

The Calvinism in Faulkner's *Light in August*

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Light in August is one of the masterpieces which William Faulkner wrote during a period of extraordinary inspiration and craftsmanship in his life. Needless to say, it belongs to Faulkner's "Yoknapatawpha Saga." Yoknapatawpha is an imaginary county in the state of Mississippi, whose county seat is called Jefferson. Therefore the setting of this novel is the deep South, where severe Calvinism prevails, and violent racism is rooted very deeply.

William Van O'Connor says, "If one does not perceive that the Calvinist spirit is the central issue in *Light in August*, the novel will of necessity seem confused in theme," in his book on Faulkner's novels.¹ Calvinism plays a very important role in *Light in August*, and several characters of this novel are influenced by it. In this short thesis, I would like to consider mainly the influences of Calvinism on those characters.

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Joe Christmas is especially influenced by Calvinism among several characters of this novel. Among the main religious influences on Christmas, we can find Eupheus Hines' fanatical Calvinistic faith, Calvinistic severe discipline at the orphanage, and Simon McEachern's Calvinistic faith. First of all, I would like to turn my eyes to those three kinds of influences on Christmas.

Eupheus Hines is a fanatical Calvinist and he thinks himself to be a God's instrument. When Christmas says, "Is God a nigger too?", he says, "He is the Lord God of wrathful hosts, His will be done. Not yours and not mine, because you and me are both a part of His purpose and His vengeance."² Mrs. Hines says to Gail Hightower that Eupheus Hines once said, "It's the Lord God's abomination, and I am the instrument of His will,"³ when he looked at Milly, Christmas' mother, who was about to give birth to Christmas. As he believes that God abominates bitchery, he is certain that he is doing God's will by killing the man who had seduced his daughter. He regards Christmas as "a sign and a damnation for bitchery."⁴ He believes that God abominates Christmas and God's will works on Christmas. Since he thinks himself to be God's instrument, he must watch how God's will works. Therefore he always watches Christmas so as to see how God's will works. When other children begin to call Christmas Nigger, he is glad inwardly to know that God's will has worked on Christmas.

It is quite obvious that Eupheus Hines wants to blame his daughter's bitchery, because he refuses to allow a doctor to assist his daughter in the birth of her illegitimate son, Joe Christmas. As he believes that God abominates bitchery, he is certain that he is doing God's

will by refusing assistance to his daughter. His daughter dies because of his refusal to assist her. Therefore Joe Christmas doesn't know his mother at all.

Eupheus Hines not only killed his daughter indirectly, but also killed the man who had seduced her, that is to say, Joe Christmas' father, in order to blame her bitchery. Whether Christmas' father was a Negro or not is quite uncertain. But only Eupheus Hines says that he "could see in his face the black curse of God Almighty."⁵ In order to blame his daughter's bitchery, it may have been more convenient for him to think that his daughter's seducer was a Negro than to think that he was not a Negro. Possibly, only he may have thought that Christmas' father was a Negro, in order to blame his daughter's bitchery, and may have convinced Christmas of his Negro blood. For in the South, where severe Calvinism prevails, and violent racism is rooted very deeply, whites are "the elect" and Negroes are "the damned." Perhaps, a main cause of Christmas' tragedy, namely his lack of knowledge about his own identity, is made by his grandfather, Eupheus Hines. It is Eupheus Hines' fanatical and perverted faith in Calvinism that makes a main cause of Christmas' tragedy. He kills Christmas' father and mother and convinces Christmas of his Negro blood.

In addition, Eupheus Hines believes in the Calvinistic concept of predestination. He is not surprised that Christmas has found the dietitian out: he says, "I knowed he would be there to catch you when God's time came. I knowed. I know who set him there, a sign and a damnation for bitchery."⁶ When Eupheus Hines pursues his daughter's seducer and his daughter, Milly, he goes straight to the place where they are, though he doesn't know which road they took:

And yet it wasn't any possible way that he could have known which road they had taken. But he did. He found them like he had known all the time just where they would be, like him and the man that his gal told him was a Mexican had made a date to meet there. It was like he knew. It was pitch dark, and even when he caught up with a buggy, there wasn't any way he could have told it was the one he wanted. But he rode right up behind the buggy, the first buggy he had seen that night.⁷

Calvinistic predestination is found also in Simon McEachern's pursuit of Christmas when he discovers Christmas sliding down a rope from his room to meet Bobbie Allen:

He turned into the road at that slow and ponderous gallop, the two of them, man and beast, leaning a little stiffly forward. . . as if in that cold and implacable and undeviating conviction of both omnipotence and clairvoyance of which they both partook known destination and speed were not necessary.

He rode at that same speed straight to the place which he sought and which he had found out of a whole night and almost a whole half of a country. . .⁸

Christmas is affected by this concept of predestination. When Christmas is sitting outside waiting for the hour when he knows he will go up to Joanna's room and murder her, he has already been affected by the concept of predestination. Faulkner describes his state in a rather skillful way as follows: ". . . he believed with calm paradox that he was the volitionless servant of the fatality in which he believed that he did not believe."⁹

Calvinistic severe discipline at the orphanage has a great influence on Christmas. Although it is not described in detail, its influence on Christmas' character is very great. One day, when Christmas is a child, he incidentally discovers the toothpaste which the dietitian of the orphanage uses. After that he gets into a habit of going to her room, and eating her pink toothpaste in secret. One day, when he is eating the toothpaste, the dietitian and a young intern come into the room and Christmas hides himself behind the curtain. Then he happens to hear the sounds of their love affair. He is caught eating the toothpaste by the dietitian, because of his vomiting sounds. The dietitian tries to bribe him into silence with a gleaming silver dollar. She believes that Christmas has witnessed the assignation. She is too excited and frightened to think that a five-year-old boy can't understand the love affair. Christmas, who has been accustomed to the Calvinistic severe discipline at the orphanage and has expected the extreme punishment of his eating the dietitian's toothpaste, is shocked and astonished. And the money reminds him of the sensation of being sick from toothpaste:

He did not move nor speak. He might have been carved, a large toy: small, still, round headed and round eyed, in overalls. He was still with astonishment, shock, outrage. Looking at the dollar, he seemed to see ranked tubes of toothpaste like corded wood, endless and terrifying; his whole being coiled in a rich and passionate revulsion. "I dont want no more." he said. "I dont never want no more," he thought.¹⁰

After this incident, Christmas' feelings toward the dietitian change greatly. Before the incident, the dietitian reminds him of something pleasing:

The dietitian was nothing to him yet, save a mechanical adjunct to eating, food, the diningroom, the ceremony of eating at the wooden forms, coming now and then into his vision without impacting at all except as something of pleasing association and pleasing in herself to look at . . .¹¹

However, after the incident, Christmas comes to hate the dietitian, because the dietitian and the sickening taste of the toothpaste are linked together in his consciousness. His hatred of the dietitian turns into the hatred of egoistic kindness, for the dietitian, from her egoistic kindness, tries to give him a gleaming silver dollar. And then it turns into the hatred of kindness. In addition, as the dietitian is closely connected with food, he learns to have a dislike for food at the same time. This experience with the dietitian strongly affects Christmas' character. And it makes him a child who dislikes kindness and food.

When Mrs. McEachern washes Christmas' feet with hot water on his arrival, he keeps waiting for something unpleasant to take place and he is upset because it never does. This shows that he has already accustomed to Calvinistic severe discipline at the orphanage. As he has never been treated with soft kindness at the orphanage, he is confused at Mrs. McEachern's kindness. Mrs. McEachern shows soft kindness and love to Christmas in several ways. After Mr. McEachern has gone out she brings a tray of food to Christmas. At that time, although he is hungry, he dumps the dishes and food and all onto the floor in her presence. This action shows his dislike for kindness and food. His dislike for food is shown

also in his swinging and hurling dishes into the wall at the kitchen of Joanna Burden's house. When Mr. McEachern sends Christmas to bed without any supper, he feels "weak and peaceful,"¹² because of lack of food. Mrs. McEachern tells Christmas the place where her secret savings are hidden. And when Christmas' new suit is found by Mr. McEachern, she tries to protect Christmas with kindness. But in spite of her kindness Christmas begins to steal some amount of money from her secret savings to give Bobbie Allen. Once, in order to annoy Mrs. McEachern, Christmas wants to tell her that he is a Negro. These facts show his hatred of kindness. Faulkner describes his hatred of kindness as follows:

It was not the hard work which he hated, nor the punishment and injustice. He was used to that before he ever saw either of them. He expected no less, and so he was neither outraged nor surprised. It was the women: that soft kindness which he believed himself doomed to be forever victim and which he hated worse than he did the hard and ruthless justice of men.¹³

Mr. McEachern plays an important role in forming Christmas' strict character. He is a fanatical Calvinist like Eupheus Hines. He thinks that "two abominations are sloth and idle thinking, the two virtues are work and the fear of God."¹⁴ Besides, he regards lechery as a sin. Therefore when he notices that Christmas is committing lechery, he pursues Christmas. On a Sunday McEachern forces Christmas to learn a catechism. He whips Christmas and he doesn't give Christmas any breakfast, any lunch, and any supper. But Christmas doesn't try to learn it. McEachern tells him to kneel down in order to pray to God. Christmas kneels down, but he doesn't pray to God. He resists McEachern obstinately. Even when he is whipped by McEachern he doesn't flinch. Faulkner describes it as follows: "When the strap fell he did not flinch, no quiver passed over his face. He was looking straight ahead, with a rapt, calm, expression like a monk in a picture."¹⁵ Through this experience with McEachern, Christmas learns to resist. And through this experience, Christmas comes to hate to pray to God.

After all, through these Calvinistic disciplines Christmas' strict character is formed. When he has grown up, he has been already one of those who can't understand and accept kindness and love. Because of such a character he can't truly get along with other people. And it is reasonable that Melvin Backman says as follows: "As a child Joe had been the victim of his grandfather's pathological religion of which supremacy, and as a boy he had been the victim of his foster father's narrow Calvinism."¹⁶

Gail Hightower and Joanna Bruden are isolated persons and have much to do with religion through their grandfathers and fathers. Hightower's grandfather was a member in good standing of the Episcopal Church and his father was a minister and preached in a small Presbyterian chapel. As for Joanna Burden, her grandfather, Calvin Burden was a Methodist. The following passage describes Calvinism in the South:

It came directly across the Atlantic with the Scottish and other settlers; it came also from New England, both before and after the war, in the teachings of Northern preachers and schoolmasters. It was propagated not only in the Presbyterian

churches but also by the more numerous Methodists and Baptists; by Low-church Episcopalianism, which has exerted an influence on the South out of all proportion to its numerical weakness; by the sects that have splintered off from these others; and at revivals and tent-meetings. Calvinism is apt to turn up almost anywhere that religious belief impinges upon Southern life.¹⁷

Considering these above mentioned, I conclude that Gail Hightower's religion and Joanna Burden's religion are both Calvinism.

Gail Hightower is a minister of the Presbyterian Church and now he is retired and he leads an isolated life. His reflection gives some criticism to the Presbyterian Church when he recollects the days when he had served as a minister in a Presbyterian church:

It seems to him that he has seen it all the while: that that which is destroying the Church is not the outward groping of those within it nor the inward groping of those without, but the professionals who control it and who have removed the bells from its steeples. He seems to see them, endless, without order, empty, symbolical, bleak, skyspointed not with ecstasy or passion but in adjuration, threat, and doom. He seems to see the churches of the world like a rampart, like one of those barricades of middleages planted with dead and sharpened stakes, against truth and against that peace in which to sin and be forgiven which is the life of man.¹⁸

From this passage, we can find how the Presbyterian Church of those days was far from the truth and peace. Faulkner may want to criticize the condition of the Presbyterian Church of those days.

Joanna Burden is a spinster living in a big, old mansion who is a descendant of an abolitionist family from New England. Her grandfather and brother had been killed in Jefferson by Colonel Sartoris over the issue of Negro voting. She had heard the following opinion insistently held by her grandfather:

He got off on Lincoln and slavery and dared any man there to deny that Lincoln and the negro and Moses and the children of Israel were the same, and the Red Sea was just the blood that had to be spilled in order that the black race might cross into the Promised Land.¹⁹

Her job is to give some advice to Negro colleges and various kinds of Negro schools. Her business affairs are conducted by a Negro lawyer in Memphis. She helps the Negro not out of sympathy for other human beings but out of a sense of obligation to carry out God's design. One day, when she was four years old, her father took her to see the grave of her grandfather and brother. Her father tells her at the grave as follows:

"Remember this. Your grandfather are lying there, murdered not by one white man but by the curse which God put on a whole race before your grandfather or your brother or me or you were even thought of. A race doomed and cursed to be forever and ever a part of the white race's doom and curse for its sins. Remember that. His doom and his curse. Forever and ever. Mine. Your mother's. Yours, even though you are a child. The curse of every white child that ever was born and that ever will be

born. None can escape it.”²⁰

This speech affects Joanna’s way of thinking about the Negro. After she has heard this speech of her father, she comes to see the Negro as a thing and a shadow:

I had seen and known negroes since I could remember. I just looked at them as I did at rain, or furniture, or food or sleep. But after that I seemed to see them for the first time not as people, but as a thing, a shadow in which I lived, we lived, all white people, all other people. I thought of all the children coming forever and ever into the world, white, with the black shadow already falling upon them before they drew breath. And I seemed to see the black shadow in the shape of a cross. And it seemed like the white babies were struggling, even before they drew breath, to escape from the shadow that was not only upon them but beneath them too, flung out like their arms were flung out, as if they were nailed to the cross. I saw all the little babies that would ever be in the world, the ones not yet born—a long line of them with their arms spread, on the black crosses.²¹

The following words spoken by Joanna’s father make her have a sense of obligation to carry out God’s design:

“You must struggle, rise. But in order to rise, you must raise the shadow with you. But you can never lift it to your level. I see that now, which I did not see until I came down here. But escape it you cannot. The curse of the black race is God’s curse. But the curse of the white race is the black man who will be forever God’s chosen own because He once cursed Him.”²²

Since Joanna has a sense of obligation to carry out God’s design, she wants Christmas to “take over all her business affairs—the correspondence and the periodical visits—with the negro school.”²³ She wants to help the Negro. What she really needs in order to carry out God’s design is not Joe Christmas but a Negro. She tells him to go to a Negro school and to study law at the Negro lawyer’s office in Memphis. Christmas rejects her request because accepting her request means becoming a Negro. Christmas doesn’t know his identity and is searching for it. He doesn’t want to become a Negro easily.

After he rejects Joanna’s request, she calls him and tells him to kneel. Then she prays to God, but Christmas doesn’t pray. This shows his hatred of religion which was caused by Simon McEachern. Two nights later, she calls him again and tells him to kneel with her. At this time, like Eupheus Hines, she sees herself as God’s instrument and says that it is God who is insisting that Christmas should pray. Christmas rejects her request obstinately, and Joanna tries to shoot him and her with a revolver. Then finally, he kills her with a razor, almost severing the head from her body. Though Christmas escapes, he is caught, killed, and castrated by a captain in the State national guard.

(3)

It is obvious that each character’s personality is more or less distorted by severe Calvinism.

And Joe Christmas' personality is especially distorted by it among five characters I have mentioned in this short thesis. Faulkner has compassion on Christmas' tragedy. In relation to Christmas' tragedy, he says as follows:

I think that was his tragedy—he didn't know what he was, and so he was nothing. He deliberately evicted himself from the human race he didn't know which he was. That was his tragedy, that to me was the tragic central idea of the story—that he didn't know what he was, and there was no way possible in life for him to find out. Which to me is the most tragic condition a man could find himself in—not to know what he is and to know that he will never know.

Judging from this statement, it is distinct that Faulkner pities Christmas. Superficially, Joe Christmas seems to be a villain, but he is a victim of severe Calvinism and violent racism of the South. In the South, Calvinism and racism are closely linked together as we can know from Joanna Burden's words. In *Light in August*, Faulkner describes how human character is distorted by severe Calvinism and violent racism and how a tragedy is brought about by these things of the South. After all, he seems to criticize severe Calvinism and violent racism of the South.

要 約

「八月の光」の数人の人物がカルヴィニズムの影響を受けているが、とりわけジョー・クリスマスは大きな影響を受けている。クリスマスの祖父ハインズはカルヴィニズムの狂信的な信者で、女のふしだらを嫌うあまり、私生児を生んだ娘ミリーを間接的に、そしてその相手の男を直接に殺してしまう。また私生児である孫のクリスマスに黒人の血が混じっていると思いこませる。それ故クリスマスは生まれた時から自分の正体を知らぬという悲劇の要因を持っているのである。ハインズによって孤児院へ入れられたクリスマスはカルヴィニズムに基づく厳しいしつけをされ、そのために優しさや親切を嫌う、ゆがんだ人格の人間となる。マックイーチャン家の養子となったクリスマスは、ここでもまた養父のカルヴィニズムへの狂信的な信仰のために厳しくしつけられ、ますますその人格はゆがみ、神に祈ることを嫌うようになる。クリスマスが自分の正体を知らぬこと、彼に黒人の血が混じっているかもしれぬこと、彼自信のひどくゆがめられた人格などのために、彼は悲劇の人生を送らねばならなくなる。

ハイタワーの回想の中には、カルヴィニズムを信ずる長老教会の当時の状態に対するフォークナーの批判が感じられる。バーデンは黒人救済事業をやっているが、それは人間としての黒人に対する思いやりからではなく、ただ神の意志を実現しようとする義務感からである。バーデンの話からは、アメリカの南部におけるカルヴィニズムと人種差別の密接なつながりが明らかになる。フォークナーは以前にクリスマスの悲劇をあわれむ言葉を述べたことがある。このことから考えると、彼はカルヴィニズムや人種差別によっていかに人間の人格がゆがめられ、悲劇がひきおこされるかを描き、アメリカの南部における厳しいカルヴィニズムや激しい人種差別を批判しているように思われるのである。

Notes

- 1 O'Connor, William: *The Tangled Fire of William Faulkner*, 72–73, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis (1954)
- 2 Faulkner, William: *Light in August*, 362, Harrison Smith and Robert Haas (1932)
- 3 *Ibid.*, 360.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 119.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 354.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 119.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 355.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 190.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 264.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 117.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 112.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 144.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 158.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 135.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 140.
- 16 Backman, Melvin: *Faulkner: The Major Years. A Critical Study*, 72, Indiana University Press, Bloomington (1966)
- 17 Douglas, Harold J., and Robert Daniel: "Faulkner's Southern Puritanism," in *Religious Perspectives in Faulkner's Fiction: Yoknapatawpha and Beyond*, ed. J. Robert Barth, 39, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame (1972)
- 18 Faulkner, William: *Light in August*, 461.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 238.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 239.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 239.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 240.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 254.
- 24 Gwynn, Frederick L., and Joseph L. Blotner, eds.: *Faulkner in the University: Class Conferences at the University of Virginia, 1950–1958*, 72, University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville (1959)