Resisting Normativity in Subjection: An Analysis of Lena Grove's Vagrancy in *Light in August*

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Abstract

Lena Grove is widely acknowledged within the academic world as embodying the "light" of *Light in August*. However, the specific narrative strategies Faulkner employs to construct this luminous image need further critical examination. This study utilizes Judith Butler's notion of normativity and subjection to elucidate Lena's vagrancy, positioning it in relation to the novel's titular "light", the problems of the American South, and the broader condition of modernity: In her vagrancy, Lena not only adopts a resisting standpoint to the traditional identity of the Southern lady and the interpellation of Southern normativity, but also demonstrates a capacity to seek the mainstream's recognition with an appropriate strategy of subjection, through which a desirable modification of the rigid Southern ideologies is made possible. Therefore, Lena's vagrancy is a symbol of the freedom of spirit, a possibility to modify Southern ideologies, and an inherent impulse to progress; Lena also functions as the light and a savior of the Southern town in *Light in August*. Through creating Lena, Faulkner offers a cure to the Southern disease of stagnation, racism and puritanism, and transcends the literary images of ineffectual, impotent modern men characteristic of the early twentieth century.

Keywords: Lena Grove; *Light in August*; William Faulkner; vagrancy; normativity

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1.Introduction

In William Faulkner's *Light in August*, Lena Grove is a significant embodiment of the author's concept of "older light": "It reminded me of a luminosity older than our Christian civilization. Maybe the connection was with Lena Grove ... And that was all that meant, just that luminous lambent quality of an older light than ours. (Faulkner, 1965, p. 199)" Here Faulkner links Lena with the theme and title of this novel: it is her that lights the light of August in Jefferson and gives the novel its name.

Based on Faulkner's words many scholars lay emphasis on Lena's uniqueness and luminosity in their researches: Stanley R. Gillespie (1983) identifies Lena as a goddess of nature, and thus establishing Faulkner's "older light" in terms of a spiritual or religious attitude (p. 40). Irene Visser (2004) refers to Lena as a "mendicant Madonna" who brings peace to the people whose charity she receives (p. 47). Grmusa and Oklopcic (2022) interpret Lena as a "lady travelling" who rejects the cultural memory of the Cult of True Southern Womanhood (p. 4). While these valuable studies offer compelling interpretations of Lena's status as the "light" of *Light in August*, the specific strategies Faulkner employs to construct this luminous character need further critical examination. To explore Faulkner's characterization of Lena, this study introduces Judith Butler's notion of normativity and subjection to illustrate Lena's vagrancy, and its function in relation to the American South and modernity.

Judith Butler's notion of normativity and subjection offers a profound theoretical framework for analyzing individual resistance in relation to traditional gender identity and social normativity, which is a central concern in the early twentieth-century American South, in which the Southern ladies are given normative expectations to embody ideal womanhood: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity... (Grmusa and Oklopcic, 2022, p. 4). However, Lena Grove refuses to perform the identity of a "proper Southern lady", instead she exists as an unmarried woman vagabond who is perpetually on her journey to enact a resistance against the interpellation of the Southern normativity. Moreover, her resistance is grounded in an appropriate strategy of subjection so that the mainstream's care and recognition can be gained to ensure livability. Thus her vagrancy creates a subtle tension between the non-conformer and Southern ideologies, offering a possibility for the individual to modify the normativity to build a more livable social environment. This study proceeds in three parts to explore this relationship between Lena Grove and the established ideologies in the South: Firstly, it explores Lena Grove's resistance to Southern gender norms and ideological normativity; secondly, it examines her strategic subjection to communal ideologies to seek recognition and opportunities to negotiation; and finally, it analyzes her transformative impact on the Southern society: Though the depiction of Lena's vagrancy and its transformative function, Faulkner imagines an opportunity for the South to transcend its entrenched traditions and to embrace modern world.

2. Resisting Southern Normativity in Lena Grove's Vagrancy

When Lena Grove, an unmarried pregnant girl in her twenties, firstly appears in the novel, she is on her journey from Alabama to Jefferson, Mississippi, to search for her unborn baby's father. In this journey she sheds "the bleak heritage of bloodpride (Faulkner, 1972, p. 7)" of her family, and abandons the familial obligations associated with her brother's household, thus initiating her vagrancy. This action of leaving domestic sphere and traversing public space constitutes a direct challenge to the traditional identity of Southern ladies: when normativity expects her to be "an angel in the house", she leaves the domain of domesticity and enters the male-dominated public space; when traditions demand her to be protected and guarded by males, she embarks alone on her long and rough journey. In her vagrancy, Lena no longer performs as a traditional female confined to a fixed social position, instead she actively redefines her identity in spacial mobility.

An even more radical subversion of Southern normativity and traditional womanhood lies in Lena's pregnancy and her denial of the necessity of marriage. To be an unmarried mother in the American South in the early 20th century is sufficient to incur severe social condemnation under the traditional moral code. Yet Lena neither conceals her true situation nor expresses shame. Instead, she confronts others with what Faulkner terms as "tranquil and calm unreason and detachment (Faulkner, 1972, p. 17)" In her refusal to view her pregnancy before marriage as a brand of sin, she redefines motherhood outside the normativity: Lena dissociates pregnancy from marriage, regarding it instead as a natural consequence of her relationship and life experience. Even when she has the opportunity to step into marriage with Byron Bunch and to end her life of vagrancy, she still refuses to "settle down" but chooses to continues her wandering journey. This refusal gives her greater freedom by constituting a strategic non-response to the interpellation of the matrimonial norms. Byron's proposal, though well-intentioned, functions as a normalizing discourse, analogous to the Althusserian scenario cited by Judith Butler: If the policeman representing authoritative voices hails the passerby, and the passerby turns to him and answers the call, a subject subordinating to the ideological normativity comes into being (Butler, 1997, p. 5). Here in Lena and Byron's story, Lena demonstrates a counter-action by refusing to turn and answer the interpellation of matrimonial normativity, thereby resisting against the traditional female identity it prescribes. This resistance marks the inception of her vagrancy at a deeper, ideological level. Lena answers the call of her own inner impulse instead of the interpellation of the outer world normativity, and accepts her own existence as a mother beyond marriage.

A deeper and subtler deconstruction of Southern normativity is constituted by the similarity between Lena's vagrancy and pregnancy and those of Jesus' mother Mary: They both get pregnant before marriage, both do not have fixed residences and have to give

birth to children with symbolic meanings in dilapidated places, even both wear blue dresses and bonnets (Visser, 2004, p. 45). However, despite of the apparent similarity, the non-virgin Lena's story is rooted in a fundamentally different context with that of the Virgin Mary: While Mary's pregnancy is a result of her devotion to God, Lena's pregnancy shows her violation of God's moral code. Lena's pregnancy does not comes from the favor of the God, but is an outcome of the illegitimate union of rural men and women. In these parody of the Virgin Mary's story, a juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane is created to subtly undermine the cornerstone of Southern normativity: In American South in the early twenties century, puritan dogmas were employed to justify racial and sexual oppression, exemplified by Doc Hines' use of "God's wrathful purpose" to find excuse for his action of indirectly killing his daughter and banishing his mulatto grandson (Faulkner, 1972, p. 304). In this social context, puritanism along with sexism and racism forms the core ideological framework of the Southern belief (Bleikasten, 1990, p. 326). By utilizing Lena, this violator of Southern norms and even a representative of puritan "woman evil" in some Southerners' eyes, to parody Jesus' mother, an idol of purity, innocence and virginity in Southern belief, Faulkner exposes the constructive essence of puritan normativity and offers a possibility to deconstruct the traditional gendered idol of the Southern lady, just as Butler's use of parody to delineate the false naturalization of gender identity: "The parodic repetition of 'the original' reveals the original to be nothing other than a parody of the idea of the natural and the original. (Butler, 1999, p. 41)" By blurring the boundary between the normal and the abnormal, the natural and the artificial, Faulkner criticizes the established Southern normativity and shows its inherent historical contingency as well as unnaturalness; by put the Virgin Mary's attributes not on a traditional Southern lady but on a vagabond unmarried mother, Faulkner implies the urgency of reformation of Southern ideologies: what the South requires is not rigid traditions inherited from the antebellum age, but more inclusive social ideologies that can afford individuals greater latitude and embrace pluralism.

3. Modifying Southern Ideologies in Lena Grove's Subjection

The hope of modifying Southern ideologies towards a more inclusive direction can not be achieved only by Lena's resistance to normativity and rejection of traditional identity of Southern lady in vagrancy, but more importantly, also by her subjection to seek public recognition. Butler always views the recognition by community as a prerequisite of the establishment of a subject, which has to be realized by resistance and subjection alike (Zhao, 2017, p. 524). Only the resisting consciousness arising in subjection can make possible a negotiation between the individual and the authoritative ideologies, and this delicate balance is embodied in *Light in August* by the vagrancy of Lena, who chooses neither to disregard the social dimensions of existence

nor to isolate herself completely, but selectively subject herself to established values of community to seek the sympathy, recognition and help of the mainstream.

Lena's journey in vagrancy is smoothly continued on the basis of strangers' help, which is gained through her proper understanding and appropriate subjection to the unwritten rules of Southern community. As a young pregnant woman wearing no wedding ring, Lena is inevitably put under the gaze of Southern normativity, but in face of the outward judgement, her attitude is not confrontational. Her look is "all-embracing, swift, innocent and profound" (Faulkner, 1972, p. 8), and her expression is "calm as stone, but not hard" (Faulkner, 1972, p. 17). When communicating with Mrs. Armstid who is a "gray woman with a cold, harsh, irascible face, who bore five children in six years (Faulkner, 1972, p. 15)", she uses words about Lord and family to get understanding: "I reckon a family ought to all be together when a chap comes. Specially the first one. I reckon the Lord will see to that." (Faulkner, 1972, p. 19) Here Lena's use of religious discourse seems to contradict her action of getting pregnant before marriage, but actually it is consistent with the situation: It reveals a mild, appropriate strategy of evasion and resistance under the surface of subjection: when Mrs. Armstid coldly judge her premarital pregnancy out of God's principles, Lena use God's name to demonstrate her innocent belief. She does not contend or confess in face of the judgement, instead she evades the binary structure of guilty and guiltless, and uses apparent subjection to established religious ideologies to seek the judge's sympathy. Through this strategy she gets the help of Mrs. Armstid, who finally gives all her eggmoney to Lena. As a woman living in vagrancy outside the normativity, Lena utilizes her subjection strategy to negotiates with established Southern ideologies, rendering them more flexible and inclusive. This process thereby activates the latent ethics of care within the Southern community, facilitating the very conditions of livability envisioned by Judith Butler: "The possibility of care, insofar as it also implies the political and social institutions that underpin it, is the first criterion of a life's livability (Butler & Worms, 2023, p. 5)." By fostering livability grounded in an ethics of care, the vagabond Lena enables the Southern ideologies to transcend judgement and violence, and brings hope of progress to the whole Southern society.

This capacity to foster livability distinguishes Lena Grove's vagrancy from that of other characters. Lena is not the sole vagabond character in the novel. In another line of the story, the mulatto Joe Christmas is also a wanderer and a "foreigner" who always refuses to turn and answer the interpellation of Southern normativity in vagrancy, but unlike Lena, his resistance lacks the dimension of subjection. When he is asked by his foster father McEachern to learn Presbyterian catechism, he would rather get savagely beaten than show the slightest sign of submission; when he is caught with the prostitute by McEachern at a dance, his reaction again bypasses subjection. In the confrontation he resorts to violence and killed

his foster father. This kind of deliberate, even violent contempt with all the established ideologies shows Christmas' neglect to subjection as the basic condition to seek recognition and livability. Therefore, a fruitful process of resistance and a successful negotiation with normativity are impossible for him. Unlike Lena whose vagrancy is a heart-warming journey bringing hope to the Southern society, Christmas' vagrancy is a tragic, hopeless exile. Therefore, the vagrancy arrangements in the two story lines of the novel are presented dialectically: one is about Christmas' vagrancy, demonstrating the individual's helplessness in face of the deep-rooted disease of racism and puritanism in the South; while in the another line about Lena's vagrancy, a cure for the Southern disease is implicitly introduced.

4.The Vagabond Lena Grove as a Savior to the South

As an unmarried pregnant woman, Lena embodies the hope of reformation to suffocating Southern normativity through her dual strategy of resistance and subjection in vagrancy. Thus Lena's journey of vagrancy signifies not only a refusal to perform conventional gender identity, but also a desirable modification of entrenched Southern ideologies concerning racism and puritanism. It enables her to be independent of the ideological violence in the South and makes her a contrast to other characters in the novel who live as instruments of racism and puritanism. Percy Grimm who lynches Joe Christmas, and Doc Hines who procures his daughter's death because of her love with a black man, are typical examples. They all believe that they act out of their own free will and their choices are made according to principles of justice and "God's will", but none of them possesses the critical capacity to question the legitimacy of the Southern "justice" itself, which is merely an outcome of institutional oppression, historical conflicts and long-standing racial hatred. Unlike these people manipulated by Southern ideologies, the vagabond Lena has opportunities to get away from the madding crowd, to re-evaluate the overwhelming normativity and to act independent of racial bigotry. Therefore, Lena's vagrancy as well as her spiritual freedom it engenders, emerges as Faulkner's proposed antidote to the South's deep-seated pathologies.

The curing ability of vagabond Lena as an antidote manifests itself through her interactions with other Southern characters in the novel depicted as sufferers of historical trauma and ideological violence. It is the presence of Lena and her quality that influence them, save them from the condition of stagnation or even living death and bring some of them the hope of progress. The "Done Damned" priest Gail Hightower is one of the trapped people. Before his meeting with Lena, he is almost an epitome of the pathology of the South: His body is shapeless, motionless, obese, almost monstrous (Faulkner, 1972, p. 72) and his life is "like a forgotten flag above a ruined fortress (Faulkner, 1972, p. 286)". All these features present him as a personification of

Southern stagnation. Moreover, Haunted by his grandfather who dead for the South in the civil war, he has no ability to cope with his present life and his duties as a husband as well as a priest. He even can not cease propagating the war glory in his sermon, which leads to his expulsion from the pulpit and subsequent numbed existence during years of isolation and "shabby remoteness (Faulkner, 1972, p. 286)". At the beginning when he is assigned by Byron Bunch to take care of Lena he is reluctant because according to the traditional puritan value he believes, an unmarried mother represents women evil, but after he meets Lena and helps her to give birth to her son, his old prejudice is shattered mysteriously and his life condition changes as if he has been baptized by hope: He begins to act with "glow of purpose and pride" and "that air forceful and assured" (Faulkner, 1972, p. 320). He ceases his morbid self-pity, gradually realizing it is his malpractice that has caused his present situation. With the help of Lena and her newborn baby, this depressed old man reconciles with the his personal and familial history to prepare for the future. Moreover, the hope brought by Lena's luminosity extends beyond Hightower. It also helps other characters like Byron Bunch, who turns "from a worried workaholic to a carefree traveller (Visser, 2004, p. 46)", and Mrs Hines who summons the courage to meet her lost grandson, Christmas, for the last time. Before Lena's arrival this Southern town can not escape from the influence of "the dead ones that lay quiet in one place (Faulkner, 1972, p. 61)", and people live as "instruments of someone outside oneself (Faulkner, 1972, p. 387)", but after the vagabond Lena arrives Jefferson and gives birth to her son in that little cabin, the hope machine begins to run mysteriously and everyone can witness an enigmatic yet palpable and positive shift in his life. The vagabond Lena Grove's presence functions as a regenerative force within this stagnant, repressive Southern town.

As a Southern writer, Faulkner remains deeply rooted in the regional reality of the South. However, unlike the writers who persistently defend Southern superiority and cling to the Southern tradition after the civil war, Faulkner's attitude to Southern cultural memory and tradition is complex: As a pivotal figure of Southern Renaissance who grows in the collision between Southern tradition and modern world, he uses his work to dissect the weakness of his own culture, trying to establish a viable connection with his tradition and to offer a solution to his country's predicament. In *Light in August* Faulkner delineates the factors that prevent the South from progressing and embracing modern world: the repressive and conservative atmosphere of community, the rampant racial bigotry and rigid puritan beliefs... and creates Lena, whose vagrancy represents the freedom of spirit, a possibility to modify Southern normativity, an inherent impulse to progress, to save the South from the curse of its historical trauma, its stagnation and racial violence. Moreover, the vagabond Lena not only functions as a savior to Jefferson town of the American South in 1930s, but also has admirable healing power to the whole modern world: when modern literature uses characters

like J. Alfred Prufrock to represent modern men's mental crisis, their ineffectiveness and impotence in disillusionment, Lena Grove offers a natural solution to their problems: just move on, to think about no doctrines or ideologies but always focus on the existence itself, to wander and to seek no purpose, because "the Lord will see to that" (Faulkner, 1972, p. 19). In crafting Lena Grove, Faulkner illuminates not only the darkness shrouding the Southern town Jefferson but also offers a resonant alternative to the prevailing literary depictions of the impotent modern men in the early twentieth century literature.

5.Conclusion

Through creating Lena Grove the pregnant woman vagabond to embody the "older light" in *Light in August*, Faulkner offers a cure to the Southern disease and the civil war trauma: In her vagrancy, Lena enacts not merely a resistance to the interpellation of Southern normativity, but a strategic subjection to seek the mainstream's recognition, through which a desirable modification of the rigid Southern ideologies is made possible. Thus Lena's vagrancy becomes a symbol of hope and progress, of spiritual independence and freedom, and Lena symbolizes a savior to the stagnant South and a cure of Southern diseases of racism and puritanism: Her presence forms a sharp contrast to those who have turned into instruments of suffocating Southern ideologies and functions as a regenerative force for the town people who are haunted by their historical trauma. Moreover, her vagrancy also gives solution to the common disease of stagnation, anxiety and disillusionment in modern world: Never mourn for that past or cling to the established doctrines, just focus on the existence itself and embrace the future. Thus, the vagabond Lena Grove is not only a illuminating character in Faulkner's novel but an enduring, transformative figure within twentieth-century literary modernism.

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