"In a Language Not His": Reader-Response Criticism and "Light in August"

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"IN A LANGUAGE NOT HIS": READER-RESPONSE CRITICISM AND LIGHT IN AUGUST

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APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
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Master of Arts

Kathy Lynn Pippert

Approved, May 1989

Walter Wenska

Colleen Kennedy

Joanne Braxton
DEDICATION

This manuscript is dedicated to my husband and parents,
whose patience and understanding enabled me to seek an advanced degree.
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ABSTRACT

This manuscript reveals how recent reader-response criticism brings into sharper focus some of the obstacles to understanding that William Faulkner presents in Light in August. To accomplish this task, the manuscript presents principles of reader-response criticism that focus on the nature and limitations of interpretation and then uses these principles to help explain passages from Faulkner’s novel. Principles proposed by Stanley Fish, a very sophisticated reader-response critic, appear quite frequently throughout the manuscript because they are especially enlightening.

The manuscript can be divided into three primary sections. The first section concentrates on the arbitrariness of language. Besides noting how reader-response critics believe people internalize interpretive strategies, this section explores the various ways that Faulkner shows how people assimilate interpretive strategies and how these strategies limit consciousness.

The second section explains that, because language is arbitrary, numerous communities having different interpretive strategies can exist within a society and that membership is not limited to merely one of these communities. Emphasis is given to the way that Faulkner presents various interpretive communities within the larger Mississippi community by contrasting people of different ages, environments, sexes, and races.

The third section examines the relation of egocentricity and belief to interpretation. The apparent contradiction inherent to maintaining that interpretation is based on shared interpretive strategies while claiming that it is also self-serving is resolved by noting that one learns to interpret one’s concerns in socially determined ways.

The manuscript concludes that, like many reader-response critics today, Faulkner seems to argue that man can only interpret the world—the actions and motivations of others and of himself—in terms of those strategies for sense-making provided by the various interpretive communities to which he belongs. These shared sense-making strategies constitute these communities—and men himself.
“IN A LANGUAGE NOT HIS”:
READER-RESPONSE CRITICISM AND LIGHT IN AUGUST
Reader-response criticism examines attitudes of authors toward readers, the kinds of readers various texts seem to imply, the role actual readers play in determining literary meaning, the relation of reading conventions to textual interpretation, and the status of the reader's self (Tompkins ix). While reader-response criticism concentrates on the reader and the reading process, its principles concerning the nature and limitations of interpretation extend to a receiver's decoding of a message or a participant's or observer's explication of a person, place, action, or event. Recent reader-response criticism—with its emphasis on the place and importance of the reader in the meaning-making process—brings into sharper focus some of the obstacles to understanding that William Faulkner presents in *Light in August*. These obstacles include the arbitrary nature of language, the existence within a society of numerous communities having different interpretive strategies, and the relation of egocentricity and belief to interpretation.

Since the transmission and reception of any message depends on the presence of one or more shared codes of communication between the sender and receiver, reader-response critics stress the importance of acknowledging that a message has "meaning" only with respect to conventions that both the message's sender and receiver share. Reader-response critics such as Stanley Fish, Jonathan Culler, David Bleich, and Walter Michaels generally refer to such shared conventions as "interpretive strategies" and to the groups of people who have internalized these conventions as "interpretive communities." According to these reader-response critics, an interpretive community constitutes a message's properties and assigns its intentions.
Such recent concerns of reader-response critics shed considerable light on Faulkner's novel. Like them, Faulkner recognizes that the conventional nature of language necessitates the assimilation of a system of rules. To demonstrate a language's adventitious quality, Faulkner frequently emphasizes the arbitrary connection between words and their referents. When Joe Christmas nears Jefferson, for instance, the narrative voice indirectly draws attention to how a name is indiscriminately ascribed by noting that "he [Joe] didn't care what word it [Jefferson] used for [a] name" (Faulkner 213). Faulkner also implies that meaning is attributed by noting, in a description of Joe's reading of a magazine, that a word "not yet impacted" is but a "trivial combination of letters" (104). To show what happens when the necessary rules have not been assimilated, Faulkner has Joe inappropriately reading a magazine "to the last and final page, the last and final word" (104) as if it were a novel.

Similarly, toward the end of Light in August, Byron Bunch considers the arbitrary way in which communities designate identity. When philosophizing about what awaits him outside of Jefferson—a town that he thinks that he must leave because he expects that Lena Grove and Lucas Burch will be reunited—Byron muses:

'Where trees would look like and be called by something else except trees, and men would look like and be called by something else except folks. And Byron Bunch he wouldn't even have to be or not be Byron Bunch. ... All right. You say you suffer. All right. But in the first place, all we got is your naked word for it. And in the second place, you just say that you are Byron Bunch. And in the third place, you are just the one that calls yourself Byron Bunch today, now, this minute....' (401-02)

Besides entertaining the notion that names are merely assigned labels, Byron observes that changing names would have no effect on the actual substances or essences of the objects or people to which these names refer. Faulkner also makes this point when he has Gail Hightower's father adopt a label that has been recently coined without letting the word have any influence upon his understanding of that subject.
The son [Hightower’s father] was an abolitionist almost before the sentiment had become a word to percolate down from the North. Though when he learned that the Republicans did have a name for it, he completely changed the name of his conviction without abating his principles or behavior one jot. (447)

In addition to emphasizing that the assignment of a name is indeed handed down from some “authoritative” source—in this case the creation of the name is attributed to Northern Republicans—the above excerpt suggests that a name can be adopted without any change in the convictions or principles held by the person who appropriates the label.

While he indicates that names are arbitrarily assigned, Faulkner also recognizes their importance by having a great number of the novel’s characters named after ancestors. He shows the authoritative power names are believed to possess by having Joe refuse the McEachern name. During pubescence, Joe renounces this surname for that of Christmas, a name that McEachern considered heathenish and insisted be changed when Joe was a boy, to show that he is not subservient to his foster father. Because he believes that his denial is a triumph over McEachern in their struggle for power, and because that denial is at least partly motivated by his desiring a sexual relationship with Bobbie Allen, Joe’s rejection of the McEachern name can be viewed as a step toward his initiation into manhood.

The expectation that names, like words, mean something in themselves is itself a reading convention still held by interpretive communities today. Because man has been drilled by his interpretive communities to “decode” names in ways that demonstrate that they are meaningful, the narrative voice points out that people are likely to believe that names are, if interpreted “correctly,” augers that can be used to decrease the number of problems encountered in life. Byron, for instance, is reminded upon hearing Joe Christmas’s name for the first time of how he thinks of names as augers:
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 somehow an auger of what he will do, if other men can only read the meaning in time. ... none of them had looked especially at the stranger until they heard his name. But as soon as they heard it, it was as though there was something in the sound of it that was trying to tell them what to expect; that he carried with him his own inescapable warning, like a flower its scent or a rattlesnake its rattle. Only none of them had sense enough to recognize [sic] it. They just thought that he was a foreigner.... (29)

In this passage, Faulkner suggests two theoretical orientations regarding the location of meaning. During the 1930s through the 1950s—and even into the 1960s and 1970s—supporters of what is known as New Criticism argued for the autonomy and objectivity of a text: meaning is "in" the text, "in" words. However, in the 1960s and 1970s, reader-response critics proclaimed that a text cannot be understood apart from its results since meaning has no effective existence outside of its realization in the reader's mind. As Fish argues, "the place where sense is made or not made is the reader's mind rather than the printed page or the space between the covers of a book" (36). A man's name may be "just the sound for who he is," but Faulkner also suggests the older view—that meaning is contained in rather than imputed to words—by writing that "none of them [the planing mill workers] had sense enough to recognize it [the warning in Joe's name]" (29). While many characters in Light in August exhibit similar views about language and meaning, Faulkner often has the characters express such beliefs only so that he can discredit them or—as in Byron's musings on his own name—question them.

Although Light in August argues that names have no significance in themselves, the novel indicates how deeply one's interpretive strategies are ingrained by showing the extent to which Byron goes in his attempt to justify the appropriateness of Brown's surname:

"But I reckon that may be his right name [Joe Brown]. Because when you think of a fellow named Joe Brown, you think of a bigmouthed fellow that's always laughing and talking loud. And so I reckon that is his right name,
even if Joe Brown does seem a little kind of too quick and too easy for a natural name, somehow.' (49)

By having Byron take a stab at explaining how Brown's name is appropriate, even after stating how he doubts that this is Brown's real name, Faulkner stresses how meaning is retrospectively imputed upon the receipt and application of some later "evidence" that seems to confirm the belief that meaning resides in names or words or events. Thus, in addition to providing an interesting study of the way human beings interpret the people they meet, the men's reaction to Brown emphasizes how meaning and significance are ascribed or put into word containers. After seeing the man who calls himself Joe Brown—but who is actually Lucas Burch—for the first time, Byron responds to Mooney's remark that Simms has hired less than a full man by saying: "That's so . . . . He puts me in mind of one of these cars running along the street with a radio in it. You can't make out what it is saying and the car ain't going anywhere in particular and when you look at it close you see that there ain't even anybody in it" (32-33). Although Byron's views suggest those held by both New and reader-response critics, Faulkner undercuts the New Critical attitude by ensuring that Byron finds no substance in any observation suggesting that meaning is inherent rather than ascribed.

Faulkner further demonstrates that meaning is attributed rather than immanent by including the passage describing the sign that hangs outside of Hightower's home:

So the sign which he [Hightower] carpentered and lettered is even less to him than it is to the town; he is no longer conscious of it as a sign, a message. He does not remember it at all until he takes his place in the study window just before dusk. Then it is just a familiar low oblong shape without any significance at all.... (54)

Because neither Hightower nor the town bothers to read the "low oblong shape" that has stood for so many years in the ex-minister's yard, Faulkner emphasizes the sign's lack of
significance. And in noting that this sign is only read by an occasional Negro nursemaid "with that vacuous idiocy of her idle and illiterate kind" (53) or a stranger who must ask about the sign in town, Faulkner reveals the limitations placed on interpretations by interpretive strategies—or their lack. Moreover, while the "D.D." he had painted on the sign had originally been meant by Hightower to stand for "Doctor of Divinity," the people of Jefferson insist on interpreting it as "Done Damned." The townspeople can support this reading because they have available to them as evidence Hightower's past adversities. Thus, in addition to indicating that interpretive strategies determine and limit the shape of what is interpreted, Faulkner shows how interpretive communities can retrospectively assign meanings that become more widely accepted than those proposed by the text's author.

In explaining the role of an interpretive community, Fish says, "If the speakers of a language share a system of rules that each of them has somehow internalized, understanding will, in some sense, be uniform. ... And insofar as these rules are constraints on production they will also be constraints on the range, and even the direction, of response" (44–45). Besides stressing that limitations are placed on interpretations, Fish calls attention to the essentiality of a shared language in forming interpretations that a community's members will consider acceptable. According to Fish, members of different interpretive communities will perceive the text or message in the way that their interpretive strategies demand:

... members of the same community will necessarily agree because they will see (and by seeing, make) everything in relation to that community's assumed purposes and goals; and conversely, members of different communities will disagree because from each of their respective positions the other 'simply' cannot see what is obviously and inescapably there: This, then, is the explanation for the stability of interpretation among different readers (they belong to the same community). (15)

Because the purposes and goals of interpretive communities differ, one interpretative community is not likely to adopt an interpretation proposed by a different community.
Faulkner emphasizes the important role that interpretive communities play in enabling their members to arrive at somewhat uniform interpretations by demonstrating the ways that interpretive strategies limit the operation of their members' consciousnesses.

While Byron is described as being so much a loner that "there is but one man [Hightower] in the town who could speak with any certainty about Bunch, and with this man the town does not know that Bunch has any intercourse, since they meet and talk only at night" (43), the narrator notes that the citizens of Jefferson change their opinion of him from his being "a minor mystery" (398) to that of his being "an outrage and affront" (398) when they learn he is helping Lena. Besides hinting earlier in the novel that the people in the town would never be able to correctly interpret Byron's innocence and lack of meanness because they lack these qualities, the narrative voice notes much later that Byron's involvement with Lena and his initial decision to take her to Mrs. Beard's boarding house is interpreted as a disgrace since the moral standards of cognition and judgment shared by the community quickly cause its members to believe that Byron is responsible for Lena's being pregnant.

When Byron takes Lena to Mrs. Beard's boarding house and tells Mrs. Beard that he will not be going away for the weekend as he usually does, the narrator notes how the landlady reads what she believes to be the truth instead of what is actually the truth. As Byron tells Mrs. Beard that he will not be leaving, the narrator says, "He [Byron] looked straight into cold, already disbelieving eyes, watching her in turn trying to read his own, believing that she read what was there instead of what she believed was there." (79) While the naïve Byron believes that Mrs. Beard is reading what is in his eyes, the narrative voice makes clear that what this woman is reading is actually what she believes she sees through her own. She and the other members of the community conclude that Byron is responsible for Lena's condition
because they have been taught that a man aiding an unmarried and pregnant woman is doing so because he is the one who inseminated her.

Faulkner demonstrates how sharing a "language" constitutes membership in the same interpretive community by comparing the way in which the words of the "insane" are perfectly understandable to the mad while they are totally incomprehensible to those sound of mind. According to the narrative voice in chapter six, the crazy words of the janitor, Eupheus Hines, are probably understood by Miss Atkins because both are crazy. Although Hines's eyes "were quite mad" (118-19), the narrator indicates that the dietitian either never noticed, "or perhaps they did not look mad to her" because "mad eyes looking into mad eyes, mad voice talking to mad voice" (119) are able to communicate. To provide contrast, Faulkner reveals that insanity is not comprehensible to those who are "sane." He accomplishes this by describing the congregation's response to Hightower's ranting and raving while in the pulpit. The narrative voice accounts for the view of Hightower's preaching as garbled nonsense in the following passage:

... up there in the pulpit with his hands flying around him and the dogma he was supposed to preach all full of galloping cavalry and defeat and glory just as when he tried to tell them on the street about the galloping horses, it in turn would get all mixed up with absolution and choirs of martial seraphim, until it was natural that the old men and women should believe that what he preached in God's own house on God's own day verged on actual sacrilege. (57)

Thus, because the minister and his congregation do not share the same language, they are unable to communicate. By embodying such examples of understanding being limited to those people who share linguistic competences, Faulkner establishes the ways in which languages determine, limit, and produce understanding in a manner similar to that argued by today's reader-response critics.
Faulkner also emphasizes how a community's shared values—its "purposes and goals"—affect interpretation. In the scene in which McEachern takes five-year-old Joe from the orphanage, Faulkner stresses that McEachern's life is founded upon and validated by his understanding of the Protestant interpretation of God's words. Besides telling Joe that he "will find food and shelter and the care of Christian people" (135) in the McEachern home, Joe's newly-acquired guardian says, "I will have you learn soon that the two abominations are sloth and idle thinking, the two virtues are work and the fear of God" (135). Joe's adoption of McEachern's Protestant work ethic is demonstrated after he hits his foster father in the head with a chair at the dance and then takes Mrs. McEachern's hidden savings so that he and Bobby can escape. Upon Bobbie's leaving town with another man, Joe thinks about the crimes he has committed to continue his relationship with this woman. His conclusion, "Why, I committed murder for her. I even stole for her" (204), illustrates Joe's inheritance of McEachern's view of work since he considers stealing a greater crime than murder.

Faulkner also marks Joe's similarities to McEachern in the stubborn confrontation between the man and the young boy that occurs after Joe refuses to learn his catechism. In his description of their heading toward the barn for Joe's punishment, Faulkner depicts those traits that Joe shares with his hard, cold foster father: "They went on, in steady single file, the two backs in their rigid abnegation of all compromise more alike than actual blood could have made them" (139). The narrative voice continues pointing out how alike these two are as Joe is being whipped: "He [Joe] was looking straight ahead, with a rapt, calm expression like a monk in a picture. McEachern began to strike methodically, with slow and deliberate force, still without heat or anger. It would have been hard to say which face was the more rapt, more calm, more convinced" (140). Twenty years later, Joe identifies, through a flashback, that it was "On this day I became a man" (137).
While most men view their first sexual experience as the start of manhood, Joe considers his defiance of McEachern as his first manly act because he has also adopted McEachern's Old Testament view of women as evil. Faulkner initially depicts Joe's adoption of this belief by having him prefer violence to sex. In his first encounter with a woman, for instance, Joe kicks the Negro girl who is willing to have sex with him and his friends. Faulkner follows this violence with Joe's view of menstruation as a curse. Since menstruation is something that he has not and will not experience, Joe is anxious to rationalize its occurrence when he hears about it during his early teens. Joe tries to immunize himself from this new knowledge by immersing his hands into the blood of a sacrificial sheep; he then accommodates the physical fact by incorporating it into a revised system of beliefs.

In *Light in August*, Faulkner contrasts various communities within the larger Mississippi community to explore the different ways that they perceive some message or situation. In the beginning of chapter six, for instance, the dietitian, Miss Atkins, discovers that five-year-old Joe has been hiding in her closet while she has been having sex with Charley, a young intern from the county hospital. By having the dietitian believe that the boy will tell on her because he understands what she has been doing with the intern, Faulkner humorously depicts the common human foible of those people who believe that all human beings, whatever their age, think as they do. Following the description of the dietitian's outrage when the boy is discovered, the narrator calls attention to the flaw in Miss Atkin's reasoning: "She was also stupid enough to believe that a child of five not only could deduce the truth from what he had heard, but that he would want to tell it as an adult would" (114-115). While the narrator notes that such a belief by an adult is absurd, Faulkner generalizes the dietitian's "misreading" by having Joe reflect—when the police are returning him to the orphanage after he has been stolen away by the janitor—that "though children can
accept adults as adults, adults can never accept children as anything but adults too" (131). Faulkner reinforces the idea that differences exist in an adult's and a child's interpretive skills and strategies a few pages later in Light in August when he has the narrator explain Joe's silence as McEachern shows him his new home by saying that Joe "was not old enough to talk and say nothing at the same time" (135).

Just as Faulkner contrasts adults and children, he also contrasts country and city dwellers. Faulkner achieves this contrast by describing how Joe and McEachern are isolated from Mame and the men upon entering the Confrey diner. Although McEachern forbids him to return to the diner, Joe decides to stay clear of this establishment because he has nothing in common with its occupants: "They are not my people. I can see them but I don't know what they are doing nor why. I can hear them but I don't know what they are saying nor why nor to whom" (164-65). Although Joe eventually returns to the diner because he is attracted to the waitress, Bobbie Allen, the narrative voice notes once again that Joe cannot understand the Confreys: "... it was as though they were speaking of him and in his presence and in a tongue which he knew that he did not know" (182).

Faulkner further demonstrates the existence of various interpretive communities by showing how people of different races are unable to communicate. For instance, Joe does not understand the language of the Negroes of Freedman town because it differs from the language with which Joe has been taught to interpret his life. As Joe approaches Freedman Town, Faulkner writes, "They ['the summer voices of invisible negroes'] seemed to enclose him like bodiless voices murmuring, talking, laughing, in a language not his" (106-07). Because Joe is a stranger to the "language" or linguistic conventions of the Negro community, he finds himself unable to understand what it is that its members say. Faulkner enhances this distinction between whites and blacks by showing that their values are perceived to be different. For instance, Joe Brown [Lucas Burch] exclaims to the sheriff, "' Didn't I tell you?
I told you all the time! I told you" (309) upon the sheriff’s finding the note that Joe leaves in the Negro church. Brown believes that Joe’s use of “dirty” words is proof of his having Negro blood since no white person could, according to Brown’s and possibly the entire town of Jefferson’s way of thinking, possibly do such a thing.

In Faulkner’s world, women and men at times make up different communities with different interpretive strategies. One of the fundamental differences that Faulkner emphasizes is the way that each uses language. For instance, Joe’s grandmother, Mrs. Hines, maintains that a woman’s language is basically nonverbal while a man’s is verbal: "I aint saying that it aint been women that has done most of the talking. But if you had more than mansense you would know that women dont mean anything they talk. It’s menfolks that take talking serious" (397). In Mrs. Hines’s opinion, women do not assign the same importance—or meaning—to talking as do men; and men’s taking talking too seriously—also a belief of Addie Bundren in Faulkner’s As I Lay Dying—makes men foolish.

While the novel’s women think that men are silly, its men tend to view women, whose physical and nonverbal nature makes them virtually incomprehensible, as having an “affinity and instinct for secrecy, for casting a faint taint of evil about the most trivial and innocent actions” (157). Besides reinforcing that differences do most definitely exist between the languages used by each of the sexes, the inclusion of such statements suggests that men fear women, even as they are drawn to them, because they cannot comprehend their nonverbal “language.” The numerous instances in which men are unable to fathom this nonverbal language often concern what is traditionally viewed as solely feminine functions. For example, Byron claims that Lena’s screaming during labor is like a “wailing cry in a tongue unknown to man” (378) and that the responses that Mrs. Hines give when soothing Lena’s newborn baby are “also in no known tongue” (381). Because men have never themselves experienced these female conditions of childbearing or motherhood, they are
unable to interpret the sounds and actions associated with them; and because men are unable to understand the nonverbal language and nurturing instincts of women, they tend to fear women when this nonverbal language is used or their maternal instincts displayed.

When Joanna begins telling him the Burden family history, Joe concludes that all women surrender to men in words. While his conclusion initially appears quite similar to Mrs. Hines's saying that females do a lot of talking without saying anything important, this observation by Joe may be Faulkner's way of referring to the linguistic imperialism of men. In having Joe think, "'She is like all the rest of them. Whether they are seventeen or fortyseven, when they finally come to surrender completely, it's going to be in words'" (227), Faulkner implies that women are forced into accepting and using language in the same way as do men. Since the physical and nonverbal nature of women must, in many ways, be rejected for the dominant, verbal one of men, Joe's conclusion that all women do eventually surrender to men in words prior to surrendering to them their virginity suggests that language is male-contrived.

Although Joe thinks, when McEachern adopts him at the age of five, that he cannot look at this man's eyes because they look at him with "the same stare with which he might have examined a horse or a second hand plow, convinced beforehand that he would see flaws, convinced beforehand that he would buy" (133), Joe eventually becomes comfortable in his relationship with McEachern because he is certain about what he may expect from both his foster father and himself. When Joe finds McEachern waiting for him upon returning from a late-night rendezvous with Bobbie, for instance, the narrator notes, "He [Joe] seemed to recognize McEachern without surprise, as if the whole situation were perfectly logical and reasonable and inescapable" (149). The narrative voice then speculates upon why it is that Joe is not surprised by McEachern's presence: "Perhaps he [Joe] was thinking then how he and the man could always count upon one another, depend upon one another; that it was the
woman alone who was unpredictable" (149). By noting the affinity that now exists between Joe and McEachern, Faulkner traces Joe's progression from the community of children to that of men.

Faulkner clearly indicates that Joe now understands men while finding woman incomprehensible in the excerpt that follows:

The man [Mr. McEachern], the hard, just, ruthless man, merely depended on him [Joe] to act in a certain way and to receive the as certain reward or punishment, just as he could depend on the man to react in a certain way to his own certain doings and misdoings. It was the woman [Mrs. McEachern] who, with a woman's affinity and instinct for secrecy, for casting a faint taint of evil about the most trivial and innocent actions. (157)

While unintimidated by the man's ruthlessness, Joe is threatened by the woman's compassion. At one point, the narrative voice notes how Joe's hatred of his foster mother stems from "that soft kindness which he believed himself doomed to be forever victim of and which he hated worse than he did the hard and ruthless justice of men" (158). Because Faulkner portrays woman's nature as nonverbal, the men, who generally confirm all that they do with words, find women secretive and view their kindness as either "meddling" (160) or as an attempt to ingratiate themselves. While all that Mrs. McEachern does can be regarded as her striving to make Joe's life easier, the narrative voice notes that Joe at age eighteen perceives her as "the old wearilying woman who had been one of his enemies for thirteen years" (194) and as an inexplicable female who stands in the way of McEachern and his natural, impersonal behavior. Thus, Mrs. McEachern, in contrast to her husband, symbolizes for Joe the uncertain mystery of women as well as that possessive affection that he has come to hate.

Perhaps the earliest example of differing interpretive communities occurs at the end of the novel's first chapter. In his depiction of Lena sitting on the steps of the general store outside of Jefferson as she awaits a ride into that town, Faulkner writes:
The squatting men along the wall look at her still and placid face and they think as Armstid thought and as Varner thinks: that she is thinking of a scoundrel who deserted her in trouble and who they believe that she will never see again, save his coattails perhaps already boardflat with running. 'Or maybe it's about that Sloane's or Bone's Mill she is thinking,' Varner thinks. (22-23)

While the men's interpretation of what they believe Lena must be thinking seems reasonable given her precarious position as an unwed and pregnant young woman dependent upon charity, it proves, rather amusingly, to be far from correct. According to the narrative voice, Lena is not thinking about entering Jefferson and confronting Lucas Burch at all. Instead, the narrator claims, "She [Lena] is thinking about the coins knotted in the bundle beneath her hands. She is remembering breakfast, thinking how she can enter the store this moment and buy cheese and crackers and even sardines if she likes" (23).

By having the men interpret Lena's thoughts as if she were the leading lady of some unfolding melodrama, Faulkner stresses how people of an interpretive community interpret those outside their community in the same manner and with the same constraints as they interpret written works. In discussing the reading process in Literature as Exploration, Louise M. Rosenblatt points out how a reader brings "to the work personality traits, memories of past events, present needs and preoccupations, a particular mood of the moment and a particular physical condition" (713). Like Rosenblatt's readers, Faulkner's men are limited by their outlooks, activities, and needs—which are obviously very different from those of the pregnant and single Lena Grove. Since these men have never felt the poverty and hunger that Lena has experienced, they never consider that she may be contemplating what food the money in her possession will allow her to buy. Because they cannot base their interpretation of Lena's thoughts on common experiences, the men's interpretation must stem from that knowledge of women to which they have been exposed. Their all arriving at the same interpretation demonstrates that the men share similar past experiences as well as
embrace the same interpretive strategy. Since their interpretation must be based on their limited understanding of what it is to be an unmarried mother-to-be, their reaching this rather dramatic "misreading" of Lena's thoughts is no surprise.

While her attending to food rather than vindication may initially seem an amusing way of indicting human beings for failing to reflect upon an approaching crisis, Faulkner hints that Lena's concern with hunger is a more elemental, and thus a more important, consideration of mankind. This idea is most obviously suggested when the narrative voice says:

So she [Lena] seems to muse upon the mounting road while the slowspitting and squatting men watch her covertly, believing that she is thinking about the man and the approaching crisis, when in reality she is waging a mild battle with that providential caution of the old earth of and with and by which she lives. (22-23)

In an explanatory introduction preceding the reprint of "Interpreting 'Interpreting the Variorum, '"Fish briefly discusses the correctness of interpretations:

Within a community, however, a standard of right (and wrong) can always be invoked because it will be invoked against the background of a prior understanding as to what counts as fact, what is honorable as an argument, what will be recognized as a purpose, and so on. The argument, as I shall later write, is that standards of right and wrong do not exist apart from assumptions, but follow from them, and, moreover, since we ourselves do not exist apart from assumptions, a standard of right and wrong is something we can never be without. (174)

Faulkner enters into such an analysis of an interpretation's correctness by indicating that the men's interpretation of Lena's thoughts, influenced by male interpretive strategies, is not accurate. Because the past poverty of Lena's life has taught her that her first concern must be for her own survival, Faulkner indicates that the basic necessities of life are and should be the most important to her. By having the men believe that Lena's thoughts center on her
upcoming confrontation with Burch, Faulkner emphasizes—as does Fish in his explanation—that the interpretation of the majority proceeds from shared values and a shared interpretive strategy. In noting that a person outside of the dominant interpretive community can be “read” for meaning and intention—here incorrectly—Faulkner suggests that the interpreting majority does not always arrive at a “correct” interpretation but only at one that its members accept as correct.

The narrator also expresses that interpretations are always limited in this way by noting how the town’s belief concerning Byron’s working at the mill on Saturdays may be incorrect:

The other workmen, the town itself or that part of it which remembers or thinks about him [Byron], believe that he does it [work on Saturdays] for the overtime which he receives. Perhaps this is the reason. Man knows so little about his fellows. In his eyes all men or women act upon what he believes would motivate him if he were mad enough to do what that other man or woman is doing. (43)

As the narrative voice clearly explains, the citizens of Jefferson believe that Byron must be working on Saturdays for the extra money that he will receive because they can only consider as a possible cause that which would motivate them to perform the same action. The force of the word “Perhaps” in the above quotation’s second sentence causes the reader to question whether the theory of Byron’s working at the mill on Saturdays for financial gain is correct. While the town believes that Byron works on Saturdays for money, Byron believes that he works on that day to keep himself out of trouble. By having the narrative voice note that “Perhaps” Byron does work on Saturdays for financial gain while presenting the reader with Byron’s own interpretation, Faulkner proposes that the true explanation of Byron’s working on that day is not knowable since it is only the belief of each of these two parties which can serve as evidence.
In chapter thirteen, Faulkner indicates that even those people who stand opposed to a particular community often share its interpretive strategies. He accomplishes this by having Hightower, who is a close friend of Byron, misconstrue Byron's motivation for coming to see him. When Byron comes to consult Hightower about his moving Lena from the boardinghouse so that she will have more privacy in which to deliver her baby, Byron claims that he is only there because he desires the elderly ex-minister's advice about whether or not he should interfere in Lena's life by finding and offering such arrangements to her. Hightower assumes that Byron wants him to take Lena in so that the planing mill worker might be able to call on her without arousing the suspicions of the townspeople because that is the way that such a request by a fellow male is normally interpreted. Byron responds to Hightower's belief by saying that Hightower knows that this is not what he meant, but thinks, "I reckon I expected it. I reckon it is not any reason for him to think different from other folks, even about me" (283).

In "Interpreting 'Interpreting the Variorum,'" Fish contends that our perceptual habits are so automatic that we regard as facts data that are actually the results of interpretive conventions and argues that all interpretations are a function of the conventions upon which—and thus the "facts" about which—an interpretive community publicly agrees (174). These interpretive conventions or strategies—like the habit of reading names as augers—are so deeply ingrained, says Fish, that we do not even realize that our interpretations are actually determined, limited, and produced by them. To stress the degree of unconscious, ingrained influence that interpretive communities and their strategies have on shaping what is viewed as truth, Faulkner has the narrator suggest that even Joanna's and Hightower's ideas of romance are very probably the by-products of their viewing plays or reading books. Faulkner first hints that Joanna obtains her ideas of passion from drama by noting that Joe views her sexual game of hiding herself for him to find her "as if she had
invented the whole thing deliberately, for the purpose of playing it out like a play" (244-45). Similarly, although Hightower believes that he and his lover are being innovative in their hiding of love notes in the hollow of a tree, the narrator notes that "...in reality, he [Hightower] had got the idea not from her or from himself, but from a book" (454). Both Hightower and Joanna develop what the narrative voice calls an "infallible instinct for intrigue" (245) in their love lives, an "instinct" that is clearly culturally implanted.

Fish further asserts that "the things the reader does are not merely instrumental, or mechanical, but essential as meaning "develops in a dynamic relationship with the reader's expectations, projections, conclusions, judgments and assumptions" (2). By having characters adopt and act out ideas presented in books and plays, Faulkner shows readers how what they have read previously influences their reading of his novel. To demonstrate that the meanings of or "in" books are expressions of interpretive communities, Faulkner shows how Joanna and Hightower have assimilated the definitions of love that are commonly found in their society's literary texts; however, Faulkner also indicates that the inherited interpretation may be rejected by an interpreter if his or her own personal experiences make it invalid. For instance, when Hightower's lover "talked to him suddenly of marriage and escape in the same words" (455), the ecclesiastical student thinks quietly to himself: "So this is love. I see. I was wrong about it too,' thinking as he had thought before and would think again and as every other man has thought: how false the most profound book turns out to be when applied to life" (455). Although Hightower comes to believe that books on love are false, his interpretive strategies are so deeply ingrained that they cause him to consider that what is in these books must be there for a good reason: "Perhaps they were right in putting love into books. Perhaps it could not live anywhere else" (456). Faulkner demonstrates that men other than Hightower believe that women use techniques presented in
drama and romance to gain their own ends in the passages in which Joe uses literary metaphors to describe his relationships with both Bobbie and Joanna. Faulkner also explores the speed at which men accept these ploys of romance and passion to demonstrate how men's beliefs about women constitute what it is they see as reality.

The similarities between Fish's theory of interpretation and those beliefs presented by Faulkner in *Light in August* become even more marked when Fish points out that there is not only interaction between the message that one receives and a person's developing response but also that he or she will reach for interpretations that are, at least in some way, self-serving. Like many contemporary reader-response critics, Faulkner believes that man interprets information in such a way as to cast it in terms of his characteristic way of coping with the world—itself an interpretive strategy. Faulkner demonstrates how man reaches for self-serving interpretations by suggesting that he reads particular books because they justify his behavior. After Byron asks for Hightower's advice concerning his involvement with Lena, for instance, Faulkner has Hightower, who still desires immunity from society, escape into Tennyson. Faulkner indicates that Tennyson's sexless poetry appeals to Hightower because it does not entail involvement in the world:

> Soon the fine galloping language, the gutless swooning full of sapless trees and dehydrated lusts begins to swim smooth and swift and peaceful. It is better than praying without having to bother to think aloud. It is like listening in a cathedral to a eunuch chanting in a language which he does not even need to not understand. (301)

Like Latin, which is used in religious services where it is not understood by the majority of those attending, the "fine galloping language" of Tennyson requires no direct participation, no "understanding." Hightower uses this poetry, whose "gutless swooning full of sapless trees and dehydrated lusts" soothes him, to escape from the world into a self-imposed isolation. After delivering Lena's baby, however, Hightower reads *Henry IV*, a play which recounts
heroic, manly activity as well as, ironically, Falstaff's famous disquisition on the emptiness of words. By having Hightower elect to read a book that contains "food for a man" (383), Faulkner indicates how one will read what validates his self-perception.

Faulkner further illustrates the role of egocentricity by having each of the primary male characters in *Light in August* perceive his woman in self-serving rather than objective ways. The way that twenty-year-old Joe "reads" Bobbie, for instance, illustrates how a man's emotions, physical desires, and naiveté can interfere in his assessment of a woman. Because he views Bobbie as "demure, pensive; tragic, sad, and young; waiting, colored with all the vague and formless magic of young desire" (165), Joe assumes, after he learns that she is willing to have a sexual relationship, that Bobbie loves him. According to the narrative voice, Joe's image of Bobbie as a childlike young woman reflects Joe's innocence since "the adult look [of Joe's foster father] saw that the smallness was not due to any natural slenderness but to some inner corruption of the spirit itself" (161). Joe's remarkable unawareness of anything in the affair's early stages but what he considers his own unique relationship with Bobbie is demonstrated when Joe sees her smallness as protection from "the roving and predatory eyes of most men" (162) rather than the product of corruption. This innocence is also evident in his believing that the first gift that Bobbie has ever received from a man is his candy. Although still naïve enough to expect her to be awaiting his arrival at the Confrey home after he assaults McEachern at the schoolhouse dance, Joe is not totally blinded to Bobbie's flaws. Faulkner reveals the progressive hardening of Joe's character through his beginning to steal and then, after his discovering Bobbie has been in her room with another man, to smoke, drink, and "even in her presence, in his loud, drunken, despairing young voice, calling her his whore" (187).

In describing Joe's running the remaining distance to the Confrey house after the horse he has taken from McEachern gives out, the narrator suggests that Joe is, despite his
suspicions about the waitress and the Conreys, probably still able to deceive himself about Bobbie's loyalty to him: "He [Joe] reached the house and turned from the road, running, his feet measured and loud in the late silence. Perhaps he could see already the waitress, in a dark dress for travelling [sic], with her hat on and her bag packed, waiting" (198). Instead of finding the loving woman whom he expects to make his wife, Joe discovers a bitter female who now hates him enough for what she considers the jam he has gotten her into that she is preparing to leave town with another man. When she realizes Joe's reasons for coming, Bobbie throws the money he has brought so that they can be married into the air and begins struggling, shrieking, and throwing his possible Negro blood up to him as a curse. Bobbie's sudden belief in Joe's Negroness comes only when it is to her benefit to believe that this is true. When Joe first says to Bobbie, "'I think I got some nigger blood in me'" (184), she immediately accuses him of lying and refuses to believe it—probably because she still finds the attentions that he pays her flattering; yet, when it is possible that Joe has committed murder and her association with him will no longer prove beneficial, Bobbie promptly acknowledges Joe's having Negro blood as the truth and shrieks out what it is that Joe has confessed to her earlier for all to hear.

In some ways, Faulkner repeats the scenario of a young man whose opinion of a woman is colored by his own desires when recounting Hightower's personal history in chapter twenty. In this chapter, the young Hightower serves as an example of a man who lets his beliefs about a woman shape or constitute what he sees as reality: "He believed at once that she was beautiful, because he had heard of her before he ever saw her and when he did see her he did not see her at all because of the face which he had already created in his mind" (453–54). Faulkner has three years pass after the seminary student begins dating her before noting that the young man "saw her face for the first time" (455). After she speaks of marriage to Hightower as an escape from her present life, his view changes from regarding
her as beautiful to seeing her "as a living face, as a mask before desire and hatred: wrung, blind, headlong with passion. Not stupid: just blind, reckless, desperate" (455). Faulkner subtly demonstrates how Hightower's new view is not motivated by any physical change in this woman but by her desire to wed him and her reasons for marrying him to suggest that beauty is not real or does not exist apart from belief. By having Hightower change his view of her physical attributes for these reasons, Faulkner implies that our designating something as beautiful has nothing to do with the physical qualities of the person or object itself but rather with the feelings or beliefs that this person or object stimulates in us. In 1924, I.A. Richards, a man now considered by many to be the father of reader-response criticism, had also claimed that beauty is nothing but a delusion. According to Richards, we attribute a quality or attribute such as beauty to the things that cause them "when what we ought to say is that they cause effects in us of one kind or another" (20). Because Hightower's interpretation of this woman and her beauty changes in response to both his own beliefs concerning marriage and his rather odd ambition of receiving the parish church in Jefferson, his new estimate of her can be no more "true" than the one that was based strictly on the rumors praising her physical attributes. Just as the interpretive strategies that he had assimilated prior to his actually seeing the woman created in his mind a vision of her as being beautiful, so too, these interpretive strategies cause him to change his interpretation to justify his taking advantage of her and her father's connections to obtain the parsonage in Jefferson and to excuse his later neglect of her.

Hightower accepts responsibility for his wife's suicide—or can "read" his own actions—only after he realizes that he had played the role of martyr all these years in an attempt to create unity or continuity in his own life. Hightower indicates that it was his obsession with returning to the place of his grandfather's raid that destroyed his wife when he says:
'Perhaps in the moment when I revealed to her not only the depth of my hunger but the fact that never and never would she have any part in the assuaging of it; perhaps at that moment I became her seducer and her murderer, author and instrument of her shame and death. After all, there must be some things for which God cannot be accused by man and held responsible. There must be.' (462)

The realization of his responsibility for his wife's suicide becomes linked with Joe's predicament when Hightower begins to see himself as responsible not only for his wife's death but also for the welfare and guilt of all man—a concept of self that he probably also obtained from a Book. Hightower then considers pleading guilty to being Joanna's murderer.

In chapter seventeen, self-interest also motivates Byron to protect himself from viewing a woman's true attributes. In this case, the narrator notes that Byron refuses to believe that Lena is pregnant, despite the most obvious evidence of her swollen abdomen, when he says that "his [Byron's] eyes had accepted her belly without his mind believing" (377). While Byron knows that Lena is pregnant, he will not believe that it is true. The narrative voice explains how Byron's self-deception is possible after Byron hears the child's first cry: "He [Byron] knew now that there had been something all the while which had protected him against believing, with the believing protected him" (379–80). Thus, Byron believes that Lena is a virgin to protect himself from the truth of her pregnancy. Byron voices amazement at his ability to accept Lena's pregnancy without acknowledging it by his telling himself that Lucas Burch is just "a lot of words" (380), even though he has met the man. Byron's wonder dissipates when he recognizes how he has manipulated language and meaning to fit his interpretation of Lena as a virgin. Byron then thinks, "it was like me, and her, and all the other folks that I had to get mixed up in it, were just a lot of words that never even stood for anything, were not even us, while all the time what was us was going on and going on without even missing the lack of words" (380).
In "Demonstration vs. Persuasion," Fish emphasizes that a standard of truth is never available independent of a set of beliefs. "If one believes what one believes," says Fish, "then one believes that what one believes is true; and conversely, one believes that what one doesn't believe is not true, even if that is something one believed a moment ago" (361). Thus, when one changes a belief, the previous position is dismissed because the new position is considered sounder. Things never seen before become obvious and indisputable while things formerly seen are no longer visible. Fish's position—that "Quite often we find it inconvenient to believe the things we currently believe, but we find too that it is impossible not to believe them" (362)—can at least partially explain both Hightower's reevaluation of his wife and Byron's final acceptance of Lena's pregnancy. As what is "known" changes if and when one's beliefs change—and one is always in the grip of some belief or another—there can be no standard of truth, for truth is never available independently of a set of beliefs. Thus, because one cannot will a belief or disbelief, one can only believe what one believes.

Faulkner also depicts the self-servingness of interpretation by having Hightower believe that his grandfather deserves to be considered a Confederate hero—not because he was killed in the war but because he was shot by a housewife as he stole chickens from her henhouse. As R.G. Collins points out in "The Other Competitors for the Cross," the world of Hightower's grandfather—the first Gail Hightower, who died in the Civil War—is kept alive for the grandson by Cinthy, the half-mad Negro woman. Since he gets the story "filtered through the Negro woman's words of 'savage sorrow and pride;'," Collins says, "Hightower comes to know the grandfather as a classic figure of the period immediately before the war: hard-drinking, sexually aggressive, a glorious shadow figure whose courage and pride were monumental, a mythic hero, a Sutpen figure, in short, who looked on his preacher son with good-natured contempt" (82). While most people would fail to find heroism in his grandfather's last act, Hightower rejects the standard interpretation of his death as cowardly,
reading it instead as the glorious death of a hero. He insists on viewing his grandfather's stealing of chickens as a heroic act, regardless of public opinion or of his learning that Cinthy had invented this tale. Such determination to retain a belief emphasizes how interpretations are self-serving and the extent to which these interpretations are held to be truth, despite any and all evidence to the contrary.

Faulkner shows how a person determined to retain beliefs will do so despite irrefutable evidence in Lena’s response to discovering that the planing mill worker is not Lucas Burch but Byron Bunch. After finding that Burch is not an employee of the planing mill, Lena says, “‘When I got close to town they kept a-calling it Bunch instead of Burch. But I just thought they was saying it wrong. Or maybe I just heard it wrong’” (45). Later, in her conversation with Byron, Lena admits that many of the people she met along the way told her that she was wrong in believing a man named Burch worked at the planing mill but that her own belief that he was caused her to refuse to accept what they had told her:

‘They told me away back on the road that Lucas is working at the planing mill in Jefferson. Lots of them told me. And I got to Jefferson and they told me where the planing mill was, and I asked in town about Lucas Burch and they said, ‘Maybe you mean Bunch’ and so I thought they had just got the name wrong and so it wouldn't make any difference. Even when they told me the man they meant wasn’t dark complected. You aint telling me you dont know Lucas Burch out here.’ (46)

Thus, even after realizing that Burch is not the man at the planing mill, Lena is able to retain her belief by refusing to acknowledge that it is untrue. And like Hightower’s view of his grandfather, Lena’s belief is self-serving.

Byron notes man’s tendency to persuade himself that his beliefs are true by refusing to acknowledge illusory thinking in chapter thirteen. Although Byron had believed that Lena did not know that the man she was chasing was a profligate, he tells Hightower that he believes she knows but refuses to believe it:
'And all the time I thought I was keeping her from finding out that he had not only run off and left her in trouble, he had changed his name to keep her from finding him, and that now when she found him at last, what she had found was a bootlegger, she already knew it. Already knew that he was a nogood. He says now, with a kind of musing astonishment: 'I never even had any need to keep it from her, to lie it smooth. Like she had already thought of that herself, and that she already didn’t believe it before I even said it, and that was all right too. But the part of her that knew the truth, that I could not have fooled anyway ....' (285)

While Byron is amazed at Lena’s being able to deceive herself about Bunch when she actually knows the truth, he himself accepts what he sees without permitting his mind to believe it when he thinks of Lena as a virgin even though he can see that she is pregnant.

Besides showing how beliefs affect the interpretation of any message, *Light in August* also points out that one must question the reliability of the message’s source—its “authority”—as well as the dependability of the source’s channel if he or she desires to avoid being misled. When Burch unexpectedly meets up with Lena, for instance, Burch tells Lena—who realizes that he is lying—that he has sent her a message that told her of his location and which contained money for her to make the journey to that destination. Although he says that he doubted whether she had received the message because the messenger was a fellow whose name he did not know and who “didn’t look reliable” (406), Burch claims that he had no choice but to trust him. In addition to realizing that Burch is actually the one whose reliability has proved less than admirable, the reader recognizes that Faulkner is demonstrating how all messages come from a “source” whose motivation and reliability must be examined. To increase the irony, Faulkner later has Burch voice his apprehensions about the trustworthiness of the Negro whom he asks to deliver a message to the sheriff. According to the narrative voice, Burch looks at the Negro and “cannot tell if the negro is looking at him or not. And that too seems somehow right and fine in keeping: that his final hope and resort should be a beast that does not appear to have enough ratiocinative power to find the town, let
alone any given individual in it" (412). Justice seems to be served in some ways, however, as the Negro, who, in many ways, appears more reliable than Burch, unwittingly relays to Byron the place where Burch says he will be awaiting the sheriff's reply.

While the scene in which the Negro reveals Burch's hiding place to the man who would most like to intercept him is amusing, it is not nearly as humorous as the scene in which Percy Grimm takes the bike of the Western Union messenger to pursue Joe. Because a Western Union messenger is usually depicted as an efficient courier, the passage describing the way in which Grimm snatches a bicycle from "the inevitable hulking youth in the uniform of the Western Union, leading his bicycle by the horns like a docile cow" (434), stresses that all messengers—even the most professional and reliable of them—are sometimes prevented from delivering to their intended receivers the important messages that have been assigned to them. The humor of the incidents involving the intercepting of the Western Union boy and the revealing of Burch's hiding place to Byron barely conceals the wry observation that all messages can be impeded or adulterated.

When telling Lena of the two men named Joe who are living on the Burden estate, Byron extends the questioning of a source's credibility from just the characters who are seemingly unreliable to all sources by noting that most of what is repeated by people is untrue: "And I have heard what they do to make a living. But that aint none of my business in the first place. And in the second place, most of what folks tells on other folks aint true to begin with. And so I reckon I aint no better than nobody else" (49). While noting that rumors are generally false, Byron tells Hightower in chapter sixteen that "If public talking makes truth, then I reckon that is truth" (344), thereby establishing the major role that public opinion plays in determining what is regarded as truth. *Light in August* contains many such references to the ways in which what is believed to be true by an interpretive community constitutes truth for all those who share its interpretive strategies. For example, in chapter three, the narrator
describes Hightower's entertaining women of his congregation who have come to call and suggests that he "may be wondering if he knew what they believed that they already knew" (58), stressing how what is believed to be true is then considered known to be true by an interpretive community's members.

Habit also causes one to continue espousing the same interpretation even when one no longer believes that interpretation. When Hightower aids the black women during her pregnancy, for instance, the town finds that it has regained its opportunity to gossip about the reprobate minister and begins claiming that the child is his. The narrator remarks that the town supports this interpretation but that its inhabitants do not necessarily believe that it is true:

But Byron believed that even the ones who said this did not believe it. He believed that the town had had the habit of saying things about the disgraced minister which they did not believe themselves for too long a time to break themselves of it. 'Because always,' he thinks, 'when anything gets to be a habit, it also manages to get a right good distance away from truth and fact.' (68-69)

In the first two sentences, Faulkner emphasizes again forms of the words "believe" and "belief." The passage concludes with the statement that "it [a belief that is a habit] also manages to get a right good distance away from truth and fact" to demonstrate that man's interpretations of new events are founded on the way he has interpreted past events and that he will continue supporting these interpretations even when he no longer considers them to be totally valid. Byron points out to Hightower how the town would believe that Joe was "with" him the night that Joanna Burden was murdered because "'They [the citizens of the town] would rather believe that about you than to believe that he [Joe] lived with her [Joanna] like a husband and then killed her'" (369). Thus, members of an interpretive community reach for explanations that confirm the interpretations that they already hold.
Faulkner includes such observations to indicate that "readings" and reading habits that are held to be valid by an interpretive community die hard, if at all.

Mr. Armstid, the farmer who gives Lena a ride, notes the tenacity with which people adhere to their beliefs after he considers telling Lena that Burch is an irresponsible drifter. Upon realizing that "It wouldn't have done any good. She would not have believed the telling and hearing it any more than she will believe the thinking that's been going on all around her . . . ." (21), Mr. Armstid remains silent. Lena retains her belief despite the community's efforts to discourage her because she is able to preserve her own reading of Burch as a loving man who will be anxiously awaiting her arrival. In the novel's final chapter, Hightower, while reflecting upon his life, realizes that such illusory thinking is common and explains it to himself by "thinking how ingenuity was apparently given man in order that he may supply himself in crises with shapes and sounds with which to guard himself from truth" (453). Ironically, this last thought may itself be a product of ingenuity, a self-guarding from the truth.

As a result of the many examples stressing man's continued espousal of beliefs he knows are no longer valid, one can infer that Faulkner questions whether either a seemingly detached observer or a person involved in a situation is capable of "truly" understanding or interpreting a state of affairs since his own beliefs and interpretive strategies actually constitute his interpretation. Similarly, the "evidence" upon which these interpretations are based is not just out there waiting to be "weighed," but comes into view or is declared to be "evidence" only as part of some set of beliefs. Thus, it cannot be assumed that beliefs and interpretations—both private and public—are separate and separable since what is considered knowledge is, in fact, only a set of often delusive beliefs that are stored in one's memory.
Toward the end of the novel, Byron again speculates on what causes people to retain their beliefs. This time, however, Byron not only voices the reasons that he believes people continue to hold beliefs, but he also extends his analysis to a consideration of what it is that will motivate people to change them: "Folks are funny. They cant stick to one way of thinking or doing anything unless they get a new reason for doing it ever so often. And then when they do get a new reason, they are liable to change anyhow" (336-37). While supporting Byron's earlier analysis by maintaining that people continue to espouse beliefs when new circumstances reinforce their holding them, this theorizing differs by suggesting that these same reasons may cause people to change their beliefs. The changing of a previously held belief is likely to be the result of members of an interpretive community arriving at new interpretations that they find better suited to some recent need.

Faulkner clearly indicates the way that interpretive strategies limit interpretations in his depicting the town's reaction to both Joe Brown [Lucas Burch] and Joe Christmas after it "learns" that Joe Christmas is black. When Brown tells the sheriff "He's got nigger blood in him. I knewed it when I first saw him" (91), the marshal replies, "'A nigger. I always thought there was something funny about that fellow'" (92). Upon being told by Brown that Joe has Negro blood, the investigating officials immediately believe him, and, as Byron later tells Hightower, "'It's like he [Burch] knew he had them then. Like nothing they could believe he had done would be as bad as what he could tell that somebody else had done" (91), especially when that somebody else happens to be a Negro. Thus, after the new "fact" of Joe's being of Negro descent is presented, the forthcoming interpretation of the citizens of the town is that such suspicions had already been held and that they were only awaiting evidence to confirm them before making just such a pronouncement. As noted earlier, these reinterpretations also extend to the names of Joe and Lucas.
A theory that Wolfgang Iser presents on interpretation in "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach" provides some insight into the way in which the town so easily changes its views of Joe. In this essay, Iser states that whatever we read or interpret sinks into our memory and is foreshortened so that when it is later evoked and set against a different background, the reader or interpreter develops "hitherto unforeseeable connections" (53). In Light in August, Faulkner emphatically points out how such "hitherto unforeseeable conditions" impose upon the interpretation that is stored in our memory so that by the time that this earlier interpretation is actually recalled, the new evidence with which we have been presented has already been merged with it. By noting ways in which hindsight allows men to make "new" interpretations, Faulkner demonstrates how something that is newly recognized is often assumed to be something long acknowledged. In his essay, Iser makes a similar observation when he says,"The evoked memory can never reassume its original shape for this would mean that memory and perception were identical, which is not manifestly so" (55). Faulkner's many references to the way in which "Memory believes before knowing remembers" (111) also help demonstrate how the interpreter takes new "evidence" and forms interrelations between past, present, and future events to create unity within his or her life.

Other instances in Light in August in which things are seen retrospectively as "symbols" or "signs" include Byron's view of Hightower's shabby lawn chair as a symbol. While Byron and Hightower are friends of some years, Hightower refuses Byron's request to aid Lena, causing Byron to anticipate Hightower's being unwilling to help save Joe. As Byron approaches the lawn chair in which Hightower can usually be found sleeping, the narrative voice notes: "... Byron thinks how the mute chair evocative of disuse and supineness and shabby remoteness from the world, is somehow the symbol and the being too of the man himself" (342). Byron designates the shabby lawn chair a symbol of Hightower's
self-imposed isolation only after Hightower refuses to help him, thereby indicating the
general way man attempts to create meaning from something after some new "evidence" comes
into view.

Similarly, Mrs. Hines uses hindsight to substantiate an earlier claim involving Mr.
Hines's whereabouts on the night of their daughter's birth. According to Mrs. Hines, she
deemed Mr. Hines's being in jail when Milly was born a sign the very day after Milly's
delivery. She maintains that she told her husband “that him being locked up in a jail on the
hour and minute of his daughter's birth was the Lord’s own token that heaven never thought
him fitten to raise a daughter” (352). Mrs. Hines can actually insist upon the validity of her
husband's being in jail as an augury of Milly's ruination only eighteen years later, after
their daughter's affair with a circus member and then her death during labor. This search
for an explanation of what can be viewed as a symbol or sign after the fact is an attempt by
both Byron and Mrs. Hines to create meaning from, by imputing meaning to, the things which
occur in their lives.

The community's attempts to create a sense of unity—a sense all interpretations aim
at—are seen in its explication of Joe's murder of Joanna and in its interpretations of his
capture, later escape, and then subsequent surrender. In these cases, the community creates
a feeling of single-mindedness by promoting the reading of Joe's actions as if he were playing
a part in a conventional morality play. After learning of his having Negro blood, each citizen
of Jefferson arrives at the same explanation for why Joe cut Joanna's throat: "'He dont look
any more like a nigger than I do. But it must have been the nigger blood in him" (330). Thus, such a horrible crime is quickly explained away by the community—whose
interpretive strategies reflect the values and beliefs of white citizens—as being a result of
the black blood that it believes runs through Joe's veins.
When telling Hightower of Joe's capture, Byron notes that it is Joe's walking the streets of Mottstown "in broad daylight, like he owned the town" (331) that makes the residents so angry:

"He never acted like either a nigger or a white man. That was it. That was what made the 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 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."

According to Donald M. Kartiganer in "The Fragile Thread: The Meaning of Form in Faulkner's Novels," the town people interpret his staying in the area as he flees from his pursuers as a sign of Joe's blackness. "But though he [Joe] refuses to leave the country," writes Kartiganer, "he has little trouble avoiding his pursuers, and so his believed ignorance becomes his arrogance, the two combining to make clear categorizations of Joe impossible" (100). While the townspeople attribute his staying in the Jefferson area after murdering Joanna to Joe's having black blood, Faulkner presents no evidence about Joe's racial heritage or its being responsible for his actions. Instead, Faulkner proposes what might be an excuse for Joe's murdering of Joanna when he has Hightower ask himself at the end of chapter seventeen, "... how can we expect an individual to refrain ['from taking human life'] when he believes that he has suffered at the hands of his victim?" (392). While Hightower has grown enough to realize that we cannot know what Joe has suffered at Joanna's hands, the townspeople can only continue to believe that it is his black blood that is to blame.

While the narrative voice states, "There were many reasons, opinions, as to why he [Joe] had fled to Hightower's house at the last" (419), Gavin Stevens—the town's "authority" since he is from an established Jefferson family, "the District Attorney, A Harvard graduate, a Phi Beta Kappa" (419), and a man who "has an easy quiet way with country people"
(420)—has his own theory. Stevens' explanation of Joe's behavior maintains that black and white blood are irreconcilable:

'But his blood would not be quiet, let him save it. It would not be either one or the other and let his save itself. Because the black blood drove him first to the negro cabin. And then the white blood drove him out of there, as it was the black blood which snatched up the pistol and the white blood which would not let him fire it. And it was the white blood which sent him to the minister...." (424)

As the theory of the two warring bloods is similar to the theory explaining how his having Negro blood was responsible for the haughty way in which Joe strolled down the streets of Mottstown prior to his capture and to his not being able to leave the Jefferson area after he escapes from the jail, this interpretation, despite its many flaws, will probably become the most commonly accepted one amongst the citizens of Jefferson and Mottstown. The possibility of such agreement shows that the townspeople share the same interpretive strategies about blacks—strategies that have been assimilated and that therefore exist prior to the text or message and determine the shape of all that is interpreted.

Perhaps by refusing to make clear Joe's ancestry Faulkner hoped to reveal to his readers the limiting influence that interpretive strategies have on their reading of a novel. In obscuring Joe's racial heritage, Faulkner not only causes controversy to arise amongst the characters of the novel, but he also challenges those readers who insist on "correct" or final interpretations by denying them any conclusive evidence that would prove one interpretation superior to another. By leaving Joe's ancestry ambiguous, Faulkner stimulates thought and discussion on the ways in which our interpretive strategies prompt us to choose and insist upon the validity of particular interpretations. Moreover, his inclusion
of the town's reaction to learning that Joe has black blood shows how interpretive strategies impose new interpretations following the presentation of additional "evidence."

By making Joe's blackness and final actions open questions, subject to multiple and conflicting answers, Faulkner again calls attention to the determining influence of interpretive strategies and interpretive communities. Like many reader-response critics today, he seems to argue that man can only interpret the world—the actions and motivations of others and of himself—in terms of those strategies for sense-making provided by the various communities to which he belongs. These shared sense-making strategies constitute these communities—and man himself. Whether these concerns make Faulkner a proto-reader-response critic is also an open question—necessarily so, for our responses will reflect the interpretive communities to which we belong and the interpretive strategies that we employ.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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