

UNIVERZITA KARLOVA V PRAZE – FILOZOFICKÁ FAKULTA

ÚSTAV ANGLOFONNÍCH LITERATUR A KULTUR

**"It must have been the nigger blood in him": The Mechanism of
Lynching in William Faulkner's *Light in August*.**

**"Ale negerská krev se v něm přeci jen nezapřela": Mechanismus lynčování
v *Srpnovém světle* Williama Faulknera**

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Abstract

Race and the American South are inseparable from both the literary work of William Faulkner and the practice of lynching. The aim of this thesis is to analyze the mechanism of lynching in Faulkner's novel *Light in August*. Lynching served as a racial and social control tool to scare Black Americans into submission and acceptance of a lower social rank. Black people were cruelly treated – shot, beaten, burned alive, tortured, or hung from trees. The thesis argues that the character Joe Christmas from *Light in August* is a victim of such practice when he is hunted and shot on the pretense of being a Black criminal. The thesis explores how his identity has been created by the communities – first as a Black man and then as a Black criminal. From his early childhood, Joe Christmas has passed through different communities that created assumptions about his racial origin. Since his race is never revealed in the book and Joe is unsure of it himself, his racial identity is socially constructed as a Black man.

His Blackness is further stereotyped by two myths – the myth of the tragic mulatto and the myth of the Black rapist. The myth of the tragic mulatto is based on the notion that a person of mixed Black and white origin does not belong anywhere and is doomed to end tragically. The idea of the Black rapist is particularly noteworthy because it has been linked to a large number of actual documented cases of lynching. Joe Christmas and other Black males have been stigmatized as hypersexual beings and menace to white women. Christmas is found guilty even though there is no solid evidence or proper investigation.

The thesis further elaborates on the role of the community and mob behavior which plays a significant role in the lynching of Joe Christmas. The fictional community of Jefferson is diverse – it has its insiders and outsiders, nevertheless, most of them still have shared values that stand on white supremacy and discrimination against Black people. Not only did they construct Joe's identity as a Black man, but in the end, they also supported his punishment by lynching. While employing the psychology of the crowd, the thesis mostly focused on the role of the character of Percy Grimm, who was classified as a mob leader. Percy Grimm can be described as the epitome of white supremacist values and a defender of Southern norms. As he believes Joe is a threat to white women, he establishes a group of men to punish him. Joe was treated and killed as a Black man by the same community that socially constructed his racial identity in the first place.

First, the work provides a theoretical background that focuses on the etymology of the word lynching and the history of the practice. Secondly, it introduces the theory of social constructivism (Berger and Luckmann, Smedley), the stereotypical racial myths (Pospíšil), and the psychology of the crowd (Le Bon, Freud). The second part is a literary analysis that builds on the theoretical part and analyses the mechanism of lynching present in the novel.

Key words: William Faulkner, lynching, white supremacy, race, Southern United States, *Light in August*

Abstrakt

Téma rasy a amerického Jihu je neoddělitelné jak od díla Williama Faulknera, tak od praktiky lynčování. Cílem této práce je analýza mechanismu lynčování ve Faulknerově románu *Srpnové světlo*. Lynčování sloužilo jako nástroj rasové a společenské kontroly, který měl zastrašit černošské obyvatelstvo Ameriky, aby se podřídilo a dostalo se na nižší společenskou úroveň. S černochoy bylo krutě zacházeno – byli stříleni, bití, pálení zaživa, mučeni nebo věšeni na stromy. Argument práce je takový, že postava Joe Christmase z románu *Srpnové světlo* je obětí těchto praktik – je pronásledován a zastřelen pod záminkou, že je „černošský zločinec“. Práce zkoumá, jak byla jeho identita vytvořena komunitami – nejprve jako černocho a poté jako černošského zločince. Joe Christmas byl od raného dětství součástí různých komunit, které vytvářely domněnky o jeho rasovém původu. Vzhledem k tomu, že jeho rasový původ není v knize nikdy odhalen a Joe sám si jím není jistý, je jeho rasová identita sociálně konstruována jako černošská.

Jeho černošství je dále stereotypizováno dvěma mýty – mýtem tragického mulata a mýtem černého násilníka. Mýtus tragického mulata vychází z představy, že člověk smíšeného černošského a bělošského původu nepatří nikam a je odsouzen k tragickému konci. Představa černého násilníka je obzvláště pozoruhodná, protože je spojena s velkým počtem skutečných zdokumentovaných případů lynčování. Joe Christmas a další černí muži byli stigmatizováni jako hypersexuální muži, kteří jsou hrozbou pro bílé ženy. Joe byl obviněn z vraždy a znásilnění, přestože neproběhlo řádné vyšetřování a nebyly pádné důkazy.

Práce dále rozvádí roli komunity a chování davu, které hraje významnou roli při lynčování Joea Christmase. Fiktivní komunita Jeffersonu je různorodá – má své insidery i outsidersy, nicméně většina z nich stále vyznává společné hodnoty, které stojí na nadřazenosti bělochů a diskriminaci černochoů. Nejenže konstruovali Joeovu identitu černocho, ale nakonec také podporovali jeho zlynčování. S využitím psychologie davu se práce zaměřuje především na roli postavy Percyho Grimma, který byl klasifikován jako vůdce davu. Percyho Grimma lze označit za ztělesnění hodnot bílé nadřazenosti a také jako obhájce jižanských norem. Protože se domnívá, že Joe je hrozbou pro bílé ženy, sestaví skupinu mužů, která ho má potrestat. Byla to ta stejná komunita, která s Joem jako s černochem zacházela, která ho poté i zabila.

Práce nejprve představuje teoretický kontext se zaměřením na etymologii slova lynčování a historii této praktiky. Za druhé představuje teorii sociálního konstruktivismu (Berger a Luckmann, Smedley) a zaměřuje se také na stereotypní rasové mýty (Pospíšil) a psychologii davu (Le Bon, Freud). Druhou část tvoří literární analýza, která navazuje na teoretickou část a analyzuje mechanismus lynčování přítomný v románu.

Klíčová slova: William Faulkner, lynčování, bílá nadřazenost, rasa, Jižní Spojené státy americké, Srpnové světlo

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1 Introduction

Considering its brutality, lynching might seem like an ancient practice, but it most frequently occurred in the 19th and 20th centuries. Black people were cruelly treated - shot, beaten, burned alive, tortured, or hung from trees.¹ It served as a racial and social control mechanism to scare Black Americans into submission and acceptance of a lower social rank.

I argue that the topic is still relevant and important to discuss as racial violence continues to occur in the 21st century. The United States witnesses cases of police brutality and racial violence, which bear the legacy of lynching. The lifetime risk of a Black man being killed by a police officer is 2.5 times higher than that of a white man. Another study found that Black people killed by police appeared twice as likely to be unarmed than white people.² Police violence is committed against defenseless Black individuals like Breonna Taylor or George Floyd. Taylor was a 25-year-old emergency medical technical assistant who was shot in her own home when police raided the wrong house. Floyd was a 46-year-old man brutally killed by a policeman who knelt on his neck after being accused of paying with counterfeit currency in a store; three other officers watched it happen.³ The terror of lynching replaced the shackles of slavery, and lynching is now replaced by police violence.

There are also cases of other racially motivated violence that would directly fit the description of lynching, such as Ahmaud Arbery. The 25-year-old man was shot by three white men when he was jogging near his home; they chased and cornered him.⁴ All these

¹ The word "Black" is capitalized by the author of this thesis. It is not a universally accepted rule, but it reflects the shared culture and experiences better.

² Lynne Peoples, "What the Data Say about Police Brutality and Racial Bias - and Which Reforms Might Work," *Nature News*, published June 19, 2020, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-01846-z#ref-CR1>.

³ DeNeen L. Brown, "Violent Deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor Reflect a Brutal American Legacy," *History*, published May 4, 2021, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/history-of-lynching-violent-deaths-reflect-brutal-american-legacy>.

⁴ Brown, "Violent Deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor Reflect a Brutal American Legacy".

instances demonstrate that white supremacy and racism are still part of the lives of Black people in the United States.

This thesis aims to analyze the novel *Light in August* by William Faulkner, emphasizing the character of Joe Christmas. The primary concern is the mechanism behind lynching - how the allegation is constructed and how the mob establishes and functions as an entity. It only feels natural that William Faulkner, a Southern author who wrote about race in most of his literary work, has also written about lynching. Several of Faulkner's works relate to the topic of lynching, but *Light in August* is particularly suited to this analysis for several reasons. Firstly, it illustrates how the character Joe Christmas's race is socially constructed, highlighting that lynching is a racial issue. Secondly, it depicts the myth of the tragic mulatto and the myth of the Black rapist, concepts explored in literature, culture, and sociology. Both tropes contributed to the lynching in the novel. Thirdly, the story depicts the community's role and white supremacist values vividly.

This bachelor thesis takes a multidisciplinary approach. It deals with the origin of the word lynching and the history of the practice. Such a strategy is necessary to understand the complex and multilayered character of lynching. The literary analysis then bases its arguments on concepts borrowed from sociology and psychology. The lynching in *Light in August* is not a typical case, but it does not fail to depict the reality of the Southern racist practice accurately.

2 Etymology: The many disputes

Approaching the topic of lynching is incredibly complicated on multiple levels. It might even be naïve to long for a tidy definition of a phenomenon that changed significantly in meaning and practice over time. In his book *First As Tragedy, Then As Farce*, Slavoj Žižek wrote, "Words are never 'only words'; they matter because they define the contours of what we can do."⁵ Words also matter because they define the contours of injustices people can do to other people, including lynching. The controversy of the word's origin connects closely to its meaning and perception of the practice; therefore, it is desirable to elaborate on it before going further into its history and analysis.

2.1 New meanings

The first and most contemporary layer of the controversy is that it has gone through the process of generalization. The scope of its meaning is, therefore, broader and relatively loose. It can be found in contexts distant from the actual violence-charged meaning of the word, and it is not rare to encounter notions such as "digital lynch mob." Another instance of taking the word out of context is the case of the former president of the United States, Donald Trump, who used it to victimize himself and the Republican party as follows:

So someday, if a Democrat becomes president and the Republicans win the House, even by a tiny margin, they can impeach the president without due process or fairness or any legal rights. All Republicans must remember what they are witnessing here – a lynching. But we will WIN! 6

(Donald Trump on Twitter on October 22, 2019)

Although such usage of the term in the American context is considered highly insensitive and diminishes the African American experience, it does borrow an aspect of the real lynching. It

⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (London: Verso, 2009) 109.

⁶ Tom McCarthy and Martin Pengelly. "Fury as Trump Compares Impeachment Inquiry to 'Lynching,'" *The Guardian*, published October 22, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/oct/22/trump-impeachment-inquiry-lynching-tweet>.

suggests that something lawless happens to an individual without a trial, initiated by a group of people – a mob.

2.2 Origin stories

The second layer concerns the ambiguity that stems from the numerous origin stories. Tracing the origin has been a subject of an academic debate without any definite conclusion. Some of the most notable contributions come from Hubert Howe Bancroft, James E. Cutler, and Christopher Waldrep. In his book *Lynch-law*, James E. Cutler called some of the origin stories: "nothing more than the offspring of minds fertile in resources."⁷ The explanation of the word's etymology has been changing since its first appearance, which can be traced through different definitions in dictionaries. A dictionary from 1842 called *Brande's Dictionary of Science, Literature, and Art* contains the following description:

Lynch Law. The irregular and revengeful species of justice administered by the populace in some parts of the United States is said to have been so-called from a Virginian farmer of the name of Lynch, who took the law into his hands on some occasion, by chasing a thief, tying him to a tree, and flogging him with his own hands. (Cutler, 9)

The mentioned story of a Virginian farmer Lynch is one amongst many anecdotes ascribed to be the potential origin of the word. In reaction to Cutler, an American activist James Weldon Johnson wrote that "to various civilians and colonels named Lynch is ascribed the doubtful honor of establishing this form of crime in our country."⁸ Such a statement is perhaps what defines this search for origin most accurately. Some theories may be ruled out, but even those with more solid foundations are still speculative. Cutler concludes that there is direct evidence pointing to Charles Lynch. Charles Lynch was a colonel in the Virginia militia during

⁷James E. Cutler, *Lynch-Law: An Investigation into the History of Lynching in the United States* (Montclair: Patterson Smith, 1969) 13.

⁸ James Weldon Johnson and Sondra K. Wilson, *The Selected Writings of James Weldon Johnson* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) 17.

the Revolutionary War. The ongoing war fostered an environment of ad hoc justice, as there were often no official courts to rely upon. During the last years of the war, farmers experienced increasing livestock theft by the bandits and the British loyalists. In reaction, Charles Lynch and the local landowners took law into their own hands and organized an unofficial justice system. They captured the suspected criminals, held trials, and punished them by whipping.⁹

Besides Charles Lynch, some definitions work with a theory based on William Lynch. While Cutler acknowledges the existence of William Lynch, he does not find the evidence sufficient. In 2002 Christopher Waldrep contributed to the debate with his book *The Many Faces of Judge Lynch*. He reacts to the two previously mentioned stories by saying that "the first lyncher certainly did not live in Virginia, but the first man to call himself a lyncher probably did."¹⁰ Suggesting that practicing lynching has been something to be proud of and respected in the community. As for William Lynch, Waldrep considers this source of the word "even more sketchy than Charles." It is pointed out that William Lynch was an ordinary farmer and had no significant role in the militia.¹¹

2.3 The Geographical Origin of the Word

The next complication one must face is the ongoing dispute between scholars, whether lynching and the lynch law are peculiar to the United States. While the author of *The Americans in Their Moral, Social and Political Relations*, Francis J. Grund, traced its origins to the Bible, Hubert Howe Bancroft connected the practice to the popular justices during the Enlightenment and to Ireland, where he found his version of Judge Lynch. Therefore, none believed in the word's purely American origin. It needs to be said that their theories were influenced by their

⁹ Andrew S. Buckser, "Lynching as Ritual in the American South," *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 37 (1992): 12.

¹⁰ Waldrep, Christopher. *The many faces of Judge Lynch: Extralegal Violence and punishment in America* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002) 19-20.

¹¹ Waldrep, *The many faces of Judge Lynch*, 15.

motivation to justify lynching. They aimed to show their readers the deep and old source of the word to legitimate the collective violent expression of popular justice.¹²

Cutler reacted to their theories, and he denied their universality. He believed lynching to be "the national crime of the United States" and the word to be originally American. One of his main arguments is the difference between Americans and Europeans regarding their relationship to the law. Cutler felt that the American attitude toward the law is somewhat dangerous and less respectful. The tradition of law in Europe is long, which awakes respect in Europeans:

Americans naturally respect law less for having made it themselves. It is therefore inevitable that the legal machinery will prove powerless to control popular excitements.¹³

On this account, Waldrep wrote that Cutler sought to justify an idea about ordinary Americans' rights to violence outside the law by finding the first lyncher in Virginia.¹⁴

It is impossible to say whether lynching is a uniquely American tradition or if one can draw some parallels to different customs in other areas of the world. The common trait is selecting a victim because of their particular characteristic or a crime they allegedly committed. This way, some correlations can be traced to rituals such as the ancient method of stoning or the burning of scapegoats in Asia. For the further literary analysis, it is necessary to focus on the fact that lynching has taken on a specific meaning, which is still prevalent in the 21st century and geographically concerns the United States, especially its Southern states. It was "a tool used to enforce Jim Crow laws and racial segregation—a tactic for maintaining racial control by victimizing the entire African American community, not merely punishment of an alleged

¹² Waldrep, *The many faces of Judge Lynch*, 13.

¹³ Waldrep, *The many faces of Judge Lynch*, 14.

¹⁴ Waldrep, *The many faces of Judge Lynch*, 13-14.

perpetrator for a crime."¹⁵ By the 1930s, the meaning came to mean almost exclusively the killing of Black people by a group of white people.¹⁶

2.4 The Definition

The numerous challenges one must overcome when studying lynching have been introduced thus far in this chapter. Before moving to the literary analysis of *Light in August* by William Faulkner, it is essential to settle on a working definition of lynching. An American scholar Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, who reviewed and combined definitions by other scholars before him, came up with a definition: "A lynching is an act of extralegal collective violence by a group alleging pursuit of summary justice."¹⁷

It is desirable to elaborate on some of the words in the definition. Firstly, "extralegal" depends on our accepting the legal status of the state." The definition of "a collective" also varies, especially on a state level. Rushdy notes that state legal codes either define a "mob" as "any number," "a group of people gathered for an unlawful purpose" or in terms of numbers as "three or more persons" to "twelve or more persons who are riotously or tumultuously assembled." The term "violence" is also ambiguous – it can be from corporal to lethal. Secondly "summary justice" refers to the action of the lynchers, who not only lynch, they also police and judge. They only pursue a particular type of justice (referred to as "summary") that they believe to be more efficient and effective than formal or state-sanctioned justice.¹⁸

3 The Lynching Belt: The History of Lynching in the South

The Civil War concerned the question of race as the fundamental dispute between

¹⁵ Bryan Stevenson "Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror," *Equal Justice Initiative*, Accessed March 24, 2022, <https://lynchinginamerica.eji.org/>, 5.

¹⁶ Buckser, "Lynching as Ritual in the American South", 13.

¹⁷ Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, *American Lynching* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), 66-67.

¹⁸ Rushdy, *American Lynching*, 67-68.

the Union and The Confederacy was abolishing slavery. It was also a protest of the Southern states, which believed that the federal government was interfering with the power of the individual states.¹⁹ After the Civil War and the loss of the Confederacy, Black people in the postbellum South gained some political and economic power. Changes were possible due to emancipation and access to Constitutional protections, such as the ratification of the Thirteenth amendment in 1865. On certain conditions, they could vote, hold office, own property, and compete in the marketplace.²⁰

While slavery was abolished with the end of the Civil war in 1865, and some rights were gained, racial terror did not cease, and equal rights were far from reality. White supremacy thrived as it was based on the fear of white Southerners, who did not want to be considered equal to African Americans and lose the control, they had over them in the antebellum era. In 1993 Ole Weaver coined an influential constructivist concept called securitization. It works with the idea that a security threat is a phenomenon created by elite groups. Essentially, an actor picks a security threat that he presents as life-threatening or harmful for a referent object. Afterward, the threat needs to be accepted by the audience in order to become a security threat. A security threat then justifies extraordinary protective measures. The theory of securitization can be applied to the situation of Black people in the Southern states because Black men were constructed as a threat by Southern men. When their existence was considered life-threatening, extraordinary measures of lynchings could take place and be accepted by the community.²¹

As the report on lynching by Equal Justice Initiative states:

White Southern identity was grounded in a belief that whites were inherently superior to African Americans; following the war, whites reacted violently to the notion that they

¹⁹ Martin Kelly, "What Were the Top 4 Causes of the Civil War?" *ThoughtCo*, modified on July 21, 2020, <https://www.thoughtco.com/top-causes-of-the-civil-war-104532>.

²⁰ Buckner, "Lynching as Ritual," 20.

²¹ Ole Weaver, *Securitization Theory - International Relations*, *The Open University*, published October 3, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wQ07tWOzE_c&t=1s.

would now have to treat their former human property as equals and pay for their labor. In numerous recorded incidents, plantation owners attacked Black people simply for claiming their freedom.²²

The reaction to the reality of post-slavery times began with the Black codes, which were passed by Southern legislatures, and they followed the antebellum Slave codes. Black people were denied the right to enter schools, theaters, hotels, and other public spaces and facilities. Each state had its version of the laws, but all aimed at limiting Black people's gained freedom. The Black codes were the predecessors of the infamous Jim Crow laws, which existed between 1876 to 1965. Jim Crow laws concerned almost every area of life of Black people in the South of the United States. The laws, jails, powerlessness, and the constant fear of death came to substitute the chains and whips of slavery.²³ Historian Leslie V. Tischauser wrote in her book *Jim Crow Law* that the Jim Crow laws were "harsh laws separating blacks from whites, always backed up by fear of a lynch mob, a beating, or a severe, pain-filled punishment, that would keep blacks from ever coming close to achieving equality." ²⁴ Jim Crow laws were therefore interconnected with the practice of lynching.

In 1866, L. E. Potts, a white woman from Texas, wrote a letter to President Andrew Johnson in which she addressed the racial violence of lynching in the South and asked him to act on it. She pointed out that "whites were so angered at the idea of losing their slaves, they were trying to persecute them back into slavery." She addressed the practice of lynching by saying that "[Black people] are often run down by bloodhounds and shot because they do not do precisely as the white man says." ²⁵

²² Stevenson, "Lynching," 7.

²³ Leslie Vincent Tischauser, *Jim Crow Laws* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2013) 13.

²⁴ Tischauser, *Jim Crow Laws*, 13.

²⁵ Stevenson, "Lynching," 12.

This letter voiced the same concern that the Equal Justice Initiative accents at the beginning of its extensive report on lynching in the South. Even when the Civil War ended, white supremacy was strongly present in the Southern States, leaving Black Americans unprotected from the violent acts of white supremacy for more than a century. The EJI criticizes the amendment and other legal acts for their inefficiency in addressing "the myth of racial hierarchy that sustained slavery" and "not establishing a national commitment to the alternative ideology of racial equality."²⁶ The specific environment and social mood in the South resulted in the former slave states becoming "the lynching belt" of the United States.²⁷ As historian W. Fitzhugh Brundage puts it, lynching and mob violence were so pervasive and chronic in the South that they "define Southern distinctiveness every bit as much as the Mason-Dixon line marked the boundary of the region."²⁸

3.1 A Typology of Lynchings

The absence of a formal record of lynching deaths is not surprising; the actual number of victims is undoubtedly underreported. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) states that from 1882 to 1968, 4,743 lynchings occurred in the U.S. The majority of the victims were Black - 3,446, or about 72 percent of the people lynched. According to the data of the NAACP, the highest number of lynchings occurred in the state of Mississippi, with 581 recorded. Georgia was second with 531, and Texas was third with 493.²⁹

African Americans were lynched by white people in the South under various circumstances. The most known one is the allegation of rape of a white woman by a

²⁶ Stevenson, "Lynching," 7.

²⁷ Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890-1940* (Chapel Hill: University Of North Carolina Press, 2011) 4.

²⁸ Randall M. Miller "LYNCHING IN AMERICA: SOME CONTEXT AND A FEW COMMENTS." *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 72, no. 3 (Summer 2005): 277.

²⁹ "History of Lynching in America," NAACP, published February 11, 2022, <https://naacp.org/find-resources/history-explained/history-lynching-america>.

Black man. According to the EJI report, such cases made up 25% of the lynchings.³⁰ The other circumstances, which can overlap, are divided by EJI as follows³¹:

- 1) lynchings that resulted from a wildly distorted fear of interracial sex
- 2) lynchings in response to casual social transgressions
- 3) lynchings based on allegations of serious violent crime
- 4) public spectacle lynchings
- 5) lynchings that escalated into large-scale violence targeting the entire African American community
- 6) lynchings of sharecroppers, ministers, and community leaders who resisted mistreatment, which were most common between 1915 and 1940

3.2 Lynchings Based on Fear of Interracial Sex

They were usually based on an accusation and not even followed by identifying the suspect by the victim. Due to the widespread belief that a white woman could not engage in consensual sexual activity with a Black man, the definition of “Black-on-white rape” in the South was fairly broad.³² Ida B. Wells was a journalist who dedicated part of her work to this topic and was a vocal anti-lynching campaigner. In one of her speeches, she said: "The cowardly lyncher revels in murder, then seeks to shield himself from public execration by claiming devotion to woman."³³ Her newspaper offices were burned down, and lynching threats were made when she wrote an article debunking the myth

³⁰ Stevenson, "Lynching," 30.

³¹ Stevenson, "Lynching," 30-38.

³² Stevenson, "Lynching," 30.

³³ Ida B. Wells, "Lynching, Our National Crime (1909)," *Black Past*, published on September 20, 2019, <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/1909-ida-b-wells-awful-slaughter/>.

that white women never engage in consensual relationships with Black men.³⁴

However, in many instances, a romantic or sexual relationship was not necessary; it was enough to see a Black man talking to a white woman or any other activity that could be interpreted as his interest in having sexual intercourse with her. The EJI report mentioned a specific case when a Black man entered a room where three women were present and later got lynched for his "offense". There were no other allegations besides his presence in the room. A white mob lynched another Black man in 1904 for knocking on the door of a white woman's house in South Carolina and another man in Louisiana for allegedly writing letters to a white woman asking her to get a drink with him.³⁵ Even the allegation of a white woman was enough, as Wells mentioned in her speech:

The Springfield, Illinois, mob rioted for two days; the militia of the entire state was called out, two men were lynched, and hundreds of people were driven from their homes, all because a white woman said a Negro assaulted her.³⁶

Perhaps the most known case that falls into this category is the one that concerns a Black boy named Emmet Till, which happened in 1955 in Mississippi. Till was 14 years old when he allegedly whistled at a white female clerk and made sexual advances toward her. Later, her husband with his brother lynched Till. He was forced to carry a 75-pound cotton gin fan to the Tallahatchie River's bank before being told to remove his garments. Then, after shooting him in the head and beating him nearly to death, the two guys tied his body to the cotton gin fan with barbed wire before throwing it into the river. Till's mother decided to have an open-casket

³⁴ Becky Little, "When Ida B. Wells Took on Lynching, Threats Forced Her to Leave Memphis," *History.com*, published August 2, 2018, <https://www.history.com/news/ida-b-wells-lynching-memphis-chicago>.

³⁵ Stevenson, "Lynching," 30.

³⁶ Wells, "Lynching, Our National Crime".

funeral for her son to show the brutality done to her son and other victims of lynching. The civil rights movement was sparked by her bold action.^{37 38}

The described lynchings supported the myth of the hypersexuality of Black men, which was considered a threat to Southern women. The myth is sometimes referred to as the myth of the Black rapist. The Black rapist stereotype contained two Southern principles – “that black men are rampaging sexual, and that white women are immutably chaste.”³⁹ Lynching was, therefore, not only a matter of racism but also sexism because, through it, Southern men assured their masculine dominance.

3.3 Lynchings Based on Minor Social Transgressions

Such cases of lynching were based on minor "offenses". Among the offenses of social transgression are "speaking disrespectfully, refusing to step off the sidewalk, using profane language, using an improper title for a white person, suing a white man, arguing with a white man, bumping into a white woman or insulting a white person." By the character of the offenses, one can deduce that Black people had to live in terror of violating a social norm set by white people and getting lynched at all times. Wright notes that Black people did not even need to see a lynching to be terrorized by it; the feeling of the death penalty upon them every waking moment was enough.⁴⁰ The EJI report found many such cases; in 1940, Jesse Thornton was lynched in Alabama for referring to a white police officer by his name without "mister", and a mob in 1916 lynched Jeff Brown in Mississippi for accidentally bumping into a white girl when

³⁷ "Emmett Till Is Murdered," *History.com*, published February 9, 2010, <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/the-death-of-emmett-till>.

³⁸ The legacy is still alive as in 2022, the American president Joe Biden signed the Emmett Till anti-lynching bill that made lynching a federal hate crime for the first time in American history. (The United States Government. (2022, March 30). "Remarks by President Biden at signing of H.R. 55, the "Emmett till anti-lynching act." *The White House*, accessed October 20, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/03/29/remarks-by-president-biden-at-signing-of-h-r-55-the-emmett-till-antilynching-act/>)

³⁹ Diane Roberts. *Faulkner and Southern Womanhood* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994) 170.

⁴⁰ Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle*, 2.

he was rushing to catch a train.⁴¹

3.4 Lynchings Based on Allegations of Crime

Most commonly, it was either an allegation of rape or murder; according to the data, it made up more than half of the total cases. The dynamics of this phenomenon began with the belief embedded in Southern people that Black people have a criminal nature. A Black person was the first to get accused if there was a crime. The legal principle of "Innocent until proven guilty" did not apply to African Americans. A mob would instead punish them before they could ever be proven guilty. ERI traced the following story to demonstrate this category:

When Berry Noyse was accused of killing the local sheriff in Tennessee in 1918, an angry mob lynched him in the courthouse square, then dragged his body through the town's streets and shot it dozens of times. Then they burned his body in the middle of the street below hung banners that read, "This is the way we do our bit."

In many cases, the lynched man was proven innocent after his death, and the real criminal was found. The charges of rape, murder, or other crimes were routinely fabricated.⁴²

3.5 Public Spectacle Lynchings

The category of public spectacle lynchings stands out as the mechanism differs from the rest, and there is also considerable visual evidence. Amy Louise Wood points out that it also had a specific unifying function as Southerners across different classes or generations all found their common purpose with public spectacle lynching and shared the moment – "the feel and push of the crowd created the sense of belonging and commonality that sustained the violence." This unity also made the practice seem socially acceptable and even respectable.⁴³

⁴¹ Stevenson, "Lynching," 35.

⁴² Stevenson, "Lynching," 32.

⁴³ Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle*, 11.

The public event was always pre-planned, and the crowd came to watch a victim get lynched as some form of a social happening, theatre play, or circus. Instances of torture, mutilation, dismemberment, or burning of the victim were no exceptions. The crowd ate various refreshments as they watched a Black person get tortured and lynched. Such killings showed that Black people were not considered human, and their lesser status had to be demonstrated publicly.⁴⁴ In her pamphlet "Lynch Law in America," Ida B. Wells wrote, "The nineteenth-century lynching mob cuts off ears, toes, and fingers, strips off flesh, and distributes portions of the body as souvenirs among the crowd."⁴⁵

The story of Ell Persons demonstrates what is meant by public spectacle lynchings; he was on the way to stand trial for rape and murder but did not reach his destination. The mob had announced the time and location for his planned public spectacle lynching. Thousands of people enjoyed refreshments as they watched the lynchers douse Persons with gasoline and set him on fire. People in the crowd then voiced their fear that he would die too quickly in the fire, so the fire was extinguished. The crowd later fought over his clothes and the rope to keep as mementos, and two men cut off his ears. His head was removed and thrown into the crowd.⁴⁶

It was not rare that people took souvenirs in the form of body parts or a rope, but there were also postcards bearing a photograph of a lynching circulating the United States postal system.

These photographic mementos, which were frequently turned into postcards, served to spread the lynching's visual rhetoric, its assertions of white superiority, and the legitimization of violated Black bodies outside of the lynch mob to distant loved ones who got these horrifying

⁴⁴ Stevenson, "Lynching," 33.

⁴⁵ Ida B. Wells "Lynch Law in America," *Digital history*, accessed December 25, 2022, https://www.digitallhistory.uh.edu/disp_textbook.cfm?smtID=3&psid=1113.

⁴⁶ Stevenson, "Lynching," 35.

pictures in the mail.⁴⁷ Such visual material further proves that the nature of public spectacle lynchings was performative and aimed to impress white Americans and scare African Americans. These spectacles created and propagated images of white supremacy and Black subjugation, white unity, and Black criminality, which were used to instill and sustain a sense of racial superiority in their white audiences.⁴⁸ It almost functioned as a twisted memento mori, only to remind Black people that their race should always fear death and keep the threat in mind. The postcards also serve as visual evidence with symbolic power, which later became necessary for the anti-lynching movement and the comprehensive study of the subject.⁴⁹

3.6 Lynchings Targeting the Entire African American Community

Such lynchings targeted the whole African American community, not only individuals or specific groups. They aimed to force the community to leave; otherwise, they would all face the same fate – death by lynching. The report by ERI states that such lynching happened in Forsyth County, Georgia, in 1912; local whites distributed leaflets that threatened all Black people to leave or they will get rid of them. The result was the decline of the Black population in the county from 1100 to 30 by 1920. The practices of lynchings on a whole community further show that the method served to instill fear and dominance rather than serving popular justice.⁵⁰

3.7 Lynchings of Black People Resisting Mistreatment

The last category concerns the times when Black people in the South began to fight for their rights and economic power and were not met with understanding. Sharecroppers, ministers, and community leaders who resisted were victims of lynching to ensure the

⁴⁷ Linda Kim, "A Law of Unintended Consequences: United States Postal Censorship of Lynching Photographs," *Visual Resources* 28, no. 2 (2012): 171.

⁴⁸ Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle*, 2.

⁴⁹ Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle*, 4.

⁵⁰ Stevenson, "Lynching," 38.

community that they were still second-class citizens. The white Southerners could not coerce themselves to acknowledge the end of slavery and the necessity of paying workers. An example of such behavior can be seen in the following story from the report:

In 1918, when Elton Mitchell of Earle, Arkansas, refused to work on a white-owned farm without pay, “prominent” white citizens of the city cut him into pieces with butcher knives and hung his remains from a tree.⁵¹

While these six categories have their specific characteristics, they all prove that the essence of lynching is a mob acting without justice to instill the idea of white supremacy.

4 The Sociology and Psychology behind the Mechanism of Lynching

In the previous chapter, the history of lynching was covered; for the literary analysis, it is also necessary to explain some sociological observations. The following chapters will therefore draw on sociology and psychology to advance the argument and concentrate on race as a social construct, racial myths, and the psychology of the crowd. These particular observations were chosen because they help to explain the complex mechanism behind lynching.

4.1 The Construction of Race

Lynching cannot be separated from the concept of race. The discussion about race is currently dominated by the social constructionist viewpoint.⁵² According to social constructionists, the idea of race as a classification based on skin color and other superficial characteristics like body shape or hairstyle is a pseudo-biological idea that has been used to justify and rationalize the unfair treatment of particular groups of people by others.⁵³ According

⁵¹ Stevenson, "Lynching," 38-39.

⁵² Edouard Machery, Luc Faucher. "Social Construction and the Concept of Race," *Philosophy of Science* 72, no. 5 (2005): 1208.

⁵³ Edouard Machery, Luc Faucher, "Social Construction and the Concept of Race", 1208.

to Bergman and Luckmann, essential theorists in the field of social constructivism and authors of the book *The Social Construction of Reality*, society is created by humans and their interaction. Their core ideas are that “Society is a human product. Society is an objective reality. Man is a social product.”⁵⁴ In order to understand constructivism better, it can be put in contrast with the essentialist approach, which works with the idea that “certain phenomena are natural, inevitable, and biologically determined.”⁵⁵ Therefore, the social constructivism viewpoint challenges precisely that.

Perhaps every attempt to define race always means entering a controversial, uncertain, and sensitive field. It is additionally proved by the fact that The American Anthropological Association has adopted a policy that the word "race" should always be put in quotation marks because, as a social and not biological construct, there is no definitive, legitimate way to define it.⁵⁶ Naturally, there are different attempts to reach some kind of definition. With the turn of the 21st century, "debates have increased between those who continue to maintain that biological races and race differences exist and those in increasingly larger numbers who oppose them. “⁵⁷ According to Smedley, some scientists even work with the notion that there is no such thing as race. Such a "color blind" idea ignores that "there is a reality to the idea of race grounded in America's historical consciousness and all of its political, economic, religious, recreational, and social institutions. ”⁵⁸

⁵⁴ P. Berger and T. Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Penguin, 1991), 79.

⁵⁵ John D. DeLamater, Janet Shibley Hyde, "Essentialism vs. social constructionism in the study of human sexuality," *The Journal of Sex Research* 35, no.1 (1998): 10.

⁵⁶ Bárbara C. Cruz and James A. Duplass, "Making Sense of 'Race' in the History Classroom: A Literary Approach," *The History Teacher* 42, no. 4 (2009): 425.

⁵⁷ Smedley, *Race in North America*, 2.

⁵⁸ Smedley, *Race in North America*, 19.

Leaving behind the idea of race as biology, one must still acknowledge the real impact of the construct of race on social interactions, social division, status, as well as the lynching experience in the United States. Smedley also points out the importance of the notion of culture, which works along the social construction of race. By the statement, "biological variations among people have no social meanings except what we humans give them," Smedley claims that races were culturally constructed.⁵⁹ This chapter aims to prove that although the concept of race based on biological and physical differences has been disregarded, race cannot be erased as a whole. It is real and present as a sociocultural phenomenon that significantly shapes society.

4.2 Racial Myths and Stereotypes

One of the ways that the sociocultural construct of race exists in society is through racial stereotypes and myths. In attempting to describe the mechanism of lynching in *Light in August*, it is relevant and necessary to introduce some racial myths present in the story, namely the myth of a tragic mulatto and the myth of the Black rapist. Myths are stereotypical and often serve to negatively and untruthfully depict a social group. They are unfavorable systematic and long-lasting subjective evaluations of groups or their members. For many years, the idea has been central to sociological research on race and ethnicity.⁶⁰ Tomáš Pospíšil in his book *Sambo tu již nebydli?: Obraz Afroameričanů v americkém filmu 20. století* defines several racial stereotypical myths, which all depict African Americans in a certain way and consolidate societal opinions.

General knowledge would suggest that a mulatto is a person of mixed Black and white heritage, and as Pospíšil notes, the myth of the tragic mulatto works precisely with that. The character's destiny tragically ends because he is a misfit who is not certain about his racial

⁵⁹ Smedley, *Race in North America*, XII.

⁶⁰ Bryan S. Turner, *The Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 470.

identity, as he can identify as neither Black nor white. This myth functioned to condemn miscegenation, as such disapproving attitude was also present in society.⁶¹ The character of Joe Christmas in *Light in August* is an example of the trope, and his tragic destiny escalates into his death by lynching.

The second trope present in *Light in August* is the Black rapist. There are differences between the myths from the slavery era and those after the civil war; the myth of the Black rapist is an example of the latter. Pospíšil reflects on the shift between the character of Sambo to the Black rapist. Sambo was intellectually underdeveloped, childish, and satisfied with his life as a plantation slave. He lived in harmony with his owner, and his presence in culture normalized the institution of slavery. After the civil war, the white idea of Black masculinity quickly developed into the notion that Black men are brutes who long for white women.⁶²

The fear of Black emancipation gave birth to the myth of the Black rapist.⁶³ A direct link can be made between the emergence of the myth of a Black rapist and the peak of lynching and white mob violence, both taking place in the post-Civil War era.⁶⁴ Before lynching became a habit applicable to a wide range of alleged or actual offenses, it was first a tool of whites against "the threat of the black beast to white women."⁶⁵ Through this myth, Black men were viewed as the epitome of animalism and sexual energy, which coexisted with the myth of the sexual purity of white women. As said in the previous chapter, it stood on the notion that it is unimaginable that white women would engage in a consensual relationship with Black men.

⁶¹ Tomáš Pospíšil, *Sambo tu již Nebydlí?: Obraz Afroameričanů v americkém filmu 20. Století* (Brno: Nadace Universitas Masarykiana, 2003), 19-20.

⁶² Pospíšil, *Sambo tu již nebydlí*, 20.

⁶³ Pospíšil, *Sambo tu již nebydlí*, 21-22.

⁶⁴ Sandra Gunning, *Race, Rape and Lynching: The Red Record of American Literature, 1890-1912* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 5.

⁶⁵ Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black-White Relations in the American South since Emancipation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 184.

Angela Y. Davis, in her acclaimed book *Women, Culture and Politics*, counters the base of the myth by writing that "the myth of the Black rapist renders people oblivious to the realities of rape and to the fact, for example, that over 90 percent of all rapes are intraracial rather than interracial." She also notes that according to studies on sexual assault, white males rape Black women more frequently than Black men rape white women. Since this was especially true during the time of slavery, it is possible that white Southerners wished to both protect Southern womanhood and conceal their brutality at a time when slave women were frequently subjected to sexual abuse by their owners.⁶⁶

4.3 Collective Behavior and the Lynch Mob

Moving from the racial aspect of the mechanism of lynching in *Light in August*, it is important to focus on its collective nature. Author William D. Carrigan writes:

Most men and women who participated in lynch mobs attended spectacle lynchings and defended (or tolerated) lynching possessed no criminal record. They were not the outcasts sometimes portrayed by civic elites defending their communities.⁶⁷

Therefore, the acceptance of lynching and mob violence cannot be disregarded as a phenomenon among criminals, low-class, or uneducated people. How was it possible that Southern society members generally accepted lynching? Why did the crowds collectively participate?

Public lynching spectacles have been attended to and enjoyed by the masses, and in most cases, the lynchers formed mobs to "ensure justice." It was also common for local newspapers to express approval for such behavior and portray it as a necessity that "performed an important function in Southern society by punishing criminals more efficiently and severely

⁶⁶ Angela Yvonne Davis, *Women, Culture & Politics* (New York: Vintage, 1990). 73.

⁶⁷ W. D. Carrigan, "No Ordinary Crime: Reflections on the Future of the History of Mob Violence," *Journal of American History* 101, no. 3 (January 2014): 847.

than was possible in the formal criminal justice system." ⁶⁸

It is indisputable that lynching is linked to groups, collectives, and communities. Most definitions work with the word "mob" or "collective" in some way. In their book *Violence: The Enduring Problem*, Alexander C. Alvarez et al. list lynch mobs among the main types of mob violence.⁶⁹ For this reason, the theory of collective behavior might help understand its mechanism.

The psychology of the crowd has been an influential theory found in works by different authors and thinkers, from Herodotus to Adorno.⁷⁰ The author most famously connected with the theory is August Le Bon, who believed that a crowd takes on a mind of its own and individuals become highly susceptible to the whims of the collective group. He believed that crowd behavior is contagious because one person's happiness, anger, or violence gets easily transferred to others in the crowd. He speaks of "a collective mind," which replaces individual conscious personality.

The theory describes the crowd member as "irresponsible", "no longer conscious of his acts", "an automaton who has ceased to be guided by his will", "impulsive, changeable and irritable", "extraordinarily credulous", having "no critical faculty" and "entirely conservative". When such characteristics are put together, one gets the idea that "by the mere fact that he forms part of an organized group, a man descends several rungs in the ladder of civilization. Isolated,

⁶⁸ Amy Kate Bailey and Stewart Emory Tolnay, *Lynched: The Victims of Southern Mob Violence* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 7.

⁶⁹ The complete typology of the most well-known forms of mob violence consists of riots, lynch mobs, and vigilante groups.

⁷⁰ Herodotus, "the father of history," proclaimed, "I hate the blind mass." (Ruth Parkin-Gounelas, *The Psychology and Politics of the Collective Groups, Crowds and Mass Identifications* (New York, N.Y: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2014), 69-70.) The German philosopher Theodor W. Adorno wrote an essay called "Freudian Theory and Patterns of Fascist Propaganda," where he also reacted to crowd behavior.

he may be a cultivated individual; in a crowd, he is a barbarian—that is, a creature acting by instinct."⁷¹

Sigmund Freud also counts among classical authors on crowd behavior. He expanded on Le Bon and essentially stated that in groups, individuals display specific behavioral characteristics that include "(1) the lessening of a conscious individual personality, (2) convergence of thoughts and emotions in a common direction, (3) emotions and unconscious drives displacing reason and rationality, and (4) the propensity to immediately carry out intentions as they develop."⁷²

Both theories inspired the term "deindividuation", which psychologist Philip Zimbardo describes as a state when individuals lose their sense of individuality in a crowd or a group. It often results in behavior that is more aggressive and cruel than their individual behavior would be. To stay with the main focus – a lynch mob – the freedom of the crowd allows the lynchers to act outside the boundaries of their standard behavior and embrace and support the group's violent actions.⁷³ Another aspect that helps the feeling of anonymity is clothing, a tactic used by the Ku Klux Klan, who wore white capes to stay anonymous during their rituals of racial violence.⁷⁴

4.4 The Concept of Community

The concept of community is closely related to the crowd behavior theories that were covered in the previous chapter. The community in *Light in August* also represents the mob and

⁷¹ Ruth Parkin-Gounelas, *The Psychology and Politics of the Collective Groups, Crowds and Mass Identifications* (New York, N.Y: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2014), 68.

⁷² Alex Alvarez and Ronet Bachman, *Violence: The Enduring Problem* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2021), 63.

⁷³ Alvarez, *Violence: The Enduring Problem*, 63.

⁷⁴ Irving B. Weiner et al., *Handbook of Psychology* (Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley, 2013), 403.

the crowd. In her diploma thesis *William Faulkner's Light in August: Constructing Race in the Community*, Karolína Jelínková pointed out the importance of community in the story. This thesis can therefore build on her work to prove the importance of community also in the event of the lynching of the character Joe Christmas. *The Cambridge dictionary of Sociology* defines community through two characteristics:

- (1) a web of affect-laden relationships among a group of individuals, relationships that often crisscross and reinforce one another (as opposed to one-on-one relationships); and
- (2) a measure of commitment to a set of shared histories and identities – in short, a particular culture.⁷⁵

The importance of community has been the central idea of a philosophy called communitarianism, which works with the belief that the individual and his identity are rooted in his community, and his personality and moral and political judgments are molded by it.⁷⁶ To relate it to the topic, Jelínková states that the shared identity or culture in the Southern society of *Light in August* is "the commonly shared racial views (that) constituted no small part of the communal consensus in the U.S. South."⁷⁷ As the beliefs and attitudes towards race are rooted in the community, it can be argued that accepting lynching is also shared among community members by restating both communitarianism and crowd psychology. Such shared values manifest themselves and grow more potent in the crowd, which Le Bon and Freud described as a process when one changes to his morally lower self and his simplistic emotions and instincts become more prominent. A lynch mob is a crowd without moral responsibility and acting on barbarian impulses and emotions.

⁷⁵ Bryan S. Turner, *The Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 83.

⁷⁶ Daniel Bell, "Communitarianism," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, published May 15, 2020, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2022/entries/communitarianism>.

⁷⁷ Karolína Jelínková, "*William Faulkner's Light in August: constructing race in the community*" (Diploma thesis, Charles University, 2006), 19.

5 On the Author: William Faulkner, Race and Lynching

William Cuthbert Falkner was born in New Albany, Mississippi, on September 25, 1897, and he died in Oxford, Mississippi, in 1962.⁷⁸ He was born in the post-Reconstruction era and the start of the 20th century, when racial radicalism was at its height.⁷⁹ It is safe to say that Faulkner's views on racial issues in the United States were ambiguous. In 1956, Faulkner was asked about the lynching of Emmet Till, and he reacted by saying:

"If we in America have reached that point in our desperate culture when we must murder children, no matter for what reason or what color, we don't deserve to survive, and probably won't. "⁸⁰

Yet, it would be a mistake to portray Faulkner as a liberal and anti-racist person. In an interview in the same year, 1956, Faulkner is quoted as saying:

"If I have to choose between the United States government and Mississippi, then I'll choose Mississippi. If it came to fighting, I'd fight for Mississippi against the United States even if it meant going out on to the street and shooting Negroes."⁸¹

While the quote might be influenced by many things and this thesis does not aim to label Faulkner as a racist and a strictly conservative person, the quote still exemplifies how his life and literary work are intertwined with the South and its culture, myths and beliefs. Faulkner personally adopted many of the racist ideologies that he, at the same time, masterfully depicted and denounced in his literary work. The ambiguity of his attitude might support the classical

⁷⁸ A. Nicholas Fargnoli et al., *Critical Companion to William Faulkner a Literary Reference to His Life and Work* (New York: Facts On File, 2008), 3.

⁷⁹ Karolína Jelínková, "William Faulkner's *Light in August*, 3.

⁸⁰ Evan Kindley, "William Faulkner's Southern Guilt," *The New Republic*, published August 18, 2020, <https://newrepublic.com/article/158710/william-faulkner-civil-war-biography-review-southern-white-guilt>.

⁸¹ Charles D. Peavy, "FAULKNER AND THE HOWE INTERVIEW." *CLA Journal* 11, no. 2 (1967): 118. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44328248>.

idea that the art needs to be separated from the artist. After all, it was Faulkner himself who believed that "The artist is of no importance. Only what he creates is important."⁸²

In 1931 William Faulkner created the novel *Light in August*. One of the possible inspirations for the storyline of Joe Christmas, who is the main interest of this thesis, is the lynching of Nelse Patton that happened near Faulkner's childhood home. Similarly to Joe Christmas, Patton had been accused of slitting the throat of a white woman with a razor, then arrested and jailed under guard. Two thousand white people gathered outside the jail throughout the night. The local authorities, including the sheriff, the judge, and the minister, tried to stop the lynching. When a well-known Oxford attorney who had previously served in the U.S. Senate urged the crowd to lynch Patton in the name of justice, their attempts to stop it ultimately failed. The young Faulkner likely witnessed or at least heard of the event as his family lived only a few blocks from the Oxford jail.⁸³ As Joel Williamson puts it: "Knowing William Faulkner as man and boy as we now do, it is impossible to imagine that he failed to record and retain every detail of the drama that came to his senses."⁸⁴

Before *Light in August*, in 1931, Faulkner wrote a short story called "Dry September," which has some significant parallels to *Light in August*.⁸⁵ It tells a story of a lynch mob formed because a Black man allegedly attacked a white woman. The topic of lynching is also present in Faulkner's significant novels *Sanctuary* (1931), *Go down, Moses* (1942), and *Intruder in the Dust* (1948).

⁸² Maria Popova, "William Faulkner on Writing, the Purpose of Art, Working in a Brothel, and the Meaning of Life," *The Marginalian*, published September 18, 2015, <https://www.themarginalian.org/2013/09/25/william-faulkner-paris-review-interview-writing/>.

⁸³ Fagnoli et al., *Critical Companion to William Faulkner*, 430.

⁸⁴ Joel Williamson, *William Faulkner and Southern History* (Oxford University Press, 1996), 159.

⁸⁵ Lynching is not the only connection between "Dry September" and *Light in August*. Both stories contain the character of Captain McLendon and focus on the characters' psychology.

6 A Literary Analysis

The title of this thesis, an excerpt from the novel – "It must have been the nigger blood in him," sums up the central struggle in the story.⁸⁶ The life of Joe Christmas revolves around his racial identity and what color of "blood" he has in his veins. Both Joe himself and the people around him struggle to identify his race. Although the novel does not provide a definite answer, whether Joe is Black, white, or mixed, his destiny is undoubtedly determined racially. He is lynched because of his "negro blood".

6.1 Becoming Black: How the Construct Developed

Joe Christmas encountered this racial confusion from his early childhood. When he lived in an orphanage for white children, the other children started calling him "a nigger" to mock him. At one point, the worker of the orphanage says:

"They have been calling him Nigger for years. Sometimes I think that children have a way of knowing things that grown people of your and my age don't see. "⁸⁷

The adults working at the orphanage did not give the mocking names much value until an incident occurred with Joe and the dietitian. While eating a stolen toothpaste, he witnessed the orphanage's dietitian engaging in sexual intercourse with a doctoral assistant. Joe did not understand what they were doing and that it might be inappropriate. After he is caught, the dietitian immediately calls him "a little nigger bastard!" Once he infuriates her because he caught her doing something that might cost her a career, she resorts to racial slurs. She constructs his identity to suit her needs, even though it is stated in the novel that she has never had the urge to do so before:

⁸⁶ The author of the thesis is aware of the negative, derogatory connotations associated with the word "nigger". Its inclusion in the thesis is not intended to excuse or encourage its use. It merely reflects the language of William Faulkner.

⁸⁷ William Faulkner, *Light in August* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 133.

She had not thought of it before, but she believed that she had, had known it all the while, because it seemed so right: he would not only be removed; he would be punished for having given her terror and worry. 'They'll send him to the nigger orphanage,' she thought 'Of course. They will have to.' (Faulkner 129)

This was the first time his race or assumptions about it were used against Joe Christmas. Restating the social constructivist theory, his racial identity is a product of the minds of the children and workers in the orphanage. The construct forms his life throughout his entire life until his lynching.

Another crucial encounter regarding Joe's racial identity is his romance with a waitress and a prostitute, Bobbie Allen. Joe feels passionate about Bobbie and confides in her that he might be of mixed origin. It changes her opinion about him and immediately makes her regret her involvement with him. When she talks about Joe after finding out about his possible Blackness, she says:

He told me himself he was a nigger! The son of a bitch! Me f—ing for nothing a nigger son of a bitch that would get me in a jam with clodhopper police. At a clodhopper dance! (Faulkner 218)

She then tells other people at the diner where she works, resulting in Joe getting beaten up. The attackers again emphasize Joe's race when they say that the beating will prove whether he is Black, depending on the color of his blood.

The experience does not end in the orphanage and with Bobbie. There are numerous other situations when people assume his race. The townspeople of Jefferson decide early on "that an aura of evil surrounds (Joe), and this idea is based upon his physical appearance and rumors about his 'mixed race parentage.'"^{88 89} In *Light in August*, Faulkner deviated from the

⁸⁸ Katie Bell, "Dickens and Faulkner: Saving Joe Christmas." In *Dickens After Dickens*, edited by Emily Bell, 57–82. White Rose University Press, 2020. 64.

⁸⁹ Joe Christmas is described as white-passing. Therefore, physical appearance refers to his clothing rather than his skin color.

established conventions of modernism. He followed the naturalist and realist approaches when concentrating on the characters' physical appearance. Christmas's physical characteristics, in some way, contributed to his character growth and, thus, to this tragic outcome.⁹⁰

When Joe Christmas first appears in the town, he starts working at the windmill, where he is not perceived warmly. The other workers immediately question his race based on his appearance, untypical behavior, and name. When they discuss Joe Christmas, they say:

"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. (Faulkner 33)

When Joe Christmas appears at the windmill, it is the reader's first encounter with him. As critic Randall Willhelm points out, he is "framed through the eyes of other workers at the sawmill, (which is) a socialized vision that projects a white male gaze upon the new hire."⁹¹

Moreover, the workers and the rest of their community continue constructing his racial identity after this encounter. The assumptions are strengthened by the fact that Joe lives in "a nigger cabin", and he engages in a romantic relationship with a woman called Joanna Burden, whom the townspeople label as "a nigger lover". Joanna is described followingly:

She is a Yankee. Her folks come down here in the Reconstruction, to stir up the niggers. Two of them got killed doing it. They say she is still mixed up with niggers. Visits them when they are sick, like they was white. Won't have a cook because it would have to be a nigger cook. Folks say she claims that niggers are the same as white folks. (Faulkner 53)

⁹⁰ Bell, "Dickens and Faulkner: Saving Joe Christmas", 67.

⁹¹ Randall Wilhelm, "Framing Joe Christmas: Vision and Detection in Light in August," *Mississippi Quarterly* 64, no. 3-4 (2011): 399.

The mentioned episodes all describe that Joe has been labeled as Black, and in most crucial instances, he has been treated accordingly. In one of his lectures, Faulkner said that "Christmas is not born 'bad' as Hines believes, but is made 'tragic' because of the actions of others."⁹² From the very beginning, Christmas' fate seems predestined by others. The people believed he was not a white man because they connected Blackness with evil and crime. I argue that this construction is the first step that leads to his lynching. He was lynched because that is how Southern society treated an alleged criminal when he was Black.

6.2 The Racial Myths about Joe Christmas

Myths and stereotypes surround the idea of Blackness ascribed to Joe's identity. Perhaps because Joe Christmas was uncertain about his racial identity, it was easier for other people to make assumptions. It needs to be emphasized the novel never offered a definite and objectively truthful answer about Joe's racial heritage. It mentions his father, who worked in a circus, and there are unreliable hints that he might be Mexican or Black. His physical appearance is described as different, but at the same time, still white-passing. Joe's racial identity, therefore, cannot be viewed as inherited; it is constructed.

6.3 Joe Christmas as a Tragic Mulatto

Joe Christmas's confusion is strongly connected to his tragic end. In a lecture, William Faulkner said of the character of Joe Christmas:

He didn't know what he was, and so he was nothing. He deliberately evicted himself from the human race because he didn't know which he was. That was his tragedy, that to me was the tragic central idea of the story—that he didn't know what he was, and there was no way possible in life for him to find out. Which to me is the most tragic

⁹² Bell, "Dickens and Faulkner: Saving Joe Christmas," 70.

condition a man could find himself in—not to know what he is and to know that he will never know.⁹³

It all supports the idea that Joe Christmas embodies the myth of the tragic mulatto. The process of becoming a tragic mulatto is further described by Robert M. Slabey, who describes three phases in the life cycle of such a tragic character.

The first stage is childhood, when he is unaware of racial conflict. Nevertheless, as mentioned previously, other children called him "a nigger". Even at this stage, Joe is insecure about his racial identity. The second phase begins "when the marginal man consciously experiences the conflict as a personal problem." He goes through social and inner isolation and feels the urge to find himself again. In order to do so, he needs to reconstruct his perception of himself and the place he holds in society.

Slabey identifies two fundamental conflicts in this phase – the potential murder of his adoptive father McEachern, and his love interest Bobbie leaving him. After his affair with Bobbie, he began "to run the streets". He first tried assimilating with the dominant group because he could pass for white. According to Slabey, "During this stage, Joe tricked or teased white men into calling him a Negro to fight them, to beat them and be beaten. In some border state, he was nauseated, sick for two years when he found a prostitute willing to take a Negro".

The marginal man then began to seek assimilation into the subordinate group due to the white men's racial prejudice, but then he was also rejected by Black people. Again Joe picks a fight with a man, but this time for calling him white. He also lived with a woman who is described as resembling "an ebony carving." When lying with her in bed at night, he would try "to breathe into himself the dark odor, the dark and inscrutable thinking and being of Negroes,

⁹³ "Blotner's Novel and Gwynn's American Fiction Classes," Faulkner at Virginia: Transcript of audio recording WFAUDIO06_1, accessed November 15, 2022, https://faulkner.lib.virginia.edu/display/wfaudio06_1.

with each suspiration trying to expel from himself the white blood and the white thinking and being" (Faulkner 225-226).

Slabey states it is "a profound spiritual crisis," which takes *Marginal Man* to the third stage. The last stage can be characterized either by "perpetual conflict - and in extreme cases (like that of Joe Christmas) continual restlessness, a process of disorganization ending in dissipation, crime, sometimes suicide, the development of an ambivalent attitude, a feeling of belonging to no race, and a desire for differentiation - and/or an eventual adjustment of his situation, a discovery of a new role, some sort of accommodation between the two races."⁹⁴

The third phase describes what makes a character a tragic mulatto. Although either race has not entirely accepted him, his life has been shaped by the fact that the white community always resorts to viewing him as a non-white person making him an outsider. He did not belong to any community, which made his life desperate and full of suffering.

6.4 The Framing of Joe Christmas as a Black Brute

It was not only race but also sexuality and relationships with women that Joe Christmas was perplexed about, which eventually led him to his tragedy. Throughout the story, it is deducible that his attitude toward women is often degrading and violent. He beat up a girl when he was 15, acted violently towards other women, and overall seemed to hate the entire gender; he even said that:

It was the woman: that soft kindness which he believed himself doomed to be forever victim of and which he hated worse than he did the hard and ruthless justice of men. (Faulkner 168-169)

One could say that Joe Christmas killed Joanna Burden by solely considering his

⁹⁴ Robert M. Slabey, "Joe Christmas, Faulkner's *Marginal Man*," *Phylon* (1960-) 21, no. 3 (1960): 267-268.

relationship with women.⁹⁵ In my opinion, the narrative partly suggests so as the description of all the violence Joe committed and the unhealthy relationships he had follow after Joanna's death. It creates the idea that his past behavior shows why he would murder her.

Joe Christmas never seemed to understand any of the female characters he encountered. Beginning with the dietitian, who did not physically punish him, she confused him by playing mind games and torturing him mentally. He did not understand such punishment as he was used to physical punishment from men. The literary critic Cleanth Brooks points out that the dietitian was undoubtedly Joe's first damaging experience with a woman, but not the first crucial one. There was an earlier experience that was "not damaging but indicating plainly what Joe needed and did not get."⁹⁶ In the orphanage, Joe had a close friend who was only a little older, but she was a mother figure to him. One day the girl left without Joe realizing it, leaving him alone among people who did not care for him. The character served as a reminder of how little maternal care and love Joe received. Brooks also concludes that Joe Christmas never understood care and love from women. As a result, he only felt comfortable with justice, which always came from the men in his life.⁹⁷

His complicated attitude towards women alone cannot explain how his guilt has been constructed in the story. The people from the Jefferson community blamed Joe Christmas for the murder, which is apparent in instances such as: "They just caught that nigger Christmas that killed that lady up at Jefferson last week," the man said." (Faulkner 346)

It is not only the community but also the readers who are made to believe the guilt of Joe Christmas. I think that it is precisely what William Faulkner intended. Once the sheriff is

⁹⁵ Their relationship was complicated. She forced him into roles he did not feel comfortable in. She also triggered his past trauma by making him pray, which reminded him of his stepfather, who used to do the same.

⁹⁶ Cleanth Brooks, *William Faulkner: First Encounters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 169.

⁹⁷ Brooks, *William Faulkner: First Encounters*, 169.

told that Christmas is Black, he suspects him of killing Joanna Burden. Similarly, the reader is drawn into the narrative to join the Jeffersonian community, which condemned Christmas and framed him for murdering her.⁹⁸ It is arguably also the reason or the pretext for the lynching of Joe Christmas. In the book, there is not any evidence that would prove his guilt. Instead of evidence, Randall Willhelm argues that the novel employs the concept of pointing fingers, which Faulkner adopted from classical painting. He says that "symbolically and formally speaking, (some) scenes "finger" Joe as the morally corrupt murderer the narrator makes him out to be."⁹⁹

According to Michael Millgate, *Light in August* also adopts some features of the contemporary American detective story or at least "of the detective story as intruded upon by Greek tragedy."¹⁰⁰ It is, therefore, relevant to speculate whether it was or was not Joe Christmas who brutally killed Joanna Burden with a razor. Perhaps it could also be argued that it was an act of self-defense, but I dare to agree with theorists who state that it did not have to be Joe Christmas who killed Joanna. Readers were solely put in the position to believe so.

Randall Willhelm believes that "from a forensic point of view, there is no physical evidence at all." Christmas was already out of town when the house was set on fire, and his razor, identified as the murder weapon, was also never found. Another indicator might be that after the murder, there is no mention of Joe being covered in blood, which would be expected after such a violent murder. What is of significant importance, is that "these are some of the more crucial visual clues that readers disregard or blindly overlook in the novel." Willhelm points out Faulkner's play with the seen and unseen:

In fact, Faulkner's continuous probing of the seen and unseen components of narrative

⁹⁸ Bell, "Dickens and Faulkner: Saving Joe Christmas," 75-76.

⁹⁹ Wilhelm, "Framing Joe Christmas," 399-400.

¹⁰⁰ Michael Millgate, *New Essays on Light in August* (Cambridge u.a.: Cambridge Univ. Pr., 1987), 5.

vision is an indictment of the town's socialized vision—and one which may also implicate readers as well—a way of looking that does not see, one that does not need visible evidence, but one which is nevertheless completely sure in its knowledge of the unseen.¹⁰¹

Joe Christmas and Joe Brown are both outcasts in the novel, live in the same cabin, and engage in bootlegging together. However, only Christmas is considered a non-white person; therefore, when there is space for assumptions, it is easier to frame him for the murder. The option of murder as self-defense is also diminished because the community would not believe that a white woman could harm a Black man.

It resembles the previously mentioned real cases of lynchings and the way Black men were put in the role of a rapist or a murderer without proof. There are indications that the townspeople believed the relationship between Joe and Joanna not to be consensual, even though, on many occasions, one learns that it was. After Percy Grimm lynches him, Joe Christmas is also castrated. Percy Grimm comments on it with the words: "Now you'll let white women alone, even in hell." Castration and genital dismemberment were a standard part of the lynchings of alleged rapists. It symbolized that "the evil was abolished permanently from the earth." In his book *The Crucible of Race*, Joel Williams points out that in *Light in August*, "William Faulkner, with his usual unflagging instinct for the truth about the South, caught the image perfectly in the lynching of Joe Christmas (...)." ¹⁰²

Just like it was described in the chapter on the myth of the Black rapist, Joe was viewed as a hypersexual threat to the white women of Jefferson. But other than Joanna, he does not appear to have interacted with any other white female characters during his time in Jefferson. On the contrary, he was described as an outcast who avoided most both male and female

¹⁰¹ Wilhelm, "Framing Joe Christmas," 396.

¹⁰² Williamson, *The Crucible of Race*, 309.

townspeople. His sexual life before coming to Jefferson can be considered promiscuous, but there are no indications that his killer Percy Grimm or the community would be aware of this. In Jefferson, his only sexual relationship is with Joanna. Therefore, his hypersexuality and lusting after white women are again a figment of the Southern imagination and a racially conditioned construct.

It is also notable that in the beginning, Joanna is labeled "a nigger lover" and shunned by the townspeople, but when she is murdered, she suddenly becomes a victim of a Black brute. Another critic Abdul-Razzak Al-Barhow points out that "Joanna's social status is changed to protect a basic tenet of the Southern racist ideology, which is the "unnaturalness" of the relationship between white women and black men."¹⁰³ The scene where the town assembles to view Joanna Burden's dead body demonstrates the community's ongoing use of the myth of the Black rapist further. The moment is described as follows:

Among these came the sheriff of the county—a fat, comfortable man with a hard, canny head and a benevolent aspect—who thrust away those who crowded to look down at the body on the sheet with that static and childlike amaze with which adults contemplate their own inescapable portraits. Among them the casual Yankees and the poor whites and even the southerners who had lived for a while in the north, who believed aloud that it was an anonymous negro crime committed not by a negro but by Negro and who knew, believed, and hoped that she had been ravished too: at least once before her throat was cut and at least once afterward. (Faulkner 287-288)

The community unites in their belief that Joanna Burden has been killed and likely routinely raped by Joe Christmas, a Black man, and he needs to be punished for it. The excerpt also suggests that the community hoped that Joe Christmas raped Joanna Burden because it fits into their narrative. An article written by Melanie Masterton Sherazi even goes as far as

¹⁰³ Abdul-Razzak Al-Barhow, "Focusing on the Margins: 'Light in August' and Social Change." *The Southern Literary Journal* 42, no. 2 (2010): 54.

suggesting that their affair from its beginning is:

the manifestation of a collective social fantasy, conjured within racialized and gendered structures of domination. Though Joe and Joanna engage in a private performance of gender play and policing that is predicated upon the prohibition against miscegenation and its violation, their erotic play is always already public insofar as its climax and outcome are predetermined and will be played out upon the public stage.¹⁰⁴

Sherazi presents the idea that their love affair is "scripted by the social discourse of the Old South", in which Joe plays the role of the Black rapist and Joanna of the white victim. According to her, it is predetermined that Joe will end up lynched and Joanna murdered.

6.5 The Role of the Community and the Crowd

After Joanna Burden is murdered and her house burned down, her nephew promises a thousand dollars reward to the person who finds the murderer. Joe Brown is driven by the promise of money to accuse Joe Christmas of being the murderer. When he goes to the sheriff to give his testimony, the sheriff finds many inconsistencies in his charges against Christmas. Joe Brown panics and says:

"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." (Faulkner 97)

After finding out that Joe Christmas is not a white man, the attitude of the officers' changes. The marshal even says: "A nigger, (...) I always thought there was something funny about that fellow." (Faulkner 99) The marshal thinks he knows about Joe's racial background, much like the nutritionist did when he was a child. More importantly, the officers then began to believe that Joe Christmas was, in fact, the murderer. They were convinced of his guilt by the racial stereotype. It is also important to note that Jefferson's townspeople must have been

¹⁰⁴ Melanie Masterton Sherazi, "'Playing It out like a Play': Joe Christmas and Joanna Burden's Erotic Masquerade in William Faulkner's *Light in August*," *Mississippi Quarterly* 67, no. 3 (2014): 484.

aware he would be treated differently now that they suspected he was not white. The character of Hightower says:

"Is it certain, proved, that he has negro blood? Think, Byron; what it will mean when the people—if they catch ... Poor man. Poor mankind." (Faulkner 100)

Following Brown's suggestion, the search for Joe Christmas starts. The prejudiced community, eager to apprehend the Black rapist and killer and motivated by the financial reward, is holding his life in its hands. In an article for *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, John L. Longey, Jr. writes that "the white community considers him a Negro, hunts him as Negro, and will lynch him as a Negro."¹⁰⁵ While it was explained how the community considered him a Negro, now it is necessary to focus on the hunt and lynching resulting from the construct.

At one point, the character of Hightower says: "Not yet. Not the last I heard. They took some bloodhounds out there today. But they hadn't caught him when I heard last." (Faulkner 100) Joe Christmas is on the run, and everyone in Jefferson seems to be either out to catch him or patiently waiting for him to be caught. The hunt after Joe Christmas is motivated by the financial reward but also by the Southern urge to rid their community of the evil that Joe Christmas represented for them. It works as a unifying aspect for the majority of the community.

As Thadious M. Davis describes it:

While the reader may assume the existence of a traditional community in *Light in August* (largely oriented toward rural, agrarian, familial values), the reader perhaps should not automatically assume that its morality is an ideal norm. In the world of Jefferson as much fanaticism and misperception lie within the white community as without (...)

He affirms that the community has shared values that stand on white supremacist ideology. Despite their differences in education, wealth, or personalities, most of them unite on their

¹⁰⁵ JOHN L. LONGLEY "JOE CHRISTMAS: THE HERO IN THE MODERN WORLD." *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 33, no. 2 (1957): 244.

prejudices against non-white people.¹⁰⁶ In the language of crowd psychology, the individuals from the community became a collective mind. It needs to be said that all of the non-fictional lynching cases described in the second chapter were motivated by the same unifying attitudes.

6.6 Percy Grimm and his Mob

The shared values and the general consensus that Joe Christmas is the murderer who must be apprehended and punished gave power to Percy Grimm, the person who ultimately leads the lynching of Joe Christmas. He is what the psychology of mob behavior describes as a crowd leader. According to August Le Bon, the crowd does not necessarily need a leader as a founding figure to form. Le Bon believed that people tend to follow a leader because they give the crowd direction and help keep them stable. The crowd places trust in their leader.¹⁰⁷ Such characteristic applies to Percy Grimm as well, which is proved by the following excerpt:

(...) the town had suddenly accepted Grimm with respect and perhaps a little awe and a deal of actual faith and confidence, as though somehow his vision and patriotism and pride in the town, the occasion, had been quicker and truer than theirs. (Faulkner 456-457)

According to Le Bon, the leader usually stands out not because of outstanding intellect or capabilities but because of his will. Additionally, such a leader often resembles "a madman".¹⁰⁸ In the novel, Percy Grimm is described as someone who failed to fulfill his dream of fighting in the European war because he was born too soon. He was also considered lazy and worthless by his parents and at school and later found his worth as a captain of the state national guard. His life was fueled by the "belief that the white race is superior to any and all other races". (Faulkner 451) It may be said that he does resemble a madman who has become so

¹⁰⁶ John N. Duvall "Murder and the Communities: Ideology in and around 'Light in August.'" *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 20, no. 2 (1987): 102.

¹⁰⁷ Urs Stäheli and Eric Savoth. "Seducing the Crowd: The Leader in Crowd Psychology." *New German Critique*, no. 114 (2011): 68.

¹⁰⁸ Stäheli, "Seducing the Crowd", 68.

enthralled by the notions of white privilege that he would even risk his life to uphold them. He decides to organize American Legion members as he believes catching Joe Christmas could finally earn him the respect he has sought his entire life. At first, he proclaims that:

"We must let the law take its course. The law, the nation. It is the right of no civilian to sentence a man to death. And we, the soldiers in Jefferson, are the ones to see to that."
(Faulkner 452)

The excerpt can be read as Percy Grimm's determination to prevent the civilian act of lynching and his plan to solve things following the law. Ironically, he ends up carrying out the lynching himself. Although neither the sheriff nor the Legion commander approved of Grimm organizing the Legion members, Percy Grimm technically had some legal authority because the sheriff designated him as a special deputy. As a result, he cannot be regarded as a civilian, even though he did not obtain his rank in the usual manner, and he acted to defend white privilege and Southern ideals. Although Percy Grimm's legal authority contradicts the notion that Joe Christmas's death was a lynching, I contend that the ideological nature still allows for this classification.

The lynching event of *Light in August* clearly demonstrates that crowd psychology is part of the mechanism of lynching. When it takes place in the house of the town's reverend, there are four members of the mob present. The number of people can therefore be classified as a mob. Secondly, there is anonymity, which is typical in the psychology of the crowd. The novel never mentions the names or the backgrounds of the other three men that accompanied Percy Grimm to the kitchen, where he shot and castrated Joe Christmas.¹⁰⁹ Since they are just group members and can act on their wild instincts due to their anonymity, their identities do not matter. Thirdly, the three men lose the courage they once had among the crowd as Percy Grimm

¹⁰⁹ James Leo Spenko, "The Death of Joe Christmas and the Power of Words," *Twentieth Century Literature* 28, no. 3 (1982): 254.

castrates Joe Christmas before lynching him. One of them even starts vomiting. The situation is described as follows:

(...) when they saw what Grimm was doing one of the men gave a choked cry and stumbled back into the wall and began to vomit. (Faulkner 464)

The situation shows the process of deindividuation, which builds on the theories of Le Bon and Freud. When in a crowd, people tend to act differently than when they are alone. I believe that initially, the men were set on lynching Joe Christmas. But once it occurred, they turned to their individual morality and could not cope with the situation. The hypnotization of the leader and the crowd wore off, and they realized the brutality of their actions.

Finally, the dying of Joe Christmas is described as follows:

(Blood) 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. (Faulkner 465)

The lynching incident will remain in the collective memory of the town. It will always be a reminder of white privilege and a demonstration that when a Black individual is the suspected offender, an accusation is sufficient. Again, this reinforces the idea of the spectacle because lynchings were used to intimidate the entire race and act as a constant reminder of their inferiority. They were meant to be known about and remembered.

7 Conclusion

The thesis included a comprehensive chapter on the history of the practice, along with actual accounts of lynchings that took place in the American South. The foundation of the chapter was the extensive report on lynching by Equal Justice Initiative, which tracked 4,400 racial terror lynchings in the United States between 1877 and 1950. It provided a broader background for understanding the thesis' primary subject, the literary analysis. The chapter was added to show that lynching had many forms, besides the case of Joe Christmas, which differed in methods, the size of the mob, and the prior allegations.

The goal of the literary analysis was to explain the lynching mechanism as portrayed in *Light in August*, which has many characteristics found in real-life lynching incidents. The primary connection is that lynching is a racial issue and a tool used against Black people to maintain white supremacy and authority. In the story, the racial aspect is emphasized by the unknown origin of Joe Christmas. Once he is perceived as Black, he is treated accordingly – accused, hunted, and lynched. The argument was supported by employing the sociological theory of social constructivism introduced and popularized by the authors Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann. It works with the core idea that people construct reality and everything in it; therefore, they create social constructs. Race certainly has a biological basis, but Audrey Smedley's book *Race in North America* supported the argument that race also counts as a social construct. It was then demonstrated that the character of Joe Christmas and his racial uncertainty are the ideal illustration of this social constructivist approach.

The racial aspect is again present in the racist myths, which were part of popular culture and literature, including the main interest, the novel *Light in August*. One of the most frequent justifications for lynching Black men is the charge of murder and rape of a white woman. As stated in the thesis, such cases made up 25% of the lynchings. The findings of Tomáš Pospíšil

from his book *Sambo tu již nebydlí?: Obraz Afroameričanů v americkém filmu 20. Století* proved useful as they offered a theoretical basis for the analysis. It concluded that the well-known stereotype of hypersexual Black men constantly pursuing white women was part of the mechanism behind Joe's lynching. In addition, it confirmed that Joe Christmas is an example of the tragic mulatto myth, as his destiny is undoubtedly tragic and determined by his racial ambiguity.

Lastly, the story of Joe Christmas includes the community and the mob as crucial components of the lynching mechanism. The difference in Joe Christmas's case is that the lynch mob was not civilian but had some official authority, which goes against the notion that lynching is extralegal conduct. It needs to be said that they were still acting under the ideology of white supremacy, and the conditions were not standard. The literary analysis concludes that Joe Christmas is a lynching victim and a victim of the stereotypes present in the Jeffersonian community. The argument is supported by findings from the field of crowd psychology with a focus on mob behavior and the role of the leader.

Along with the psychological and sociological borrowings, pertinent literary analyses from various authors was also incorporated. The available literary criticism on *Light in August* is profound and offers ideas on many aspects of the novel, including race. I was persuaded that this thesis might add to the discourse and possibly introduce some novel insights because the specific subject of lynching is discussed relatively infrequently and marginally.

The thesis employed the work of Faulkner scholars Cleanth Brooks and Michael Millgate, which served as a helpful explanation for some of the story's fundamental components and the novel's general setting. It also offered explanations regarding Joe Christmas's troubled relationship with women, which proved helpful in the explanation of how Joe's guilt was

constructed. Randall Wilhelm's points about framing Joe Christmas were an essential addition to the discussion. They helped to clarify how the reader is even persuaded to believe that Joe Christmas murdered Joanna Burden. While most of the material on myths has been provided by Tomáš Pospíšil's study, the theory of The Marginal man by Robert M. Slabey was also employed, which explained in detail how Joe Christmas's life as a tragic mulatto developed. The perspective on the romantic relationship and the role of Joanna Burden in the story has been provided by the articles of authors Melanie Masterton Sherazi and Abdul-Razzak Al-Barhow.

It was also acknowledged that *Light in August* has been analyzed in a diploma thesis by Karolína Jelínková, who focused on the concept of community. The aim was partially to build on some of her findings that were relevant to the thesis's focus on the lynching in the story. More generally, this bachelor thesis may be viewed as an addition to the discourse on lynching in fiction. It also concluded the many findings on how Faulkner specifically depicted race in *Light in August*.

It must be pointed out that many possibilities still lay beyond the scope of this thesis. It only analyzed one of Faulkner's novels, while it is possible to analyze the mechanism of lynching in his other novels as well. His novel *Intruder in the Dust* might be considered for a closer analysis of the lynching mob and the psychology of the crowd. The short story "Dry September", which depicts the fabrication of guilt based on the character's race, would be a valuable extension of my findings.

Faulkner was also not the only author who approached lynching in his work. Another possible novel to analyze in terms of the mechanism of lynching would be *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee. The character of Tom Robinson is accused of raping a white

woman, which parallels Joe Christmas in *Light in August*. The myth of the Black rapist in *Light in August* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* may be contrasted, which would be quite an intriguing comparative analysis. I also believe that each sociological concept employed in this thesis can be studied independently in *Light in August* and yet be sufficiently in-depth to be a bachelor thesis. All things considered, there are virtually limitless opportunities for additional study and extension of this thesis and the topic.

Finally, one should not ignore that while William Faulkner's writing undoubtedly offers a significant portrayal of racial violence in the American South, the fact that he is a white Southern man reflects in his work. It is crucial not to forget to uplift marginalized Black voices who addressed the topic of lynching, such as the journalistic work of Ida B. Wells, the prose of Toni Morrison, or the poetry of Audre Lorde.

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