. As they pulled into a town, the furniture seller announced that they had arrived in Salisbury, Tennessee, hoping Lena would be surprised by this news. The book ends with Lena's remarks in response to this announcement: "My, my. A body does get around."

The description of Lena's never-ending journey connects her to Christmas, who spent his life wandering on an endless quest with no purpose. Again, readers are reminded that both Lena and Christmas are outcasts who benefit from the freedom of travel, yet suffer for being alone and outcast, not belonging anywhere.

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