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THE ROAD

IN LIGHT IN AUGUST

Have you ever read a tale so dark?

A winter's tale in the middle of August... full of sound and fury
A dark house (that was the original title) burning in the fire of hell

The Fall of the House of Burden

A fallen world haunted by sin and guilt peopled by grotesque fanatics worshipping a God of wrath and punishment

A fallen world believing in a hellfire religion seeing both women and "negroes as the incarnations" of Evil, a world cursed by slavery and haunted by miscegenation...

The Fall of the House of Usher

The Fall of the South

The Fall of Mankind ?

A man on the road, Joe Christmas, running away from all this madness but unable to get out of this mad circle: the wheel of tragedy taking him inexorably to a horrendous death.

An innocent, almost comic, country girl on the road, Lena Grove, travelling in the light of August.

She is not related to the main protagonist, Joe Christmas, she never meets him, she just follows her own road heedless of the tragedy which is being woven at the same time....

André Bleikasten in his biography of Faulkner wrote :

Lumière d'Août s'ouvre et s'achève en douceur sur la figure en mouvement de Lena, impavide petite paysanne enceinte, allant son petit bonhomme de chemin, sa petite bonne femme de route, à la recherche d'un mari et sûre d'en trouver un...**Elle nous vient de la profondeur d'un temps sans âge...**¹

This timeless age is Ancient Greece

At one point in his manuscript, Faulkner had crossed out the title "*the Dark House*" and replaced it by *Light in August* and made the character of Lena Grove open the book. (instead of Hightower) In an interview, he explained how he came to change the title:

In August in Mississippi, there's a few days somewhere about the middle of the month when suddenly there's a foretaste of fall, it's cool, there's a lambence, a luminous quality to the light as though it came not just from today but from back in the old classic times . It might have fauns and satyrs and the gods and from Greece , from Olympus in it somewhere. It lasts just for a day or two, then it's gone, but every year in August that occurs in my country, and that's all that title meant, it was it was just to me a pleasant evocative title because it reminded me of that time, of a luminosity older than our Christian civilization. Maybe the connection was with Lena Grove, who had something of that pagan quality of being able to assume everything.²

Here lies the clue to the meaning of the novel. Lena Grove opens and closes the novel and her story is the frame within which Joe Christmas' dark story is inscribed. Although the two characters are not related and are inverted mirrors of each other, it is this contrast which gives a meaning to the novel: the motif of the roads that take opposite directions is the unifying pattern of the novel which otherwise would have had a very loose structure.

¹ André Bleikasten , *William Faulkner, une vie en romans*, Editions Aden 2007 p.279

² *Faulkner in the University* University of Virginia Press, 1995

LENA GROVE walks in the Light...

Chapter one

THE FRAME



Lena is Helena which in ancient Greek means the light, the warm light, the torch... So Lena walks in the light, whereas Joe Xs walks in darkness. She walks in the heat, on the dusty roads carrying her shoes in her hands

The woman went on. She had not looked back. She went out of sight up the road: swollen, slow, deliberate, unhurried and tireless as augmenting afternoon" ³ Ch One p.10

She walks along, carrying a palm leaf fan and a small bundle tied in a bandanna hankerchief, or she sits in a wagon "quite still looking ahead between the ears of the mules. She has been travelling for one month all the way from Alabama. She is described in the present tense because she lives in the present and looks ahead to the future unlike Joe Christmas who is enclosed in his past. Her road is a straight line. She never looks back but keeps going, slow, deliberate "unhurried"...

When the book opens she is seen sitting by the side of the road with her feet in the ditch waiting for a wagon to climb up the hill: with her candid innocent look her palm leaf fan, her faded blue sunbonnet and dress, she looks like the Virgin Mary

To the people she meets, she tells artlessly her story, She knows for sure, she says, she will find her husband to be, Lucas Burch, who had left on the day she had told him she was pregnant promising he would send for her when he found a job and a house to settle down. ... she never heard from him. The same age-old story, the reader smiles nobody believes her

³ William Faulkner, *Light in August*, Vintage Books 1985
Martine SPINA ANTON

but they dare not laugh or undecieve her. They are moved by her “unshakable fidelity” to a man who had lied and abandoned her, so they help her, even Mrs Armstid the stern farmer’s wife, feels compassion and gives her her meager savings.

In fact, although she travels alone, she is rooted in the rural community ; she connects to the people, inspires compassion, human solidarity , nobody blames her, she relies on the kindness of strangers and is ready to share her box of sardines with the others. Unlike Joe Christmas who is alienated and isolated, she is part of the community of men and women.

Lena grove walks in the light,

but **she is also the light itself** “inward lighted” she watches people intently with her clear blue eyes, listening, silently. Watching and listening, listening and watching, she gets an insight into the minds of people and can guess the truth, one could say she seems to have an intuitive fore-knowledge of it.

Lena est la femme ensoleillée, écrit **André Bleikasten**, la femme sans ombre, assujettie à la lumière, à sa mesure et son ordre -l'ordre apollinien des forces visibles ⁴

As her name, “grove” implies, Lena Grove belongs to the permanent world of Nature, and looks like a **pagan goddess**:

as the wagons move on the dusty road,

the outlines get blurred, the outside reality dissolves into this strange late August luminosity giving the whole landscape an unreal oniric quality and Lena Grove a mythic dimension. There is a sudden suspension of time, the wheels of the wagon creak on in a timeless static *hypnotic “nomotion”*

“ Fields and woods seem to hang in some inescapable middle distance, at once *static and fluid*, quick, like mirages. Yet the wagon passes them.” Ch1 p.28

“ The wagon moves *slowly, steadily*, as if here, within the sunny loneliness of the enormous land, it were outside of, beyond all time and all haste.” p.27

“ The wagon *goes on, slow, timeless*. The red and unhurried miles unroll beneath the steady feet of the mules, beneath the creaking and clanking wheels.”

(my italics) p.29

⁴ Op Cit p.279

A kind of drowsiness and lethargy conveyed by the slow rhythm of the sentences, hangs over the whole countryside which is compared to an urn:

backrolling now behind her a long monotonous succession of peaceful and undeviating changes from day to dark and dark to day again, through which she advanced in identical and anonymous and deliberate wagons as though through a succession of creak-wheeled and limpeared avatars, like something **moving forever and without progress across an urn.** P7

This urn is the timeless pastoral world of Nature evoked by Keats in his *Ode to the Grecian Urn* :

Thou still unravish'd bride of **quietness**,
Thou foster-child of **silence** and **slow time**,
Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:
What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape
Of deities or mortals, or of both,

Thou, **silent form**, dost tease us out of thought
As doth eternity: **Cold Pastoral!**

and Lena Grove is transfigured into a kind of pagan goddess of fertility

Her time is not the furious frantic time of Joe Christmas, it is **the slow pace of the natural cycle of the seasons** and her patience and **stillness** is the stillness of the ancient Mother-Earth
Her voice , “dogged” , quiet, patient, peaceful, belongs to Eternity: she is **the Eternal Female Principle**, her slow pace and unwavering determination are symbols of the permanence of Nature.

The wheels have been turning slowly, **steadily since immemorial times.**

Once Lena arrives in Jefferson the narration shifts to the story of Joe Christmas and Lena recedes in the background, she reappears to give birth to her baby **and she closes the book.**

Lena’s story is the outward frame of *Light in August*, the rim of the wheel which encapsulates or encompasses the story of Joe Christmas

Joe' Christmas story is the wheel within the wheel and with the introduction of this character in chapter 2 the reader leaves the world of **pastoral comedy** to enter the world of **tragedy**. Joe's wheel turns in a counter direction

Whereas Lena Grove walks in the **Light** towards **Life**, Joe Christmas walks in **darkness** towards an inevitable **death**.

THE ROAD TO PERDITION

Joe's road runs **backwards** into his **fateful past**,

Joe Christmas is the prisoner of his past. He is not on a quest for freedom or self-fulfillment as many American heroes are, he is a drifter, an outcast running away from himself, always looking back in his flight, tormented by his own obsessions, unable to get out of this death circle which encloses him. He is described as **a black phantom** running on **a street** hunted down by his own demons, unable to reconcile his black and white identities

When Lena Grove arrives in Jefferson he has already killed Joanna Burden, and Byron Bunch remembers him as a man isolated from society. Unlike Lena he does not try to connect with people

There was something definitely **rootless** about him, as though no town, no city was his, no street, no walls, no square of earth his home" p.31

He has two obsessions: a revulsion for women and a revulsion for "negro blood" – which he believes, is running in his veins: two revulsions inherited from his Calvinistic education obsessed with moral and racial purity, inherited from a perverted religion which considered woman as the incarnation of Evil, sex as fornication and condemned "miscegenation", -the mixing of white blood and black blood- as the "Unforgivable sin"

In chapter 5, on the eve of his murder his visit to Freeman Town, the black section, is like a descent into hell, he feels entrapped by the black bodies and of the black men, above all he feels repelled by the "**fecundmellow voices of the negro women**" which threatened to engulf him into the dark abyss of the

the lightless hot wet primogenitive Female ch 5 p.115

The repelling **primogenitive Female** is the counterpoint of the bright, innocent **Female Principle** embodied by Lena in Chapter One.

As he runs away from this place of filth he sees his killing of Joanna Burden as the inevitable outcome of his past which comes back to him dimly like unconscious voices or murmurs that make him unwind the thread of his life (chapters 6 to 12) leading to this fateful murder.

-- **the episode of the toothpaste and the lustful dietetician** in the orphanage which convinced him convinced that black blood was running in his veins, “negro blood” - which he saw as a curse and which determined his fateful destiny .

-- **his years of childhood and adolescence in the grips of a monstrous Calvinistic sadistic foster-father** who forced him to kneel and whipped him for not learning his catechism,

-- **his unfortunate love affair with the prostitute Robbie**

-- **and his fifteen tears’ flight** after killing his foster father. A flight not along country roads, like Lena: but from modern city to modern city without ever finding peace, running along an empty deserted **street, an inner labyrinth** from which there was no escape

From that night the thousand streets ran as **one street**, with imperceptible corners and changes of scene, Ch 10 p.223

He thought that it was loneliness which he was trying to escape and not himself. But the street ran on: catlike, one place was the same as another to him. But in none of them could he be quiet. But the street ran on in its moods and phases, **always empty** p.226

He was thirty three when he finally came back to Jefferson and broke into Joanna Burden’s dark house and stayed for two years

There in the grips of the nymphomaniac black spinster, his downfall was complete.

“It was as if he had fallen into a sewer” Ch.12 p.256

and when, in the last part of their relationship she asked him to kneel and pray as his foster father had done the voices of the past told him he had no choice but to kill her .

The dark was filled with the voices, myriad, out of all time that he had known, as though all the past was a flat pattern. And going on: tomorrow night, all the tomorrows, to be a part of the flat pattern, going on. **Then it was time.** p.281

Joe Christmas –a doomed young man who got entangled in the threads a fateful past who thought he could escape through violence and murder: the counterpoint of Lena Grove, the young woman full of hope in the future

On the day of his death, Joe Christmas realizes at last that his road- or his street -had been **turning in a loop** for thirty years and that he could find peace only in the acceptance of his black heritage and by facing death . He returns to Mottstown on the black boy's wagon:

the wheel has come full circle

...

Point/ counterpoint.⁵

The wheels of the wagon creaking on the road to **Life ... and Death.**

Lena's delivery on the day' of **Joe Christmas' death** -her baby crying in a replica of the scene of Nativity with Byron - Joseph watching over mother and child

Lena's delivery // Hilltower's delivery , *reborn* to Life and reality

Joe Christmas' delivery in death -a horrendous death:

The Grim Reaper, Percy Grimm, hunting him,

The wheel of fire

Tomorrow, and to-morrow and to-morrow (Macbeth)

⁵ François Pitavy explained « la structure contrapuntique » of *Light in August* in *William Faulkner* , collection U2, Armand Colin1970, p.240
Martine SPINA ANTON

The black pistol,

the five shots,

the knife...

"the Horror" (*The Heart of Darkness*)

"Poor man ! Poor Mankind !!" Hightower Ch4, p.100

THE EPILOGUE

THE QUEST FOR MEANING "LA BEAUTE d'HELENE"

Et voilà notre petite paysanne, qui reprend sa petite bonne femme de route dans ce dernier chapitre 21 qui vient détendre l'atmosphèreL'épilogue raconté d'un ton goguenard par le marchand de meubles dans le lit conjugal remet tout le roman en perspective. Le retour au monde de l'idylle pastorale vient nous rappeler les valeurs essentielles: le caractère sacré de la Vie, l'importance des valeurs humaines, la beauté du monde. Il apporte une note optimiste à une histoire qui autrement aurait semblé être absurde, dénuée de sens

a tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury
signifying nothing *Macbeth* Act V

Mais Faulkner n'était pas un nihiliste, bien au contraire, dans son discours de réception de son prix Nobel , il a exprimé toute sa foi en l'être humain, en sa capacité de surmonter les épreuves, en sa capacité d'endurer ...Lena Grove incarne ces valeurs: **rien ne l'atteint**, elle poursuit sa quête du bonheur indifférente à la violence et à la fureur qui l'entoure.

Son personnage appartient à une **Arcadie perdue**, il nous rappelle l'**urne grecque de Keats** sur laquelle sont gravés la beauté de la Nature et l'Amour éternel

bold Lover..... do not grieve
she cannot fade though thou had'st not thy bliss
Forever will thou love and she be fair

Lena nous renvoie à cette ancienne civilisation hellénique qui vouait un culte à la beauté incarnée par Hélène de Sparte

Beauty is truth, truth beauty -that is all
Ye know on earth , and all ye need to know. Keats

Lena, la petite paysanne impassible vient nous rappeler cette vérité et apporte **sa sagesse** dans un monde moderne abandonné à la **folie des hommes**. Elle ignore tous ces fanatiques qui prêchent la haine et l'intolérance: tous ces prophètes de malheur, ces prédicateurs fous qui voient la Femme comme l'incarnation du Mal, tous **ces Grands Inquisiteurs** hantés par la pureté, qui organisent des **chasses aux sorcières** pour délivrer le monde d'un Mal qui réside pourtant dans leur propre nature.

.....

Comme il m'arrive souvent lorsque je lis Faulkner, je pense à **Albert Camus**, qui, dans son exil à Paris était impatient d'appareiller en direction de son Algérie natale pour retrouver ce qu'il appelait, *'l'ancienne beauté*, pour retrouver à Tipasa cette communion de l'Homme avec la terre, le soleil et la mer.

Dans *'l'Exil d'Hélène*, il reprochait à l'homme moderne d'avoir coupé ses liens avec la Nature et d'avoir ainsi exilé la Beauté

nous vivons le temps des grandes villes ...
délibérément le monde a été amputé de ce qui fait sa permanence,
la nature, la mer, la colline, la méditation des soirs...

Il nous invite à retrouver la sagesse des Grecs, cette *luminosité* dont parlait Faulkner :

« L'ignorance reconnue, le refus du fanatisme, les bornes du monde et de l'homme, le visage aimé, la beauté enfin, voici le camp où nous rejoindrons les Grecs. D'une certaine manière, le sens de l'histoire de demain n'est pas celui qu'on croit . Il est dans la lutte entre la création et l'inquisition. Malgré le prix que coûteront aux artistes leurs mains vides, on peut espérer leur victoire. Une fois de plus, la philosophie des ténèbres se dissipera au-dessus de la mer éclatante.

O pensée de midi, la guerre de Troie se livre loin des champs de bataille !
Cette fois encore, les murs terribles de la cité moderne tomberont pour
livrer, « âme sereine comme le calme des mers », **la beauté d'Hélène.**

Albert Camus *L'Exil d'Hélène*, dans *Noces* suivi de *L'été*
Folio p. 140



Dessins Claude ANTON

