

“Light and Fire in August: Violence, Body, and the Dichotomy between Spiritual and Savage”

Nina Wang

In a Tortoiseshell

In this paper on Light in August by William Faulkner, Nina Wang argues for a new reading of Christmas’s character that focuses on the dichotomy between the spiritual and savage. The strength of Nina’s argument lies in its effective structure, as she uses clear topic sentences to ensure that each body paragraph only argues one idea at a time, but links them together in an effective way that allows her to move through three complex sub-arguments in a short six-page essay.

Excerpt

In William Faulkner’s *Light in August*, violence and brutality are the only constants in many characters’ lives. Molded or even created by their violent pasts, they know only how to perpetuate the cycle by enacting the same brutality on others. This is especially true for Joe Christmas, who was orphaned by his own grandfather in defense of racial purity and supremacy, who was seen as “the devil’s walking seed” (Faulkner 383) from the very moment that he was born, and who spent the rest of his life acting in “silent and unflagging savageness” (40). Christmas emerges as the most repeatedly and unyieldingly brutal character in the novel, whose acts of violence—pulled at one end by “black blood” and at another by “white blood” (449)—are often attempts to resolve his ambiguous racial identity in the only way that he knows how. Upon closer examination, we see that Christmas also uses violence and brutality to explore what it means to be a physical being, and to view personhood apart from religion or an intangible God. His struggle to navigate racial identity is thus mirrored in and even predicted by his struggle to find resolution between spirituality and savagery—another rigid binary in Faulkner’s South. Though Christmas rebels against the spiritual ruthlessness of his upbringing by trying to adopt a savagely physical and bodily one, he can only end up a shadow of both, unable to make peace with this, or any other, aspect of his identity.

In order for people to accept religion as the moral stronghold of civilized society, they must establish it as fundamentally opposite from the savage. In Christmas’ upbringing, this is enforced through religion’s complete denial of the physical. When, as a young boy, Christmas places his catechism book on the stable floor, McEachern chastises him by saying, “You would believe that a stable floor, the stamping place of beasts, is the proper place for the word of God” (149). He sets up a physical dichotomy between God and beast, where the catechism is not the book but rather the word of God, which cannot be held at the same level as a floor where animals stamp their feet. He teaches Christmas that religion exists as separate from the corporeal, the animal. This is also enforced in his various beatings; though beatings are by nature physical acts, there is absolutely no evidence of physicality in McEachern or in Christmas. Faulkner highlights this by drawing attention to their stone-like faces. Despite the brutality and violence,

“It would have been hard to say which face was the more rapt, more calm, more convinced” (150). Each time, Christmas “[does] not flinch, no quiver [passes] over his face. He [looks] straight ahead, with a rapt, calm expression like a monk in a picture” (149). The blankness and immobility of his face is thus directly put in religious context. In later beatings, even his entire body comes to exist outside of physicality. His “body might have been wood or stone; a post or a tower upon which the sentient part of him mused like a hermit; contemplative and remote with ecstasy and self-crucifixion” (160). Whether as a result of successful indoctrination or mere self-preservation, in the brutal and unforgiving nature of McEachern’s religious way of life, Christmas loses the concept of body entirely, and it is only his sentience, his spirit, that remains.

As a result, when Christmas rebels against the religion that shackled him in his youth, it is the intangibility and lack of physicality that he spurns. His hatred of religion arises precisely from the fact that it has no body. Even as a child, he despised the way religion turns physical beings into “pairs of knees without tangible substance...talking in a dream, talking, adjuring, arguing with a Presence who could not even make a phantom indentation in an actual rug” (154). He remains disgusted by how people like Joanna Burden could ignore this, who could talk to God “as if He were a man in the room with two other men,” (280) and how, in turning God from a figment into a person, she surrenders her own sense of body, becoming “sexless” (281) herself. Indeed, Joe’s recurring repulsion to the act of kneeling before God— “[jerking] his eyes away as if it were death that they had looked at” (279) whenever he sees the prints of knees—can be understood as his repulsion to a physical act of submission to something that is abstract, impalpable. As we see, Christmas has no patience for what cannot exist in a physical form. While McEachern facing his death at Christmas’ hands believed “it was not that child’s face which he was concerned with: it was the face of Satan,” (205) Christmas rejects religion’s habit of symbolism and asserts his belief in what he knows to be real, tangible, unchanging: “all that damn foolishness. She is still she and I am still I,” (272) he says.

Author Commentary

Nina Wang

This paper was written for the class “Topics in American Literature: Henry James and William Faulkner” with Professor Mitchell, a course which surveyed the works of two of the most complex and challenging writers of their time. The novel that I chose to write on, Faulkner’s *Light in August*, was no exception, and the process of fully grasping this difficult, wrenching, impassioned text was already challenging enough on its own, much less trying to develop a cohesive and manageable argument about it. There were simply so many themes taking place at once: the virulent racism of the postwar South, the too-often pernicious effects of religion, the rigidity of gender during a time where norms held fast, and so on.

Because of this, as I came upon the end of the novel, all I really had were the lingering shadows of my own emotions and impressions. While I was initially frustrated by the fact that the only thing I had to work with was this sense of curiosity and fascination as I kept revisiting certain passages of the novel, utterly unable to put into words as to why, this actually turned out to be a powerful driving force throughout the writing process. I eventually noticed that I was especially fascinated by Faulkner’s extremely unsettling portrayal of violence, which often seemed to play out as a tug of war between the bestial and the spiritual, with nothing even close to human in between. My emotional draw to this topic was what kept me motivated to hone my scattered thoughts and impressions into a rigorous analytical argument; after all, I was writing to address a question for which I myself really wanted to know the answer.

However, like the novel itself, my paper also needed to grapple with multiple tangled, interweaving themes, which presented a real challenge in terms of structuring a logical, coherent argument. As someone who values clarity quite highly in their writing — but whose thoughts usually accumulate in jumbled piles — outlining was really vital for making sure that everything followed a clear logical structure, in which each piece of the argument extends the previous one and leads into the next. The end result is a paper that is coherent but not rigid; there is still plenty of room for interpretation and nuance for a novel as wonderfully rich and complex as this one.

Editor Commentary

Catherine Wang

It is not necessarily true that a short paper is always a more simplistic one. But how do you craft an effective short essay when you have many important ideas to cover? In her paper on *Light in August*, by William Faulkner, Nina grapples with this challenge, weaving an argument that explains the complex dichotomy between spirituality and savagery within Joe Christmas. Her essay first introduces surface-level characteristics, describing the brutal and savage character with which Christmas is frequently attributed. Nina cites an often-mentioned interpretation of Joe Christmas's character: the claim that Christmas's acts of violence are actually "attempts to resolve his ambiguous racial identity." She then pushes this claim further with a strong thesis statement that draws a parallel between Christmas's struggle with his racial identity (a white vs. black binary) and his broader identity (a physical vs. spiritual binary). Ultimately, Nina argues Christmas's "struggle to find resolution between spirituality and savagery" is what causes him to reject the spiritual ruthlessness of his upbringing and replace it with a physical ruthlessness.

Nina's thesis is strong in that it effectively lays out two essential parts of her argument: 1) how her reading differs from and complicates the existing readings of Joe Christmas's character, 2) how this reading can better explain the character's actions within the story (and this is where her argument truly shines is in its effective structure). Nina's thesis statement is quite a complex roadmap, filling three sentences. In order to craft an effective essay that can fully argue and support this thesis, she needed to ensure that each of her body paragraphs was consistently driving towards the conclusion that her thesis statement was indicating.

While reading, I identified three major moves that Nina made which supported her thesis. Nina:

1. *establishes the spiritual as opposite from the savage, yet explains how spirituality itself can be so brutal and ruthless as to remove Christmas's physical body.*
2. *explains how Christmas's rebellion against religion is then clearly tied to his strong pull towards the physical — reclaiming his body for what it is.*
3. *identifies the implications of Christmas's turn towards the physical, and how it causes him to move towards abandoning spirituality.*

Nina uses strong, succinct topic sentences to direct her reader through these points. In the first paragraph, she establishes the spiritual as opposite from the savage by claiming "In order for people to accept religion as the moral stronghold of civilized society, they must establish it as fundamentally opposite from the savage." Nina then supports this idea with close readings of McEachern's lectures and Faulkner's descriptions of Christmas. In the second paragraph, Nina shifts to the second major move, claiming that "when Christmas rebels against the religion that shackled him in his youth, it is the intangibility and lack of physicality that he spurns." Finally, she supports her position with close-readings that show Christmas's lack of patience for the nonphysical.

By moving through the first two major moves in two body paragraphs, Nina then leaves room for her third move: implications of the argument made so far. Although those paragraphs are not included in the excerpt, I've left the topic sentences of the paragraphs that follow below. Taken together, they act as a clear road-map for the path which Nina's argument takes.

1. "For the majority of his life, then, Christmas turns to violence to embrace its inherently tangible and physical nature."

2. "However, as Christmas begins to embrace only the purely physical, he completely abandons the end of the spectrum that represents symbolism and intangibility but also significance and meaning."

3. "Moreover, for all the physicality in his violence, Christmas still cannot truly extricate the part of himself that is influenced by the spiritual."

Nina's use of strong topic sentences, each of which identifies the key idea of the paragraph, ensures that as readers, we never feel unsure about where Nina is going, even as she takes us through a complex argument. By examining the structure of Nina's paper, we gain a better understanding of how she identifies a new reading of Christmas's character that focuses on the dichotomy between the spiritual and the savage and then crafts her argument to support it.

Works Cited

Faulkner, William. *Light in August*. Vintage International, 1990.

Bios

Nina Wang '19 is a computer science major who also spends a fair amount of time studying English literature at Princeton. When she isn't reading or writing for class, she is usually reading and writing for herself, whether it's for an upcoming show for Ellipses Slam Poetry or just talking to herself in her journal. She wrote this as a junior.

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