

In an essay entitled “Death by Fiction in *Light in August*”, Brian Richardson writes that “in addition to the story of the characters’ action, there is another plot centering on the movement of language in the text and the function of storytelling as a social transaction.” The passage chosen for today illustrates this as it portrays the community talking about Joe Christmas’s arrest the previous day. In this extract storytelling is present at different levels: the story told by the characters, the story told by the narrator and the story told by William Faulkner. This metafictional dimension thus highlights the function of the narrative and shows the reader that in this extract, although storytelling seems to be a way to protect the community’s structure, it in fact undermines it. The first part will analyze how social cohesion is achieved through gossip, the second part will study that storytelling is a way for the community to reassert its racial superiority and finally, the undermining of the binary structure of Southern society will be addressed.

I. Social cohesion through gossip.

The notion of community is stressed from the beginning of the text as it appears in the first sentence: “they clotted about the square and before the jail—the clerks, the idle, the countrymen in overalls” l.2. The people who are generally separate and distinct are here brought together by the talk. This is further emphasized by the opposition between townspeople and country people, who, despite their differences (“to wives and families about supper tables in electrically lighted rooms and in remote hill cabins with kerosene lamps.” l.6-7) have one thing in common: their subject of conversation. The impression of interconnection is also created through the binary rhythm of the text: “clean shirts and decorated suspenders” l.8, “pipes about country churches or about the shady dooryards of houses” l.8-9, “visiting teams and cars” l.9-10, “were tethered and parked”, l.10. The reader does not yet know what they are talking about but realizes the importance of the gossip at play here. Talking was an essential feature of the South, as Davis Applewhite explains in his essay “The South in *Light in August*”, in which he says: “ And finally there is the endless habit of talking, a soft flood of words from porches, barbershops, parlors, and the corner filling station. Day and night the sound of talking flows on. In this Faulkner is true to his South.”

In this extract, the talk is compared to natural elements (“like a wind or a fire” l.3, “flared” l.5), and it is described as having its own existence. The phrase “dying and borning again” (l.3) is interesting as it is ungrammatical. Indeed, “born” is an adjective and not a verb (the verb corresponding is bear). The correct phrase would be “dying and being born again” but that would be a passive voice, thus lending an impression of lifelessness to the talk. Here, “borning” is active, hence giving the gossip its own volition. This impression of natural motion, associated to fire and wind, is also created by the alliterations in **fricatives** and **plosives**. The fricatives imitate the sound of the wind blowing while the plosives mime the crackling sound of the crepitation of fire:

And on the next day, the slow, pleasant country Sunday while they squatted in their clean shirts and decorated suspenders, with peaceful pipes about country churches or about the shady dooryards of houses where the visiting teams and cars were tethered and parked along the fence and the womenfolks were in the kitchen, getting dinner (l.7-11)

This emphasis on the comparison between the talk and natural aspects is meant to show how unstoppable and forceful the talk is, but also that it is as natural in the South as those elements.

The gossip spread through town is a tale the citizens exchange to bring together rich and poor, townspeople and country people, men and women. The fictionality of the stories is visible in the text through the use of epistemic modals (“it must have been the nigger blood in him” l.11-12, “they might not have found out about the murder for a month” l.14), but also verbs related to appearances (“It looked like he had set out” l.12, “It was like he never even knew” l.33). The degree of uncertainty in these bits of talks makes the recounting of what happened appear untrustworthy and thus more like fiction than reality. The point of what I would call this *shared fiction* is to unite a community by coalescing them against someone whom they see as not belonging to their community, not being one of theirs. What matters the most in this talk is not the veracity of what is being told, not the interest they find in the story itself but the fact that it is a form of common ground on which the community can build a sense of belonging. Instead of gossiping about other people or other social groups of the community, which can bring about division, the denizens gather against Christmas, the person they see as an outsider.

II. Storytelling as a way for the community to reassert its superiority.

This outsider, Christmas, threatens their codified society. Indeed, Southern society was founded on a structure based on white masculine values. The Southern community favored first white males, then white females. Black males, then black females were integrated into society as long as they didn't question their own inferiority. The threat in Christmas's attitude is the potential loss of the white men's superiority in the community. Indeed, they see him as a minor citizen who tries to enter the majority. But here, the word "minority" is not going to be used in its usual meaning, defining a "small group of people within a community or country, differing from the main population in race, religion, language, or political persuasion"¹ but as defined by philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari for whom minority was linked to the relation of subordination of one group of people to another group, whatever its numerical power. According to Deleuze, Society is organized in fixed, rigid territories separated by hard, molar lines: you are either male or female, adult or child, young or old, black or white... For him, majority has nothing to do with the size of the territory or the number of elements involved but corresponds to a model you have to conform to. For instance, in the South of the United States, the majority corresponds to white men, even if they were outnumbered by black men and women, white women, children... By passing for white, Christmas crosses territory and refuses to abide by the structure of Southern society and to acknowledge the superiority of the white men.

This is illustrated clearly in the text when the intradiegetic narrator explains what Christmas did just before his arrest: "He went into a white barbershop like a white man, and because he looked like a white man they never suspected him. Even when the bootblack saw how he had on a pair of second hand brogans that were too big for him, they never suspected." (l.20-23). Everyone assumed that he was white because he acted like a white man, no one believing that a black man could act like a white man so naturally. The repetition of "like a white man" shows the incredulity and frustration of the narrator when faced with the impossibility to distinguish a black man from a white man. In *The Ink of Melancholy*, André Bleikasten asserts: "Now if a black man can look and act exactly like a white man, if appearances fail to match and confirm essences, whiteness and blackness alike become shady notions, and once the opposition white/black has broken down, the whole social structure threatens to crumble. Christmas is

¹ English Oxford Dictionary

thus a living challenge to the community's elemental norms and categories."² The worst that could happen in the eyes of these people did: not only did they mistake a black man for a white man, but they did not realize it until someone else told them: "And they would not have suspected him then if it hadn't been for a fellow named Brown" (l.15-16). This outrages them because it reveals not only their own blindness in this case, but also the possibility of it happening again.

This anger is expressed clearly in the last part of the extract. It is interesting to notice that the inverted commas that are opened are not closed before they are opened again ("Then yesterday morning l.19), hence with either a new character speaking or the same one resuming after being interrupted by the narrator. At times, (l.15) with "And they would not have suspected him "or "He never acted like either a nigger or a white man." (l.29-30) there seems to be a change in the way the event is recounted, as until the end of the paragraphs the story seems to be told by the omniscient narrator and the point of view seems to be that of all the white people in town, not only that of the person who began the telling of what happened. The narrator serves to compound the multiple points of view of the people talking about Christmas and the absence of quotation marks at the end of the paragraph, just before the beginning of a new quote, is the sign of this multiplication of focalizers combined into one.

The source of their anger here is not that they believe that Christmas has killed a white woman but that he acted like a white man as we can see in the next passage:

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 skulking 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. (l.30-33)

The semi-modal "ought to" expresses that Christmas's attitude does not correspond to the one the people telling the story would expect from a black murderer. It reveals that they have stereotypical racial images of how black people should behave. What is striking here is that the image of the black man wanted for murder as they envision it is one that recalls runaway slaves ("skulking and hiding in the woods, muddy and dirty and running"). By comparing Christmas to a fugitive slave, these people present themselves as Christmas's masters. This enables them to reassert their superiority over him and to sustain the white supremacy which prevailed in the South.

² BLEIKASTEN, André, *The Ink of Melancholy* (1990), Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2017, p.327.

III. Storytelling undermines binary structure.

Storytelling, here the telling of Christmas's arrest, is thus a way for the white community to reaffirm their domination over the black community by expressing their indignation at seeing Christmas act as a white man although he is black. However, the way the story is told undermines this assertion of superiority. Indeed, what is revealed implicitly in this extract is the white community's naiveté due to their overconfidence in the structure of their society. By acknowledging that their codified and structured society has been breached by Christmas, they show that the territorialization they have set up is illusory. In this extract the enunciators highlight Christmas's impudence: for instance the phrase "in broad daylight" is repeated (l. 19 , 26) to insist on the fact that he didn't even have the deference to hide but, on the contrary, provoked them by staying where everyone could see him. But the failing comes from them: they did not realize that the man was not white. They are so trusting in their system that even the clues that could have given Christmas away are misinterpreted ("Even when the bootblack saw how he had on a pair of second hand brogans that were too big for him, they never suspected" l.21-23). The image of Christmas walking back and forth waiting for someone to realize who he is and arrest him while everyone goes about their own business without looking twice at him because he looks white is humorous but is also the sign of the deficiency of the Southern society. Their story is not just about how they arrested Christmas, it is also, and even more importantly, about how they were fooled by Joe Christmas. So, instead of asserting their superiority, this narrative is in fact subverting it.

The failing of the society, which is at the core of this extract, is also visible in the focalization as it brings to light the gap there is between the prejudice they have against Christmas and his behavior. The community sees Christmas's return as an act of stupidity, as he would never have been caught if he had left town without coming back. They associate this foolishness to his blackness ("But it must have been the nigger blood in him" l.11-12) and believe that, as a black man, he is less intelligent than white people and thus, made an irreparable mistake that will cost him his freedom, and as the events unfold, even his life. Yet, what the reader sees is Christmas getting ready to be arrested and wanting it to happen with dignity. He thus gets shaved and his hair cut, buys new clothes and walks up and down the street for someone to notice him. What is interesting here is that, although the focalizer is white and is convinced of his

superiority, his point of view undermines itself because it unwittingly reveals the rupture there is between the beliefs on which the Southern society is founded and reality. What those white people consider as stupidity on Christmas's part, the reader views as dignity and honor. The focalization thus puts into perspective the way the South is codified and enables the reader to gain critical distance from the white people's narrative in this extract.

Critical distance is not only gained through focalization, it is also achieved through irony. Indeed there is a gap between how convinced white people are of the validity of their opinion and the way the reader is made to see them. The elements quoted above – the description of the community's anger at Christmas pretending he was white, the focalization- are the sign of Faulkner's irony in this passage. They show how Southern society is organized from another perspective than that of the white characters. Story telling is thus a way for Faulkner to try to blur the lines on which his society is structured by reflecting his own society but from another angle than the one being mirrored. He is in fact mirroring his own society, that is, showing both its image and its reversed image. Indeed, he presents the way the white community sees itself, but he also exposes another representation, one with more distance and a different perspective. By superimposing the two images, Faulkner creates a form of anamorphosis: depending on how the reader reads the scene, i-e either relying on the character's point of view or the narrator's, he won't see the same thing. Writing enables to reveal those different visions which bring a better understanding of Southern society and undermines its binary nature.

Although in this extract the affection Faulkner has for his community is made manifest through the description of the social cohesion created by the talking, he also exposes that this cohesion is illusory as it includes only white people. Furthermore, the metafictional dimension of this passage allows the reader to see that story telling is both a way for the community to reassert the superiority challenged by Joe Christmas and to undermine that same assertion. Literature can thus blur the structural lines of society to provoke thought and try to make those lines fade.