

Fading into Knowledge

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Throughout William Faulkner's novel, *Light in August*, references to blackness and whiteness are made. This much is indicated by the title itself, which suggests the fading of summer whiteness into the blackness of the cooler autumn months. Faulkner uses darkness to illustrate a mode of knowing. There are certain modes of knowing that must enter the unknown, darkness. Those who choose to stay in the light are only doing so out of fear of what is not certain. This is true of Joe Christmas for thirty years of his life; it is only through tragedy that Christmas fades from the whiteness of not knowing into the blackness of knowing.

Joe's state of not knowing is shown by his lack of recollection of his childhood. When Joe's memory of an incident from his childhood is introduced, Faulkner says, "Memory believes before knowing remembers"(119). This refers to the imprint that has been made on Joe because of events in his life. Although Joe is not fully conscious of things that have happened, the evidence is there. Joe's dislike for women is the result the result of his bad experience with the dietician at the orphanage. Because of this incident, Joe views women as unpredictable. Men, on the other hand, are stable and predictable. Joe learns this through McEachern, whose actions Joe is always sure. Joe also does not question the things that happened to him when he was young. This is also evident in Joe's relationship with McEachern. Joe just goes along with his father's ways and accepts things the way they are. Joe's acceptance of McEachern's ways shows his lack of thought. He never bothers to think and go deeper into himself for answers.

Joe's transformation from his state of unconsciousness to his state of self-awareness occurs quickly in the last week of his life. After Joe kills Johanna, he runs away. He abandons his predictable surroundings and goes into the unknown. It is on unpaved roads that Joe accepts himself and gains the knowledge to be at peace. It is said of Joe's journey "it made a circle and he is still inside of it. Though during the last seven days he has had no paved street, yet he has traveled further than in all thirty years before"(339). It is not the number of miles that matter to Joe now. Rather, it is the progression of his mind into self-awareness that he has never had before. The turning point for Joe occurs when he accepts the black shoes from the negro woman. This is symbolic of Joe's acceptance of his own blackness. At this point, he sees that he has been moving toward a "black abyss" all of his life and, at this point, he finally enters it. He then "...breathes deep and slow, feeling with each breath himself diffuse into the neutral grayness..."(331). This shows that Joe is coming to be at peace with himself. Joe also acknowledges that the peace, which he is fading into, is what he wants.

It is only in death that Joe will be at peace. It is at this point that the grayness fades to black. When Joe fails to fire the pistol at Grimm, he accepts his execution and realizes that only in death will he truly be at peace. In the final moments of Joe's life, everything is described in blackness and peacefulness. As he lies on the floor, his "unbearable eyes" are evidence of the peace that he has found. They reveal the truth and the knowledge that is within him and gushes out just as "...the pent black blood seemed to rush like a released breath"(465). This black blood is his final sigh of peace.

Through the events in Joe's life, Faulkner illustrates the blackness that one must enter in order to obtain knowledge and be at peace with oneself. Just as the light fades in August, Joe's

lack of self-awareness fades in tragedy. The tragic events in the last part of Joe's life force him to be knowledgeable of himself.

Teresa K. Walls is an English Education major. Dr. James Walter was her English professor.

Dr. Walter's Comments: *Avoiding the stereotypes that often fetter discussions of Faulkner, Teresa carefully studies his novel's own poetic language of self-disclosure. The result is clarification of a universal human quality, an ontological blackness that is always fertile, yet also potentially tragic.*