

**Dionysian Joe Christmas:
The Tragic Essence of William Faulkner's *Light in August***

Hitoshi Yokomizo

Some people have been tempted to read *Light in August* (1932) as a tragic story about Joe Christmas, or to be exact, as a story about his confrontation with racial uncertainty and the eventual catastrophe. Cleanth Brooks, a representative of the early days' critical discourses on Faulknerian literature, alleges that Joe Christmas is finally executed as a "black" pariah owing to his deviation from the community's norm (69–70).¹ In addition, recent critics such as Diane Roberts detect a certain subversive quality in Joe Christmas, whereas they tend to conclude that Joe Christmas's racial uncertainty or his subversive character is ultimately obliterated in the community's desire for order.² If so, Joe Christmas could be regarded as a very tragic hero, for Christmas seems to reflect a form of tragedy, which Friedrich Nietzsche discussed in *The Birth of Tragedy*. According to Nietzsche, Greek tragedy is an incredible union between the Dionysian as the sensual, the spontaneous, or the chaotic, and the Apollonian as the rational, the ordered, or the self-disciplined: the "Apolline [Apollonian] consciousness alone, like a veil, hid that Dionysiac [Dionysian] world" (21). Just as the Dionysian is veiled by the Apollonian, Christmas's racial uncertainty or his subversive element is covered by the community's normative power. Nevertheless, I doubt whether Joe Christmas is really executed as a "black" criminal in accordance with the community's expectation. Is it appropriate to assert that his subversive nature is eradicated in the end?³

This study attempts to reread the racialized career of Joe Christmas from the viewpoint of the interrelation between Joe Christmas as the Dionysian and the townspeople as the Apollonian. The first section deals with Joe Christmas's radical transformation into the Dionysian in Chapter 14 of *Light in August*. The second section evaluates Joe Christmas's subversion of the townspeople, recounted in Chapter 15. The third section sheds light on Joe Christmas's death in Chapter 19. Finally, this study aims to relativize the tragic essence of *Light in August* by exploring who and what Joe Christmas is.

I

The latter half of Chapter 14 of *Light in August* narrates Joe Christmas's flight after his killing of Joanna Burden and describes his radical transformation. During the

flight, Christmas is awakened to the normative world and its binding power; thus, he becomes free from the racial discipline, which he has adhered to indeliberately. Ever since his childhood at a “white” orphanage, Christmas has been torn between two racial identities, and therefore, has displayed some antinomic behaviors about race. His racial oscillation and his racial antinomy result from “blackness” engraved on Christmas by the words of other people; however, the essential cause resides in that he has clung to the normative identity, whether he has done so consciously or not.⁴ As Christmas has ideologically internalized racial taxonomy, which never permits anyone who is like “a walking oxymoron and its negation: both white and black, and *neither*” (Bleikasten 83), he has never been able to accept his racial uncertainty and has struggled against it all the time.⁵ Through the seven-day flight, however, encountering the natural world and its chaotic power, Christmas is reborn as a subversive being that transcends the normative world:

For a week now he [Christmas] has lurked and crept among its [the country’s] secret places. . . . For some time as he walks steadily on, he thinks that this is what it is—the looking and seeing—which gives him peace and unhaste and quiet, until suddenly the true answer comes to him. He feels dry and light. ‘I dont have to bother about having to eat anymore,’ he thinks. ‘That’s what it is.’ . . . he is entering it again, the street which ran for thirty years. It had been a paved street, where going should be fast. It had made a circle and he is still inside of it. Though during the last seven days he has had no paved street, yet he has travelled further than in all the thirty years before. And yet he is still inside the circle. ‘And yet I have been further in these seven days than in all the thirty years,’ he thinks. (338-39)

The above quotations hint at Joe Christmas’s radical transformation. During the seven-day flight, Christmas swerves from a “paved street,” sneaks into an unpaved area as “secret places,” and finally arrives at “the true answer.” Considered in the light of Mary Joanne Dondlinger’s observation that the “paved street” is “a man-made construction” (111), it is reasonable to assume that Christmas has roved over the normative world, constructed by man, for thirty years, but now he enters the natural world that is not *paved*—not constructed. In other words, Christmas steps into the natural world, a certain chaotic/secret sphere, in which “[t]ime, the spaces of light and dark, had long since lost orderliness” (333).⁶ By touching the chaotic power lurking in the normative world, he discovers “the true answer” and undergoes a complete

transformation. To put it another way, relatively becoming aware of the normative world and its binding power, Christmas realizes the background of his hardship and his destiny. For this reason, not only the seven-day flight is much more decisive for Christmas than all the thirty years of his life, but also Christmas muses “I don’t have to bother about having to eat anymore”: this mediation is not a negative imagination about his death, but a positive one that results from his epiphanic experience. It is safely assumed that Joe Christmas is reborn at this stage. Leaving the horizon of orderliness or rather the norm, Christmas recognizes that he is no longer troubled over his racial identity. Joe Christmas epistemologically transcends the normative world.⁷

Olga W. Vickery investigates the above issue from the viewpoint of Joe Christmas’s “humanization.” According to Vickery, the seven-day flight, “where even food becomes unnecessary, gives to Christmas the human dignity” and Christmas “sees his life not in terms of “black” and “white” but simply of the human race” (73). However, Vickery looks upon Christmas’s racial transcendence as an individual matter and hence states that, in the face of the townspeople’s desire for order, Christmas is ultimately forced to conform to the community’s racial norm (73–75). Vickery detects deracialization in Christmas, but she ends in emphasizing Christmas’s eventual passivity. Nevertheless, we should not fail to note that Christmas cannot be easily incorporated into the community’s plot. Through the epistemological metamorphosis, Joe Christmas becomes a subversive being who embodies racial invisibility. At the same time, Christmas becomes a spontaneous/strategic character, who chooses his own death of his own accord in order to leave his being behind.

Here, let us examine Joe Christmas as a subversive character from a standpoint of Nietzschean tragedy. Referring to Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*, Donald M. Kartiganer argues Joe Christmas in terms of the Dionysian and the Apollonian:

Christmas is comprised of what Nietzsche called the Dionysian and the Apollonian, the will to destruction and the will to order. Nietzsche’s understanding of those concepts and his insistence on the dynamic relationship between them captures the dynamic of Christmas’s character and the tragic conflict he epitomizes. Christmas is both the Dionysian force and its verbalization by the Apollonian force, that difficult fusion that Nietzsche said was the focus of every Greek tragedy. . . . (15)

As Kartiganer suggests above, Joe Christmas surely seems to be a “difficult fusion” between the Dionysian and the Apollonian, for Christmas, in the former period, cannot

accept his racial uncertainty and therefore cannot but verbalize his racial identity antinomically; in other words, he sometimes behaves as a “black” and sometimes as a “white.” To take his metamorphosis into consideration, however, Joe Christmas emerges not as the incredible fusion between the Dionysian and the Apollonian but as the very Dionysian itself. Christmas, in the seven-day flight, shifts his epistemological position from the Apollonian level symbolized by a *paved* street to the Dionysian level represented by the natural world and its chaotic power. As a consequence, Christmas gives up normalizing/verbalizing his racial uncertainty as the Dionysian element, and becomes “Dionysian Joe Christmas” as a subversive and spontaneous being who personifies racial invisibility and performs his own death.

II

In Chapter 15 of *Light in August*, Joe Christmas, reborn as the Dionysian, subverts the townspeople and their racialized identity. Through the epistemological metamorphosis, Christmas makes an inflexible resolution to leave his life behind him and dares to return to the town where the hysteric townspeople are spurred to capture Joe Christmas as a “black” criminal who murdered a “white” woman, Joanna Burden. After all, Christmas is caught by Halliday, one of the townspeople, in Mottstown, where Christmas, at this time, unsettles the psychological stability of the townspeople:

. . . Halliday saw him [Christmas] 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. . . . It was like he never even knew he was a murderer, let alone a nigger too. (350)

As the passage above gives suggestions, Christmas’s racial invisibility makes the townspeople’s blood boil with indignation. What renders the townspeople “so mad” is “the visible invisibility of his [Christmas’s] blackness” (Bleikasten 98). Joe Christmas never fulfills the townspeople’s desire to identify him as a “black” man. Rather, as we have noted, Joe Christmas is somebody that the townspeople can never identify as either “white” or “black.” Considered in the light of the townspeople’s reaction to his capture: “It looked like he had set out to get himself caught like a man might set out to get married” (349), it is obvious that Christmas’s “deliberate capture is disruptive to the citizens” (Dondlinger 111). Joe Christmas as the Dionysian shakes the townspeople’s judgment and their racial dualism, and therefore, causes trouble between

them over racial ideology and racial awareness. Christmas's racial uncertainty at the core of his tribulation is due to other people's verbal violence, which is deeply rooted in racialism; his racial invisibility, in this phase, subverts the townspeople's racial ideology as if it made a counterattack against them.

However, Christmas's racial invisibility is ironically enough to drive the townspeople into lynching him. The Dionysian of Joe Christmas stirs the Apollonian of the townspeople to veil his chaotic nature. Thus, Joe Christmas's racial invisibility once subverts the townspeople and their racialized identity; nevertheless, is the invisibility, the Dionysian force, ultimately covered by the townspeople, verbalized by the Apollonian force? It seems that Joe Christmas could never be absorbed into the townspeople's plot of racial identification. Turning our attention to how Joe Christmas spontaneously performs his own death, we know that he is the very Dionysian that thwarts the townspeople's Apollonian impulse to "blacken" him.

III

Chapter 19 of *Light in August*, recounted from the townspeople's viewpoint, tells us how Joe Christmas carries out his own death and how he leaves behind his being, the Dionysian, that can never be subsumed into racial normalization by the townspeople. By performing his mysterious death, Christmas attains his own self and leaves it behind. Joe Christmas, after his rebirth, dares to depart for the town so as to act out his own death; subsequently, he is captured in Mottstown and taken to Jefferson. At this point, Christmas displays an inscrutable behavior. With the special grand jury close at hand, he escapes from captivity at the very center of the square where the townspeople move around here and there. Christmas goes around the town without intending to actually evade and, in the end, he is shot and castrated by Percy Grimm in Gail Hightower's house. Readers wonder about his actions and probe into them, just as the townspeople do:

About the suppertables on that Monday night, what the town wondered at was not so much how Christmas had escaped but why when free, he had taken refuge in the place which he did, where he must have known he would be certainly run to earth, and why when that occurred he neither surrendered nor resisted. It was as though he had set out and made his plans to passively commit suicide. (443)

This is the opening passage of Chapter 19, which narrates the townspeople's reaction toward Joe Christmas's death and reveals that the townspeople are suspicious about

Christmas's escape and his eventual death. They evidently sense something intended in his escape and death. This suggests that Christmas leaves his being, his mysterious being, in the townspeople's mind. In this light, it is possible to consider that Christmas has succeeded in his difficult attempt to leave his life behind by performing the mysterious death. Gavin Stevens as a town commentator is typically fascinated by the mystery about Christmas and endeavors to grasp its essence; however, his observation that Christmas's conflict between "blackness" and "whiteness" drives him into such an enigmatic behavior is unfortunately nothing but an arbitrary interpretation based on the wrong impression (Hiraishi 96). At that moment, is it impossible that the mystery, which Joe Christmas leaves behind, remains an *unsolved* mystery? Is it impossible for Christmas to leave his *mystic* being behind? Closely analyzing the scene of Joe Christmas's death, we should notice that Joe Christmas is a very mystic/Dionysian character, who is never subsumed into interpretation.

The scene of Joe Christmas's death appears to be the most significant part in the novel for readers to understand that Joe Christmas is the very Dionysian, a subversive character, who always already takes on some attributes that can never be subsumed into normalization/verbalization. Before putting forth the argument, let us now refer to one or two preceding studies, which have different views on Christmas's death. First, James A. Snead contends: "As [Theodor] Adorno suggests, 'all reification is a forgetting': Jefferson cannot remember the truth without losing its flattering and fixed self-image. For the town, Joe Christmas will always be 'the nigger' who slit the 'white woman's [Joanna Burden's]' throat and 'got what he deserved'" (133). Diane Roberts also argues: "Joe incorporates both white and black, both male and female, both the ability to menstruate and to ejaculate, and is present yet erased; the myriad play of self and desire is obliterated in the face of the community need for conformity and unity, for the hierarchies of white/black, male/female to remain undisturbed" (184). I recognize the importance of their assertions; however, it seems to me that they fail to grasp the essence of the pronoun "black" used in the locale of Christmas's death. To take the inexplicability of "black" into consideration, Joe Christmas's death comes out more thrillingly than we imagine.

Then his face, body, all, seemed to collapse, to fall in upon itself, and from out the slashed garments about his hips and loins the pent black blood seemed to rush like a released breath. It seemed to rush out of his pale body like the rush of sparks from a rising rocket; upon that black blast the man seemed to rise soaring into their memories forever and ever. They are not to lose it, in whatever

peaceful valleys, beside whatever placid and reassuring streams of old age, in the mirroring faces of whatever children they will contemplate old disasters and newer hopes. It will be there, musing, quiet, steadfast, not fading and not particularly threatful, but of itself alone serene, of itself alone triumphant. (465)

With regard to the above scene, Snead indicates syntactic ambiguity, or to put it concretely, the ambiguity of the referents of the pronouns such as “they” and “it” and the ambiguity of the meanings of the adjective “black” (131). According to Snead, if “they” refers to the townspeople, it is an unavoidable question whether “they” includes the “black” townspeople or not; moreover, the referent of “it” depends on if the pronoun “they” includes “black” people. In the light of the thread of meaning in the passage, however, “they” seems to refer to Percy Grimm and his company, who participate in the symbolic lynching. When the passage says “They are not to lose it,” “they” seems to refer to the “white” townspeople symbolically. At this moment, there emerges a crucial question: what does “the pent *black* blood” or “*black* blast,” which the “white” townspeople witness at the scene of Joe Christmas’s death, signify? The meaning of “black” is essentially inexplicable.

As far as we treat the adjective “black” as what it is without any bias, it is impossible to determine whether “black” refers to racial matter symbolically or blood color literally. Taking into consideration the townspeople’s desire to veil Christmas’s racial invisibility or their impulse to see “negro blood” in him, Christmas should be incontrovertibly designated as a “negro” or a “nigger” at the dying scene narrated from the point of view of the townspeople. At the same time, any ambiguous expression of blood should be avoided here. Nevertheless, why are the ambiguous expressions selected? The reason would be that Joe Christmas’s racial invisibility never yields to the townspeople’s normalization. The narrator, or rather the implied author, whom I am tempted to identify as Faulkner, suggests here that the townspeople can never normalize or “blacken” Christmas. As Snead succinctly describes him as “an elusive shadow” (124), Christmas could be considered as an intangible character who slips through normalization/verbalization. Even if the townspeople persistently strive to confine Christmas within the semiotic code of race, their attempt invariably ends in failure. Joe Christmas is a radically subversive character who always already possesses some quality which can never be subsumed into normalization/verbalization. As Thadious Davis points out that “[w]hat the men [the townspeople] will experience along with the image of Joe’s face is guilt” (174); the townspeople are never free from Joe Christmas and are doomed to be disturbed by the Dionysian power. That is why the

word “triumphant” is used at the end of the death scene. The phrase implies that Christmas’s venture ends in success. The townspeople’s racialism and their verbal violence bring about unendurable suffering to Joe Christmas, whereas Christmas, in the end, leaves *Joe Christmas*, the Dionysian, behind him to keep on disturbing the community and its inhabitants. Moreover, Joe Christmas, in this light, appears to be somebody who epitomizes the alternative way of being, for Joe Christmas emerges as “a paradoxical joy”; he accomplishes *be(com)ing* through the negative way of being, i.e., his death.⁸

Light in August has been read as a tragedy in which the uncertain/subversive character of Joe Christmas is finally obliterated by the townspeople. However, as we have discussed so far, Christmas’s subversive nature, the Dionysian, can never be veiled or verbalized by the community’s prescriptive power, i.e., the Apollonian. Joe Christmas is “Xmas” (*LIA* 58, emphasis mine) in the text, “an elusive shadow” drifting about the normative world, and the inexplicable “black”; namely, he is the very Dionysian that always resists verbalization/signification. If “[t]ragedy acts out the chaos at the core of a socio-discursive order, but also recuperates for knowledge the ‘inexpressible’ which eludes that order” (Eagleton 20), *Light in August* cannot be a tragic story. Joe Christmas, in the novel, remains forever as “the inexplicable.” If we readers thoughtlessly give it a structure, the essence of the novel is to be crucially vitiated. Thus, *Light in August* could be interpreted as a story about Joe Christmas’s triumph over the townspeople; in other words, it is a story of the Dionysian’s triumph over the Apollonian. Consequently, *Light in August* is not a tragedy that comprises an incredible union between the Dionysian and the Apollonian, but an unconventional tragedy that depicts the Dionysian overwhelming the Apollonian; as it were, *Light in August* is a “novel,” which shakes the generic stability of tragedy and also relativizes our way of being.

Works Cited

- Bleikasten, André. “*Light in August*: The Closed Society and Its Subject.” *New Essays on Faulkner’s Light in August*. Ed. Michael Millgate. New York: Cambridge UP, 1988. 81-102.
- Brooks, Cleanth. *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1963.
- Davis, Thadiaz M. *Faulkner’s “Negro.”* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1983.
- Dondlinger, Mary Joanne. “Getting Around the Body: The Matter of Race and Gender

- in Faulkner's *Light in August*." *Faulkner and the Natural World*. Ed. Donald M. Kartiganer and Ann J. Abadie. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1999. 98-125.
- Eagleton, Terry. *Sweet Violence: the Idea of the Tragic*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2003.
- Faulkner, William. *Light in August*. New York: Vintage International, 1990.
- Hiraishi, Takaki. *Shosetsu ni okeru Sakusha no Furumai: Fokuna teki Hoho no Kenkyu* [The Author's Behavior in the Novel: A Study of Faulkner's Method]. Tokyo: Shohakusha, 2003.
- Kartiganer, Donald M. "The Meaning of Form in *Light in August*." *Modern Critical Interpretations: William Faulkner's Light in August*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Educational Communications, 1988. 9-41.
- Kazin, Alfred. "The Stillness of *Light in August*." *William Faulkner: Critical Assessments Volume III*. Ed. Henry Claridge. East Sussex: Helm Information, 1999. 119-34.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Birth of Tragedy*. Trans. Shaun Whiteside. London: Penguin Books, 1993.
- , *Twilight of the Idols and the Anti-Christ*. Trans. R.J. Hollingdale. London: Penguin Books, 2003.
- Nussbaum, Marth C. *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*. New York: Oxford UP, 1990.
- Ohashi, Kenzaburo. *Fokuna: Amerika Bungaku, Gendai no Shinwa* [Faulkner: American Literature and the Modern Myth]. Tokyo: Chuokoron-sha, 1993.
- Roberts, Diane. *Faulkner and Southern Womanhood*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1994.
- Snead, James A. "Figures of Division: *Light in August*." *Modern Critical Interpretations: William Faulkner's Light in August*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Educational Communications, 1988. 117-34.
- Vickery, Olga W. *The Novels of William Faulkner: A Critical Interpretation*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1959.

Notes

¹ Cleanth Brooks is so conservative that he looks upon the prescriptive power of the community's norm as positive one; André Bleikasten argues it against Brooks's view on the norm that the cause of Christmas's deviation lies in the defect of the community's norm.

² See also Theresa M. Towner's "Unsurprised Flesh : Color, Race, and Identity in Faulkner's Fiction" in *Faulkner and the Natural World* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1999), ed. Donald M. Kartiganer and Ann J. Abadie: 45–65.

³ Alfred Kazin positively reads into Joe Christmas an "existential" attitude to try to

“become *someone*, a human being” (123).

⁴ In his childhood, Joe Christmas, brought up at a “white” orphanage, interiorizes the possibility of “blackness” by the word “nigger” arbitrarily uttered to him by other people such as the dietician or other orphans. The origin of the word “nigger” lies in a racist mad speculation made by Doc Hines, Joe Christmas’s grandfather, whereas the repeated word “nigger” performatively inscribes “blackness” on Joe Christmas.

⁵ Bleikasten asserts that Joe Christmas adheres to the “white” myths or the “white” standards that the townspeople follow (84).

⁶ Regarding the “paved street” as a symbol of American civilization, which is a counterforce to Nature represented by Lena Grove, Kenzaburo Ohashi suggests that Joe Christmas, in the seven-day flight, undergoes the natural power, the power of “earth,” for a brief space of time (118–19). As is shown in the following parts, *nature* or the *natural* world, in this paper, is assumed to be what latently possesses a certain chaotic power—the Dionysian power.

⁷ It is not appropriate that he transcends the normative world itself. Joe Christmas *epistemologically* transcends the normative world. In the light of the passage, “‘But I [Christmas] have never got outside that circle. I have never broken out of the ring of what I have already done and cannot ever undo,’ he thinks quietly. . . .” (*LIA* 339), such metaphorical words as “circle” and “ring” imply that Christmas is never released from the normative world itself or its binding power. After the epistemological metamorphosis, Joe Christmas lurks around and in the normative world subversively, just as the chaotic power does so.

⁸ In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche, who radically revises his own observation on the Dionysian discussed in *The Birth of Tragedy*, bestows his highest praise on the overflowing of the Dionysian and mentions a particular form of joy: “Not so as to get rid of pity and terror, not so as to purify oneself of a dangerous emotion through its vehement discharge—it was thus Aristotle understood it—: but, beyond pity and terror, to realize in oneself the eternal joy of becoming—that joy which also encompasses joy in destruction...” (121). Here, Nietzsche presents a form of the paradoxical joy or rather an alternative way of being that can be achieved with and expressed only by a certain negativity. Nietzsche is often misunderstood as a very nihilist who is full of negation or despair, whereas, in reality, “Nietzsche did hold out for a human life beyond nihilism” and “believed his task as a writer to be the creation of that hope as vivid possibility” (Nussbaum 307). In addition, Takaki Hiraishi reads in Joe Christmas’s death a psychoanalytical idea “thanatos” as positive acceptance of death (88). In my understanding, “thanatos” is connected with *be(com)ing*.