

Fremont Great Books Book Club

Discussion Questions for “Light in August” by William Faulkner

August 15, 2026

1. The term “light in August” describes a specific quality of light during late summer. How does Faulkner employ light and darkness as recurring motifs, and what do they signify?
2. Faulkner uses a fragmented, non-linear narrative style, shifting among several perspectives. How does this approach influence your understanding of characters like Joe Christmas? What does the structure itself imply about the nature of truth and storytelling?
3. Joe divides his affair with Joanna Burden into three phases. How does this structure reflect the instability of identity and power in their relationship, and how effective is this method in generating sympathy or unease in the reader? How does Joe’s uncertainty about his racial identity affect his destiny? Before he kills Joanna he thinks, “Something is going to happen to me. I am going to do something.” How do you understand this paradox of will and fate, passive and active?
4. Reverend Hightower and Joe Christmas are affected by a harsh form of Calvinist Christianity. In what ways does religious belief serve as a source of both meaning and destruction in the novel? Are there any positive or redemptive spiritual elements present?
5. The main characters live on the fringes of Jefferson’s community. How do they seek connection with others? As readers, we learn things about them that none of the townspeople can know. Does this matter? How does their obsession with the dead determine the characters’ lives? How does the burden of history confine or shape them? Is it ever truly possible to escape the past in Faulkner’s universe?
6. Compare the female characters: Lena Grove, Joanna Burden, Mrs. McEachern, Mrs. Hines. How does each of these women navigate the limitations imposed by Southern society and the men in their lives? In what ways do these men’s reactions reflect wider societal concerns about gender and sexuality?
7. Byron Bunch falls in love with, and pursues Lena, completely altering his life. He changes more than any other character. Do you find him admirable?
8. Why do Mr. and Mrs. Hines frantically travel to Jefferson, and what is the significance of Mrs. Hines’ presence at both Joe’s murder and Lena’s childbirth?
9. Faulkner has said that “violence and sexuality determine the contours of the South’s romance of blood” and that Joe is “a character whose very physical and emotional self embodies the sexual violence of racial conflict”. How does the town’s attitude change when Lucas Burch aka Brown announces that Joe told him he was biracial?
10. Does Percy Grimm intend to prevent a lynching, or to lead one? What does he represent about American culture?
11. The District Attorney, Stevens, interprets Joe’s entire life in terms of the conflict between white blood and black blood. Do you agree? Is this Faulkner’s belief?
12. Why is the “toothpaste scene” considered one of the most important scenes in the book?