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Bakalářská práce

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Zobrazení archetypu postavy tragického mulata v románu Williama
Faulknera *Srpnové světlo*

The Portrayal of the Tragic Mulatto Myth in William Faulkner's *Light
in August*

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Prohlašuji, že jsem bakalářskou práci vypracovala samostatně a pouze na základě uvedených pramenů a literatury.

I declare that the following BA thesis is my own work for which I used only the sources and literature mentioned.

V Praze dne 6. 8. 2010

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ANOTACE

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá pojetím rasové problematiky v díle předního amerického spisovatele Williama Faulknera, konkrétně tedy pojednává o zobrazení mýtu postavy tragického mulata v románu *Srpnové světlo*. Z hlediska rasového konfliktu se jedná o práci, která se zaměřuje především na vyobrazení rasových stereotypů, existujících v americké společnosti počátkem dvacátého století, přetrvávající do období let šedesátých, mnohdy i později. Tyto stereotypy byly cíleně namířeny proti černošským obyvatelům Spojených států a staly se tak nedílnou součástí literárního, ale i filmového dědictví této země. Některé z nich sloužily pro pobavení bílých, jiné k soucítění s hrdiny či hrdinkami (jako právě v případě tzv. tragického mulata, který je „více bílý než černý“ a u bílých čtenářů či diváků vyvolává soucit a pochopení). Stereotypní vyobrazení tragického mulata, který neví, zda je příslušníkem bílé či černé rasy, se zakládalo na tvrzení, že v tehdejší době bylo míšení ras považováno za prokletí či hřích. Tudíž osud hrdiny, který má černošské kořeny, se stává tragickým, povětšinou začíná absolutním vyčleněním ze společnosti a končí v mnoha případech smrtí.

Ve své práci se soustředím na postavu Joea Christmase, hlavního hrdiny románu *Srpnové světlo*, který splňuje většinu atributů pro jeho chápání jako tragického mulata; přesto je tento fakt sporný, jelikož sám autor neuvádí, zda Joe ve skutečnosti má nebo nemá černošské předky. Skrze tuto postavu je tedy možné vidět, jak autor věrohodně a realisticky a mnohdy až drasticky vykresluje prostředí amerického jihu. Ve městě Jefferson není místo pro „negry“ a „barevné“. Tamními světu vládou bílí silní muži, v jejichž světě je každý byt' jen s údajnou kapkou černošské krve násilně zlynčován, i když se ničím neproviní. Černoši žijí na okraji společnosti, obdobně jako Joe Christmas, i přesto, že fyzicky vypadá jako běloch.

V úvodu práce se obecněji zaměřuji především na popis tohoto mýtu postavy tragického mulata, na všechny aspekty, které daný mýtus tvoří a na definici pojetí bílé a černé rasy, respektive tehdejšího světa bílých a světa černých. Dále se věnuji definici pejorativního termínu „negr“ a pojetí tohoto konceptu. Oba dva tyto stereotypy jsou důležité a klíčové pro

obsah mojí práce. Joe Christmas je tragickým mulatem právě díky tomu, že vykazuje jisté vlastnosti a rysy typické pro „negra“. V další kapitole se věnuji autorovi románu *Srpnové světlo* a jeho koncepci pojetí rasové tematiky v tomto díle. Postavu Joea Christmase analyzuji na základě jeho údajné „kapky černošské krve“. Jeho vztah k ostatním lidem ve společnosti, především k ženám, které byly v době Faulknerovy tvorby postaveny naroveň černým obyvatelům, je jedním z klíčových ukazatelů jeho chování a jednání. Ztracen mezi dvěma světy, které jsou striktně odděleny rasovou segregací, snaží se Joe najít sám sebe alespoň v jednom z nich. Díky svému údajnému podědění černošské krve se ocitá na rozmezí, odmítán společenskými konvencemi, pobývá na okraji společnosti a zažívá krutost a násilí, kterému se ovšem sám nevyhýbá, naopak jej sám vyhledává. Jeho život končí tragicky, z důvodů rasových a společenských. Joe Christmas tedy ztvárňuje postavu tragického mulata, jelikož zároveň zosobňuje většinu rysů typických pro vyobrazení tohoto stereotypu. Při této analýze vycházím jak z četby samotné, tak ze sekundárních pramenů a literatury.

KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA

Postava tragického mulata, rasové stereotypy, rasový konflikt, postava a koncept „negra“, pojetí rasové problematiky z hlediska amerického jihu

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1. Introduction

This thesis deals with the concept of race in the work of the American novelist William Faulkner, namely with the depiction of the tragic mulatto myth in his novel *Light in August*. In this thesis I explain and discuss the concept of racial heritage as such and also within the Southern context. Subsequently, I argue the importance of race for the development of the character of Joe Christmas, the protagonist of the novel. The theoretical part explains the concept of the myth of biracial heritage in broader sense. The following analysis of the tragic hero, in terms of racial and therefore also social predetermination, specifically focuses on the particular situations in Joe Christmas's life that contribute to the core argument of the thesis.

The theme of depiction of racial conflict in the American society could be grasped from many various perspectives, discussed on several artistic levels and observed from a number of different angles. There is a vast heritage in the field of literature, paintings or film, documenting the actual state of the society of that time. The matter of Afro-American inheritance that contributed to the cultural complexity and diversity within the American society is, beyond any doubts, a very serious one. The overlooked absurdity of the racial conflict in American democratic system could serve as an example of the greatest paradox in human history.

American democracy has been, more or less, proclaimed for centuries as an ideal democratic state which was always admired for equal treatment of every individual. Built upon the puritan tradition of equality and responsibility of the individual, the American society was gradually becoming rich and mighty. Nevertheless, it was the powerful institution of slavery that the American society adopted as a standard for its own democracy. In the very beginnings, it was plainly and merely the democracy of the white citizens in the United States.

Blacks were simply not humans and therefore were excluded from the society; they were owned by their masters, treated like animals, tortured, lynched and exploited as a cheap labour. After the abolishment of slavery as a legalized institution, the blacks were still regarded as a lower human race, even though they were liberated from the chains of their masters.

However, this thesis neither intends to judge the historical facts nor claim any correctness in the field of artistic depiction of the racial problem. The emergence of various stereotypes labelling blacks collectively as a degenerated and stupid human race, subordinate to the white one, commenced and formed a racist ideology in the United States of America. As every stereotype emerges due to some pre-existing ideology, it was a logical necessity to create stereotypical images of the Afro-Americans which contributed to maintaining their position in the society. The impacts that ensued were again another logical necessity—not only they regarded the blacks as wild, savage and uncivilized, but they also strengthened the self-perception of the blacks themselves. It was then solely the issue of racial heritage that became a concern of the white propaganda.

It is therefore interesting to observe how the white supremacy once contributed to shaping the whole American society. If one should examine the issue of racial heritage in literature thematically, it is possible to come to a conclusion that there are certain images that appear regularly, usually thought of being based on reality. However, most of these wrongly and artificially created stereotypes emerged as a targeted racist propaganda against the Afro-Americans. One of such stereotypes is a so called “tragic mulatto myth”.

This thesis observes, describes and analyzes the concept of race and treatment of this myth in the novel *Light in August* in which the protagonist embodies the features of the abovementioned tragic mulatto character. Joe Christmas, the hero of the novel, is portrayed as a white male with reminiscence of Negro blood; yet this claim is disputable. Basically, what

Faulkner does is that he deliberately places his character in the position of an individual with mixed-race heritage, never really providing a direct evidence for this claim.

My aim is to firstly introduce the possible concepts of a stereotype that might be applicable for the hero in *Light in August* and, secondly, analyze the main character of the novel in terms of these stereotypes. Along with that, I also intend to argue the importance of the definition of race with all its impact on the life in the American South, which is generally recognized as the author's main focus. Initially, I introduce the concept of the so called "tragic mulatto myth" in broader theoretical sense, with all its aspects that are undoubtedly important to the development of my argument. After the thorough description of this concept, the concept of race itself needs to be defined.

The importance of the racial issue in the work of William Faulkner and its immediate association with the South are thus clearly interconnected and play a key role in developing my argument. The way Joe Christmas is treated after being marked a "nigger", his lifestyle and his deeds, stem from the preconception based on the assumed racial heritage. Undoubtedly, it is possible to argue that the fact that Joe Christmas acts like a brute and his life terminates in tragic solitude as a social outcast does not have to be associated with his black ancestry. Nevertheless, it is the dramatic depiction of the despair and confusion and constant oscillation between the two worlds—the world of white and the blacks—what makes the story attractive and invites for a thematic discussion concerning race, or, let us say, exploration of the given subject.

2. The “Tragic Mulatto Myth”

To focus on the concept of race and Faulkner’s approach towards this issue, it is necessary to introduce the so called “tragic mulatto myth”. The shifts in focus from interracial founding couples to biracial ascendants, from parents to their children, and from slavery to race, were central to the rise of the figures that have become known collectively as the “tragic mulatto”. The so called “tragic mulatto myth” in American literature is then a phenomenon derived from the stereotypical image of an individual with biracial heritage.

Before introducing and defining the concept of the “tragic mulatto”, it is essential to broadly define the concept of who actually is a mulatto as it might be also beneficial for my argument. General knowledge suggests that a mulatto is a descendant of a white and a black parent. However, from a broader perspective, any person with any black and white racial heritage might generally be marked as a mulatto. Therefore, the American South, an area on which I intend to focus in my thesis, can be regarded as one vast mixture of black and white race. Thus, a mulatto as a literary concept may represent an individual with only an insignificant percentage of black blood.

The stereotype then suggests that people of mixed-race heritage are predetermined to live their lives in a doom, in a constant search for their identity, never finding out where they actually belong. This makes them tragic in a sense that their lives usually terminate in a suicide or any other form of tragic ending since they never are able to acknowledge themselves with either black or white world to live in. Not knowing where they belong, whom to consider as their ancestors and not being able to identify their position within the society, logically, the lives of the mulattoes lead to a tragic end. Even though the racial heritage necessarily does not have to be visible, the predetermination for further conduct in life plays a key role in finding the identity and automatically presupposes a given status in the society.

The tragic mulatto character as such is, in a sense, pitiful, or, in other words, is intended to be in most of the cases. Since the term is quite broad and not often precise in its application, it might be helpful to review its origins and functions in literature, according to Sterling A. Brown. Therefore, in order to support my argument, it is necessary to observe the key elements that form this myth.

Sterling A. Brown appears to have been the first to call attention to the literary stereotype of the tragic mulatto in a systematic fashion and to have named it and defined it. His observation has undoubtedly contributed to the whole concept. Naturally, he sees the mulatto as tragic and pitiful, in a sense, however, he criticizes its undeveloped aspects and unilateral focus on the black heritage. From his point of view, the mulatto is more or less an invention of a white author to arouse emotions in other white readers by creating a poor character, in most of the ways tragic and pitiful, right due to the “warring blood” that was believed to be coursing in his or her veins.¹ Usually, nonetheless, it is more often the emotionally unstable female mulatta who is supposed to arouse feelings in white readers (for example in the works of Chopin, King). Brown claims that the tragic mulattoes’ conflict was ultimately believed to be biological, generated by the duality of blood heritage. He repeatedly emphasizes the underlying racialism in the generally believed concept that the tragic mulatto was a victim of a divided inheritance; from his white blood come his intellectual strivings, his unwillingness to be a slave, from his Negro blood come his baser emotional urges, his indolence and his savagery.

As for the racist issue itself, Brown sees in white readers’ racial prejudice much of the reason for the existence of the tragic mulatto myth, or, in other words, the stereotypical image. White authors like Samuel L. Clemens used the tragic mulatto characters for whom the reader’s sympathies are aroused less because they are coloured than because they are nearly white.

¹ Werner Sollors, *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both, Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature*. (London: Harvard University Press, 1997) 224.

White readers were interested in these characters because of their (nearly complete) whiteness. For obvious racial reasons mostly the rebellious and militant men were generally shown to be of mixed blood, whereas the over-sexed female mulattas represented pity, emotions and compassion with their nearly-white beauty. It is because of the Negro of unmixed blood was regarded as no theme for tragedy; rebellion and vindictiveness were to be expected only from the mulatto.² The mulatto was believed to be a victim of a divided inheritance and there miserable; he was the man without the race, worshipping the whites and despised by them, despising and despised by Negroes, perplexed by his struggle to unite a white intellect and black sensuousness. The faith of such a mulatto is usually intensified by the tragic ending, commonly in a suicide.

As has been already mentioned above, the tragic mulatto character as such is, in a sense, pitiful. Looking at Kate Chopin's short story *Desiree's Baby*, the heroine is portrayed as a truly pitiful character. According to Sollors, Chopin used the convention in order to prove that white readers are likely to identify with the tragic mulatto because he or she is typically raised as white and only later discovers the trace of blackness and that the idea of a tragic mulatto characters also suggests that mulattoes are more tragic, more deserving of pity, than people with purely black ancestry.³ In Chopin, the depiction of the heroine is clearly following the typical depiction of a poor, pitiful white protagonist who discovers traces of Negro blood. "To be black in a racist society compelled little sympathy, but to be young, beautiful and ladylike (in the case of the mulattas) and only technically black was truly pathetic."⁴

Concededly, Brown's critique has a point for there is a certain positive outcome from this tragic myth. That is the form of flattery to the white race, to the race which, in all its self-assurance, seems to stand in a great need of this flattery. White race has always been considered superior to the black one and in the dramatic issue of miscegenation it has always stood for the biologically and intellectually supreme race. As is was mentioned earlier in the

² Sollors, 225-6.

³ Sollors, 226-7.

⁴ Sollors, 227.

text, white American writers were more likely to employ the stereotype of the tragic mulatto, though there is enough evidence of black writers who did so as well (for instance Charles Waddel Chesnutt). However, for black writers the mulatto represented a device to stress the irrational nature of the caste, with the implication that the colour bar should be lowered, at least for descendants of the dominant race. Therefore, the whole tragic mulatto myth can possibly be as well read and understood as a vehicle for the criticism of race, namely the white race. Two counter arguments concerning the different view on the issue of race thus provide a broad space for further observation.

To develop my argument further, certainly the gender distinction concerning the mulatto character should be pointed out. According to Brown, the male mixed blood characters, merely because they were nearer white, were more intelligent and militant, and therefore more tragic in their enslavement than their pure black counterparts. On the other hand, a female tragic mulatta character deserves a thorough observation in the field of sexuality, being generally described in terms of physical appearance.⁵ Even though both male and female characters are associated with over-sexed physical appeal with carnal desires, both are looked upon from different angles and perspectives. A tragic mulatta is often presented as a threat to the white wife, a perfect Southern Belle in most of the cases, whereas the male character is—in the moment when his identity is somehow defined—immediately associated with the brutal rapist, Negro beast seducing a white woman. The mulatta women are exceptionally beautiful but often doomed, while the male characters (if they were not associated with the pure black counterpart) were thought of more militant in their acting.

This behaviour is thus applicable to Faulkner's hero Joe Christmas, since he acts as a brute and an ignorant for most of the time. The way he treats women around him is then associated with this stereotype. His lost identity ultimately shapes his further conduct. Simply, Faulkner tries to suggest and depict the confusion of an individual with biracial heritage and points out the tragic consequences that stem from this confusion, however, suffice it to say, never

⁵ Sollors, 224.

actually proving whether Christmas has black roots or not. Due to his presupposed biracial heritage Joe Christmas is not only portrayed as a typical Negro brute but also as a social outcast, living at the edge of the society. Ironically enough, his life is predetermined to end up tragically due to one unverified rumour. In my opinion, many of these aspects that have been described significantly contribute to the claim that Joe Christmas is indeed a tragic mulatto character however, ironically enough, he is not a typical prototype of this literary concept. Therefore, to support argument for and against this claim, I will observe and analyze the case of Joe Christmas more profoundly later on in this text.

To sum up, the mulatto is, in a sense, a tragic character, depicted in a constant futile search for identity, arousing pity and compassion. As stated earlier in the text, it is also a character more or less artificially created by a white author for a white reader, even though there are exceptions to this argument. Usually, there is a chance to pass for white however, not every of the characters decides to do so. Throughout the bygone centuries, the mulatto as a literary figure has more or less been sketched as an image corresponding to the given convention created by the whites. Conceived for white readers, these characters invite empathy because they are so much like whites and so little like blacks; the internal conflict they experience can be explained as a result of racial forces. Therefore, no wonder white writers were far more eager to develop the mulatto characters as we know them nowadays. What more, it is possible to go that far and claim that the truly pitiful tragic mulatto character (mostly in the cases of the mulatta) might be a white man's invention.

The constant search for an identity, confusion stemming from the mixed-blood inheritance, underlining racism of the white authors and both flattery and critique of the white race- these all elements that constitute the tragic mulatto myth. The truly significant aspects of racism, intellectual dominance of the white race and the savagery and sensuousness of the black race form this stereotypical image. To understand the concept of this myth in more detail, it is essential to closely examine the issue of blackness and whiteness, the two inseparable matters that constitute this myth.

2.1 Blackness and Whiteness: the white and not-white dichotomy

To define the aspects of blackness and whiteness which are important for the development of the character of Joe Christmas, it is necessary to acknowledge what it actually is that Joe Christmas identifies with within the world of blacks. Nonetheless, the tendency to define blackness as opposed to whiteness is, in a sense, racist itself. There are also attempts to call it the “otherness”. Generally, throughout centuries, white blood was associated with asceticism and black blood with unbridled lust, white meant purity and black stood for dirt and filth. This actually reveals how delicate and flimsy the structure is, moreover when even nowadays such theories can be proclaimed (for example by Ku Klux Klan or racist propaganda).

Thus, in the following lines I will try to provide an explanation of these terms, considering their importance for my further arguments. As most critics have agreed, the whole tragic mulatto myth had been shaped due to the belief that mixture of the races was a curse. Therefore, the stereotypical image of a mulatto whose ancestors were regarded as a lower human class and their race was considered inferior to the white race, undoubtedly and necessarily had to support such a claim and contribute to the myth. However, the distribution of the white blood in the American South should also be considered. Clearly, there are not always pure blacks or pure whites. From a general point of view, the whole American South is a mixture, originating in the very early times of slavery. The greatest paradox constitutes the fact that it was mostly white male slave-holders who raped the black women, distributing their white blood further. Acting of the black males vice versa was considerably contributing to the interracial sexual intercourses however it was not the only way of spreading the black blood further.

So, considering the attempt to define blackness in terms of otherness as racist, it is needed to try to analyze for what reasons it might be called racist. The first one is that mainly and primarily the concept of race in literature is addressed to the whites. Whites can associate more with the fate of the tragic mulattoes because it is more or less the most part of their lives when they think they are white. When they find that not, it calls for empathy from the reader,

however more probably from the white reader. A black person will probably not associate himself or herself with the mulatto character and with all its aspects. Nevertheless, taking into consideration a hypothesis that a black reader should somehow respond to the stereotype, it would be interesting to guess what he or she would identify with. Because there are no good features of the mulatto characters, and if there are, they are automatically associated with the white race. Therefore, it is possible to claim that the whole attempt to define this myth in literature is racist, no matter how the characters are sketched.

Another important definition of blackness comes as a matter of consideration to this whole problematic and that is the concept of a Negro. As this text deals with the treatment of a Negro in various aspects, it is necessary to define this term. If we look into history of the American slavery, the Negro—both as a person and a term—is its direct product. Adjectives like stupid, negligent, dilatory, inconstant and inferior, these all are features that create a stereotypical image of a Negro. The Negro is cursed by “inherited inaptitude” and is “by racial quality submissive”. Thus, the American slavery system could be, in many ways, considered a delightful social system admirably contrived for the efficient and undisturbed subordination of an inferior people. These apologetic “excuses” of the whites to the human exploitation and further racial segregation thus formed a stereotype applicable to the whole treatment of the blacks: they are simply stupid and pitiful.⁶ Then, if a pure Negro is pitiful, a person with only a little percentage of Negro blood becomes even more pitiful, in a sense that he or she would perfectly well suit into the white world but unfortunately, the sudden shock from the fact of belonging to the inferior race terminates, in most of the cases, in tragic consequences.

Together with the definition of the terms “tragic mulatto” and “Negro” I should also consider the treatment of those; more or less, the terms exist mostly as stereotypes. In literary studies, the word “stereotype” is commonly used pejoratively to apply the underdeveloped characters or caricatures recognizable in outline. Character types used in comedy and satire make readers

⁶ Herbert Aptheker, *Essays in the History of the American Negro*. (New York: International Publishers, 1964) 4.

who recognize them feel superior and hence in a position to laugh. The character types used in drama or literature arouse empathy from the respondents. Stereotype is something “continued or constantly repeated in an unvarying pattern.”⁷

The Negro, as well as the tragic mulatto, mainly exists as a stereotype, portrayed and created by the whites to fit the stereotypical images. These stereotypes then served as a device of the whites to prove that blacks are really and truly pitiful, comic, and simply less intellectually developed. There are number of such stereotypical images apart from Negro and a tragic mulatto. Sambo, cheeky Pickanniny, good-hearted and master-devoted Uncle Tom or stupid Rastus; all of these stereotypes sketch various pictures of the blacks, serving only one purpose: to mock the black race as a whole.⁸ What more, these stereotypes were created not only to entertain the whites, but also to show the blacks themselves how the society sees them. Thus, in the time of strict racial segregation, for an average black person it was understandable to identify himself or herself with such stereotypes. Naturally, if there is no other image to identify with and the white society presents us artificially made stereotypes of Negroes and Samboes, it comes only with the time when the blacks themselves would actually represent those images.

Following the ideas of Werner Sollors in his explication of Alain Locke’s manifesto *The New Negro*, the Negro has been in the mind of America more of a formula than a human being and, as a consequence, his shadow, so to speak, has been more real to him than his personality.⁹ Also, the mulatto represented a character doomed by the racial inheritance, more or less artificially created, potentially suggesting a thread to the white society. As already mentioned earlier in the text, the interracial partnerships were regarded as a curse and thus, by

⁷ Sollors, 229.

⁸ Tomáš Pospíšil, *Sambo tu již nebydlí? Obraz Afroameričanů v americkém filmu 20. století*. (Brno: Ak.nakl., 2003) 18-20.

⁹ Sollors, 229-11.

some racist creeds, mulattoes should not exist, and “if they were shown feeble and moribund in fiction that would echo, help to validate, and spread the belief”¹⁰.

Coming back to the critique of Sterling Brown, in terms of racism both the terms are used incorrectly because blackness is compared to whiteness only on the basis of difference: black is what is not white. However, in the case of a tragic mulatto character, nothing is purely black or white. Brown most probably did not expect racists and segregationists to offer positive images of mulattoes (as mulatto was mostly associated with doom, curse and degeneration), but he was disappointed in finding abolitionists and liberals who incorporated racist doctrine into the very descriptions, in the speeches made by characters, and in authorial or narrative comments. There are many such instances, as for example this brief extract of passages collectively referred to as articulations of the topos of “blood infusion”:¹¹

2. The infusion of Anglo-Saxon with African blood has created an insurrectionary feeling among the slaves of America hitherto unknown.

3. We do not allow for the infusion of white blood, which became pretty generally distributed in the inferior black race during the existence of slavery. Some of this blood, too, was the best of the country.¹²

To conclude, the white and not-white dichotomy and the strict division of blackness and whiteness with respective impact on the society in the American South has formed a pattern, or, in other words, a codex sufficient enough to be applicable to the fields of arts and literature. The creation of the tragic mulatto myth based on the stereotypical images of blackness and a flattery of whiteness proliferated further into the minds of people not only as an artificially created behavioural pattern, but as a common belief that mulattoes should be pitied just due to their biological predetermination. The social aspects that formed such myths were mostly clearly used deliberately, in order to dehumanize the black race. Nonetheless, the

¹⁰ Sollors, 231.

¹¹ Sollors, 230.

¹² Sollors, 230.

case of William Faulkner and his treatment of blackness presents something else than a mockery and racism. Faulkner gives a warning about the state of the society as a whole.

3. Faulkner's concept of the "Negro" and the Southern context

If William Faulkner is generally considered to impersonate the American South in his novels, it is necessary to acknowledge the Negro as the key aspect which is irrevocably joined with the South. A Negro is associated with the South immediately due to the historic context and it embodies a central imaginative force in Faulkner's fiction. In general terms, the work of William Faulkner evokes the South; and the South evokes the Negro. Faulkner's notions of the Negro life were shaped by traditional societal rules in the South and therefore he can be considered as a reflector of the Southern problematic. In his novels, he employs the blacks, however not being interested in them as individual characters as he is in formulating his aesthetic image and sense of a Negro.

To paraphrase what was stated earlier in the text, the definition of a Negro depended not on what he was, but more or less on what he was not: he was not white. The Negro was considered inferior to the whites in every area of consequence. He was described in terms of physical features which were different from the whites and his deviations from the white standards. He was an inseparable unit of the South; yet a very isolated one due to the fact of representing a subordinate human kind.

In Faulkner's fiction, generally speaking, the Negro functions both as a concept and as character and becomes an integral component of the structural and thematic patterns. According to Thadious M. Davis, Faulkner views the Negro from both aspects-biological and social. From the biological he pays attention to depiction of bodily features (for example describing the odour and animalism of a woman black body in *Light in August*), the social aspects are then displayed throughout his fiction, forming the central conflict between an individual and society. Actually, it is quite natural for Faulkner to think of life itself as conflict, mainly because of the nature of the southern world that he was born into.

Recognition of the nature of Faulkner's world is, in large measure, dependent upon recognition of the place of the Negro in it.¹³

The traditional southern world of Faulkner's times was divided into two major parts, one white and the other black. The Negro, then, is the other half of the racially divided world; he represents a natural antithesis or a counterpoint to the white world. From the perspective of the white South, Faulkner presents what it means to be a Negro and what Negro means to the general society. Thus, he focuses more on the social definition of a Negro from the perspective of a white Southerner. At the base of Faulkner's analysis of southern life is an awareness of a society that it is the legacy of the enslavement of human beings. Therefore, the product of his writing is violence, reflecting the state of the society.

In his novel, Faulkner does not try to deny the position of a Negro in the southern society but, on the contrary, it is possible to claim that he actually inherently shares this traditional view of blacks. What he does, focusing on his character in *Light in August*, is an assumption that a Negro is an essential element of the life in the South and bases his work on this fact. Namely, in *Light in August*, he tries to display a life of an individual who searches his identity, puzzled and confused. In this novel, the Negro is a very dominant thematic concern embodied by Joe Christmas, a mulatto who is considered to have a little percentage of Negro blood running in his veins.

To paraphrase Thadious M. Davis's essay, within the story of Joe Christmas, Faulkner actually dramatizes his conception that a social, not a biological, definition of Negro underpins southern thought. The perception of the Negro is that he is an African, heathen and primitive, but at the same time, the Negro is a form of actual or imagined behaviour: the slave, brutish and ignorant "nigger".¹⁴ To give an example of such a treatment of this concept, at the very beginning of the novel, the crowd which is present to the sight of the burning

¹³ Thadious M. Davis, *Faulkner's "Negro", Art and the Southern Context*. (Louisiana State University Press: Baton Rouge and London, 1983) 2-5.

¹⁴ Davis, 130-134.

house “believed aloud that it was an anonymous negro crime committed not by a negro but by Negro.”¹⁵ The ways of viewing Negro dissolve reality into various perceptions of a Negro. It is not a biological definition that determinates the Negro, it is an abstraction imagined by the society in which all its members are linked by their stereotyped conception of the “brute Negro,” who maniacally rapes his white victim whether or not she is alive (as for instance the murdered Joanna Burden).

As it has been mentioned earlier in the text, one of the elements that forms the tragic mulatto myth is based on the biological heritage. In Faulkner, as we can observe, the Negro is treated more like a social concept, an abstract image of a social status of an individual more than an individual of certain blood heritage. The Negro exists as a social figure in the minds of the inhabitants of Jefferson. Though, the assumed biological inheritance determinates Joe Christmas’s life to such an extent that due to his presupposed Negro blood he is lynched like a real “nigger”. Ironically enough, he does not have any proof for his biological heritage. Therefore, it is vital to analyze his character from different perspectives, as he deserves a thorough observation in terms of identity.

¹⁵ William Faulkner, *Light in August* (New York: Modern Library, 1950) 271.

4. Joe Christmas: The Problem of Identity

The racial predetermination that Faulkner uses in *Light in August* is, in a sense, ironic. In the case of Joe Christmas, the tragic hero of the novel, the author leaves the question of whether Christmas has Negro blood unanswered. Yet, it is solely and primarily the issue of racial heritage that shapes his whole life and is responsible for his degenerated humanity. Thus, Joe Christmas is exposed to a treatment suitable for a “nigger” despite the fact that there is no clear evidence to prove his racial background. He then remains a tragic mulatto character whose deeds are underlined by his constant oscillation between the world of whites and world of blacks, an act which he deliberately and voluntarily chooses, although—according to the very small probability of Negro blood— he would be free to pass for white. Yet, this argument is not explicit enough, therefore it is essential to examine both the white and black worlds carefully.

Whether or not Joe Christmas is of biracial origin, his life encompasses a struggle for survival that is magnified by the accepted myth and the social reality of the black experience. Joe’s struggle is concerned with the social definition of a Negro. He suffers aloneness and a crisis of identity as well as the life of an industrial labourer. The introduction of his character serves as an illustration of Joe’s confused identity as he is initially described as a man on the road:

He looked like a tramp, yet not like a tramp either. His shoes were dusty and his trousers were soiled too. But they were decent serge, sharply creased, and his shirt was soiled but it was a white shirt, and he wore a tie and a stiff brim straw hat that was quite new, cocked at an angle arrogant and baleful above his still face. He did not look like a professional hobo in his professional rags, but there was something definitely rootless about him, as though no town nor city was his, no street, no walls, no square

of earth his home. And that he carried his knowledge with him as though it were a banner with a quality ruthless, lonely and almost proud.¹⁶

Throughout the whole novel, Faulkner maintains that Joe Christmas is both black and white, rather than that he is neither black nor white. Joe is given a chance to live both existences, contrary to the accepted standards of the South. During his wandering, he exists as a black man with other blacks and also as a white man with other whites. He can and does occupy both spaces, sometimes even simultaneously as, for instance, when he cohabits with Joanna Burden.

The dramatic story of the hero begins already in his childhood, in the times when he is placed into an orphanage. Joe Christmas is a little boy without any family background; it is only later as the story begins to unfold and we find out it was his grandfather who put him into the institution. Abandoned by his family, Joe Christmas is left in the orphanage. Being marked a “nigger child”, he does not understand the term. Thus, it is already his early childhood in which his confused identity begins to develop.

As he is a child without any proper name, Joe obtains his surname due to being born at Christmas. His birth is a mystery and also, throughout the novel, there is a possible loose parallel with the birth of Jesus Christ. Both names have the same initials and also Joe Christmas, as well as Jesus, brutally dies at the age of 33. However, any attempt to see Joe Christmas as a martyr is complicated by his life of violence and his general contempt for humanity and so it is difficult to judge whether there actually is any intended resemblance with the martyrdom of Jesus Christ. The theme of Joe Christmas’s origin is so open that it leaves space for many possible explanations. It is arguable whether Faulkner wanted to provoke by creating a figure which, in many ways, resembles the traditional Christian symbolism of martyrdom.

¹⁶ Faulkner, 27.

From my point of view, there is certainly an obvious critique of the society for its shallowness and racism and, therefore, a loose resemblance with Jesus Christ was used to enhance this perception. On the other hand, Joe is also portrayed as violent and ignorant; obviously then, the concept of race gains its importance again in this issue. Jesus Christ—a white man—is a symbol of purity and spiritual and intellectual maturity whereas all the negative aspects are represented by the black skin, suggesting a doom and curse, created by Satan. Going then back to the purpose of the artificially created tragic mulatto myth, the description of Joe Christmas as a literary character evokes, though rarely, pity and compassion in the reader, at a certain stage.

There are certainly many questions inviting for discussion, even though not many of them might be well straightforward. Is Joe a white man because the features as self-control and intellectual strivings are supposed to originate in his white blood or does his potential savagery and violence represent the heritage of the black blood? As mentioned above, it is possible to claim that Joe is *both* black and white. Nevertheless, the actual answer is a very complicated one since Faulkner never really reveals the factual truth about Joe's racial origin; he only gives certain hints and arguments. Thus, throughout the novel, Joe Christmas stays basically a loner who embodies the “negative incarnation of a man” due to his racial heritage, he is a man without any identity. Unaware of his birth name and his exact racial heritage, he wanders in a futile search for a place where he can belong.¹⁷

As he remembers to be called a “nigger bastard” in the orphanage, Joe Christmas comes to a conclusion that he has a reminiscence of Negro blood. He is caught eating a tooth paste while accidentally encountering a dietician. She has a job to lose and therefore acts according to her own needs—she labels him a “nigger”. The dietician is actually one of the first people who deliberately attempt to manipulate Joe's personality. By labeling him a “nigger” she basically undermines his role in the society; Joe is a young boy who encounters an adult couple in a

¹⁷ Thomas M. Inge, *Studies in Light in August*. (Columbus: Charles E. Merrill Publish. Comp., 1971) 111.

sexual intercourse, can understand nothing of it and a role of a “nigger bastard child” is automatically imposed on him. Thus, already at this defining moment, he commences a journey of an individual with confused identity.

Later on in his adulthood, instead of passing for white—his outer look is more of an exotic stranger than a mulatto (to illustrate this, one of his lovers, Bobbie, thinks of him rather as an Italian or Mexican)—he opts for carrying a burden of a mixed-race individual. Following Joe Christmas’s path of life, nearly everyone in his surroundings laughs at his name, workers at the mill consider him a mysterious man of exotic looks, and believe that he hails from an unknown foreign country. Literally everyone keeps distance from him. Being called a “nigger bastard”, Joe Christmas desperately searches his own identity in which he never actually fully succeeds. Again, this can be illustrated by Joe’s encounter with the Negro working in the orphanage:

Until at last the nigger said: “What you watching me for, boy?” and he [Christmas] said, “How come you are a nigger?” and the nigger said: “Who told you I am a nigger, you little white trash bastard?” and he says, “I ain’t a nigger” and the nigger says, “You are worse than that. You don’t know what you are. And more than that, you won’t never know. You’ll live and you’ll die, and you won’t never know...”¹⁸

Joe Christmas as a child is presented as a solitary character, dreadful things are whispered about him in the orphanage and he does not have a single authority that he could identify with. By the whites he is called a “nigger”, by a Negro “a white trash bastard”. He is a child of indefinable identity, without a family, without a social background. Subsequently, a possibility to be brought up by foster parents emerges. However, this attempt of shaping his further life turns to be a failure.

¹⁸ Faulkner, 336.

When Joe Christmas has the opportunity to leave the closed door of the orphanage behind, it is possible to claim that the first decade of his desperate search for who he is and where he comes from commences, also due to the fact that he grows older and begins to comprehend the issue of race much better. The middle-aged couple adopts the child and tries to change him according to their lifestyle. Mr. McEarchen intends to provide the child with a decent upbringing and makes Joe accept his name: "...he will eat my food and he will observe my religion, why should he not bear my name? ...He [Christmas] didn't even bother to say to himself *My name ain't McEarchen. My name is Christmas*. There was no need to bother about that. There was plenty of time." ¹⁹

To broaden this idea, the fact that Joe does not have any proper name also reflects his lost identity. If the social code defines Negro as a prescribed pattern of acting, not as a state of being (or blood), then Joe can be well treated as both black and white. And given the nature of southern beliefs, Joe's name must be either white or black for the name sets the limits of the bearer's existential predetermination. And therefore, in a passage introducing Joe Christmas, it is possible to see the given rules in the racist society which depended on labelling individuals according to their status, including names. Imposing the white morals and a white name on a boy whose knowledge of his own family background is very poor leads inevitably to an inner struggle in Joe's soul. A white name (like McEarchen) demands a white lifestyle, a Negro name of a lost individual predetermines Joe to a life of a "nigger". With an illustration of this fact, it is easy to see how the society functioned in shaping human possibilities within the community:

"His name is what?" one said.

"Christmas."

"Did you ever hear of a white man named Christmas?"

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

¹⁹ Faulkner, 107.

And that was the first time Byron remembered that he had ever thought how a man's name, which is supposed to be just the sound for who he is, can be somewhat of an augur of what he will do if other men can only read the meaning in time.²⁰

The McEarchens try to bring him up as a white child even though Joe is putatively a Negro child. This is probably the most crucial point in the novel. Joe Christmas is free to choose where he will belong and his freedom is infinite. Therefore, he must find out who and what he is, and he chooses the path of loneliness and infinite searching. During his solitary wandering, he constantly encounters the both world of the whites and the one of the blacks. In each of them there are certain individuals who try to force him to choose where to belong and which identity to accept.

But understandably, Joe Christmas cannot let others tell him what to do and where to belong. He has to undergo McEarchen's beating and punishment to worship his religion and to obey and respect his authority. These sickening attempts to make him white as the others terminate in a murder. Joe is able to kill his step-father and the question is why? When he was given a chance to pass for white, why does Joe decide to leave the world of the whites and contemns all the authorities around him? It is ultimately the strict upbringing of the adoptive couple that imposes a burden on him, he is not able to ask, to choose, he only has to obey and accept his new identity. If Joe was assured by a nurse in the orphanage to have a reminiscence of Negro blood, trying to bring him up as white proves ineffective and unnatural. It causes the discrepancy in allowing him to identify with either of the worlds. Joe's rebellious nature and hatred of the authorities does then not originate in his black roots (as it would be commonly believed due to the classic stereotyped image of a tragic mulatto) but, on the contrary, more probably in his white roots; all the whites around him try to manipulate him to become as white as themselves.

²⁰ Faulkner, 29.

The exception to this is a white female Joanna Burden, who forces Joe to accept his position as a “nigger”. This constant manipulation results in Joe’s reluctance to accept the terms for his existence dictated by southern society. Those terms—to be either black or white, to live as one or the other—are in themselves limiting and dehumanizing. Refusing this strict definition of his own existence, Joe’s acting, though effectively defeated, has a positive outcome as a sign of warning, as an impulse to start considering the meaningless racial segregation in the society.

After the murder of McEarchen, Joe escapes the world of whites and commences another decade of a loner life at the edges of society. He gradually starts to explore the world of Negroes. He dines with the blacks, trying to absorb as much of their culture and lifestyle as he can. He openly associates the black bodies with the smell of sweat, dirtiness and filth. He lives in a tumbled down negro cabin on Joanna Burden’s place, he does a Negro’s job at the mill. He enters Joanna’s house like a “nigger” invading in the night and is served a meal as for a “nigger”. At the same time, while portraying Joe as a Negro, Faulkner establishes Joe’s white ties. When Joe lived with a black woman who resembled an ebony carving, he would lie awake “watching his white chest arch deeper and deeper within his ribcage, trying to breathe into himself the dark odor, the dark and inscrutable thinking and being of negroes...trying to expel from himself the white blood and the white thinking and being”²¹.

Considering the stereotypical image of a Negro in terms of sexuality, the fact is that a male Negro character is mostly associated with the brutish rapist behaviour. A Negro was a threat to all white women, a man of unbridled animalistic lust who raped and sexually tortured white women. This stereotype was again artificially established due to the different body structure, claiming that a black man’s muscles are as strong as the muscles of an animal. Therefore, it is necessary to mention Joe’s repulsive and humiliating relationship towards women and observe it more closely. Since it is another factor that contributes to Joe’s bipolar perception of his identity and difficulty to establish some given order in his life, the female characters—

²¹ Faulkner, 212.

apart from Lena Grove—play a very important role to Joe’s conduct. One of the many women who Joe encounters in a sexual affair is, for example, a prostitute Bobbie; she considers him a man of exotic looks and claims that probably she would think he is Italian. However, when Joe reveals the possible truth about his racial background—to which he is not able to provide any evidence though—Bobbie automatically labels him a “dirty nigger, dirty pig”.

The complicated relationship towards women is more explicitly discussed in subchapter 4.1. However, as one woman plays a key role not only in defining Joe’s own transferred masculinity but also in his futile search for his racial identity, I find it crucial to analyze her character at this point. Joanna Burden is a character which, in a sense, also supports Joe’s confused behaviour. Her attitude towards the blacks is sometimes explained symbolically with her name—the view frequently held by the whites that the Negro is the white man’s burden. Her name can therefore have both moral and religious overtones.²² However, to me as a reader, Joanna’s surname stands for her own personality—she herself becomes a burden to Joe’s life. She represents the whole society in a way, as she tries to apply her own behavioral codex on Joe. Joanna demands that he accepts his given position in the society as one of the “niggers”, which can be also explicitly perceived from her treatment of Joe. The meals that she cooks for him are the meals prepared for a Negro, who knows where his position should be. Her furious attempts to get a control over Joe, letting him in the house only under her permission and leaving him in his cabin—a cabin for a Negro—are, in fact, the very core arguments for her becoming a huge burden for Joe Christmas.

When Joe reveals to Joanna Burden that he believes to have reminiscence of Negro blood, he also states the irony of that belief: “If I’m not, damned if I haven’t wasted a lot of time.”²³ On one hand he claims that one of his parents was partly a “nigger”, on the other he also admits that he has no proof for that. Maybe, from my point of view, Faulkner’s point is to show how shallow the society was, judging someone by an unclear rumour rather than stated facts,

²² Davis, 137.

²³ Faulkner, 241.

wasting a lot of time with being obsessed by the concept of race. In my opinion, this may well be a core argument of Faulkner's novel. If we look at the position of Joanna within the white society before the murder, she would be called a "nigger lover" and most of the white people would avoid her. After being murdered by a "true nigger", she is recognized as a white woman deserving the loyalty of the white community since the white community feels an urgent need to protect its self-image; this image is created by their honourable deed of preventing a white woman from a Negro beast, a black man. Here, we can clearly see the application of the treatment of the concept of Negro in terms of social aspects.

When Joe murders Joanna, he believes that his burden shall no longer exist. On the contrary, the huge burden figuratively remains on his shoulders since he murdered also something in himself. As Joanna represented the white world who pities blacks, he refused to be pitied. But with murdering the pity embodied by Joanna, Joe leaves a space for the open violence that awaits him, after the sickening attempt to make him a real "nigger". In Joe's behaviour there can be found a loose parallel between murdering Joanna Burden and McEarchen, his stepfather. McEarchen tried to bring him up strictly as a white child, accepting his white roots; on the contrary, Joanna failed in her attempts to accept his blackness and finally to decide to live as a Negro. Joe kills both his black and white worlds outside; yet inside him, the two worlds mingle and he therefore embodies a truly tragic mulatto character.

Concerning the character of Joanna Burden, her role obviously deserves a thorough observation in the field of womanhood, since the concept of womanhood plays an important and inseparable role in the novel. Along with Joe's relationship towards women in general it is also necessary to focus on the particular factors that contribute to the portrayal of Joe Christmas as a "womanshenegro". Thus, I am going to elaborate the issue of womanhood and its relationship to Joe Christmas in the following subchapter.

Basically, both Joanna and McEarchen succeed, in a particular sense, in destroying Joe's personality completely. Due to being treated both like a white man and a "nigger", Joe

ultimately has to become a tragic mulatto character. His fate terminates in a tragic consequence, as he is considered a proper “nigger”. Here, Faulkner uses “Negro” as a socially defined term: “None of them knew then where Christmas lived and what he was actually doing behind the veil, the screen, of his negro’s job at the mill”.²⁴

One of the most revealing passages related to the “nigger” as a social category occurs before Joe’s capture. The observant townsman Halliday reports about Joe the following statement:

He never acted like a nigger or a white man. That was it. That was what made folks so mad. For him to be a murderer and all dressed up and walking the town like he dared them to touch him, when he ought to have been sulking and hiding in the woods, muddy and dirty and running. It was like he never even knew he was a murderer, let alone a nigger too.²⁵

At this point, then, Joe has, in a way, accepted his place as a true “nigger”, however his external appearance of a white looking non-murderer does not correspond the reality in which he is. Immediately after admitting his identity, Joe is hit in the face. Here, to illustrate my further argument, according to Davis, Joe may be an allegory of the whole South in a particular sense. He portrays the South’s fragmentation, but also the pathetic nature of its attempts at wholeness and unity. Those attempts, as well as the fate of Joe Christmas, are doomed to failure. Joe’s rare chance is not to live as either white or black, but to live as both and to mingle the two modes of existence. Therefore, he represents a serious, clearly dangerous threat to the society.²⁶

For the further development of his character, it is also necessary to mention that the narrative strategy of the author vastly contributes to the whole depiction of Joe Christmas as a tragic mulatto character. Early in the book the protagonist is revealed as the main suspect for a

²⁴ Faulkner, 31.

²⁵ Faulkner, 331.

²⁶ Davis, 136-7.

brutal murder. Seemingly, he is a man without history. It is only as the flashbacks begin to unfold and the reader has an opportunity to learn about his childhood and youth. The very past, of which Joe Christmas is personally unaware, however, proves to be too powerful a force to escape or to resist. Possibly, with this strategy, the reader obtains a slightly different view on the problematic issue of racial heritage and is able to understand the terrible consequences that ensue more profoundly. Also, the flashbacks in narrative occasionally call for the reader's sympathy with Joe Christmas.

Joe's blood heritage actually remains unresolved and in the end, he dies the death traditionally accepted for the "nigger". He is accused of raping Joanna Burden as a "nigger", he is labeled "nigger" and he is hunted as a "nigger". It is impossible to claim he found his own place within the society and could identify himself with the racial stereotypes. However, due to the pressure in the society he was finally made a "nigger", a victim of the circumstances, of his own deeds, of his confused behaviour. He stays a man without any clear identity even though he is labeled a "nigger". Despite the fact that he was given a choice to pass for white, his life of violence and social exclusion lead to an inevitable end.

4.1 Joe Christmas: The "Womanshenegro"

Joe Christmas is a character typically masculine, loathing women as a human species. When he finds out that women are, in his words, "doomed to be at stated and inescapable intervals victims of periodical filth, he vomits in disgust". According to Doreen Fowler, he is a self-mandated enemy of the female sex as a whole.²⁷ Ironically, women play a key role in the development of his character and women are who he depends on his survival. The issue of perverted womanhood functions as another device to perceive Joe Christmas as a confused individual in search not only for his racial, but also sexual identity. The fact that the racial and sexual aspects are interconnected in this book is vital to the statement that Joe embodies not

²⁷ Doreen Fowler, et al., "Joe Christmas and Womanshenegro", *Faulkner and Women*, 8 June 2010, 1 July 2010 <http://books.google.cz/books?id=66btrQLvwc4C&pg=PA144&lpg=PA144&dq=faulkner+and+women+womanshenegro&source=bl&ots=fFesu9IPKG&sig=NLgNeEX1xbIATij6f6gWI65Milk&hl=cs&ei=PghYTP-2NsusOO296J4J&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CBcQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=faulkner%20and%20women%20womanshenegro&f=false>

only the features of the male Negro brute raping women, but also as a tragic mulatto who, through the world of women, remains in between the world of whites and world of blacks.

At the age of fourteen, Joe and other boys hire a black prostitute; Joe violently attacks the woman when he copulates with her, kicking her and leaving her lie in pain. He is repelled by the female sex in every area of consideration; he loathes the smell and odour of “womanflesh”. He despises Mrs. McEarchen due to her typical female attribute-pity. He hates Joanna Burden for the same reason. Though, he cohabits with these women, repulsed by their womanhood. In his rejection towards women, Joe, to a certain extent represents his society in its attitude towards women. Further, the hatred and repulsion of women is related to Joe’s own perception of the blacks. And, following the critique of Doreen Fowler, perhaps the most important of all, Joe’s apparent dread of women is rooted in the confusion of his own sexual and racial identity and in a terror of androgyny.²⁸

Thus, apart from the racial conflict, Faulkner’s hero embodies another specific feature and that is the complicated approach towards women and woman characters as such. Looking at the issue from the critical perspective, it is possible to come to a conclusion that there are numerous striking examples of anti-woman approach in Faulkner’s novel. Before broadening this concept I shall firstly focus on the situation in the society and the strict racial and gender division in the American South.

The society of Faulkner’s days was obviously patriarchal, providing space only to the strong, masculine and white. The racial division plays a key role in defining the gender aspects in this book, because white was connected with strength, power and, what was weak was feminine and black. Naturally, as has been stated above, the concept of the male Negro brute

²⁸ Doreen Fowler, et al., “Joe Christmas and Womanshenegro”, *Faulkner and Women*, 8 June 2010, 1 July 2010 <http://books.google.cz/books?id=66btrQLvwc4C&pg=PA144&lpg=PA144&dq=faulkner+and+women+womanshenegro&source=bl&ots=fFesu9IPKG&sig=NLgNeEX1xbIATIj6f6gWI65Milk&hl=cs&ei=PghYTP-2NsusOO296J4J&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CBcQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=faulkner%20and%20women%20womanshenegro&f=false>

corresponds merely with the physical strength; apart from that, all the features that a Negro can embody are weakness, primitive behaviour and low intellectual development. Basically, blacks were at the same position as women, regarded as lower humans.

Apart from the character of Lena Grove (who more or less inhabits her own world and stands out of the actual conflict), the society presented in the novel is a masculine one and depicts a “hardnosed man’s world where practically every human interaction is a power struggle in which one person dominates and another is victimized”²⁹. In Jefferson, the town in which the story takes place, the society is strictly divided according to the racial and gender rules. Women thus form this sort of underclass, in which, together with the blacks, their plight is similarly pitiable. Following the argument of Doreen Fowler again, paradoxically, the exaltation of masculine values in such a society appears to have a perverting effect on the sexual identities of women. Therefore, the role of a woman changes in such a society. A woman has to undergo the process of “defeminization”, a process in which her own femininity is denied and transformed into a creature struggling with her own identity.³⁰

In a world ruled by white males, the blacks and women are powerless and constantly victimized. Both women and blacks exhibit the attributes which are prohibited to the white men like submissiveness and vulnerability. Women are regarded as a weak sex, subordinate to men. Already the biblical tradition suggest a woman as a lower human kind, being created from the man’s rib. It was a woman who was considered guilty for the exile from Eden. A woman is a bearer of the ultimate sin, placed in the role of a creature inferior to a man.

²⁹ Doreen Fowler, et al., “Joe Christmas and Womanshenegro”, *Faulkner and Women*, 8 June 2010, 1 July 2010 <http://books.google.cz/books?id=66btrQLvwc4C&pg=PA144&lpg=PA144&dq=faulkner+and+women+womanshenegro&source=bl&ots=fFesu9IPKG&sig=NLgNeEX1xbIATIj6f6gWI65Milk&hl=cs&ei=PghYTP-2NsusOO296J4J&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CBcQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=faulkner%20and%20women%20womanshenegro&f=false>

³⁰ Doreen Fowler, et al., “Joe Christmas and Womanshenegro”, *Faulkner and Women*, 8 June 2010, 1 July 2010 <http://books.google.cz/books?id=66btrQLvwc4C&pg=PA144&lpg=PA144&dq=faulkner+and+women+womanshenegro&source=bl&ots=fFesu9IPKG&sig=NLgNeEX1xbIATIj6f6gWI65Milk&hl=cs&ei=PghYTP-2NsusOO296J4J&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CBcQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=faulkner%20and%20women%20womanshenegro&f=false>

Similarly, Joe has to undergo the same treatment as every other woman even though he openly despises them. In terms of racial heritage, the position of women in the society of those times was equal to the blacks. Both women and blacks had virtually no rights, their role within the community had not much of a value. Possibly, the reason why Joe loathes women so much stems from the hatred towards the society as a whole. Since he is placed at the same level as women, it ultimately causes his infinite hatred of them. As women have to obey the societal rules, concerning the acceptance of the aspects of their gender inferiority, also Joe Christmas is forced to accept his black identity.

To disobey the given rules in the society the woman must undergo a transformation of her own gender role. Thus, the process of “defeminization” serves as an example of the transformation in the society, within the local community. Joanna Burden is a character which stands for the masculine within the feminine. She has “man-trained muscles and man-trained habit of thinking” and is portrayed as a virginal spinster, “calm, cold-faced, almost manlike, almost middle-aged woman who had lived for twenty years alone, without any feminine fears at all.”³¹ Even when Joe encounters her in a sexual intercourse, it is “as if he struggled physically with another man for an object of no actual value to either, and for which they struggled on principle alone.”³² Joanna Burden, as it was already mentioned, decides to carry the figurative “burden” of the Negro’s fate. According to her Calvinist beliefs, the Negro is cursed by God and doomed to Satan, therefore she is aware of her own condemnation to hell. By sexual mating with Joe Christmas—the Negro—she projects her religious beliefs into her relationship with Joe. Thus, supposedly, she uses the term Negro (for instance while shouting “Negro! Negro! Negro!” during their sexual intercourse) to debase not Joe, but herself.

On the other hand, she openly displays her white supremacy; she treats Joe like an inferior, by her patronizing behaviour towards him. When she recalls her father’s view of the Negro, she

³¹ Faulkner, 221-244.

³² Faulkner, 222.

claims that, according to her father, the black race was a doom and curse of the white race, emphasizing that no one even from a different generation can escape this damnation.

Thus, logically, Joe, after being introduced to race through taunts of “nigger” made by children in the orphanage, has to undergo a process of transformation of his own identity. “Nigger” in Joe’s world means a curse, inferiority, weakness, something womanlike. Hence, the awareness of possible black blood determines him to become dependent on a woman, but his hatred towards her is so unbearable that with murdering Joanna, he murders something in himself. Joanna represented the world of pity, pity for the blacks and weak. And Joe does not want to be pitied. On the contrary, he, by no means, intends to become a victim. Therefore he openly shows contempt to women, which merely enhances his awareness of his own degenerated humanity.

At this point it is important to mention that not even Joe Christmas is able to liberate himself from the traditional and puritanical conception of the Negro. As it has been mentioned in chapter 3, Faulkner’s treatment of the Negro exists in peoples’ minds, as a socially and provincially defined term. Thus, the stereotypical image of a Negro (Joe connects the woman and a Negro with unpleasant smell) actually shapes Joe’s self-perception. In despair, Joe sees himself becoming an inferior human being, a Negro, dependent on another weak being, a woman. This general contempt for the Negro and desire of power over the inferior [women and thus also Negroes] create together another feature that shapes the character of Joe Christmas as a tragic mulatto.

As Thadious M. Davis states in his essay, the equation of the Negro and the female principle suggests the powerful depths of racial stereotyping. Such a conception of the male leads inevitably to a denial of his own masculinity. To quote him precisely, the male Negro “is emasculated by a cultural consciousness which submerges the male’s personality in a hazy, but useful, conception of a woman, the mammy (the stereotype of a mammy suggested a black sexless matron woman whose femininity is denied to her, as she embodies all the

attributes of the perverted gender role)³³ Therefore Joe actually rebels against this conception of the Negro as female, against the conception of a “womanshenegro”. He attacks women of both races, showing off with his masculine power over the feminine (as, for instance, in the rape scene).

Nevertheless, Joe himself becomes transformed into an inferior human being, dependent on the female world. The myth about black-white sexual relations thus becomes transformed into a relationship between two white people, with one of them being only possibly black. Thus, the Negro, unable to express his manhood due to the societal oppression logically has to adopt the behavioural patterns associated with females. Even though he displays a general contempt for women, he realizes during the early stage of his relationship with Joanna Burden that “it was like I was the woman and she was the man”.³⁴ Therefore, his perverted masculinity together with the racial confusion projects in his self-perception and shapes his identity. He hates women because he fears that he might be very much like them. His hatred towards the blacks—in particular, black women—is undermined by his hatred towards the whole society which is responsible for treating Negroes and women unequally with the white males. Therefore, considering the statement that a woman equals a black person then Joe Christmas undoubtedly embodies the features of the “womanshenegro”, a male perverted in his own sexuality, racial identity and a male with denied masculinity.

4.2 Joe Christmas: The Tragic Mulatto

In the previous chapters, the character of Joe Christmas has been observed in terms of racial heritage, social behaviour and his complicated relationship towards women. Most of these components create an image of a literary character in which the elements of the tragic mulatto myth can be found. Given the divided nature of the society that Joe inhabits, there are still many questions to be asked. Is Joe Christmas a white man because of his apparent whiteness and is he thus a member of the ruling white upper-class? Or is he a Negro, both biologically and socially black member of the lower, subject caste? Or is he made a “nigger” by the white

³³ Davis, 140.

³⁴ Faulkner, 222.

mob and Joanna Burden? And last but not least, is he a tragic mulatto character and, if yes, what are the elements that make him tragic in Faulkner's conception?

The answers are certainly not straightforward ones as the character of Joe Christmas is complicated by the irony of the actual racial heritage. He does not fit into any of the social classes, he does not know where he belongs. He deliberately leaves the world of the whites to live with the blacks, to return to the white world again. It is possible to say that he longs for a status within the white caste which is apparently evident when he, after murdering Joanna Burden, walks into the white neighbourhood full of white people sitting on their porches: "That's all I wanted. That don't seem like a whole lot to ask."³⁵ On the contrary, he accepts the position of a "nigger", with all the lynching and humiliation. It is therefore logical to argue that Joe Christmas primarily does not know where to belong.

The fact that he does not know what his identity should be, the constant confusion leads to his ambivalent approach towards both the worlds. However, it would be wrong to claim that he deliberately places himself into a position of a victim. He loathes the blacks and women and places himself into a position of dominance over them, however, at the same time, he lets himself being treated like a black man, submissive and weak (for instance, while cohabiting with Joanna Burden).

Important fact about the tragic mulatto myth as a literary concept is that mostly the white characters are in general more white, that means that they do not stick deliberately to their black ancestry, but, on the contrary, attempt to pass for white, in fact, some of them would do everything to pass for white and leave their black ancestry behind. In most of the cases, even the black authors (like Charles Waddel Chesnutt) portray their characters of biracial heritage generally more white than black. In *Light in August*, Joe Christmas decides to carry the burden, so to say, of a possible Negro ascendant, even though he has a great chance to pass

³⁵ Faulkner, 108.

for white. This makes him ultimately a tragic hero, as he once accepts his blackness-and therefore otherness, he is treated like every other “nigger” in the South.

Still, however, there might be speculations about the final acceptance of the blackness. It is obvious that the combined forces of Joanna Burden and the mob eventually make Joe Christmas a “nigger” in the perception of the community. Nevertheless, Joe, in all his endeavours, is “an actor who plays to the audience of his choosing. He seeks the greatest possible reaction from that audience; for a white audience he uses the shock value of blackness; for a black audience, he asserts the superiority of his whiteness.”³⁶ Thus, it remains unclear whether he fails or succeeds in his performance. The racial situation on the South actually offers him this opportunity to act according to the given circumstances. He is an indirect victim of this situation; yet he can benefit from it. He rebels against the values of his culture, and therefore he cannot find a place in Jefferson. Due to his constant rebellion, he thus must exist at the edges of the society as all “niggers” do; yet he can always choose to pass for white by denying his possible black inheritance.

Thus, in my opinion, it is Faulkner’s aim to depict the society in a very realistic way and therefore to bring attention to the problematic treatment of racial inheritance. The disappointment and despair of the locals in Jefferson after finding out that Joe is a Negro (apparently, without any direct evidence), the Negro as a social concept, an image existing in their minds, deep-rooted in the community, may serve as an argument to support Faulkner’s intention.

The elements that contribute to the claim that Joe Christmas is a tragic mulatto character are crucial to the whole perception of Joe’s character by the reader. If earlier in this text a stereotypical image of a male tragic mulatto was asserted as a character militant in his acting, the ignorant and violent behaviour of Joe Christmas confirms this statement. Joe Christmas embodies most of the features that create the tragic mulatto myth, including the fact that his

³⁶ Davis, 149-50.

character truly pitiful. Even though there are many moments when the reader is repelled by Joe's behaviour, his tragic ending evokes sympathy with his character. The question might be whether his murder is not actually a form of a suicide, a death so typical for a tragic mulatto character. Joe's death is inevitable because though he is able to accept the role of a Negro emotionally, he is unable to accept it intellectually and socially. From all his acting, he escapes the society as a whole, his image of the Negro and decides to liberate from the chains of the constant manipulation of others around him. Thus, though his actual blood heritage remains unresolved, Faulkner places Joe in a position of a victim of the strict social rules, criticizing the society as a whole.

5. Conclusion

Light in August is a novel in which the theme of race and racial heritage plays an important role. Through the setting in a provincial town Jefferson the reader has a chance to observe how the society functions and how individual characters struggle to gain their position in the local community. Thus, the setting of a southern locality serves as a picture of the society as a whole. The strict racial segregation, dominance of the white race combined with the gender inequality; these were the milestones and dogmatic rules upon which the American South built its community. Whoever disobeys the given rules is automatically excluded. This is the case of Joe Christmas and, also, Joanna Burden. Therefore, both of them end up tragically, as they can no longer bear and accept the strict obedience to the society. Joe is unable to accept a position of a Negro intellectually and socially, Joanna Burden lives alone, pitying the “niggers” around her; yet showing her white supremacy. As a result, Joe’s and Joanna’s lives terminate in death, tragically and inevitably. From my point of view, Faulkner depicts the cruel injustice of life, the brutality and violence in all its nakedness in order to provoke and draw his attention to the problems in the society.

In my thesis I tried to analyze the character of Joe Christmas in terms of racial issue, racial heritage and the white community in Jefferson. I approached the analysis of his character from the perspective of a reader, with the help of the secondary sources. I used various literary essays to compare my own argument with the statements of other critics or to find explanatory examples in them. Certainly, there are various other themes in the novel that I completely left out, on purpose. The analysis of the main white characters in Jefferson (such as Hightower, Joe’s grandfather and others) would be also interesting and contributing to the problematic issue of race and for the development of Joe’s character. In my thesis, I tried to focus solely on the character of Joe Christmas and his relationship towards the society in a more general perspective. Also, I intended to describe him as a tragic mulatto character since he embodies most of the features typical for this myth.

From my point of view, the character of Joe Christmas is a striking example of Faulkner's warning to the society which strictly judges an individual in terms of race. Such a categorization is racist itself since it operates with the deep-rooted stereotypes about the blood heritage. Faulkner uses the concept of a Negro in this novel as a social myth that imposes a role on an individual, leaving the question of a true blood heritage actually unanswered. Therefore, I found the story very attractive due to this racial conflict.

It is interesting how Faulkner sketches a portrait of a closed world, inner community in which everyone knows everyone's private business but nobody actually really cares for the human as such. Humanity is a concept that is brutally crashed in Faulkner's world. The degenerated and declined human factor in the character of Joe Christmas reveals, in fact, a lot about the structure of the society in the American south and leaves an open space for a thematic discussion concerning racial problems, the unequal treatment of sexes and the oppression of the weaker members of this society. Thus, the Negro, or the tragic mulatto protrude as concepts highly stereotyped and imagined; yet very realistic and drastically true. To conclude, it is exactly the theme of race that makes the story attractive and interesting; on the other hand, the racial conflict depicted in all its brutality and cruelty serves as a historical account of the treatment of blacks in America, as a tragic exclamation of the reality, as a warning to the whole mankind.

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