

Gail Hightower
LENTEN DEVOTIONAL
March 27, 2025
Written by Rev Fred Garry

“One day I seemed to shut a door . . . I said to myself, Now I can write.”
—William Faulkner



Of all the characters of literature who “come and go” through the salon of memory, Faulkner’s Rev. Gail Hightower is my most frequent guest. I distinctly remember the first time I encountered him a few pages into *Light in August*. Hightower frightened me. There was a surge of panic, *don’t be Hightower*.

When I read *Light in August* I was in college. It was not for a class or research. This was an escape. I have always left the world for a while in a novel. For the most part this escape has been successful. With Hightower, though, I felt trapped, cornered, almost as if I were reading the tea leaves of fate. Years later, when I became, like Hightower, a Presbyterian minister, I remember on my ordination day saying to myself, *just don’t become like Hightower*.

I must confess this fear did not dissipate quickly. Indeed, for many years I would not read any Civil War history or literature. It felt “too close”.

The Rev. Gail Hightower is a tragic character of profound disappoint so my trepidation was not without merit. Coming out of seminary he brought his wife to Jefferson (Oxford), Mississippi where he had begged and cajoled his way into the pulpit. The rationale for his desire was to be in and around the place of his grandfather’s death, a calvary officer shot in the Civil War. Such a connection did not doom the young pastor; his obsession with the glory of his grandfather’s death did.

The parishioners of Hightower’s parish described him this way:

they could not tell whether he himself believed or not what he told them, if he cared or not, with his religion and his grandfather being shot from the galloping horse all mixed up, as though the seed which his grandfather had transmitted to him had been on the horse too that night and had been killed too and time had stopped there and then for the seed and nothing had happened in time since, not even him.¹

Hightower's obsession with the glory of his grandfather's death is all he could see. This was his sermon, his common talk, his all-consuming need to live the moment; this was what destroyed his marriage, destroyed his wife, his reputation, his career, his ability to live a life with others. After his wife's suicide, the elders of the parish gave him money to leave town. Much to their chagrin, Hightower bought a small house in Jefferson and put out a sign:

Rev. Gail Hightower, D.D.
Art Lessons
Handpainted Xmas & Anniversary Cards
Photographs Developed

It is as if he was buried alive in a memory not his own. His inability to leave town is like a prisoner pondering life beyond decades spent in a cell.

When *Light in August* begins it is 25 years since the death of Hightower's wife. He has lived in various degrees of obscurity punctuated by violence and ugly rumor. Most critics believe Faulkner sought to convey the convoluted identity of a grandchild's memory, the one who knows only glory, for whom the ravages of the Civil War are far enough removed that only the "galloping ghosts" can be felt and heard. For Hightower, life was caught, entangled, mixed up in a time before time, an un-lived yet felt memory. The grandfather being killed in battle is looped in perpetual repetition.

After doing my own ancestry work and realizing that a good portion of my "seed" lived and died not far from Oxford, my concerns for Hightower should have grown exponentially, but by the time I discovered this, I was the age of Hightower in the novel and no obsession had destroyed my marriage and ministry. I was though mildly concerned when I discovered one more connection. Hightower's grandfather died while serving in the Civil War, but he did not die in battle. He died in a chicken coop whilst stealing his supper. Although very different circumstances I too had a grandfather who died in a chicken coop.

The character of Hightower is important to the power of monument and memory. This novel, as well as nearly all his novels and stories, provides a lens to interpret interpretation. Faulkner is the hermeneutic of the American memory, the way we form our meaning. The sign Hightower puts in front of his cottage is named by Faulkner as "a monument." Before the novel progresses too much more he leaves the narrative to say:

¹ William Faulkner, *Light in August*. New York: Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 1985; 445.

Memory believes before knowing remembers. Believes longer than recollects, longer than knowing even wonders. Knows remembers believes a corridor in a big long garbled cold echoing building of dark red brick sootbleakend by more chimneys than its own.²

In such a "corridor" we find the debt we owe. Memory takes the form of a generational undertow drawing us, pulling us under the sea of multitudes and far too many voices, even some sirens. Faulkner's Hightower is the unpaid bill, the crushing debt of the past which must be paid. And the currency of vainglory will not be accepted here.

To walk down such a corridor is a risk if we are to accept the description of Gail Hightower as an authentic experience. Although a fictional character, it was as if he stands at the gate of memory, where we sift the past and excavate the lost, it is as if he guards the entry to say, "don't let my fate befall you." Know the past but live beyond it; find a way to satisfy the debt without bankrupting your future.

Faulkner's novels were written just after the monument craze of the Civil War memories was over. It was as if he said to his fellow Mississippians, "well, that didn't work." The stone soldiers, the obelisks, the maternal symbol of the Daughters of the Confederacy were set up but they did not rid the towns of any ghosts. At the very least, especially where emancipation is concerned, there is still great work to be done.

² Ibid., 487,