

RESISTING SLAVERY AND RACIAL SEGREGATION IN LIGHT IN AUGUST AND BELOVED

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Abstract

Light in August (1932) and *Beloved* (1987) differ greatly when it comes to the presentation of the role of the American black community in resisting slavery and racial segregation with *Light in August*'s portrayal of this role as inaccessible, at least at the level of language, and *Beloved*'s presentation of this role as the main strategy of resistance. The two novels, however, share an important aspect of resistance to slavery and racial segregation, which is the enlisting of some white characters in this struggle. This article studies the presentation of these white characters in the struggle against segregation by analyzing the nature of their abolitionist ideologies, which sometimes proves to be quite problematic and even racist in its own way, versus the employment of ideological "innocence" as a more effective motive in combating racism and segregation. The abolitionist heritage in three families: the Hightowers and the Burdens in *Light in August* and the Bodwins in *Beloved* are juxtaposed with the example of innocence set by Amy Denver in her relationship to the runaway slave Sethe. This comparative study makes use of some elements of the theory of ideology in examining the different versions of abolitionism in these texts in light of the debates over slavery and racism.

Keywords: Slavery, Racial Segregation. *Light in August*, *Beloved*

I. William Faulkner's *Light in August* (1932) and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) share an unusual scene of a black woman in labour being helped by a white "midwife". In *Light in August* Gail Hightower's attempt to help deliver the child of an unnamed black woman

results in a still child. By contrasts, *Beloved* celebrates Amy Denver's help to the runaway slave Sethe. The cooperation between these two lawless women succeeds not only in delivering Sethe's baby, but also in naming her after this white girl, thus marking the continuity of the collaboration between these two women from two different races. This scene of birth is indicative of both authors' interest in the role of white people in the fight against slavery and racial segregation in America. The different conclusions of the scene in both texts suggest that the two authors do not approach this role in the same way.

Since the publication of *Beloved*, Morrison has often been paired or juxtaposed with Faulkner in the classroom, and comparative critical studies of Faulkner and Morrison have also proliferated (Ladd 146). *Beloved* and *Light in August* go to different extremes when it comes to the major issue of the presentation of the role of the African American community and African American women, in particular, in resisting slavery and racial segregation. While this role is absent, or presented as an absence in Faulkner's text, Morrison places the role of this community and its women at the centre of her narrative. Grasping the role of the African American community and its agency proves a very difficult endeavour in *Light in August*, especially at the level of language as the text hardly leaves a space for the language of the African Americans. Even when this language is there, it is presented in terms of foreignness or as sounds having no meaning as the several occasions of Joe Christmas's encounter with this language demonstrate. During his passage through Freedman Town, the black section of Jefferson, Christmas finds himself "surrounded by the summer smell and the summer voices of invisible negroes. They [seem] to enclose him like bodiless voices murmuring, talking, laughing, in a language not his" (LA 87).

Pairing the two texts in relation to the role of white characters in this area is, however, a good idea. Examining the role of abolitionist figures means focusing on abolitionist families because the family seems to be the more common form of abolitionist activism in both texts. We would like to expand the concept of the abolitionist to include Amy Denver even though she is not an abolitionist in the sense that her acts can be explained by an initiation into an ideology of abolitionism. Indeed, Amy's lack of an abolitionist ideology might be read as an advantage because such an ideology can prove to be very problematical as the discussion of the Burdens in *Light in August*, for example, will demonstrate.

Faulkner preferred a gradual solution to the race issue in the South. In 1956, when he felt that there was a possibility for enforcing social change by military intervention, he said in an interview: "If I have to choose between the United States government and Mississippi,

then I'll choose Mississippi... As long as there is a middle road, all right, I'll be on it. But if it came to fighting I'd fight for Mississippi against the United States even if it meant going out into the street and shooting Negroes." Faulkner, however, regretted saying this, and he explained that he was drunk when he gave the interview (*Lion* 260-1; 265). In "A Letter to the North," he wrote, addressing "the NAACP and all the organizations who would compel immediate and unconditional integration: 'Go slow now. Stop now for a time, a moment. You have the power now; you can afford to withhold for a moment the use of it as a force...'" (*Essays* 87). The tension between Faulkner's gradualist approach and the insistence by some abolitionists on a more immediate action to emancipate African Americans and end racial segregation shapes Faulkner's presentation of these abolitionist characters quite significantly. In *Light in August*, abolitionist activism can be explored by studying the Burdens, the main representatives of abolitionism in this text, and the Hightowers. In these two families, Faulkner presents two versions of abolitionism: the Burdens are presented as promoting a radical abolitionism associated with violence, fanaticism and the North. By contrast, the abolitionism of Gail Hightower's father is domestic and pacifistic. Indeed, Faulkner gives a "history", selective as it is, to these two families because of their abolitionism. Interest in familial history goes against the grain in *Light in August*, which invests heavily in uncertainty and discontinuity. The parentage of Joe Christmas is the main, but not the only, example of this absence of familial history in this text which abounds with characters without families, histories, and sometimes even names.

Abolitionism shapes the history of the Burdens and accounts for their movement from one place to another. Calvin Burden, Joanna's grandfather, is presented with uncompromising views against slavery and "frog-eating slaveholders," as he calls them (*LA* 182). He moves from Saint Louis to Kanas after killing a man in an argument over slavery. During the Civil War he fights in a partisan guerrilla and loses one arm. Abolitionism also accounts for the difficult relationship of this family to white people in the South where they came during the Reconstruction with a commission from the government in Washington "to help with the freed negros" (*LA* 189). Gregory Meyerson and Jim Neilson rightly explain the problematical presentation of Joanna Burden's character by her political activism which contrasts with Faulkner's gradualist approach: "she represents the threat and fear of political intervention

that obsessed dominant opinion in Faulkner South” (30).¹ We find this problematical presentation true of other members of the Burden family, too. The Burdens’ abolitionism is presented as political and religious fanaticism. Calvin Burden demonstrates an uncompromising intolerance towards Catholics. He moves west to “to get away from Democrats” (*LA* 182). He sends his son a message stating “if he lets them yellowbellied priests bamboozle him, I’ll shoot him myself quick as I would a Reb” (*LA* 184). His son Nathaniel lives with the mother of his child until their son is about twelve without marriage because he does not tolerate Catholic priests. Calvin’s speeches about slavery are almost always confrontational, and one of them leads, as we have already mentioned, to killing a man in Saint Louis. In the South, both Calvin and his grandson are killed by the slaveholder John Sartoris while they are helping black people get to the ballot box. The last Burden in the South, Joanna, is beheaded by Joe Christmas, whom she tries to shoot for refusing her command to kneel down with her in prayer.

This is a very violent history. When this violence is examined closely, however, it will be found that part of this violence is perpetrated by white Southerners against the Burdens. Even when Southerners act violently against abolitionists, the text seems to suggest that the Burdens’ fanatic abolitionism is always to blame. Actually, the condemnation of the abolitionism of the Burdens seems to come, at least partially, from the Burdens themselves. In her explanation of why her father did not kill Sartoris, Joanna comes very close to justifying Sartoris’s act and laying the blame on her brother and grandfather. “It was all over then. The killing in uniform and with flags, and the killing without uniforms and flags. And none of it doing or did any good. None of it. And we were foreigners, strangers, that thought differently from the people whose country we had come into without being asked or wanted” (*LA* 192). Joanna is not only made to internalize secessionist sentiments by referring to the South as a different country, but also racist ideas as she explains her father’s act by his French blood. “And he was French, half of him. Enough French to respect anybody’s love for the land where he and his people were born and to understand that a man would have to act as the land where he was born had trained him to act” (*LA* 192). This reference to the superiority and the rationality of the white French blood is rendered more racist as it is contrasted to

¹ Part of the attack on abolitionists involved associating them with twentieth-century liberals who were accused of communism. For a discussion on the link between abolitionists and liberals see: Gregory Meyerson and Jim Neilson (31), and James Berger (816-7).

assumed “negro” blood of Joe Christmas, who maintains that he would kill Sartoris in revenge if he were in Nathaniel Burden’s shoes.

The killing of the Burdens is presented in *Light in August* by focusing on the Burdens. By contrast, the presentation of this act in *The Unvanquished* (1938) focuses on the killing of Sartoris by his rival in election. When the abolitionism of the Burdens is not the central point of the discussion, Sartoris is presented as a violent man. It is actually he and Drusilla Hawk who steal the ballot box. His shooting of the Burdens and his provocation of his rival are presented as instances of his own violence. *The Unvanquished*, which advocates the rule of law and celebrates the pacifism of Bayard Sartoris, associates violence with John Sartoris and, indirectly, presents the Burdens as victims of his violence.

The presentation of the Burdens is problematical also in relation to the way they discuss and communicate their own abolitionism. The basic principles of the Burdens’ abolitionism are its anti-slavery stance and the commitment of the Burdens to help slaves. These basic principles are hardly emphasized, however. Instead, the emphasis is on the fanaticism of the Burdens. Instead of highlighting the humanity of the slaves and their suffering because of the “queer” system of slavery, the Burden are presented as in engaging in hating and fighting slaveholders. Practising abolitionism through hatred and provocation is, of course, not the best way to proceed with this kind of activism. While abolitionists relied heavily on religious and humanitarian arguments to change public opinion about slavery, Calvin Burden engages in “arguments” over slavery rather than in debates or discussions. He makes angry speeches, sometimes when he is drunk. At the occasion of his son’s wedding, Calvin dares, in a drunken speech, “any man there to deny that Lincoln and the negro and Moses and the children of Israel were the same, and that the Red Sea was just the blood that had to be spilled in order that the black race might cross into the Promised Land” (*LA* 189). The comic nature of this challenge undermines Calvin’s serious commitment to abolitionism. And even though the reference to blood is presented in this comic context, it is a warning to the dangers of Calvin’s version of abolitionism. Calvin’s abolitionist ideas are always associated with some form of violence and fanaticism. His conversations about abolitionism often take the form of looking for objections and challenging others about the validity of his opinions. Instructing his son about abolitionism takes the form of waking him and saying: “I will learn you to hate two things ... or I’ll frail the tar out of you. And those things are hell and slaveholders” (*LA* 182-3).

If the Burdens are committed to emancipating slaves, then what is their attitude towards racism? This is the most disturbing part of the Burdens' abolitionism. We suggest that this abolitionism, when read in light of the debates over slavery, can be read as a racist rather than an abolitionist ideology. The racist components of this abolitionism are very difficult to overlook; they are clearly expressed by Calvin Burden. His son Nathaniel, in turn, instructs these ideas to his daughter Joanna. When Nathaniel Burden comes home with his wife and son Calvin after running away for sixteen years, Calvin Burden looks at his grandson and attributes "his black dam and his black look" to his mother whom he takes to be partly black. His comment goes on as follows: "Damn, lowbuilt black folks: low built because of the weight of the wrath of God, black because of the sin of human bondage staining their blood and flesh. ... But we done freed them now, both black and white alike. They'll bleach out now. In a hundred years they will be white folks again. Then maybe we'll let them come back into America" (LA 186). Explaining that black people have weak bodies because of their suffering during slavery might be understandable. The weight of the wrath of God is hardly an abolitionist argument. Indeed, it was used as a proslavery argument to justify keeping black people in the places where God has placed them. This reference to God's wrath or curse is not a passing reference. Nathaniel Burden repeats this concept to his daughter Joanna in the only conversation she remembers having with him: "[t]he 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" (LA 191).

Talking about black people bleaching out and becoming white in a hundred years means rejecting them as long as they are black, and accepting them when they become white. This position is adopted by gradualists such as Ike McCaslin who thinks that "*a thousand or two thousand years*" are needed for accepting black people in the America (*Go Down, Moses* 346). Faulkner himself notoriously commented that "the tragedy of the negro may be that so far he is competent for equality only in the ratio of his white blood" (Gwynn and Blotner 210) When Faulkner was once asked to specify a period for making the desired change, he talked about three hundred years (Gray 39).

Describing black people as white people's burden and their own shadows is another racist argument. Nathaniel expresses this in categorical terms. When his frightened daughter Joanna asks whether there is a chance for escaping this burden, he confirms that there is not. "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. ... But escape it you cannot" (LA 191). According to this, black

people can not rise; they always have to depend on white people. Nathaniel's claim that white people can never raise the shadow to their level raises questions about the effectiveness of helping black people in the first place. It suggests that this condition of a burdened white man and a depending black one will go on forever. The only solution according to this ideology can be seen in black people "bleaching" out, as Calvin Burden clearly states.

Joanna explains the way her attitude towards black people is influenced by this ideology when she talks to Joe Christmas in the cabin she gives to him to live in: "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" (*LA* 190). This ideology dehumanizes black people, and prevents Joanna from interacting with them as ordinary people. It has a suffocating effect giving her dreams and a burden in the form of having to lift a heavy cross. It is no wonder that this ideology will have a destructive effect on her relationship to Christmas whom she takes to be a black man.

This abolitionism would surprise Southerners, even the racists among them, if they came to know about it. When Byron Bunch explains to Lena Grove the ostracizing of Joanna and her people by the white community in Jefferson, he conveys Southerners' general understanding of and prejudices against abolitionism. Bunch informs Lena that Joanna and her people claim "that niggers are the same as white folks" (*LA* 42). To white supremacists, this is the most threatening premise of abolitionism. But as we have seen the Burdens' view of black people as shadows hardly means that they embrace the belief in the equality of black people to white people. Joanna's interaction with black people is read as being mixed up in queer relationships with them in and outside the town. Anti-abolitionist arguments suggested that abolitionists' motive for interacting with black people was miscegenation. In 1829 James K. Paulding argued that the white race was threatened by "mad brained" fanatical abolitionists, "traitors to the white skin," whose true goal was miscegenation (cited in Saxton 152). Joanna's relationship to Joe Christmas remains unknown to the white community in Jefferson until Joe Brown informs them that Christmas has not only killed Joanna but has also lived with her for three years. When Brown makes the final revelation that Christmas is partly black, the town rushes to choose between two possible readings of this relationship: a desire for miscegenation on the part of an abolitionist woman, and a rape by a "black beast." With Joanna dead and with their need to justify lynching Christmas, they choose the second reading. Focusing on the "black beast," Joanna's supposed miscegenation desire is forgotten

and Joanna is depicted as a victim of a black rapist. We are told that the people who crowded around Joanna's corpse "believed aloud that it was an anonymous negro crime committed not by a negro but by Negro" and that they "knew, believed, and hoped that she had been ravished too: at least once before her throat was cut and at least once afterward" (*LA* 216). We can, however, hear echoes of the first reading in the words of Percy Grimm, who accuses both Hightower and Joanna of taking "their pants down" to Christmas (*LA* 349).

Faulkner's presentation of this relationship from the inside is also as problematical as the abolitionism of the Burdens. It can be read as a confirmation of some of the racist and anti-abolitionist arguments. The most obvious of these arguments is the miscegenation desire on the part of abolitionists. While the presentation of the sexual relationship between Joanna and Joe Christmas has the virtue of presenting Joe against the stereotypes of black sexuality (Davis 139), its depiction of Joanna's role in this relationship seems to strongly support the claim that Joanna is motivated by such a desire. "She would be wild then, in the close, breathing halfdark without walls, with her wild hair, each strand of which would seem to come alive like octopus tentacles, and her wild hands and her breathing: 'Negro! Negro! Negro!'" (*LA* 195). It is possible to read Joanna's role in this relationship as a conscious attempt on Joanna's part to undermine segregation by crossing the racial borders and trying to marry a black man and have a family with him. This positive reading is undermined, however, by emphasizing the sexual nature of this relationship. Furthermore, this relationship is presented as a sterile one. Christmas clearly wants a pure sexual relationship, and Joanna's desire to have "a bastard negro child" is rendered impossible because of her own menopause or sterility.

Joanna's plan for Christmas not to waste his life can be read as an implementation of the Burden's problematic "abolitionist" ideology. What Joanna is doing in this plan is trying to lift the cross, Joe, but since the shadow can never rise to her level, then Christmas must remain in his role as a black man and be guided by her. Actually, Joanna's relationship to Christmas can be read according to the master-slave paradigm, even though neither she nor Christmas lived during slavery. Although this reading contradicts Joanna's refusal to hire cooks because they have to be black, residues of slavery in this relationship can be seen in the way Christmas is allowed to live in the cabin below Joanna's house. The relative positions of Joanna and Christmas as master and slave acquire strength in the way Christmas is excluded from the house proper. He observes that Joanna never invites him to the house. This is also seen in the way he is made to eat his food alone in the kitchen. Joanna's insistence on putting

Christmas in his “slave” position in the kitchen and the cabin might be blindness on her part, but Christmas does not miss the similarities between him and slaves. He rebels by throwing food, repeating that it is “[s]et out for the nigger. For the nigger” (LA 179).

The sexual relationship between Christmas and Joanna might initially block such a reading as male slaves did not have access to the bodies of their mistresses, though some cases existed.² Christmas’s defeat by the “masculinity” of Joanna and the way he reads his role in this relationship in feminine terms makes this reading possible. “My God,” he thinks, “it was like I was the woman and she was the man” (LA 177). This reversal of gender roles makes it possible to read Christmas as a female slave whose body is readily available for the consumption of the white “master” Joanna.

If the Burdens’ abolitionist ideology is problematical and even to some extent racist, and if Joanna’s relationship to Christmas offers no other than a confirmation of her commitment to this ideology, then what about Joanna’s abolitionist activism with the black community, or communities outside Jefferson. This dimension of the presentation of Joanna’s character might actually reveal something about the real Joanna and her family. The scope of Joanna’s activism is impressive. Christmas has a glimpse of Joanna at work.

And it was a year after he had remarked without curiosity the volume of mail which she received and sent, and that for a certain period of each forenoon she would sit at the worn, scarred, rolltop desk in one of the scarceused and sparsely furnished downstairs rooms, writing steadily, before he learned that what she received were business and private documents with fifty different postmarks and what she sent were replies—advice, business, financial and religious, to the presidents and faculties and trustees, and advice personal and practical to young girl students and even alumnae, of a dozen negro schools and colleges through the south. (LA 175)

As we see, Joanna’s activism is undermined in the way it is rendered invisible to almost all white people, whose perspective matters in *Light in August*. Joanna’s activities are made known only to Christmas who remarks the volume of her mail without curiosity. His lack of curiosity suggests that his response to these activities is similar to his response to Joanna’s plan: they are mad, in other words. Furthermore, we know the volume and the

² In his study of miscegenation, Eugene D. Genovese mentions that even during slavery white women abhorred miscegenation between their men and black women and often responded with frustration. He goes on to add that some avenged themselves by having black lovers secretly, and thus it was impossible to estimate their numbers (422.)

ubiquity of Joanna's activism, but we are not told about the effectiveness of this activism among black people because black voice does not have a space in this text. The text, which leaves the reader with Christmas's response, encourages reading Joanna's activism as part of the Burdens' fanaticism and violence.

If we put Christmas's response aside, then we can deduce that the communication Joanna maintains with black communities in the South says a great deal about her and indeed presents her in a different way. First of all, it emphasizes the humanitarian nature of her interaction with black people and their trust in her. Rumours of possible sexual relationships for Joanna with black people in and outside Jefferson are circulated among the white community, but the text limits Joanna's sexual relationship to Joe Christmas. Joanna is interacting with students and teachers in black schools and colleges. Even though we are not given a chance to hear or read the way they respond to Joanna's activism, we can deduce that they take her seriously and they have enough faith in her. Both institutions and individuals seek her advice. Joanna's relationship is not limited to men; rather she interacts with both sexes and with all age groups in these schools and colleges.

Presenting Joanna's activism from the perspective of Christmas is similar to presenting the activism of Linda Snopes Kohl from the perspective of white male narrators in *The Mansion*. Linda is presented as a more radical woman promoting the integration of white and coloured schools. *The Mansion* gives a glimpse of black people's response to Linda's activism suggesting that black people find in Linda a nuisance. They do not believe in what she is doing, but they have to talk to her because she is white. Linda's radicalism is emphasized as her relationship to communism is formally established: she has a member of the Communist Party. Joanna's is not a formal communist, but as we have seen Meyerson and Neilson rightly suggested that Faulkner is presenting her an overt communist and a radical woman.

The second version of abolitionism in *Light in August* is represented in the figure of Gail Hightower's father. Indeed, he is the only abolitionist member of his family, and his abolitionism shapes the relationships among the members of this family, especially the males; females are largely absent. This influence is not in the way abolitionism shapes the Burdens' relationships to other people, but in the way this man's father and son interact with him and with each other. Gail Hightower realizes close to the end of the text, and maybe his life, that he has lived as an extension of the dead figure of his grandfather. His obsession with his grandfather has largely to do with the heroic stories the family's ex-slave narrates and creates

to him about his grandfather. His abolitionist father lacks these heroic traits because he does not fight in the Civil War as a combatant. His pacifist role in the war does not impress his son and actually the father hardly exists for his son. Even though Gail Hightower inherits the medical profession that his father learned on the bodies of friends and enemies during the war, he does not consider his father's pacifist or abolitionist convictions worth taking. His sermons are full of battles and galloping horses, and he hires both male and female cooks, which is considered, at least by Joanna Burden, as an extension of slavery.

The abolitionism of Hightower's father contrasts significantly with that of the Burdens. It is presented as a home-grown abolitionism and thus it seems less threatening. We are told that 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" (*LA* 355). Distancing this abolitionism from northern influence allows the relationship between this abolitionist man and his slaveholding father to continue without mentionable disagreements. Actually, we never hear the son extend his abolitionism to speech. He never objects to his father for holding slaves, and he never tries to enlighten slaves about freedom. He preaches in a church in the hills, but it is unlikely that he is preaching abolitionism. If he preaches abolitionism, then it must be to an abolitionist community in the hills and in a secretive manner. This might be explained by his silence about his weekly travels to this community which the father comes to know about only a year later. His preaching to soldiers during the Civil War is definitely not about abolitionism. Actually, the abolitionism of this man is summed up in the following: "he would neither eat food grown and cooked by, nor sleep in a bed prepared by, a negro slave" (*LA* 351). This is an aspect of abolitionism which Hightower's father shares with the Burdens. As we see there is no reason for slaveholders to worry about an abolitionism that does not go beyond abstention. This is one of several abstentions that this man considers as personal convictions which he does not even discuss with others: he does not fight, does not drink and does not own slaves.

What is the basis for this abolitionism? We never hear Hightower's father explaining or defending his abolitionism. His silence accounts for his being accepted by the white community and by the confederate army. When Gail Hightower reflects on the motive of his father's abolitionism, he dismisses "sanctity" as an explanation and provides a different one. He confirms that "[i]t was some throwback to the austere and not dim times not so long

passed, when a man in that country had little of himself to waste and little time to do it in, and had to guard and protect that little not only from nature but from man too, by means of a sheer fortitude” (LA 355). This is exactly the same explanation that is given for the pacifism and the abolitionism of Mr Coldfield in *Absalom, Absalom!* Mr Compson, the son of a leading figure in the war, is not sympathetic with Coldfield’s pacifism. He explains to his son Quentin that Coldfield’s opposition to war was an opposition to the idea of waste: “of wearing out and eating up and shooting away material in any cause whatever (*Absalom, Absalom!* 83). It is needless to say that leaving the justification of abolitionism to anti-abolitionists will present abolitionism in negative way.

Dismissing the basic abolitionist premise that people are born equal and that slavery is evil is very important for disarming this abolitionism. We can add that this pacifism is made more agreeable to Southerners because Hightower’s father joins the Civil War, not on the side of the abolitionists as Calvin Burden does, but on the side of slaveholders. Rendering him completely harmless demands dividing him into two “separate and complete people, one of whom dwelled by serene rules in a world where reality did not exist. But the other part of him, which lived in the actual world, did as well as any and better than most” (355-6). So, disarming this abolitionism means that the dangerous part of this man’s character which involves practising abolitionism in any form other than not eating food grown or cooked by, or sleeping in a bed prepared by, a negro slaved is completely suppressed.

The return of Old Cinthy to live with Gail Hightower’s father can be used to support the anti-abolitionist argument. This man refuses slavery only to come with an anachronistic slavery: he becomes a slaveholder after slavery is abolished. This anachronistic slavery embodies some of the apologies which the proslavery debate has presented to defend slavery. Old Cinthy seems to replace the white women in this family and the reason for this is that she is an anti-abolitionist. She and her “husband” Pomp take their slavery as a source of pride. Unlike Sartoris’s or Sutpen’s slaves, who join the Yankees during the war, Pomp goes to war to follow his master. It is even rumoured that he is killed while quarrelling with the Yankees in search for his master. We are presented here with an example of voluntary slavery, adopted by the freed slave because she finds it better than freedom. Old Cinthy is exchanging her freedom for shelter and protection. While she could be employed as a servant and be paid for her work, the text emphasises that she does not see a point in being free. She replies to Hightower’s father who informs her that she has been freed: “Free? Whut’s freedom done except git Marse Gail killed and made a bigger fool outen Pawmp den even de Lawd Hissself

could do? Free? Don't talk ter me erbout freedom" (LA 358). Making slaves, and more particularly freed slaves, denounce abolitionism and freedom is supposed to render the anti-abolitionist argument more forceful.³ Black language is not given a space in *Light in August*, but when their expression of what is good to them serves the anti-abolitionism debate, they are given the chance to express their opinions. It is quite easy to contrast this figure to Baby Sugges who presents an entirely different attitude towards freedom, despite the fact that she is disabled and she has to work in order to support herself. Baby echoes Old Cinthy's question about the value of freedom? "What does a sixty-odd-year-old slavewoman who walks like a three-legged dog need freedom for?" Baby's answer, however, is quite different. We are told that "when she stepped foot on free ground she could not believe that Halle knew what she didn't; that Halle, who had never drawn one free breath, knew that there was nothing like it in this world" (*Beloved* 166). Baby's differentiation between freedom and slavery amounts to the difference between life and death. For the first time in her life, she feels alive with a beating heart and hands that belong to her.

Enumerating the things that mark Hightower's distance "from the ideal of bourgeois middle-class Northern/Western whiteness," Alfred J. López reads Gail Hightower as an abolitionist figure (76). Hightower himself is not an abolitionist but the death of his wife and the rumours it causes make some members of the white community, and the members of KKK in particular, read Hightower's relationship to his black cooks in the same way they read the relationships between white abolitionists and black people. This reading confirms the miscegenation desire on the part of abolitionists, of course. The rumours of a sexual relationship between Hightower and his black female cook who is referred to as "a high brown" acquire strength among the white community to the extent that the KKK forces the cook to quit her job and scares the other black women in town. The sexual dimension is made even clearer when Hightower hires a black male cook. This time he is asked to leave the town and he is beaten by the members of the KKK. His willingness to provide an alibi for Christmas is read immediately in these terms by Percy Grim. "Jesus Christ!" Grimm cries.

³ *The Southern Quarterly Review* of 1845 repeated Calhoun's and Upshur's point by arguing that the Southern slave "is sure of employment, and therefore sure of subsistence. He never wanders about in pursuit of work. He has a fixed home, certain support, food, clothing, help when sick" (cited in Grant 88).

“Has every preacher and old maid in Jefferson taken their pants down to the yellowbellied son of a bitch?” (*LA* 349).⁴

When Byron Bunch tries to help Christmas, he crosses the colour line because he does so after the blackness of Christmas has been “established” on the basis of Joe Brown’s claim that Christmas is partly black.⁵ Bunch does this secretly and the town never comes to know about his suggestions to Hightower to provide an alibi to Christmas. Had the white community known of this suggestion, they would have treated Bunch in the same way Hightower has been treated. Bunch’s celibate status would have definitely encouraged reading his initiative as a miscegenation desire on his part. Meyerson and Neilson suggest that Lena and Bunch are presented as the best whites, the opposite of Christmas and Joanna in relation to fertility and good citizenship (13). Indeed, this reading is only possible by undermining Bunch’s role in trying to help Christmas. Emphasizing this role would associate Bunch with abolitionism and consequently with homosexuality and miscegenation. Instead of associating Bunch with Lena’s fertility, Bunch would then be associated with Hightower’s sterility and death, which is embodied in his help to the black woman in labour.

Toni Morrison places black people and black women, in particular, at the centre of her narrative in *Beloved*. In this text, the major part in fighting slavery and division between the white and the black communities is played by black people. Yet, Morrison uses in this fight all possible devices. Nicole M. Coonradt rightly observes that in order to remedy, “this deep divide that American culture has excavated, Morrison realizes she can do so only by enlisting the help of the ‘in power’ white community that originally created and condoned, or ignored, the problem” (180). Thus, Morrison enlists some white people, the abolitionists, in this fight. The Bodwin siblings Edward and his sister are essential for the discussion of abolitionism in *Beloved*. Indeed, they are the only “formal” white abolitionists to speak of in the text. We know that they are members in an abolitionist society, but they are the only white members that we know from this Society. Mr Garner presents himself as a different kind of a slaveholder and, indeed, he is, but he is not an abolitionist in the full sense of the word. Baby Suggs reflects on his brand of slavery and finds that it is different from she has seen so far:

⁴ López suggests that Hightower “spends his life concealing his homosexuality from his wife, his congregation and fellow townspeople, and even from himself” (76). The rumours about Hightower's possible sexual relationships with black men and women are not based on any evidence.

⁵ Christmas’s blackness remains, of course, the central uncertainty in *Light in August*.

The Garners, it seemed to her, ran a special kind of slavery, treating them like paid labor, listening to what they said, teaching what they wanted known. And he didn't stud his boys. Never brought them to her cabin with directions to "lay down with her," like they did in Carolina, or rented their sex out on other farms. It surprised and pleased her, but worried her too. (*Beloved* 165)

Baby's fear echoes the fears of the neighbouring slaveholders who definitely find Garner's behaviour dangerous. Garner is to some extent similar to the McCaslin brothers in Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*. He allows Halle to buy his mother Baby and thus contributes to the freedom of one person, but he gets paid for that. He is on very good terms with the abolitionist Bodwins, and he even refers to them as angels. He tries to defend his brand of slavery by asking Baby about how well she is treated on his plantation. Baby answers positively to all of his questions, but does not declare her ideas which condemn his brand of slavery for breaking her and her son as a price for her freedom. Even though Garner is not an abolitionist, his "good" treatment of his slaves makes them see the difference between him and Schoolteacher and encourages them to plan their escape from Sweet Home, the ironically named plantation.

The Bodwins do not hold with slavery, even Garner's kind. The way Morrison presents them differs significantly from the way Faulkner presents his abolitionists. Indeed, the similarities are very few. The Bodwin father is described as fanatic, but his fanaticism differs from that of Calvin Bodwin because it is not linked to violence. He is described as "a deeply religious man who knew what God knew and told everybody what it was" (*Beloved* 307). There is no possibility of confusing this abolitionism with racism except in the confusion of Sethe, who takes Mr Bodwin to be Schoolteacher.⁶ This confusion, however, serves to highlight the difference between the two. Indeed, Sethe comments on this difference when she hopes "[t]hat for every schoolteacher there would be an Amy; that for every pupil there was a Garner, or Bodwin, or even a sheriff" (*Beloved* 222).

The abolitionist philosophy of the Bodwins derives from their father's single clear directive: "human life is holy, all of it" (*Beloved* 307). This solid basis for political activism, which is the proper rationale of abolitionist organizations, is not used by any of the abolitionist figures in Faulkner's text. The Bodwins engage in political activism as a family,

⁶ Mae G. Henderson reads Sethe's attack on Bodwin as part of a healing process in the sense that it revises the scene of the infanticide (81).

father and children, but they work within a larger framework, the Society. This renders their work more rational and objective and thus it differs from the activism of the Burdens which is presented as the whims and the violence of a single man and his family. Mr Bodwin remembers a variety of activities demonstrating the rationality of the Society and its activism: nothing in his life was as “stimulating as the old days of letters, petitions, meetings, debates, recruitment, quarrels, rescue and downright sedition” (*Beloved* 307). The “quarrels, rescue and downright sedition” serve to demonstrate the depth of the Bodwins’ commitment to the cause rather than their violence. Their various activities remind us of Joanna’s letters with the difference that the Bodwins’ activities are recalled by Edward Bodwin who values such activities and regards the period of his activism as the heady time of his life.

The Bodwins achieve substantial results: “[y]et it had worked, more or less, and when it had not, he [Mr Bodwin] and his sister made themselves available to circumvent obstacles” (*Beloved* 307). Bodwin remembers helping Sethe as an example of the Society’s success: “[t]he Society managed to turn infanticide and the cry of savagery around, and build a further case for abolishing slavery” (*Beloved* 307). Faulkner’s text suggests that its abolitionists hardly achieve anything. Indeed, it goes on to highlight the tragic consequences of their “dangerous” abolitionism in the form of people killing the Burdens or being killed by them. The failure of abolitionism in *Light in August* has largely to do with the way abolitionists are presented in this text. Joanna comes to the cabin to talk to Christmas about their relationship but when she starts to narrate the abolitionist history of her family, her voice is suddenly replaced with that of the omniscient narrator. This voice which relates this history from the perspective of white southerners associates this abolitionism with violence, fanaticism and ultimately with failure. Morrison, by contrast, approaches the abolitionist history of the Bodwins through the perspective of Mr Bodwin. It is through his memories that we come to know about the history of his family and its political activism. Thus, abolitionism is presented in a positive way. In this presentation, violence is associated with white racists, rather than with abolitionists. The Bodwins never initiate violence rather they are the victims of violence. Mr Bodwin’s enemies used to call him the “bleached nigger.” We are also told that on “a trip to Arkansas, some Mississippi rivermen, enraged by the Negro boatmen they competed with, had caught him and shoe-blackened his face and his hair” (*Beloved* 306).

Mr Bodwin is a pacifist and his pacifism is not negative like that of Hightower’s father. Bodwin’s pacifism is based on the clear directive that human life is holy. Denver suggests that Miss Bodwin has a positive attitude towards the war. She remembers that Miss

Bodwin looked happy when she was talking of “a war full of dead people” (*Beloved* 34). The context of Miss Bodwin’s talk which is a visit to Baby Suggs suggests that Miss Bodwin associates war with abolitionism. She is optimistic about abolishing slavery, rather than feeling happy about violence. There is a comment on the Bodwins, and it comes from the black people who appreciate what the Bodwins have done to help them. Stamp Paid suggests that Bodwin has probably decided to ignore the fact that Sethe, in her confusion, was trying to attack him: “[t]hat be just like him, too. He’s somebody never turned us down. Steady as a rock” (*Beloved* 312). We have already referred to the absence of black people’s response to Joanna’s activism, which leaves us the negative response of Christmas and the white community to her activism.

The Bodwins are not received well by critics and the main reason for this is the statue that Denver sees sitting on a shelf by their back door. This statue takes the shape of “a blackboy’s mouth full of money. His head was thrown back farther than a head could go, his hands were shoved in his pockets. Bulging like moons, two eyes were all the face he had above the gaping red mouth. ... Painted across the pedestal he knelt on were the words “At Yo Service” (*Beloved* 300). The text does not give us a response to the statue by Denver, who sees the statue for the first time, or by Janey, who has been working for the Bodwins for more than twenty years. Furthermore, the statue never initiates any discussion among the black characters in *Beloved*, but it receives a lot of attention by critics who seem to agree that it is a black spot in the abolitionism of the Bodwins.

According to Arlene R. Keizer the “statue embodies nineteenth-century white Americans’ hatred of and fetishistic attachment to the black body” (109). Barbara Christian considers the statue a portent of the future (46). Coonradt argues that the statue resembles the figure of a lynched man, and goes on to argue that the “abuse of blacks and the link to the capitalist underpinnings of slavery as whites profited from the sale of black human flesh remain present. Among these white characters, only Amy Denver falls outside the realm of racism” (179). Coonradt is certainly right about Amy Denver, but it is very hard to prove that the Bodwins are benefiting from the slave trade. James Burger considers the statue “the most prominent evidence for regarding Bodwin as racist.” He goes on to maintain while “Bodwin despises slavery, he still regards blacks as subservient and has, apparently, no comprehension of African American culture apart from stereotypes” (416.)

We have quoted these opinions to show the impact of the statue on critics’ evaluations of the Bodwins. Indeed, the statue might be a blindness of the part of the Bodwins, but even

if is so then it goes against their basic belief in the holiness of human life and the fact that they have devoted all their lives to combating slavery and segregation. Mr Bodwin is aware of the negative associations racist people link to the black body as he himself has been referred to as a “bleached nigger.” Taking the career of the Bodwins into consideration, we feel encouraged to present a different reading of the statue. Robin Blackburn’s suggests that the seeming belittlement of the slave may be read as an expression of solidarity between slaves and abolitionists. “The African was portrayed, in what seem patronizing terms, as a man on his knees; but many abolitionists also felt themselves outcasts and supplicants, laboring under civic or religious disabilities” (141). Kerry Sinanan reads the carefully obsequious note in the letters of the Sons of Africa in this way and finds that this note is epitomized by the Wedgwood antislavery icon of the slave on bended knee (64).⁷ We suggest that the statue is an expression of the Bodwins’ solidarity with slaves, rather than a sign of their racism. They believe that all human life is holy, and their insistence on “all of it” includes the lives of slaves.

Mr Bodwin and his sister are bachelors, and this might initially suggest that Morrison is also associating her abolitionists, like those of Faulkner’s, with sterility. There is indeed no explanation for the siblings’ bachelorhood. They become, however, associated with life when they help Sethe and her child Denver. The job they give to Denver close to the end of the text takes the form of adopting Denver. Reading the employment as a form of adoption is credible because Denver becomes alone, as her mother can no longer take care of her. Actually, Sethe depends on Denver’s care.

In contrast to Hightower’s fatal help to a black woman in labour, Amy Denver, the indentured white girl, succeeds in delivering the baby of the runaway slave Sethe. Furthermore, Amy gives her name to the new-born child, thus marking a continuous, healthy relationship with this girl and her mother. Amy’s association with life is indicated by Sethe even before she gives birth to Denver. “It was the voice full of velvet and Boston and good things to eat that urged her along and made her think that maybe she wasn’t, after all, just a crawling graveyard for a six-month baby’s last hours” (*Beloved* 41-2). Even though Amy meets Sethe for a few hours and she enters the narrative as a memory of the past, references to her never stop and she is repeatedly described as the white girl who helped, or the girl with

⁷ The following is an example of this obsequious note in these letters: "we trust that we and our whole race shall endeavor to merit, by dutiful behavior, those mercies, which human and benevolent minds seem to prepare us for" (Cited in Sinanan 64).

good hands, etc. In this book of memories, Amy is a memory which belongs to Sethe, but it soon becomes Denver's dear memory and an essential part of the story of her coming into this world. Marianne Hirsch rightly reads Amy as a father figure to Denver (100). For Denver, Amy's memory replaces the memory of Halle, the father that she never sees.

Amy becomes a memory shared by all those in 124 Bluestone Road, including Paul D, the last to know about Amy. As Amy helps bring Denver into this world, Denver gets into a narrative union with Beloved to bring Amy into the narrative. This narrative union is evocative of the doubling scene in *Absalom, Absalom!* when Quentin Compson and Shreve McCannon try to reconstruct the relationship between Henry Sutpen and Charles Bon. It is even possible to speak of a possible doubling between Denver and Sethe, not as she is with them now, but during her encounter with Amy. Beloved shows a great interest in the story and it is her curiosity and questions that motivate Denver not only to narrate what she has been told by her mother and grandmother, but also to see and feel the scene she is trying to recreate.

Actually this scene stands out among the many scenes of rememories. It differs from other scenes as a scene victory, freedom, life and birth. This happy scene is possible to reconstruct without interruption, which shapes recalling the many painful scenes in *Beloved*. The duet of Denver and Beloved is soon followed by the voice of Sethe "because she alone had the mind for it and the time afterward to shape it: the quality of Amy's voice, her breath like burning wood. ... How recklessly she behaved with this whitegirl—a recklessness born of desperation and encouraged by Amy's fugitive eyes and her tenderhearted mouth" (*Beloved* 92). Coonradt argues that in *Beloved*, Morrison attempts "to force the reader to rethink the traditional slave narrative, partly by including the 'enslaved' white woman, Amy, in her tale" (170). We would like to study the character of Amy as a modification of the traditional abolitionist character that readers encounter in this narrative in the form of the Bodwins. If Amy does not have any ideological initiation into abolitionism, then what is her relationship to the dominant ideology of the white people? Her encounter with Sethe demonstrates that Amy adopts the white ideology, at least in her speech. It is very easy to read in her words the prejudice of poor whites against slaves. She says to Sethe: "I don't want to see your ugly black face hankering over me. If you do die, just go on off somewhere where I can't see you, hear?" (*Beloved* 97). She also says: "You the dumbest thing on this here earth" (*Beloved* 98). But Amy's prejudice does not exceed her speech. Sethe observes that Amy "talked like a storm, but there wasn't no meanness around her mouth" (*Beloved* 90).

This realistic encounter between Amy and Sethe is obviously more honest and effective in combating racism than the activities of many of the white people who use a very polite language with black people. The intimacy in this encounter contrasts sharply with visits by white people to 124. Denver remembers these white people's "sympathetic voices called liar by the revulsion in their eyes" (*Beloved* 14). There is no revulsion in Amy's eyes. Her "fugitive" eyes make Sethe feel that Amy is communicating solidarity rather than revulsion. Michel Pêcheux, who explains that the speaking subject effects an identification with the discursive formation, which dominates it, leaves open the possibility of a "disidentification" with such formations, which is one condition of political transformation (cited in Eagleton 196). Amy is obviously "disidentifying" with the ideological and discursive formations of the white community which make up texture of her language. It is quite understandable that she is still using the vocabulary of the white community because she does not have another vocabulary. Amy is a very important force to reckon with in the study of social change in this text. As a modification or an addition to the traditional character of the abolitionist, she should not be studied as an isolated example. Morrison is presenting the encounter between Sethe and Amy as an experiment in the coalition between these two disadvantaged women in particular and disadvantaged people in general. The motive to cooperation in this case is humanitarian, but this unity is also produced by the two women's suffering and marginality. As Marianne Hirsch argues, the interaction of Sethe and Amy represents "the collaboration of a white woman and a black woman, united by their gender, their poverty, their subordinate social status, and by their stories of cruel masters, absent mothers, unknown fathers—yet forever separated by the absolute reality of slavery" (100). This relationship emphasizes physical closeness as Amy rubs Sethe's feet. This dimension is absent in the traditional abolitionist-slave relationships. In addition to its obvious Christian significance, rubbing Sethe's feet is a powerful instance of undermining the divisions between the two racial groups. This touch reminds us of Rosa Coldfield's refusal of Clytie Sutpen's touch in *Absalom, Absalom!*. Even though the circumstances of the Civil War render a similar relationship between Rosa and Clytie possible, not in a marginal setting as is the case between Sethe and Amy, but in Sutpen's house itself, Rosa fails in doing that. Minrose C. Gwin points out Rosa's denial of Clytie's "touch" as an instance of her alliance with patriarchy. "This denial of Clytie and the concomitant show of alliance with patriarchy, is precisely what leads the young Rosa to position herself as object within the realm of the proper" (55). The constant references to the encounter between Amy and Sethe support

reading it as an example of healthy relationships across the colour line, rather than an isolated instance of “disidentifying” with the dominant white community and its ideological formations. When Denver finds herself afraid to face the real world, she finds in this encounter a source of inspiration. Building on the success of this encounter, Denver succeeds in getting a job at the Bodwins’.

Amy’s help to Sethe without an ideological initiation into abolitionism and against the expectation that a white girl like her will turn Sethe in reminds, of course, of Huckleberry Finn’s help to Jim, but the difference between the two cases is quite significant. Jim’s and Huck’s journey along the Mississippi is condensed here into Amy’s help for Sethe while she is in labour and in crossing the Ohio River to the free territory. It is true that Huck is presented as an innocent boy, but he has to negotiate the ideology of his own society. Huck hesitates several times and he has to condemn himself by the letter of that ideology before he takes his final decision. Morrison presents a different kind of interaction between these women. This encounter, which coincides with the feminine experience of birth, demands immediate action. Amy acts as the situation demands without hesitation. There is no need to establish the humanity of Sethe in the same way Huck establishes the humanity of Jim, when he comes to know that Jim misses his family. Birth is a human experience which is enough for Amy to help Sethe. Amy’s experience as an indentured girl, which is similar to the experience of slaves as Doreatha Drummond Mbalia suggests, initiates her into hating slavery and identifying with slaves (95-6). Indeed, Amy is a slave almost in every aspect except in name, and even the formal description of her condition, indenture, indicates a temporary lack of freedom. Like slaves, Amy works from before sunup till after sunset and she is physically and sexually abused. We are not given access to Amy’s consciousness, but there is no need for this as Amy seems to speak her thoughts aloud. She even expresses her prejudices against and her claims of superiority to Sethe. At no stages, do we find Amy reflecting on the morality of what she is doing. Jim’s freedom, which has to come as a gesture from his mistress in her will, demonstrates the failure of Huck’s “abolitionism” like that of Faulkner’s abolitionists. Morrison leaves no doubt that Amy’s abolitionism plays an essential role in the freedom of Sethe and her baby.

Although *Light in August* and *Beloved* differ sharply when it comes to the presentation of the role of the African American community in resisting slavery and racism, they give enough attention to the role of white characters in this area. The presentation of these white characters, and white abolitionists in particular, is largely shaped by the two

authors' approaches to implementing social change in the area of race relations. Faulkner's political conservatism and his gradualist approach affect this presentation of abolitionists in the way we have two versions of abolitionism. The Burdens' active abolitionism is linked to violence, fanaticism and sterility. The consequences of this abolitionism can be seen only in a series of tragic events bringing the presence of the Burdens in the South to an end. The second version of abolitionism is allowed a silent presence in the text and the South It hardly amounts to any action to help slaves. It is the personal conviction of an isolated man, who is motivated by the scarcity of resources, rather than by any ideology that compromises slavery or even condemns it as an evil institution.

Morrison, by contrast, celebrates the battle against slavery and segregation. This can be best seen in highlighting the role of the African American community in combating slavery. The text focuses on the most radical member of this community, Sethe, who goes to an extreme measure, infanticide, in resisting slavery because slavery an extreme form of aggression against man and his dignity. When Morrison enlists some white people in this battle, she bases their activism on the solid basis of the holiness of human life, or on an innocence which resists the corruption of the racist ideology of the dominant white community. Violence is involved in this activism, but it is perpetrated by the white community. Abolitionism is presented as the work of an organized group, which uses a variety of activities and achieves substantial results. If abolitionism divides the white community about slavery, then it also divides the black community in Cincinnati for a good reason. This division is embodied in the disagreement between Sethe and her mother-in-law which is remembered by Denver when she tries to cross the threshold of 124 and face the world. Sethe defends white abolitionists:

“Oh, some of them do all right by us.”

“And every time it's a surprise, ain't it?”

“You didn't used to talk this way.”

“Don't box with me. There's more of us they drowned than there is all of them ever lived from the start of time. Lay down your sword. This ain't a battle; it's a rout.” (*Beloved* 287)

When Baby Suggs lays down her sword and shield and acknowledges that she is defeated, her language approaches racism, not because what she is saying has happened to her is not correct, but because she generalizes that about white people. In this debate, the disagreement between the two black women is essential because it blocks the way to racism on the part of

black people. This disagreement would not be possible without the work of Amy Denver and the Bodwins.

Morrison's presentation of white abolitionists highlights the great work of these abolitionists in resisting slavery and racism, but Morrison does not stop there. She experiments in the possibility undermining slavery and racism by promoting the example of Amy Denver. This example strongly suggests that if America is to move towards healthy relations among its different racial groups, then these groups should follow Amy's example in crossing racial boundaries and "touching" each other. Spontaneous interaction which builds on the "soundness" of the human heart is far more effective in combating racism than ideological preparation, which encourages approaching the African American community but as close as "touching" it.

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