Trauma and Identity in William Faulkner’s *Light in August*

Asma Chahed  
Faculty of Arts and Humanities of Sousse, University of Sousse, Tunisia  
Miss-English21@hotmail.com

Abstract

Throughout the history of the American South, the Civil War had a great impact on the defeated South which witnessed “a collective downfall” that led to a collective cultural trauma. Indeed, Trauma Theory is deeply linked to the ideologies incarnated in the region of the South and especially to the white male Southern ideology. Through writing trauma in *Light in August*, William Faulkner tries to represent his protagonist Joe Christmas as a "trauma victim" who is in a continuous quest for identity. In this respect, this paper will attempt to study how the individual identity of Joe Christmas is shaped by the collective identity of his community. This paper will explore how Christmas challenges Jefferson’s strict classifications of identity as far as race and gender are concerned which heightens and exacerbates his individual trauma. Indeed, the current paper will unravel that Faulkner depicts a tragic representation of trauma that is undergone by his mulatto character in his "Trauma Process". There will be an attempt to argue that collective traumas are incorporated into the collective identity of the American South. This, in turn, mirrors Faulkner’s apocalyptic vision of the South as suggested in his book.

Keywords: cultural trauma, trauma theory, trauma victim, individual identity, collective identity, trauma process.
Cultural trauma has been characteristic of Southern people who felt traumatized after the defeat in the war. The South is different from other regions through feelings of racial pride and belongings that characterize its people who think of their identity as being intimately connected to their region. This attachment sheds light on the power of society on identity. Indeed, southern people exerted punishment on Southern minorities as a way to overcome their traumatic past. This punishment lies in violence, lynching and castration.

After the war, the image of the glorious South was destroyed and was represented as a myth that cannot be reached because it became a mere memory of the South’s past (Singal 168). The result of this distortion of the image of Glory leads to a cultural trauma. This term according to Jeffrey:

occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways. (1)

In this respect, the defeat constitutes a traumatic event since it left its traces on the psychology of Southerners who felt tormented by this defeat since it led to the division of the South into Old and New. This trauma was also collective since it destroys the main ties between individuals and damages their sense of “communality” (Jeffrey 4).

Indeed, trauma theory is deeply linked to the ideologies incarnated in the region of the South and especially to the white male Southern ideology. Through writing trauma in Light in August, William Faulkner tries to represent his protagonist Joe Christmas as a “trauma victim” who is in a continuous quest for identity. A trauma victim, according to Kuo, "represents and understands the events that leak into the seedbed of his painful consciousness” (3). Joe as a person who looks white but who is suspected of having black blood was exposed to his racial reality in a harsh manner through racist people whom he encountered. This reality comes back through all his life to haunt him in several instances to constitute his paradoxical essence.

As a matter of fact, he felt culturally estranged because the Southern community ”[was] avenging its traumatic past upon the newly estranged other subjects within” (Kuo 133).

From his early childhood, in the orphanage Joe experienced a trauma of punishment when he steals some toothpaste from the dietician’s room. One day, when he was hiding and eating some toothpaste, he witnessed the dietician’s intimate relationship. He was watching her and eating toothpaste but the excess of toothpaste in his mouth makes him vomit and he was discovered by the woman who torments him through her word: “nigger bastard” (Faulkner 114). These words lead him to experience an identity crisis since “he never acted like either a nigger or a white man” (Faulkner 349). This scene is classified in Joe’s memory as bitter and very hard for his mind to digest since it makes him aware of the South’s trauma of race.

Even worse, it was at the hands of his grand-father Doc Hines that Joe was psychologically harmed. This person considers his grand-child as a “devil’s crop” (Faulkner 379) because of his father’s mixed race origins. Since Hines was motivated by the Puritan thinking, he killed Joe’s father and let his daughter Milly die in childbirth by depriving her of medical assistance. He contributed to enhance Joe’s agitated identity through staying near the child in the orphanage by working as a janitor in order “to watch him and hate him” (Faulkner 127). This person is the epitome of a Southern way of thinking and their disdain of the black
race which they consider as "a walking pollution in God’s own face” (Faulkner 128). All his hideous actions including leaving the boy near the orphanage and making his own grand-son suffer the impact of racist appellations and racialism from an early age contribute to the child’s trauma. Cathy Caruth affirms that: "trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden and catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (qtd in Kuo 24). Through applying this definition on the child’s life, one can see that he suffered from the burden of “catastrophic events” including loss of both parents at the hands of the grand- father, as well as living in an orphanage and bearing the repetitive racist appellations that disturb him and lead him to discover suddenly through the toothpaste episode that he has some mixed- blood origins. As a "trauma victim" who tries to understand the accumulation of all these painful events, he starts by evaluating his relationship to this janitor who is ultimately his grand- father. The passage in the novel through which the writer interferes to present the child’s perspective of Doc Hines is very telling.

Even at three years of age; the child knew that there was something between them[…] if the child had been older he would perhaps have thought he hates me and fears me[…] that is why I am different from the others: because he is watching me all the time. He accepted it. (Faulkner 137-138)

In the previous lines, the child’s frustration and his inability to find a reason for Hines misbehaving is obvious, nevertheless, he succeeded in deciphering the paradox inherent in the person’s behavior toward him and recognizes his difference. Consequently, Joe’s first response was manifested in dialogues that show his curiosity and his identification with the black race. Nevertheless, the conversation shows also his turbulence and the fact that he is presented as a trauma subject. This reaction is detected in his observation and conversation with a black worker at the orphanage.

How come you are nigger? And the nigger said who told you I am a nigger, you little trash bastard? And [Joe] says I ain’t a nigger and the nigger says ‘you are worse than that. You don’t know what you are. And more than that, you won’t never [sic] know. You’ll live and you’ll die and you won’t never[sic] know. (383-384)

Although the previous lines shed light on Joe’s invisible blackness which is at the heart of his trauma, it also uncovers the boy’s continuous quest for identity as an absurd quest since it heightens his individual trauma as the more he delves into his origins, the more traumatic he becomes. Jeffrey defines individual trauma as: “a blow to the psyche that breaks through one’s defenses so suddenly and with such brutal force that one cannot react to it effectively” (4). In this respect, Joe’s identity which escapes any fixed definition agitates the townspeople because it challenges Jefferson’s strict identity categorization as “for the black, he looks white, for the white townfolk, he is reported of mulatto descent” (Faulkner 139). This unfixidnessof the Mulatto’s identity justifies the fact that trauma escapes a fixed location. According to Jeffrey, “trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past […]but rather the way, it was precisely not known in the first instance
returns to haunt the survivor later on” (7). When it comes to Joe Christmas, trauma for him is related to a theory of blood. In other words, sometimes the white blood drives him to pass as white. Thanks to his light skin, he performs the act successfully and “went into a white barbershop like a white man and because he looked like a white man, they never suspected him” (Faulkner 349). Contradictory enough, other times he ignites the flames of a fight because he wants to be called black: “tricking or teasing white men into calling him a Negro in order to fight them” (Faulkner 225).

The accumulation of all the traumatic memorial events, which started with the toothpaste episode, leads Joe to manifest his violence and disdain toward women in a number of occasions including the prostitute Bobbie Allen and Joanna Burden. The experience with Bobbie Allen was tormenting for him. Indeed, Joe is an “abandonment neurotic” because “he doubts whether he can be loved as he is, for he had the cruel experience of being abandoned” (Fanon 77). He beats her when he learnt that she was having her period. Menstruation brings to his mind the scene of the dietician and its aftermaths. In this context, one can detect the role of memory in developing trauma as knowing about menstruation leads Joe “to see a diminishing row of suavely shaped urns in moonlight, blanched. And not one was perfect […] there issued something liquid. He vomited” (Faulkner 189). Through these lines, one can deduce that traumatic memory unconsciously tortures Joe Christmas as “the victim literally dreams about and imaginatively returns to the experience that traumatized him” (Forter 267). In this case, trauma is due to sexual knowledge. This kind of trauma happens according to Forter, paradoxically enough, “too early” and “too late”. It is too soon because it happens at prepuberty when the child cannot understand its significance and too late because the time when he grasps it, it becomes just a past experience (264). The act of vomiting according to Greg Forter is related to identity formation and expresses “a strangely elusive identity” because it refers to a substance that is both assimilated and violently rejected. Forter affirms also that Faulkner uses vomiting as an allegory for the dialectical intermingling of assimilation and rejection (271).

The sexual trauma was also manifested by Joe Christmas on Joanna Burden. This woman resembles Joe in her dual personality: “the one the woman, the other the man trained habit of thinking born out of heritage and environment” (Faulkner 235). Like Joe who faces a racial trauma, this woman faces a gender trauma because she wavers between two gendered identities the masculine and the feminine. She is also presented as endowed with “a hand more apt for a rope or a gunbutt or a knife than a pen” (Faulkner 242). This woman carries a burden which consists in her grandfather’s abolitionist mission of protecting blacks. Indeed, Joe Christmas expels his sexual trauma toward this woman through repeatedly raping her. As a matter of fact, rape allows Joe to feel superior and to control the white female body. In her “An examination of Race and Gender in Light in August”, Alicia Hickman affirms that “Joe rapes Joanna to assert his power as a ’black’ male over her as a pure white female” (19). The action of rape aims at overcoming his own inferiority complex since being black equals having feminine attributes (Forter 272). Nevertheless, Miss Burden challenged Joe’s identity through subverting his gender expectations and rendering him feminine in their sexual relationship. As a matter of fact, “the manlike strength of Joanna threatens Joe’s masculinity and repeatedly disrupts his gender expectations” (Bush 490). For instance, she meets Joe’s violence with passivity: “now she’ll
run” Joe expected. However, “[she] did not flee. She did not resist at all” (Faulkner 236).

According to Bush, the lack of action on the part of Joanna transforms the “genuine rape” into “imitative rape” (484). It is imitative because of the shift in the controller and also because the whole thing becomes like a game: “it was as if she had invented the whole thing for the purpose of playing it out like a play” (Faulkner 259).

Similarly, Lisa K. Nelson points to this subversion of roles through referring to Joanna as the one acting the myth of the black rapist. While Joe intends to make her fear him, what happened is totally the opposite: “it was as though with the corruption she seemed to gather from the air itself, she began to corrupt him. He began to be afraid” (Faulkner 260). As a result, Joe starts to think of running away and finds out that he was entrapped. Indeed, the subversion of roles is explicitly revealed through Joe Christmas who affirms that “it was like I was the woman and she was the man” (235). Joanna threatens Joe’s masculine side through her dual personality. Joe’s feelings of being like a woman with her lead him to feel ashamed of having anyone know about the change occurring in their relationship: “he could have died or murdered rather than have anyone, another man learn what their relation had now become” (Faulkner 271). In short, Joe’s trauma was not only racial but also a gender trauma that was caused by his paradoxical relationship with Joanna Burden which is notable through its subversive structure. As a victim of trauma who “may more or less simultaneously rely on, for example, denial, blaming or scapegoating others” (Smelser 45), Joe Christmas resorts to scapegoating Joanna through decapitating her with a razor to put an end to his gender trauma.

In short, the representation of trauma in *Light in August* reveals a tragic depiction of the trauma process that Joe Christmas has undergone. The ending adds to Joe’s tragic quest of identity since the novel reveals that Percy Grimm takes revenge upon the murder of Joanna through castrating Joe with a butcher knife. The incident reveals symbolically Joe’s challenging of his gender even in death:

The pent black seemed to rush like a releasing breath. It seemed to rush out his pale body like the rush of sparks from a rising rocket, upon that black blast that man seemed to rise soaring into their memories forever and ever.

(Faulkner 465)

The representation of Joe’s death and the black blood that flows from Christmas reminds readers of menstrual blood. John N. Duvall argues that “black blood that flows from Christmas’s hips and loins is metaphorically and metonymically menstrual blood” (Tamura 39). This consideration is valid since the bleeding of Christmas emanates from his sexual organs just like women’s menstruation cycle. Duvall also takes into consideration men’s reaction upon witnessing the scene of mutilation. The vomiting, according to Duvall, “repeats Joe’s vomiting upon learning about menstruation from Bobbie Allen” (qtd. In Tamura 39). In other words, men’s reaction is equated with the preceding reaction of Christmas upon learning about menstruation and considering it as a way of cleansing the body (Urgo 394).

In brief, my analysis of “Trauma and identity in *Light in August*” reveals that the work is an apocalyptic text. This term is defined by Hoefer through referring to Bull and his definition of these texts in which “bivalence is a consequence of a fractured existence and of incomplete knowledge” (qtd. in *Apocalypse South* 12). The book deals with two opposed dichotomies: blackness and whiteness. Such dichotomies uncover the inner-division within
the psyche of Joe Christmas and his inner trauma. The analysis also reveals that through re-writing the South, Faulkner uncovers his personal trauma and his extreme obsession with the Southern myth and the discourse of region which “arises as much from a sociocultural as from a psychological context” (Hunninghausen 190). Consequently, Southern trauma lies in “the tension between apocalyptic now in modernity and traumatic past into the war” (Kuo 134).

References

Primary Sources:

http://www.ijhcs.com/index.php/ijhcs/index

**Secondary Sources:**


