The Threefold Journey: Development of Home, Society, and Psyche

Nathan Heller
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In the popular mind, the myth of the journey frequently provides an apt metaphor for the process of life and the struggle to persevere. The rhetoric of metaphorical traveling appears at venues from high school commencement ceremonies—where speakers pepper their remarks with phrases such as “as you journey from this place”—to religious education, where the faithful speak of the effects of a “faith journey” on their lives.

Several reasons exist for paralleling the nature of life with the undertaking of a journey. First, traveling, like the experience of life, lacks clear definition. Instead of absolute order, a certain level of chaos and spontaneity saturate people’s lives. In the same way, travelers spontaneously move wherever they choose, at any time, and by any means available. Secondly, traveling, like life, is not a single great event but a process marked by events of varying significance. Just as traveling requires hours of uneventful movement, life requires days or months devoid of monumental or historical events. For most individuals, the journey of life is not the epic quest of an Odysseus but the consistent perseverance of a Jane Eyre. However, just as Columbus’s months of sailing culminated in the landing in North America, life holds cataclysmic events that alter an individual’s existence thereafter. Finally and most importantly, life, like the voyage, never really reaches completion. The process of discovery continues, and, as Robert Frost wrote, every person “has miles to go” before sleeping.
Just as the popular conscious has subscribed to the myth of the journey, so too have authors realized its power and significance. Two such authors, John Steinbeck and William Faulkner, utilize this myth in their respective works, _The Grapes of Wrath_ and _Light in August_. By weaving elements of physical travel with those of emotional and psychological development throughout the novels, each author creates a journey motif that mirrors the characters’ search for personal and social identity.

On superficial examination, the two novels appear to have little in common. Indeed, the disparity between the works seems to ironically reflect the attitude of Faulkner and Steinbeck when the two authors first met: Jackson Benson, Steinbeck’s biographer, says that Faulkner was drunk and “almost totally uncommunicative,” and Steinbeck took offense to his presence and attitude (770). Upon further examination, however, the incongruity between _The Grapes of Wrath_ and _Light in August_ disappears when one realizes that the two novels use the myth of the journey in similar modes. Nearly all the major characters travel physically: _Light in August_’s Lena Grove travels faithfully in search of a father for her child, and Joe Christmas has been a vagabond for over thirty years. Likewise, _The Grapes of Wrath_’s dispossessed Joad family drives from Oklahoma to California in search of a new home. A reading of the text through the socially critical eye also reveals a journey—or in the case of some characters, only an attempted journey—toward greater social acceptance: the Joads seek reintegration into mainstream society, while _Light in August_’s Byron Bunch eventually spurs Hightower toward reunion with the Jefferson social scene. Christmas’s social journey merges with elements of the psychological: he seeks not only his place in society, but also a greater understanding of himself and his racial, sexual, and religious identity. _The Grapes of Wrath_’s Tom Joad finds himself in the midst of a psychological journey to better understand the individual’s moral duty to others. Weaving
together these three aspects of the journey—physical, social, and psychological—Steinbeck and Faulkner illuminate the most basic human need: the need to understand oneself and one’s place in the world.

*The physical journey: toward the promised land*

The most literal reading reveals the importance of the physical journey to the narrative development of these two novels. The novelists create a physical world in which traveling mirrors the social disjuncture between characters and society. The act of physical movement implies the nonexistence of a connection with locality: few—arguably none—of the major characters have a physical place with which they identify. They are homeless not because they have no dwelling (though this applies in many instances), but because they have no sense of local identity: all of the characters lack a community that accepts them.

The search for community and place forms the fundamental basis of the novels. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, this epic quest for land becomes, as Susan Shillinglaw has observed, a “journey to the promised land” (82). The Joads, like the biblical Hebrews of Numbers 14, are dispossessed from their land and sent into the wilderness in search of a new home.

Yet a home is not just a place to live—indeed, the Joads find places to live aplenty—but also a place to raise a family and, more importantly, to develop emotional and psychological roots. Hence, the mantra “what I could do . . . with five acres of that [land]” represents more than a desire to own property; it represents a desire for an emotional attachment, a refuge for children, a place to bury deceased kin—in short, a place of central identity (GW 235).

In the same way, Faulkner’s characters in *Light in August* struggle with similar loss of identity due to deficient community ties. Nearly all of the novel’s characters are outsiders: Joe Christmas has never had a home; Byron Bunch works Saturdays in order to avoid social
intercourse; and Hightower has long since withdrawn from the social mind of Jefferson. Like the traveling Joads, these characters lack any assimilation with the place in which they live.

The loss of the local all-informing source of identity triggers physical, emotional, and social responses. As Howard Levant notes in his criticism of *The Grapes of Wrath*, the individual can respond to this loss of self-identity in several ways. The Joad family, with their naive optimism and dogged determination to reestablish a place in the world, expresses one reaction of hopefulness. Several less productive responses contrast with the Joad’s optimism. Other characters represent the reactions of “the stubborn, the dead, the weak, and the backtrackers” to the physical journey (Levant 106). Characters in both Steinbeck and Faulkner’s novels choose each of these responses, demonstrating the difficulty of retaining Joad-like optimism throughout the physical journey.

*The Grapes of Wrath*’s Muley Graves exemplifies the stubborn response. Rather than begin a journey to recover his lost identity, Muley denies the loss. Instead, he stalks about abandoned land raped by modern machinery, prowling it “like a damn ol’ graveyard gho’s” (GW 51). Muley cannot accept the possibility of undertaking a journey, not because of fear, but because he cannot leave the place where his father died, where he had his first sexual encounter, where his son was born. He cannot leave home.

Nor is Muley the only character who refuses to overcome present abandonment and claim a new home. Like the “ol’ graveyard gho’s,” *Light in August*’s Hightower also prowls around the edges of society without an integrated sense of place at the beginning of his novel. Hightower has been ostracized from the social affairs of the town of Jefferson, partly because of his own imprudence. However, instead of seeking social reunion, the stubborn man lives in his small house on a secluded street and prefers to remain a forgotten fixture of Jefferson’s bygone days.
Like Muley, he has a fear of association, questioning whether he would even be capable of again associating with others. Rather than risk another emotionally devastating ordeal, both Muley and Hightower choose to remain estranged from society, too stubborn to undertake any journey—physical or otherwise—that might realign them with social acceptance.

Individuals may also react to dispossession through death. Characters such as Grampa and Granma die because their journey overtakes them. Though they attempt the physical journey toward a new home, the demands of traveling eventually overtake them. As Grampa illustrates, the response of death may indicate lack of willpower. Grampa's suffers from much the same weakness as Muley: he cannot fathom the recreation of new a life in an unfamiliar land; hence leaving Oklahoma kills him. Granma's death, however, does not occur for lack of will but because of extenuating circumstances. For her, the loss of her husband figures heavily into her inability to complete the journey. After a lifetime with her obstinate mate, she cannot fathom perpetuating a life devoid of him.

Faulkner's Joe Christmas also exemplifies the response of death. Though he has been traveling for over three decades, he ultimately fails to complete his journey: Christmas dies while physically running away from society and while psychologically fleeing from his internal conflict of racial identity. Christmas does not, however, succumb to death because he lacks the desire to succeed. He demonstrates his sincerity in a night conversation with his lover Joanna when she asks him about the certainty of his interracial parentage. "If I'm not, damned if I haven't wasted a whole lot of time," he responds (LIA 254). The ambiguity surrounding his death contrasts to the relative concreteness of the passing of Grampa and Granma in The Grapes of Wrath. Characters such as Christmas, Grampa, and Granma demonstrate that death in response
to the journey is not unilateral, but instead may come in a variety of forms and for any reason, all of which effectually end the physical journey.

Individuals may also respond to the physical journey with an attitude of weakness. Noah and Connie respond in this manner. Noah’s weakness of stamina reaffirms his dearth of personality: he abandons the struggle to reestablish home, instead pursuing a “private peace” along the river (Levant 106). The narrative, however, never reveals whether he reaches that goal, and the image of Noah wading down the river hardly imparts a strong connotation of moral and narrative victory. The weeping willows that adorn the riverbank further reinforce the solemnity and sadness of the parting, especially for Ma. Though Noah may eventually attain his peace, he abandons his family, their journey, and the prospect of a new home with them in order to do so, creating a bland final presentation of an underdeveloped character.

Though Connie possesses more narrative strength than Noah, he nonetheless exhibits weakness of personality, which culminates in his abandonment of the journey and, more tragically, his pregnant wife. Connie’s excessively optimistic dreams constitute his hamartia: he repeatedly imagines gaining education through mail-order classes, landing a good job, and purchasing a home in California—all within the first several months of his arrival there. While none of these dreams understood pragmatically would pose a danger, the speed with which he hopes to transplant them into reality devastates his relationships. His use of these dreams as a comfort to Rose of Sharon further enhances their harm: as life in California worsens, reality gradually grinds away the dream, a catastrophic occurrence for someone who has such vested interest in fantasy. Connie’s weakness is primarily the inability to differentiate his dreams from reality and accept the distinction between the two. As the truth of life closes in on his world, he
abandons the hard physical journey, apparently for another life unencumbered by reality—or by an expectant wife.

Though none of Faulkner’s *Light in August* characters directly exemplifies the response of weakness, Byron Bunch at the beginning of the novel perhaps fits the description most closely. For years he has shut out the world because of fear that he will inflict harm on another person. This weakness, a refusal to engage society or to take a journey toward identity, causes him to become a hermit in the middle of populated Jefferson: a man who, though he works a steady job, has few friends and does not desire to expand their number. He does, however, overcome this deficiency through his relationship with Lena Grove, and by the end of the novel Byron frees himself from his former weakness.

The backtrackers represent the final reaction to the physical journey. They attempt the journey toward reestablishment and later abandon the hope of completing that journey. The ragged man that the Joads meet at the camp along the highway exhibits this response: “I’m comin’ back,” he says referring to California, “I been there” (GW 188). In the wake of a deceased wife and two children, this man loses his will to complete the journey. He returns defeated by harsh circumstances via the same road on which he once found optimism. Unlike his previous trek across country, however, he lacks motivation for traveling. To him, the physical journey holds no appeal: he cannot obtain its goal. Even the Wilsons, who halt when Sairy falls ill, become emblems of the backtracker. When the journey becomes difficult, their perseverance fails, and they cease traveling. In this action, the Wilsons allow hardship to overcome the hope of a new life, the hope of a new home (Levant 107).

The temptation to backtrack presents itself repeatedly to the Joads as they make their way through California. One of the strongest temptations to backtrack lies in the denied myth of the
prosperous frontier: while the Joads head west to California, they envision a frontier land 
adorned with trees laden with bundles of fruit available to anyone willing to work hard enough to 
earn them. This optimism mirrors the American myth of the west inherent in the Midwestern 
culture from which the Joads come: “Grampa killed Indians, Pa killed snakes for the land. 
Maybe we can kill banks,” cry the tenant men as they are evicted (GW 34). They come from 
families that tamed the land through brute force and strength of will—a will that the migrants 
take to California. But, just as they could not tame the banks, neither can they tame the social 
hierarchy of the west coast, a harsh truth that calls them to abandon the journey, accept defeat, 
and become backtrackers.

The Joads cannot accept this approach to the journey. Ever the epic heroes, the family 
presses on to California, first because they are ignorant of the working conditions that await 
them, later because they refuse to abandon the will to survive. As Levant notes, the Joads do not 
halt their journey even for death. They overcome various obstacles to their journey, including 
Grampa’s death, Granma’s death, Noah’s abandonment, Connie’s abandonment, and Uncle 
John’s drunkenness. Any of these events would have provided a ready excuse for the cessation of 
travels, even if only temporarily. Yet their determination to persevere never waivers. This 
characteristic illuminates their response of optimistic hope and sets them apart from the many 
backtrackers they encounter.

This affirmation of the journey’s importance ultimately doubles as an affirmation of life, 
similar to that of Lena Grove in the final chapter of Light in August. Both Lena and the Joads 
travel onward, following the proverbial black ribbon of highway across the country, comforted 
only by the hope of one day reaching the road’s end. Both overcome the temptation of the
backtracker, persevere through hardship, and affirm the importance of hope and life in order to continue their physical journey and eventually reach its end.

This affirmation of life comes with a high price. In the midst of their trials, the traditional male-dominant structure of the functional family becomes inverted, favoring a matriarchal paradigm. This reversal reinforces the hardship of the journey and the oppression of injustice. In the traditional structure, male characters (namely Grampa, Pa, and Uncle John) form the nucleus of family leadership, as the family council held before leaving Oklahoma demonstrates. Grampa, the titular head of the family, leads the family council, at which the male presence governs the family. Grampa sits in the honorary position on the truck’s running board while Pa and Uncle John squat immediately beside him. Tom, Connie, and Noah cluster around this circle of leadership. Ma, Granma, and Rose of Sharon surround the arc formed by the males. The children skirt the outside of the family circle. In this portrait, all family members occupy—given the culture and the time period—their proper places. The most mature males make the decisions, and the women and children follow the men’s edict: all is as it should be.

This established family order decays throughout The Grapes of Wrath, mirroring the Joads’ inability to reintegrate into California society. On a deeper level, this gradual inversion illustrates the consequences of a journey’s unattained goal and the harm of denied expectations. As the Joads quickly realize, they have not arrived in a new land laden with the fruit of opportunity, but in a place where the “fruit of man’s wisdom and knowledge [are] lying rotting in the fields and orchards” (Owens 49).

Grampa’s death deals the first blow to the traditional order, resulting in the loss of ceremonial leadership. With his passing, the reversal of leadership begins, and Ma takes the first steps toward eventual familial leadership. As this transformation continues throughout the novel,
Pa gradually loses proportionate influence. At the family council held after Grampa’s death, Ma now stands beside Pa, not in one of the outer circles. Her significant role in the preparation of Grampa’s body for burial reinforces her assent to the familial hierarchy. While she serves as mortician, the men contemplate the best method of burial given their financially limited circumstances. Pa assumes the primary role of leadership in this debate, and he proposes the solution upon which all eventually agree. The entire scene illustrates a new leadership prototype: Pa retains the primary decision-making role while Ma’s influence rises to fill the void left by Grampa. These subtle changes, however, do not dramatically affect the patriarchal family, and its operations largely sustain the loss of Grampa. For the time being, traditional order remains intact.

Three chapters later, the next family crisis drastically alters this structure. When the Wilsons’ car breaks down, the novel’s last formal family council takes place. The men debate the possibility of splitting into two parties: one to continue progress to California and one to remain and repair the broken vehicle. As the men reach consensus, Ma takes a vehement stand against the separation of the family:

Ma stepped in front of him. “I ain’t a-gonna go.”

“What you mean, you ain’t gonna go? You got to go. You got to look after the family.” Pa was amazed at the revolt.

Ma stepped to the touring car and reached in on the floor of the back seat. She brought out a jack handle and balanced it in her hand easily. “I ain’t a-gonna go,” she said.

“I tell you, you got to go. We made up our mind.”
And now Ma’s mouth set hard. She said softly, “On’y way you gonna get me to
go is whup me” (GW 168–69)

In amazement, the men acquiesce to the weapon-wielding Ma. Through this ordeal, Ma removes
Pa from the nucleus of leadership. In his place, Ma and Tom establish themselves as the
decision-making center of the family. From this point forward, the will of these two characters
drives family activities more than any of Pa’s actions. Pa does, for the time being, retain a
notable amount of power (and generous narrative attention). He still plays a significant role in
small matters relating to the family’s travels. Gradually however, his importance dwindles. After
the jack handle standoff, the traditional order remains nominally intact but ceases to hold any
real significance: in the midst of the rebellion, the only speech Pa musters is the meager “‘She
sassy . . . I never seen her so sassy’” (GW 169).

The inversion of power continues throughout the remainder of the Joad’s physical
journey. The practical end of Pa’s leadership comes when the family leaves the Weedpatch
government camp. Though he initially opposes the proposition of leaving the camp’s comforts,
he later succumbs bitterly to Ma’s insistence: “‘Seems like times is changed,’ he said. ‘Time was
when a man said what we’d do. Seems like women is telling now’” (GW 352). Pa’s statement
summarizes the difficult journey’s effect on the family: separation from locale gradually
overwhelms Pa until he no longer provides leadership. He finally falls totally from all influence
near the novel’s end: “‘I ain’t no good anymore. Spen’ all my time a-thinkin’ how it use’ ta be”
(GW 422). Pa has steeped himself in nostalgia for the past and never regains the reins of the
family. His attempt to construct a dam near the novel’s end proves unsuccessful—an ironically
fitting end for a man who holds so little practical leadership value. When his dam bursts, Pa
again recedes into the ranks of the submissive as Ma leads the family from the flooded boxcar in
search of more hospitable accommodations. Through the novel’s end, Ma retains steadfast control of the family’s situation, and he never questions her authority.

Pa’s loss of leadership, along with the four negative responses of stubbornness, death, weakness, and backtracking, illustrates two important characteristics of the physical journey. First, it is a demanding and exhausting pursuit that cannot easily be overcome. The myth of the journey never promises easy traveling, and opportunities for failure riddle each step of progress.

Succumbing to temptation gives birth to the second characteristic of the journey: simply attempting it does not ensure success. The response of death most clearly illustrates this: a successful journey eludes characters such as Light in August’s Christmas and The Grapes of Wrath’s Granma and Grampa. However, one need not die to fail at the journey, a truth demonstrated through Pa’s decline in leadership. Though Pa sees the journey through to the end, one can hardly argue for his successful completion. Instead, unrealized goals cause him to abandon what John Conder calls the “social self,” that manifestation of selfhood exemplified in “the role he plays in society and the attitudes . . . imbibed from its major institutions” (132). By the end of the novel, Pa cannot play any substantial role in the most primary of social institutions: the family. In short, his loss of familial influence results in his personal degeneration. He becomes only a child of a man, an empty shell of his former self.

The physical journey presents difficulties, and—as both The Grapes of Wrath and Light in August demonstrate—its fulfillment is not assured. Yet the simple act of embracing the physical journey demonstrates an affirmation of life in its most basic form. Unlike Muley Graves, whose name aptly implies his metaphoric death, the willingness to journey in order to meet and address challenges fundamentally affirms the goodness of life. It attests to the
importance self-understanding and—more importantly—a connection to a place worthy of being called home.

**The social journey: into (or out of) social participation**

Though the physical journey illustrates one means of moving toward increased self-understanding, the literal interpretation of traveling cannot fully illustrate the multifaceted importance of the journey myth. The physical interpretation, though useful because it shows how individuals respond to dispossession, does not illustrate how individuals interact with the larger society.

The myth of the journey also applies to social participation. Just as people continually move from one place to another, they also move from one social interaction to another. On a grand scale, individuals constantly move either into or out of the society in which they live, and a person may participate in society at a nearly infinite number of levels. The quintessential mode of participation is, of course, full social participation. At this level, society allows an individual to move into and out of interactions with others frequently. This perfect mode of interaction benefits both the individual as well as the larger society from the resulting social conversation.

Of the characters in both *Light in August* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, Lena Grove offers the closest symmetry to this level of social integration. Indeed, Lena represents “the very stuff of the novel, . . . a story of a pregnant girl on the road to no specific place” writes David Williams (162). Lena “comes a fur piece” from Alabama and her physical movement first introduces the motif of the journey to *Light in August* (LIA 3). Kevin Railey notes that she “sets the overall tone of the novel by traveling the open road” as a socially integrated individual (103). Lena not only journeys physically but also socially. She moves into and out of the social structure, always assimilating, never inciting dissention. Indeed, within the first few pages of the novel, Lena
demonstrates honesty in her social interactions, a quality that Joe Christmas spends his entire life attempting to find. In this way, Lena does not merely travel: she engages in the perfect social journey, for though she has left her former home, she nonetheless assimilates into local Jefferson society. The general acceptance that other characters afford Lena affirms her natural perfection at the art of the social journey: only a handful of individuals refuse to accept her—most notably Mrs. Armstid, but even she ultimately extends her generosity, giving the expectant mother her savings from the sale of farm produce. Though, as Mrs. Armstid’s attitude suggests, Lena may not possess a quintessential level of social integration, no other character achieves the same level of participation. She therefore presents the highest level of integration of the characters in either novel.

If Lena is the exemplar of the perfect social participant, many individuals demonstrate qualities opposite her. Some, like the “owner men” in The Grapes of Wrath, pervert the normal course of society. They enjoy a high social status but do not use that status to benefit the starving migrants working their plantations. Such individuals move freely within their social strata but offer little to society in return: at best, they are leeches on the social structure in which they operate.

Other characters, such as Steinbeck’s Uncle John and Faulkner’s Hightower, reject social interaction totally and instead live on the fringe of society. Though Hightower occupies a higher level of narrative importance in Light in August than Uncle John does in The Grapes of Wrath, they both exhibit similar attitudes toward the social journey. They both begin their respective novels by rejecting the possibility of social reintegration, later overcoming their bullheaded attitude and embracing a productive social journey. Hightower has given up all possibility of social participation and instead has purchased social immunity from the town of Jefferson. After
suffering several beatings and a stint as the laughingstock of the town, he now inhabits a small house that stands on a nameless and forgettable side street. Much of Hightower’s dysfunction stems from his inability to understand his personal past and separate its importance from his present life. Hightower builds his life upon the false image of his grandfather galloping to a heroic cavalryman’s death amidst the cry of Civil War battle. Instead of acknowledging the truth of his grandfather’s death during a childish raid on a Yankee chicken coop, Hightower suppresses the reality of his past in favor of an false heroism. Like the lotus-eaters encountered by Odysseus, Hightower, notes Hyatt Waggoner, is a “romantic idealist” who prefers comfortable delusion to the cold truth (129). This idealism also muddles his performance of his duties as minister: “it was as if he couldn’t get religion and that galloping cavalry and his dead grandfather shot from the galloping horse untangled from each other, even in the pulpit” (LIA 62). His sermons incite discontent among his congregation, a sentiment reinforced by the subsequent actions of his wife. She is frequently absent from town, and she eventually stops attending the church at which her husband ministers. Speculation ensues about her spending a good deal of time in Memphis, rumors that are soon confirmed when she dies there. The circumstances surrounding her death strongly allude to an extramarital affair, and Hightower resigns his pulpit in the aftermath of social turmoil and outrage surrounding her death.

Like Hightower, The Grapes of Wrath’s Uncle John also contorts the past, adversely affecting his life in the present. While Hightower suppresses the reality of his past, however, Uncle John exaggerates the reality of his. He embellishes the cold truth of the past to such a degree that it consumes him and produces a totally miserable man. Through Tom’s recounting of the past, we learn that Uncle John’s wife died of appendicitis only four months after their marriage. Though she requested a physician, John refused to because of the financial obligation
it would create. Since her death, he has lived in continual guilt, placing sole blame for her untimely demise on himself.

Though Hightower fantasizes while John wallows in guilt, both men experience similar effects from their delusions. Hightower’s romanticism of his aheroic grandfather costs him nearly everything of emotional value in his life, including his wife, his congregation, and his social status as a minster. He even becomes obese and forfeits his health as a result. He lives alone and exhibits habits of depression: he bathes infrequently, does not keep a clean house, and he takes solace solely in books. Likewise, Uncle John develops eccentric habits. Tom describes the effect of the death upon John during the first two years: he “walks arous’ like he don’t see nothin’, an’ he prays some” (GW 69). He takes a liking to children, giving them candy and treats even though he likely cannot afford the items. He responds fanatically anytime any of the Joad children are sick, frequently calling a doctor despite the wishes of Pa and Ma. He too exhibits signs of depression: he walks alone late at night, and he periodically binges on food and alcohol. The incident in which he purchases the shoot from Pa for several spools of fencing wire illustrates this. “‘When he wants pig he wants a whole pig, an’ when he’s through, he don’t want no pig hangin’ around’,” Tom says (GW 29).

In anticlimax to their social ineptitude, Hightower and John each undertake a short journey away from social participation. Hightower withdraws to a small cottage on a little-used street, a place where—he hopes—the town will forget about him. Despite early attempts to force him to leave town, Hightower eventually receives that which he desires: like his grandfather, he slips into the forgotten memory of nearly all Jeffersonians, becoming little more than the faded sign advertising art lessons that he posted at the end of the street. During his residency at the University of Virginia, Faulkner described Hightower’s social plight:
Hightower was a man who wanted to be better than he was afraid he would. He had failed his wife. Here was another chance he had, and he failed his Christian oath as a man of God, and he escaped into his past where some member of his family was brave enough to match the moment. (University^3 45)

But an escape into the past implies an escape out of the present. Though his heroic idealism of his grandfather provides him with a point of emotional anchorage, this assurance is based on a false reality and therefore cuts Hightower off from the normal business of social life. Even his physical appearance comes to reflect this social disconnect: he exudes “that odor of overplump desiccation and stale linen as though a precursor of the tomb” (LIA 318).

Uncle John likewise withdraws into philosophical consideration of the past. John’s dialogues with Casy on the road to California, during which he contemplates whether he sinned by failing to call a doctor, provide the first evidence of this. Casy responds to John’s queries: “For anybody else it was a mistake, but if you think it was a sin—then it’s a sin. A fella builds his own sins right up from the groun’” (GW 225). John considers this philosophy, but ruminating only furthers his obsession with the past. Several pages later he states: “I ain’t never done nothin’ that wasn’t part sin” (GW 229). While Uncle John’s conclusion may not provide absolution of his perceived sin, it does indicate that he thoughtfully considers his past for the first time in his life.

Casy again affects John’s philosophical questioning when, camped in a Hooverville, he sacrifices his freedom to protect Tom. When several representatives of the sheriff’s department visit the camp to question the migrants about a prior altercation, Casy confesses to the crime, even though the responsibility should fall on Tom. This self-sacrificial act troubles John, who recalls his inability to perform an act of sacrifice for his wife. The pain of guilt becomes too
strong for him, and he physically and socially withdraws from the Joad family. During the peak of his guilt, he tells Pa: "I'm a-gonna get drunk... I wouldn't be able to get through this night no other way" (GW 269). With that explanation, he purchases two bottles of whiskey and passes out in a gutter beside the road. In so doing, he too assumes the half-death in which Hightower lives: like Hightower, he cuts himself off from society and will not allow others to interact with him because doing so exacerbates his emotional pain.

Kevin Railey comments that individuals, like Hightower and John, "who live with no relation to others do not really live at all" (95). While both characters reach the pit of emotional and social death, neither character perpetuates this seclusion to the end of their novel. Through coercion by characters more socially connected than themselves, both Hightower and Uncle John embrace a journey toward reintegration with society.

Under the direction of Byron Bunch, Hightower commences on a journey toward social participation. This begins when Byron seeks Hightower's advice for dealing with Lena's arrival in Jefferson. At this point, Hightower functions as mentor and Byron as his protégé. Instead of encouraging Byron to assist Lena, he recommends that she "go back to Alabama. To her people" (LIA 302). While this may seem reasonable advice, two factors taint its sincerity. First, it fails to recognize Byron's love for Lena. Though Byron has not articulated this sentiment, his desire to assist her reveals his emotion. Instead of affirming this love, however, Hightower advises Byron to squash it and return to life as a social hermit. Second and more importantly, Hightower offers this advice out of his own illusion of the past. His own social fears taint his recommendation that Byron remain uninvolved with Lena. Following the nature of many a petitioner of advice, however, Byron does not seek counsel in order to make a decision, but to affirm a decision he has already made.
Byron’s defiance eventually overturns the mentor/protégé relationship and sets Hightower on his own social journey. By assisting Lena, Byron forces Hightower into social interaction for the first time since the minister left his pulpit. Bryon further connects Hightower to society through the current events of Christmas/Brown plot. Hightower’s increased social awareness culminates at the unification of the plots at the birth of Lena’s child. To attend to the birth, he must take the significant step of freely helping another individual on his social journey. The literal present reinforces this metaphoric movement: he journeys two miles to the Burden cabin in order to be present at the birth. This traveling, though grudgingly accepted, represents a major change in his social perceptions: it is the first action—either physical or metaphoric—that results an interpersonal interaction outside of his own home. More importantly, an appropriate interpretation of the past characterizes this selfless action. Unlike his actions heretofore, quasi-heroic cavalry do not color this journey; instead, it springs from his memory of the negro woman’s birth. Realizing that, in that previous birth, the stillborn babe resulted from untimely medical care, Hightower speeds to Lena’s bedside to deliver the healthy child. In so doing, Hightower participates in the perpetuation of new life and the arrival of innocence and hope to the tattered Jefferson social scene.

The day after the birth, Hightower awakes, shaves, and dons his ministerial collar for the first time in the novel—an action especially appropriate because Faulkner repeatedly remarks the lack of this vestment during Hightower’s years of disillusionment. Additionally, the hope symbolically born with Lena’s child spills into Hightower’s personal life, and he realizes his delusion of the past: "They [his ancestors] did their part; they played by the rules,’ he thinks. ‘I was the one who failed, who infringed. Perhaps that is the greatest social sin of all; ay, perhaps moral sin’" (LIA 486–87). John Pilkington notes that this realization informs Hightower’s
attempt to aid Christmas. Though the alibi comes too late to assist Christmas, it represents a “complete reversal from Hightower’s earlier unwillingness” to provide assistance and participate in society (156). In the final moments of Hightower’s narrative attention, his reconciliation with the past comes to fruition: he again hears the thunder of the cavalry hooves of the past, but the vision soon gallops past. “They rush past, are gone; the dust swirls skyward sucking, fades away into the night which has fully come” (LIA 493). Though the bugles of battle still echo in his mind, Hightower has confronted the past in truth, not delusion. He has overcome his fantasy and will continue the journey that Byron initiated toward social reintegration.

Just as Byron acts as catalyst for Hightower’s social journey, Casy provides the impetus for Uncle John’s. Casy’s philosophy on the nature of sin provides a foundation for John’s metaphoric travels, and Casy’s self-sacrifice for Tom’s welfare marks another significant progression in John’s consideration of his past. Though he withdraws completely at this point, John does not remain isolated. After his bout of drunkenness, the topic of his guilt largely drops from the narrative until the end of The Grapes of Wrath. During the final chapters, Ma tells John to bury Rose of Sharon’s stillborn infant. Instead of burying the corpse, however, he floats it down the flooded river with the intention that the infant may symbolically speak of the suffering of the countless migrants. He tells the blue infant: “Go down an’ tell ’em. Go down in the street and rot an’ tell ’em that way. That’s the way you can talk. . . . Maybe they’ll know then” (GW 448). Though John’s guilt from the past does not directly surface during the scene, it certainly informs his actions. The death of a loved one due to poor medical conditions is not new to John. However, unlike his wife’s fatality, the infant’s death results from multiple factors beyond the control of the Joad family: not only did Rose of Sharon lack proper medical care; she also lacked proper nutrition and a clean environment during the pregnancy. Like his wife’s passing, John
recognizes the preventability of this death. Instead of again burying pain and guilt with alcohol, he now proclaims his outrage to the masses. Though his past guilt informs his actions, he more importantly “express[es] a universal anger” by refusing to bury the child (Levant 127). In this final portrait, he has again journeyed toward social participation. He no longer secludes himself in roadside ditches but instead becomes the vehicle that enables the proclamation of the truth of suffering.

Like Hightower, Uncle John shows signs of movement toward increased social interaction, and his status at the end of the novel reaffirms life and the inherent goodness of social participation. John remains a part of the core family unit to the end of the novel. Though Grampa, Granma, Noah, Casy, Connie, Tom, and Al have left the family, John remains inside its nucleus. His allegiance demonstrates the significance of familial life and social interactions within the context of family.

While Hightower and Uncle John both participate to a fairly equal degree in the social journey, they do so only with support from other characters—Hightower with assistance from Byron and Uncle John from Casy. Like Hightower and John, Byron and Casy also engage in their own social journeys. At the opening of Light in August, Bryon largely keeps to himself. He works at a planing mill, where eating lunch with his coworkers constitutes the full extent of his social interaction. Without fail, he works overtime on Saturday afternoon because he believes that “at the mill alone on Saturday afternoon he would be where the chance to do hurt or harm could not have found him” (LIA 55). He chooses to live aloof not because of an obsession with the past (like Hightower and John), but because he fears that he may inflict emotional suffering on another person if he does not rigidly control his social interaction. To prevent this, Byron withdraws from Jefferson society: his social activities include only conversations with
Hightower and weekend participation in a distant country worship service. As François Pitavy notes, the Byron of the novel’s inception acts largely as a detached witness to social affairs: he relates Christmas and Burch’s arrival in Jefferson, he recalls Hightower’s life history, and, of course, he falls in love with Lena Grove, though he does not recognize this when he first meets her. This latter event eventually impels Byron’s social journey. Before the coming of Lena, Byron leads a static life of seclusion. Afterward, he undertakes his own social journey and becomes the primary force driving Hightower toward reunion with society.

When Byron first encounters Lena, his state of social separation immediately terminates. Not only does he interact with Lena on a spontaneous basis, he also breaks his resolve not to inflict harm on others. At the end of their first conversation, Byron has divulged to Lena the whereabouts of Burch, an act for which he “could have bitten his tongue in two” (LIA 56). Though this information has not inflicted any harm on Lena or anyone else, he believes that he has initiated a chain of events that will result in emotional harm to her. To atone for this perceived transgression, Byron continues his journey toward social interaction: he immediately offers her lodging, and he quickly consults Hightower about the potential harm Lena may experience should she attempt to meet Burch. Though these events may seem relatively insignificant, they pull Byron out of his prior role as a fringe social observer. From this point forward, Byron “disappears as narrator” and assumes indirect “responsibility for bringing the different characters together” (Pitavy 37).

When Byron next enters the narrative, he commands a central position in moving the plot forward. He continues to provide for Lena, but, more importantly, he inverts the relationship that he formerly had with Hightower. While previously Hightower had functioned as Byron’s tutor and mentor, Byron now instructs Hightower, showing him that “refusing the risks of his
[Hightower’s] humanity is more like death than like life” (Waggoner 130). As Byron drives Hightower’s journey, he also moves himself toward increased social participation. For Byron, his desire to protect Lena ultimately drives his interest. For Hightower, Byron’s actions constitute the beginning of a journey toward a time when he will not require an intermediary between himself and the town of Jefferson. At the most basic level, Byron functions as the voice of current news, both to Hightower and the audience. His conversations with the minister relate the recent happenings of the Christmas plot. More importantly, they provide insight to Jefferson’s corporate attitude about Christmas. In this way, Byron not only engages himself in the greater social scene, but also forces Hightower to interact with it.

Byron also propels both his and Hightower’s journeys through his interactions with Doc and Mrs. Hines. By bringing them to meet with Hightower, Bryon achieves in reality that which he has already accomplished through rhetoric: just as he has immersed himself in the town’s current events, he now involves himself with primary characters in those events. And, as before, he invariably spurs Hightower toward increased involvement. In this meeting, Byron demonstrates that he has achieved a yet higher level of social participation and become the “coordinator of the different focal points” of the various plots (Pitavy 81). As Byron continues to spur Hightower’s journey, Hightower’s own participation mirrors narrative structure during the meeting with the Doc and Mrs. Hines. As Hightower interacts with the Christmas plot, he develops into a more complete person while at the same time the narrative moves toward the union of major plots at the birth scene of Lena’s child. During this stage of the narrative, Byron holds singular responsibility for moving Hightower toward social reunion and bringing the three major plots into union with one another. The birth of Lena’s child is the single most significant
unification of the three plots in *Light in August*, and Byron holds responsibility for uniting the event’s attendees.

Byron completes his social journey on the eve of the birth, and the characters present at the scene arrive at his invitation: Lena because he has taken her to the cabin in which Burch lived during his stay in Jefferson, Doc and Mrs. Hines for the same sentimental attachment to Christmas rather than Burch, and Hightower because Byron enlists him as the nativity’s medical authority. The experience of the birth ultimately causes Hightower to reevaluate his voluntary isolation from society and results in his social journey toward acceptance. Byron, by entangling Hightower in the birth scene (partly against Hightower’s will), provides a social situation in which the minister reaches this epiphany and considers a major change of lifestyle. In so doing, Byron simultaneously reaches the summit of his own social participation, orchestrates the novel’s unifying scene, and provides Hightower with the impetus to engage in a social journey of his own.

Just as Byron’s personal social journey allows him to become a mentor to Hightower, Casy also acts as an instructor to Uncle John. At the opening of *The Grapes of Wrath*, he has already completed a significant portion of his journey. Through his conversation with Tom en route to the Joad homestead, he recounts his withdrawal into the woods in order to contemplate the nature of sin and its effect on humanity. Emerging from a period of introspection, Casy embraces a spirit of naturalism in which divine decree does not determine sin but in which sin occurs in any action that causes humanity to lose connection with the natural world. Fundamentally, his time spent in the woods—which seems a sort of transcendentalist re-creation of the temptation of Christ—reinforces humanity’s connectedness “even to nonhuman nature” (Conder 136).
Having journeyed back into social interactions after his period of isolation, Casy prepares himself to instruct his pupil, Uncle John. His reply to John’s inquiry about sin ("For anybody else it was a mistake, but if you think it was a sin—then it’s a sin" [GW 225]) does not necessarily indicate the correctness of John’s perception of sin, but instead suggests that sin exists in John’s mind because it prevents John from maintaining social relationships with his family, with the society at large, and with nature.

While Byron mentors Hightower throughout the course of *Light in August*, Casy soon leaves John to continue the journey alone. With Casy’s voluntary surrender to the deputies, he demonstrates his belief in the natural order of life and his desire to preserve that order for Tom. He selflessly surrenders precisely because he realizes that his assumption of responsibility will allow his naturalistic understanding of society to remain intact within the Joad family. Through this action, he enables the Joads to continue their journey as a whole social unit in harmony with nature.

When Casy reunites with Tom, he has further progressed in his social journey, and he understands the relationship between humans and nature to a more extensive degree. Whereas he previously held only a basic knowledge of the importance of humanity’s link with the natural realm, he now reveres the natural kingdom in all forms, “especially in the form known as the human species to which all men belong” (Conder 137). Casy’s imprisonment allowed him opportunity and experience to further develop his worldview of naturalistic universality: “‘mostly they [other inmates] was there ’cause they stole stuff; an’ mostly it was stuff they needed an’ couldn’ get no other way. . . . It’s need that makes all the trouble’” (GW 382). Casy now understands that the relationship between humans and nature occupies a special place among natural relationships. Further, he realizes that nature should be able to support all
members of humanity. When humans disrupt this process, they threaten all humanity’s
communion with the natural world and commit a social sin; hence, unsatisfied “need . . . makes
all the trouble.” This realization eventually leads him to recognize the importance of ensuring
that humanity as a whole maintains its roots with the natural kingdom, and this understanding
accounts for Casy’s desire to aid his fellow migrants by assisting in the formation of a strike.

Casy’s final actions prior to his death indicate that he, like Bryon, has reached the summit
of his social journey. Just as Bryon unifies Light in August’s various plots at the birth scene,
Casy represents a vision for a similar unification of humanity. Casy is Byron’s character applied
to the cosmic scale: while Bryon brings together major characters, Casy seeks to bring all
humanity into communion with each other and with nature. By the time of his death, he truly
believes that he possesses a single part of “one big soul” (GW 24). In so doing, he “abandons the
arrogance of social man who thinks of himself only in terms of his distinctiveness in nature”
(Conder 137). The former minister comes to view himself as a small part of the universal whole
of humanity and nature. He is no longer the disillusioned reverend who cannot reconcile rhetoric
with the practical world. Casy’s new worldview (and Byron’s as well) recognizes the futility of
such a distinction. When humanity enjoys an intimate connection with nature, that connection
fulfills all of life’s necessities, thereby reliving need and discarding the distinction between
rhetoric and action that existed in Casy’s pre-philosophical conception of religion.

Casy, Byron, Hightower, and Uncle John all journey toward social integration. Some
characters, however, do not participate in such a journey because they already possess that which
these four men seek to achieve. Lena Grove stands as an example of this. While Lena engages
the social journey, she does not approach it through the methods that the men demonstrate. Each
of the men journeys either toward or from social participation, many of them engage in multiple
social movements during their respective novels. Lena, however, does not journey toward anything. She simply journeys. Though finding a father for her child appears as the superficial goal of her travels, this desire is only peripheral to her journey because she believes that God will provide a father for her: “I reckon a family ought to all be together when a chap comes. . . . I reckon the Lord will see to that” (LIA 21). Lena’s “calm faith” insists that God will provide a husband for her. She conceptualizes God primarily as beneficent. Lena journeys not to find a husband and father but to reach the place where she will unite with him. Unlike the men who journey socially, Lena knows her inner self to such a thorough extent that she already foresees her journey’s end. André Bleikasten notes that she “never stands out against the landscape” because her journey does not quest after social integration (276). She already possesses societal integration. She is at peace with herself. She is at peace with society and with the natural world.

Because of this peace Lena perfectly exemplifies the importance of the social journey. Not only does she provide the goal for that which the male characters will eventually strive, she also provides an apt conclusion for *Light in August*. Just as Lena opened the novel and first introduced the myth of the journey, she also closes the novel and reminds readers that her journey (and theirs) is not yet accomplished. Martin Kreiswirth argues that the novel’s final chapter (which focuses on Lena) “propels the fictive present away from Yoknapatawpha County” as Lena and Byron move toward an “undisclosed but certainly imaginable future” (77). The final chapter serves as a reminder that Lena’s (and Byron’s) social journey has not ended simply because the final page has been reached. Instead, the traveling continues with Lena toting a bundle of new life and in possession of a man to help her raise the child, an image of hope against the bleak termination of Joe Christmas and a reminder that Christmas does not offer the only conclusion to the journey. Whereas he terminates his journey with his goals unrealized and
unaccomplished, Lena rides into the distance fully aware that life is fundamentally good, full of hope, and worth affirming. The Lena in the bed of the furniture repairer’s truck is the same Lena on the bench of Armstid’s wagon: a woman who affirms life, the importance of society, and who successfully navigates and embraces the social journey.

The psychological journey: in quest of self-knowledge

An examination of the physical journey illustrates the individual’s relationship with a place called home, a physical locale to which people emotionally attach themselves and from which they define their life. The migrant’s cry, “what I could do with that [land]” resonates as the mantra of the dispossessed and exemplifies the longing for a sense of place (GW 235). From a study of the physical journey, we learn the importance of place to the identity of an individual.

An examination of the social journey illustrates the individual’s relationship with society, a group of other individuals with which one interacts and from which one defines social existence. Hightower’s “odor . . . of the tomb” marks those outside daily social intercourse and exemplifies the effects of living aloof from one’s fellow humans (LIA 318). From a study of the social journey, we learn the importance of interacting with other individuals and how the social scene molds our own identity.

Neither the physical nor the social journey, however, can be undertaken without an adequate understanding of oneself. Indeed, undertaking a social or physical journey assumes that those engaging in the voyage are fit to travel. Without understanding oneself, one cannot hope to understand a relationship with others or with the land. Indeed, attempting a social or physical journey without an adequate understanding of the self often proves fatal.4

In no character is this plainer than Joe Christmas. Christmas has engaged in numerous wanderings through various locales and societies, all without ever formulating his self-identity.
Yet his quest to find a land or a society into which he fits cannot compare to his desire to understand himself. Instead of embracing an effective psychological journey characterized by honest introspection, however, he runs, likely because it offers the easiest option. In so doing, he attempts to formulate a self-identity while moving, thereby augmenting the difficulty of accomplishing this task. Though Christmas consciously recognizes the tension of his racial, religious, and gender background, he hopes that these various forces will simply resolve themselves as he travels throughout the Midwest. This does not happen, however, and he instead carries various ambiguous and ill-conceived notions of his identity as baggage from one town to the next, a process that ultimately results in his gruesome death.

Christmas’s psychological journey fundamentally differs from the physical and social wanderings of other characters in *Light in August* or *The Grapes of Wrath*. In others’ journeys, a social or personal force spurs an individual toward a specific goal such as social reintegration, absolution of sin, or the ownership of land. Christmas’s journey, however, lacks such clearly defined goals. Really it is an admixture of several amorphous objectives, including the definition of racial identity, the understanding of the feminine gender, an understanding of divine determinism, and ultimately integration with the social whole. He attempts to work toward these abstract obligations placed upon him by Southern society. Indeed, most of his struggles are caused because “a liberal society demands that individuals invent, create, and define themselves” (Railey 102). Joe, however, cannot define himself and falls into self-destruction because he cannot satisfy such social demands. Faulkner describes Christmas’s withdrawal from Southern society due to his lack of identity:

He didn’t know what he was, and so he was nothing. He deliberately evicted himself from the human race because he didn’t know which he was [referring to his racial
identity]. That was his tragedy, that to me was the tragic, central idea of the story—that he didn’t know what he was. (University 72)

As Christmas seeks to define himself, he falls into the tangles of three primary internal struggles that propel his psychological journey. From his earliest childhood, the ambiguity of his race drives Christmas’s life. Later, after his encounter with the dietitian in the orphanage, a fear of femininity brings his psychological turmoil to the realm of gender. As Christmas matures in the McEachern household, the seeds of the religious struggle sown by Doc Hines also come to the fore of Christmas’s psyche. As his life wends its way through dozens of cities and many individuals, these three themes of race, gender, and religion all shape his psychological journey and ultimately drive him to destruction.

From Christmas’s earliest existence, race has defined his life. Doc Hines, Christmas’s grandfather, removes him from the care of his grandmother and places him in an orphanage while Christmas is yet at toddler. Later referring to Christmas’s possible biracial existence as “God’s abomination of womanflesh,” Hines takes care to regularly peer into the child’s life, and he does everything in his power to instill in Christmas a sense of this racial ambiguity (LIA 373). Hines succeeds in doing so, and the other children begin to differentiate between Christmas’s racial identity and their own. By the time of his adoption, the other children “have been calling him Nigger for years” (133).

During his life in the orphanage, Christmas also encounters femininity and determinism for the first time, both as a consequence of hiding from the dietitian when she and her lover enter her room while he is pilfering her toothpaste. Prior to this affair he harbored no negativity toward women: the young girl Alice had always taken care of him, and his only other connection to woman is the trivial attachment to the dietitian and her “surreptitious” pink toothpaste (LIA 120).
When he faints and draws attention to his hiding place in the dietitian’s quarters, he soon becomes the object of the dietitian’s ire, not because of his interloping, but because she fears that he has recognized and understood the existence of her sexual affair. From this point forward, “femininity and evil have the same smell and taste, and are irremediably synonymous in his mind” (Pitavy 20). He first attempts to elude the dietitian to prevent punishment for intruding in her room. When she fails to enact his ideals of justice, he repeatedly seeks her out so that she may mete out punishment quickly. But punishment never comes, further challenging his notions of justice. With her failure to punish him, the dietitian presents the first challenge to Christmas’s conception of determinism. Prior to his experience with her, Christmas understood morality in causal terms: a proportionate consequence accompanied every trespass; beating was the logical outcome of misbehavior. Life was safe, predictable, and predetermined. However, when the dietitian refuses to punish him, she threatens the security of this cause/effect relationship. The dietitian’s femininity becomes representative of the ensuing lack of justice for Christmas: she does not adhere to his perceptions of an ordained system of consequence but instead discounts it.

Too young to realize that the dietitian’s fornication, not his actions, inform her behavior, Christmas attributes her skewed justice to her femininity. For the young Christmas, women become symbolic of that which challenges the natural order of the universe and (on a more personal level) threatens his primary source of identity and means of existence. As François Pitavy notes, Christmas’s opinion of women changes instantaneously after the impasse with the dietitian: “Until he was caught with the toothpaste, Joe found the dietitian pleasantly suggestive. . . Afterward, food and women are linked and he often rejects what he calls ‘woman’s muck’” (102). Through his experience at the orphanage, he forms a similar revulsion to sex: hiding from
the dietitian at the age of five, he vomits among feminine clothing, and at fourteen he feels sick in the barn when he smells the Negro girl his friends have just raped.

This rape scene that takes place during his adolescence encapsulates predominant themes that Christmas carries from his experience at the orphanage into his life with the McEacherns. As he prepares to assault the girl, the ambiguity of his racial and gender identities overcomes him, and he cannot perform the sexual act. Instead he demonstrates his persisting questions of racial identity by violently beating the “womanshenegro” and fighting his friends (LIA 157).

While issues of racial identity do not frequently surface during Christmas’s residence with the McEacherns, issues of femininity play a significant role in his daily life. Like the toothpaste incident with the dietitian, the masculine represents order and stability while the feminine represents chaos and a challenge to consistency. The masculine McEachern, with his strict Calvinism and causal consequences, becomes a figure of predictability and security. Every sin has its punishment, every virtue its reward. Under such governance, Christmas understands the reason McEachern beats him for refusing to learn Presbyterian catechism, just as he understands the gift of the heifer for productivity on the farm. More importantly, he understands why he must sneak out of the house to meet with the prostitute Bobbie. This cause/effect relationship between action and outcome appeals to Christmas’s desire for justice. But, as in the encounter with the dietitian, a female lurks, ready to impinge on this notion:

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 [the McEacherns]. He expected no less, and so he was neither outraged nor surprised. It was the woman: that soft kindness which he believed himself doomed to be forever victim of and which he hated worse than he did the hard and ruthless justice of men” (LIA 168–69).
Christmas neither trusts nor understands “soft kindness,” and he must hate those who bestow it. He demonstrates this hatred throughout his relationship with Mrs. McEachern. He first rejects Mrs. McEachern after a day of forced study with her husband. Despite his ravishing hunger and physical weariness from beatings earned for failing to learn catechism, Christmas refuses the food Mrs. McEachern offers him. Instead he dumps it in a corner of the bedroom. The repulsion he once felt for the dietitian and her toothpaste occurs reincarnated with Mrs. McEachern and her food. After she leaves the room, however, Christmas’s appetite overcomes him. He goes to the corner, and pauses “above the outraged food kneeling, [and] with his hands ate, like a savage, like a dog” (LIA 155). In the absence of the cold justice of men, women have—in the mind of Christmas—stripped him of his dignity and turned him into a savage, an animal, a disgrace.

Other acts of hatred toward Mrs. McEachern pepper Christmas’s duration in her household. When he steals her money he makes sure to clarify his act of theft: “‘I didn’t ask you for it,’ he said . . . ‘I just took it’” (LIA 209). A final act of hatred occurs when he returns from the probable murder of McEachern and commands her to “‘Get away, old woman’” (LIA 208). With this command, he not only disrespects Mrs. McEachern, but also shows utter contempt for her infertile post-menopausal body.

As he flees his home of thirteen years, Christmas’s anger and hatred surface against both the woman and her husband. In fleeing he rebels against McEachern’s religious Calvinistic determinism and Mrs. McEachern’s femininity. As he runs, he carries his twofold hatred of religious determinism and femininity with him. Coupled with his racial ambiguity, this hatred becomes a die that will mold his actions throughout his life.

Christmas’s relationship with the prostitute Bobbie also demonstrates his dysfunctional understanding of women. Throughout their sexual relations, Christmas believes that he and
Bobbie participate in a monogamous relationship. He perceives the money and trinkets he gives her as a token of affection, not as payment for a sexual service. Only when Christmas enters Bobbie’s room to find her with another client does he realize the truth about his imagined lover. His relationship with her further affects his association of femininity with filth because Bobbie first educates him about the menstrual cycle, a revelation after which he vomits. As he flees her presence, he recalls his adolescence, during which he first learned about the female genitalia, information he confirmed by killing a sheep to confirm its biology. Such experiences on the biological nature of femininity illuminate Christmas’s lack of understanding of women and, in many cases, serve as a demonstration of his hatred and revulsion for all things associated with the female.

Christmas’s continual struggle with themes of race, gender, and religion culminates in his relationship with Joanna Burden, who lives alone in a decaying mansion outside town, a house visibly separated from others. Even nature mirrors this separation: her house stands amid a clearing of trees, as if even the forest had no interest in her. Kevin Railey summarizes the reader’s experience with Joanna’s character: “there is something wrong with her; she is not natural” (101). In fact, while other characters (even Christmas) display signs of movement on journeys toward reclamation or establishment of personal identity, Joanna exhibits no signs of involvement in any journey whatsoever. Even on a psychological level, she remains static. Instead, like The Grapes of Wrath’s Muley Graves, she responds to the journey with stubbornness. She defines her self-identity in opposition to the communally accepted ideals of Jefferson; unlike the segregationist majority, Joanna “claims that niggers are the same as white folks” (LIA 53). Her objection to Southern ideology affects her connection with society, for her “assertion . . . forces her exclusion from the social world” (Railey 101).
Yet Joanna’s separation does not exhibit the same inherent goodness of Lena’s situation. Instead, through her relationship with Christmas, Joanna’s static ideology acts as a multifaceted repressive force on Christmas. When he meets Joanna, he is in the process of a lifelong rebellion against femininity, religion, and racial identity. “All of these forces come together in Joanna,” ultimately inciting his violent rebellion against her and leading to his own death (Pilkington 150).

In his interactions with Joanna, Christmas’s dysfunctional conception of the feminine reaches higher complexity than ever before. Whereas one-dimensional emotion characterized his previous relationships (his relationship with Mrs. McEachern operates solely on hatred while his interactions with Bobbie are primarily sexual), his relationship with Joanna cannot be so simply described. As in his previous relationships, Christmas links food with feminine corruption. Christmas rejects the food Joanna offers him the day after he has attempted to rape her, an act he could not commit because she did not resist him. When he sits before the meal she has prepared he hurls the food—dishes and all—against the wall. “This is fun,” he thinks, “Why didn’t I think of this before? ‘Woman’s muck’” (LIA 238, Faulkner’s italics). Unlike his prior rejection of Mrs. McEachern’s food, he does not return to Joanna’s discarded fare. By rejecting Joanna’s sustenance, he simultaneously reaffirms his masculinity and his skewed association of femininity with softness and corruption.

In the final stages of his relationship with Joanna, Christmas encounters an aspect of femininity previously foreign to his sexual experience: menopause. Perhaps more than any interaction with any female, Christmas’s response to Joanna’s barrenness epitomizes his understanding of females as purely sexual objects: “There is not anything the matter with you except being old. You just got old and it happened to you and now you are not any good
anymore” (LIA 277). In the mind of Christmas, menopause—the female body’s inability to reproduce—constitutes the ultimate feminine filth and corruption. By the time of the murder, Joanna holds as much use to Christmas as the sea does to a stranded sailor: she becomes a physical reminder of her past utility and of her present inability to perform the only function for which Christmas believes her useful. No longer having any sexual use, Christmas physically and ideologically discards Joanna by murdering her.

Christmas’s relationship with Joanna also builds upon the religious tumult of his past. Like McEachern, Joanna adheres to strict Calvinist doctrine, a link reinforced by the names of her deceased family, Calvin and Nathaniel Burden. Her Calvinistic belief that she bears an ordained burden to remain in Jefferson near her family’s graves and work amongst the Negro communities keeps her on the fringe of Jefferson society. As she recalls to Christmas, her father first introduced her to this obligation upon taking her to visit her relatives’ gravesite:

Your grandfather and brother are lying there, murdered not by one white man but by the curse which God put on a whole race. . . . 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 forever be God’s chosen own because He once cursed him.” (LIA 252–53)

Living in the constant presence of this mandate, Joanna functions only “in a world of black and white; gray leaves her helpless” (Waggoner 132). Her world has become one of compartmentalized absolutes: an individual must be either Negro or white, Northern or Southern, cursed or chosen. Ironically, this absolutism leaves her incapable of ever accepting the racial ambiguity of a character such as Joe Christmas.

Joanna’s desire to compartmentally define Christmas’s race begins almost immediately after he shares his racial ambiguity with her. She attempts to force a fully Negro identity upon
him during their sexual activity when she breathes in passion: “Negro! Negro! Negro!” (LIA 260). However, the issue of race reaches monumental proportions during the relationship’s final stages, when Joanna requests a permanent commitment from Christmas: she asks him to become involved in her correspondence with Negro institutions, with the intent that he eventually assume all responsibility for her affairs. In order to prepare for this transition, she plans to send him to study with a black lawyer in Memphis. But accepting her proposal would entail accepting her binary deterministic conception of race as well, an ideological concession Christmas cannot make. Joanna, unfortunately, cannot understand this, and she cannot comprehend why Christmas perpetually wanders through racial ambiguity. She summarizes her lack of comprehension with the pointed question “Do you realise [sic] that you are wasting your life?” (LIA 268).

For Christmas, however, the possibility of a wasted life is less important than the comfort in knowing that, even if he wasted his life, he voluntarily chose to do so. Christmas cannot accept Joanna’s proposal because doing so would require him to accept a fully negro racial identity and that God has predestined this identity for him (and likewise the years of struggle for an understanding of self). Both of these ideas counter Christmas’s need to control his life.\(^5\) Hence, Christmas responds claustrophobically to Joanna’s proposal, ultimately rejecting both the proposal and she who offered it. Though Joanna intends it innocently, her proposition forces Christmas dangerously close to choosing a racial identity, and “one of the strongest motives he has for killing Joanna Burden is his realization that she is pushing towards a final choice” (Railey 145). To accept Joanna’s proposition would mean a Negro identity, but to reject it implies a white one. Christmas cannot even accept the existence of such a choice.

Ironically, as Alwyn Berland notes, “what he has chosen to be is in fact what he believes to be predetermined: to be black and to fly from it; to see the possibility of white and to reject it”
(43). No period of Christmas’s life reflects this more than his final weeks. *Light in August*’s narrator describes Christmas’s mentality before he enters Joanna’s bedroom on the night of the murder: “he believed with calm paradox that he was the volitionless servant of the fatality in which he believed that he did not believe” (LIA 280). Even when he kills Joanna (and thus her attempt to force him into a distinct racial and Calvinist identity), he is not certain that he has in fact chosen his actions. He remains caught between determinism and choice, black and white.

The theme of paradox remains active through his days as a refugee. During that time, he engages in many activities Southern society describes as distinctly black: he exchanges his shoes for a black woman’s brogans “smelling of negro”; he intrudes on the black church service and incites violence; and he runs stupidly across the countryside with no plan of escaping the region (LIA 331). Yet when he arrives in Mottstown, he goes “into a white barbershop like a white man, and because he looked like a white man they never suspected him” (LIA 349). Yoknapatawpha district attorney Gavin Stevens further interprets this paradox of identity:

But his blood would not be quiet. . . . [T]he black blood drove him first to the Negro cabin. And then the white blood drove him out of there, as it was the black blood which snatched up the pistol and the white blood which would not let him fire it. And it was the white blood which sent him to the minister. And then the black blood failed him again, as it must have in crises all his life. He did not kill the minister. (LIA 449)

Stevens’s remarks not only illustrate Christmas’s paradoxical life, but also reinforce the fundamental source of that paradox: Southern society cannot accept an individual of mixed racial identity. Therefore, as James Snead notes, Christmas “must be ‘marked’ as belonging to one pole or the other” (162). But Christmas does not—nor could he ever—actually conform to such a
mark. Consequently, his ambiguity of racial origin and his inability to reconcile that with society's expectations for him drives his social and psychological wanderings until his death.

Unlike Hightower, Christmas never reaches a point of epiphany at which his journey turns from destructive to productive. Instead he finds relief from his wanderings only in death. Yet even in death he finds peace not because he has resolved his struggles with race, gender, and religion, but because the sources of those struggles are removed from him. As he lies in Hightower's house, his blood, symbol of his racial for struggle identity, flows out of him: "the pent black blood seemed to rush like a released breath. It seemed to rush out of his pale body" (LIA 465). After thirty years of turmoil over his race, he finally conforms to the compartmentalized social structure of Southern society with the physical removal of the "black blood" from his "pale body." Through the spilling of blood, Christmas abandons his struggle with racial identity. His struggle with identity of gender and femininity understanding is also removed from him. The macabre actions perpetrated by aptly named Percy Grimm remove Christmas's source of misconception of the feminine by emasculating his own gender identity. Through Grimm's actions, Christmas no longer struggles for gender identity and a complete understanding of the feminine. The text less obviously alludes to Christmas's release from struggle with religious determinism; however, his death in Hightower's house alludes to the removal of this tension. Having fled to Hightower because Mrs. Hines told him Hightower would assist his escape efforts, Christmas later rejects the former Presbyterian minister. Instead of imploring Hightower's help, Christmas hits him with a pistol. He not only rejects any aid that Hightower may have been able to provide to him, but also the larger religious establishment that Hightower represents. In so doing, Christmas abandons his struggle with religious determinism.
Forsaken by his three major sources of identity conflict, Christmas has little reason to live: “He just lay there, with his eyes open and empty of everything save consciousness. . . . For a long moment he looked up at them with peaceful and unfathomable and unbearable eyes” (LIA 465). His relief comes solely from the abandonment of his difficulties. He never reaches a catharsis: in the act of death Christmas undergoes “neither the redemption of a Lear, nor the ripeness of a Hamlet, or the waste of an Othello” (Pilkington 151). Instead, he belongs among those in the preliminary circle of Dante’s Inferno, who were “neither faithful nor unfaithful to their God, / who undecided stood but for themselves” (Dante 3.38–39). In short, Christmas dies in a tainted peace that comes, not from surmounting adversity, but fleeing from it. Death brings peace only because he has abandoned his psychological journey, not because he has conquered it. Ultimately, this does not make Christmas tragically honorable, but ignorant and pitiable. He dies never completing his journey.

If Christmas represents an individual who never brings his psychological journey to fruition, The Grapes of Wrath’s Tom Joad provides an example of one who successfully reaches the apex of a psychological journey. As the novel progresses, Tom exhibits a clear progression from disciple and follower to family leader and (the reader can infer) social leader. During his physical journey from prison to reunion with his family, Tom encounters and becomes the disciple of Casy. As Casy joins Tom on the trek home, the former preacher shares many of his philosophic conclusions. Though at the time Tom does not deeply consider much of what Casy says, his thoughts repeatedly turn to Casy’s ideals during the Joad family’s nomadic wanderings. As Tom ascends to family leadership, he gradually realizes the import of Casy’s naturalistic philosophy, especially as it affects the unity of all humans with nature. As Tom becomes more
aware of the social forces that divide him and the other migrants from each other and from nature, he eventually comes to more deeply understand Casy’s natural philosophy.

This transition reaches its climax when a deputy murders Casy for assisting with the formation of a strike. During the conversation preceding the incident, Casy related to Tom two instances in which he experienced the power of numbers: one in prison when all the prisoners demanded food at the same time, and a more recent circumstance in which Casy provided formative impulse for a strike. Both circumstances produce similar results: the guards feed the prisoners and the plantation owners raise wages, at least for those willing to cross the picket line. In both cases, those in authority appease the masses.

A few moments later Tom witnesses as a deputy murders Casy for his role in the strike, an action that Casy undertook for the betterment of his fellow workers. Tom immediately responds by striking and killing the deputy. As the Joad family escapes from the plantation and Tom goes into hiding in the wilderness (which nicely parallels Casy—and Christ’s—own periods of wilderness introspection and provides the productive antithesis to Christmas’s dysfunctional psychological journey), he realizes that the murder he committed is “an instinctual response . . . against the true assailter, the system, which . . . leaves him no choice other that to strike back” (Conder 135).

When Tom meets with Ma for the last time, he alludes to his intentions to continue to strike back against an unjust system. When Ma inquires about this, he replies:

“‘I been thinkin’ how it was in that gov’ment camp, how our folks took care a theirselves, . . . an’ they wasn’t no cops wagglin’ their guns. . . . I been a-wonderin’ why we can’t do that all over.’

‘Tom,’ Ma repeated, ‘what you gonna do?’
‘What Casy done,’ he said.” (GW 419).

Despite Ma’s protests for Tom’s safety, he remains resolute to pursue his course of action. He now realizes that in order to effect change, an unjust system must be challenged, not obeyed. He concisely states: “‘They drivin’ all our people’” (GW 419). Until he and others like him cease to be driven, the system will continue to take advantage of the migrants, a fact that he now fully realizes and desires to change.

With this conclusion, Tom completes his psychological journey as Casy’s disciple. He now realizes that in order to effect change he must lead more than just his family, he must lead his people in the process of overcoming oppression. Unlike Christmas, Tom has reached a point of epiphany that will change his life and action forever. He has demonstrated the successful completion of the psychological journey: he has altered his interpretation of the world and of himself in such a way that will benefit not only himself but others as well. In so doing, Tom fully becomes one of the heroes of The Grapes of Wrath and an example of the successful psychological journey.

**Conclusion: weaving the journeys together**

While many works of literature explore self-identity, The Grapes of Wrath and Light in August demonstrate that both internal and external entities affect the formation of the self. Through characters that physically travel, Steinbeck and Faulkner explore the meaning of locale to an individual’s self-understanding. As Pa Joad suggests, one cannot develop a comprehensive identity or enjoy functional social relationships without first having a locality with which to identify. Indeed, one does not simply dwell on at piece land but in the emotional spirit of that land as well. Muley Graves’s refusal to desert the farm on which he raised a family alludes to the fact that our blood runs not only in our veins but in the place where we live as well.
This fundamental connection with place affects the further formation of self, which occurs through the dynamic interplay between the social and psychological realms of society and an individual’s response to social institutions and forces. As Hightower’s social journey illustrates, one cannot formulate a functional identity apart from others. From a connection with locality and with land, one builds connections with community. Through interaction with others, the self is continually molded, both by society and by an individual’s past and present personal experiences. Byron Bunch demonstrates that social connections are the lifeblood of society—without commitment to others, hope for the future is born only into a vacuum, without a community to accept it.

Most fundamentally, however, ties to land—along with a realistically understood past—assist the formation of a basic knowledge of self. Connection to land and interaction with community both inform and are reformed as an individual continually reevaluates and remakes self-understanding. As Joe Christmas demonstrates, the blood of introspection and self-understanding must flow through our own psyche in order to create socially and personally beneficial ties to land and to community. As this dynamic threefold identity of place, society, and psychological understanding develops, it provides an anchor and reference for all personal and interpersonal interaction.

At the core, these two novels are fundamentally about identity, the attempt to pursue it, and the consequences of failing to establish it. Only when individuals fully comprehend themselves, their society, and their place in the world can they develop toward self-actualization. Through the physical, social, and psychological journeys, individuals work toward such realization—and ultimately toward a better understanding of their place in the world.
Notes

1 John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*.

2 William Faulkner’s *Light in August*

3 *Faulkner in the University*

4 It is important to note that I have now discussed death in the midst of a journey can derive from multiple sources:

   (1) Death can function as a response to the physical journey, as described on pages 5–6. Characters such as Grampa and Grandma exemplify this response. Their deaths do not occur because they lack a self-identity but because the hardship of the physical journey eventually overcomes them.

   (2) Death can also result from an incomplete conception of self-identity. Christmas exemplifies this response. For him, an insufficient self-identity couples with the hardship of the journey to result in his eventual death.

5 It should be noted that Christmas’s need to *feel* self-determinism does not necessarily imply that it *actually* exists. Indeed, Christmas’s actual life experience is likely not exclusively the product of either determinism or free choice but instead a product of the two, though I would argue that any determinism relevant to Christmas’s life is of a social rather than a divine nature.
Works Cited

Primary Texts


Secondary Texts


