

Two More Trickster Characters in the "Snopes Trilogy" (1)

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Introduction

In contrast to his earlier works such as *Light in August* and *The Sound and the Fury* which show his strife for idealistic and hopeful future, Faulkner's later works show his attitude trying to penetrate into the reality through his imaginative world, or folklore, in which "Tricksters" play a significant role. Indeed, Paul Radin, an anthropologist, says, any forms of Trickster myth are found in "clearly recognizable form among the simplest aboriginal tribes and among the complex", including "ancient Greeks, the Chinese, the Japanese and in the Semitic world."¹ According to Radin, Trickster is:

. . . a figure and a theme of themes which have had a special and permanent appeal and an unusual attraction for mankind from the very beginning of civilization . . . and [it is] at one and the same time creator and destroyer, giver and negator, he who dupes others and who is always duped himself.²

In order for the stories of Trickster to evoke sympathetic response, or to survive, they "have to be removed from the everyday world and put in a ridiculous context so that we may laugh at the laugh of superiority,"³ says Roger D. Abrahams, and he reports three important features of Trickster from his close study of Indian tales:

First, Trickster is represented as existing in the mythical world, the world as it was in the beginning or before man came to his present state. Second, he is given powers such as the ability to change shapes, or sexes, and so is somewhat removed from the sphere of man. He is generally

¹ Paul Radin, *The Trickster, A Study in American Indian Mythology* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1965), ix.

² *Ibid.*

³ Roger D. Abrahams, "Trickster, the Outrageous Hero", *American Folklore*, ed. Tristram Potter Coffin (Philadelphia: the United States Information Service, 1968), 195.

portrayed as an animal. Third, and perhaps most important, he is always presented as a creature with many human characteristics, but one who lacks exactly those features which would qualify him as a member of the tribe. Specifically, he often is shown to be a lawbreaker; the fact is, however, that he is too minatory, too childlike, too insane to be conscious of the law.⁴

The present paper tries to deal with this folkloric characteristics of the Snopes Trilogy by asserting the presence of Trickster through some examination of the two conspicuous characters; Flem Snopes and Ike Snopes, the idiot. The discussion will be made available on the ground of the above three features of Mr. Abrahams' interpretation.

I. Flem, a White Trickster

Flem Snopes shows his first appearance on the Frenchman's Bend "suddenly from nowhere one day and rented a little farm . . . so poor and small and already worn out that only the most trifling farmers would undertake."⁵ Soon after, he marries Eula, a pregnant daughter of the landowner, Will Varner, and within a year, goes off to the town of Jefferson, moving sharply upward, finally obtaining the position as the president of the bank and the mansion with slaves.

A likely character is found in Thomas Sutpen in *Absalom, Absalom!*, who also appeared in Jefferson suddenly, married a woman of a 'family' to have a white successor, owned slaves and a 'mansion' called 'Sutpen's Hundred'. Although superficially they have much in common, these two, are definitely and strikingly different; Sutpen's desperate effort was devoted into his ambition to be accepted as a member of 'the society' which apparently was not that of the white men of his sort, but of other sort. Quite conscious of the "difference between white man and white man"⁶, he persists in land ownership and consanguinity. While on the other hand, Flem had no

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ William Faulkner, *The Town* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), 5.

⁶ Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (New York: Penguin Books Ltd., 1987), 186. On Sutpen's tragic death, my paper, "Poor Whites as the Trigger of Tragedy in *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Light in August*" *Language & Literature*, Vol. 1 (1992), 61-70.

such adherence to land or blood; he does not seem to be even conscious of their importance nor capable of understanding it. Both Sutpen and Flem are brought to death by their kins, 'poor whites', but in contrast to the tragic death of Thomas Sutpen, Flem's death excites compassion in us. This difference can be attributed to the quality of the Snopes Trilogy as a folklore and that of Flem Snopes as Trickster. To argue this, I would like to refer to the texts by applying Abrahams' three conditions cited above.

First, Flem belongs to the frontier world where aristocracy or sense of belonging had no value at all. It is a world where the residents in Jefferson themselves had once lived and where they had depreciated 'history' and family names which they now cherish. To Flem, the town of Jefferson is not a society already established, but a new "pasture"⁷ yet to be cultivated. In fact, "his game of solitaire was against Jefferson."⁸ Therefore, it can be said that Flem represents the world as it was "before man came to his present state."

Second, Flem is removed from the sphere of man, for he is neither accepted by the people nor is he willing to be a member of the community; townspeople, represented by Charles Mallison, considers him as a "stranger"⁹ when he starts to work in the restaurant in a greasy apron, and his wife, Eula, "the fertility goddess", always refers to Flem as "'that man' - a nameless creature"¹⁰. Flem's aloofness from the multitude can be also depicted in his own words in a furniture shop in Memphis. Recommended a piece which could be made to "look still older" because vice-president of a bank needs "background", he answers:

"I don't aim to fool anybody. Only a fool would try to fool smart people, and anybody that needs to fool fools is already one."¹¹

It is noteworthy all the more that he says so while playing a fool himself, signifying his quality as Trickster, "he who dupes and who is always duped himself". If he does not aim to fool anybody, why does he have to go to Memphis to buy furniture which would be never put to use? Evidently, he only had to have what would be properly

⁷ Faulkner, *The Mansion* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), 128.

⁸ Faulkner, *The Town*, 221.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁰ R. P. Warren, "The Snopes World, *Kenyon Review*" (Spring 1941, iii, 253-7), *William Faulkner: the Critical Heritage*, ed., John Bassett, (London: W&J Mackay Ltd., 1975), 261.

¹¹ Faulkner, *The Town*, 221.

owned by a vice-president of the bank, not for himself. Thus, deliberately or not, he keeps a certain distance from "the sphere of man" all the time.

Third, Flem not only shows no concern for the commonplace or implicit laws of the "old community which has developed its own stable way of life and wisdom"¹², but actively neglects it. In fact, the very beginning of his activity is his first appearance, as false as to cause the people to gather and suspect:

. . . since a hired white clerk in the store of a man still able to walk and with intellect still sound enough to make money mistakes at least in his own favor, was as unheard of as the presence of a hired white woman in one of their own kitchens.¹³

The extraordinarily clever way of his pursuit of money is shown in such episodes as deceiving other innocent poor whites with 'paint ponies' and 'buried treasure' in the Old Frenchman's place. To him, money was the only means he could trust and depend upon. His insistence is outspoken by different characters, including the author, narrating Flem's "big funeral":

It was a big funeral: a prominent banker and financier who had . . . no auspices . . . : fraternal, civic, nor military: only finance; not an economy - cotton or cattle or anything else which Yoknapatawpha County and Mississippi were established on and kept running by, but belonging simply to money.¹⁴

In addition to playing tricks on others, his pursuit goes as far as to cause Linda, his own and only 'legitimate' daughter to make a will in order to be released from her 'father':

It was Linda herself that evolved the idea when she realised that as long as he lived and drew breath as Flem Snopes, he wasn't never going to give her permission to leave Jefferson for any reason. And her asking herself, impotent and desperate: But *why? why?* until finally she answered it. . . . *It's grandfather's money, that his one and only chance to keep any holt on it is through mama and me so he believes that once I get away from him*

¹² Warren, *op. cit.*, 260.

¹³ Faulkner, *The Hamlet*, 31.

¹⁴ Faulkner, *The Mansion*, 419.

*him his holt on both of us will be broken and mama will leave too . . . and any hope of grandfather's money will be gone forever.*¹⁵

In this way, Flem not only neglects the way how people are expected to behave in a certain society, but actively deceives and plays tricks on them. He inscrutably breaks tacitly understood laws of Jefferson as "a kind of inverted folk-hero"¹⁶. In the final analysis, however, Flem was inescapably bound within the mundane cares, and he was obliged to play tricks upon one after another - upon Armstid, Ratliff, Will Varner, Eula, Mink Snopes and finally upon himself. Indeed, he plays the role of fool, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the country stage.

Thus, from the viewpoint of Abrahams' and Radin's definition of Trickster, Flem can be considered to be a qualified Trickster of folklore.

II. Ike, Another Trickster

Ike Snopes is another Trickster character, who is living a life on the opposite extremity to that of Flem. While Flem Snopes is a vulgar lawbreaking demon who plays tricks on the old conventional Jefferson, Ike, the idiot, is a purified figure who lives beyond worldly affairs and laws. It will not be meaningless to mention Faulkner's use of an idiot and a cow as his joint subject of love before discussing the quality of Ike Snopes as Trickster.

In Faulkner's works are found characters who are abnormal or mentally retarded, among whom are three idiots, namely, Benjamin Compson in *The Sound and the Fury*, Ike Snopes in *The Hamlet*, and Jim Bond in *Absalom, Absalom!*. Faulkner uses these "abnormal characters in many ways in his works", states Yasuhiro Yoshizaki:

By means of these characters he sometimes criticizes impersonality of the activities of the war, points to the destruction of nature by industrialization of rural area, attacks man's selfishness and the materialistic civilization, and expresses ambivalent feelings, both hatred and nostalgia, toward the good old days of Southern history based upon slavery. Idiots, above all,

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 143-144.

¹⁶ Frederick W. Dupee, "Review, *New York Sun*" (2 April 1940, 40) *William Faulkner: The Critical Heritage*, 252.

signify both the positive and negative aspects of nature, the latter being mainly a result of man's misuse of civilization.¹⁷

Deprived "of human values such as high intellect and profound thought" though he is, the idiot is "an embodiment of natural values such as simplicity, innocence, and instinctive love."¹⁸

Then, what significance does the cow, the object of Ike's love, imply? The cow is classified in modern literature into two categories in its image. One is its seductive aspect, and the other, its goddess aspect as the symbol of nature. The former aspect can be depicted in Carson McCuller's "Poldi", or Richard Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children*, for example; there, we meet with the cow meaning a whore in such expressions as ". . . . What would he want with a cow like her?"¹⁹ or ". . . a man who would not follow a cow was a fool."²⁰

The latter example is found in D. H. Lawrence's use of it; in his essay, "Love Was Once a Little Boy", we see his yearning toward his cow, Susan, every-way explicit:

. . . how am I going to equilibrate myself with her [the cow]? Or even, if you prefer the word, to get into harmony with her?²¹

On this, William York Tindall sates, " To him, she was . . . a religious object and a symbol of life and salvation"²² and "this perfect animal naturally became the object of his devotion and the symbol of the good."²³ The image which Faulkner implies by the cow is that of the latter, as a matter of course. It can be seen in how affectionately and idyllically he describes the idiot's love-making to the cow:

Then he would hear her, coming down the creekside in the mist. It would not be after one hour, two hours, three; the dawn would be empty, the

¹⁷ Yasuhiro Yoshizaki, *Faulkner's Theme of Nature* (Kyoto: Yamaguchi Shoten, 1982), 120.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 133.

¹⁹ Carson McCuller, "Poldi" in *The Mortgaged Heart* (New York: Penguin Modern Classics, 1985), 51.

²⁰ Richard Wright, *Uncle Tom's Children* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1989), 55.

²¹ D. H. Lawrence, "Love Was Once a Little Boy" *Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 334.

²² William York Tindall, *D. H. Lawrence & Susan His Cow* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1972), vii.

²³ *Ibid.*, 29.

moment and she would not be, then he would hear her and he would lie drenched in the wet grass, serene and one and indivisible in joy, listening to her approach. . . . He would lie. . . smelling and even tasting the rich, slow, warm barn-reek milk-reek, the flowing immemorial female, hearing the slow planting and the plopping suck of each deliberate cloven mud-spreading hoof, invisible still in the mist loud with its hymeneal choristers.²⁴

The cow here is the symbol of fecundity and innocence in sacred and mythical world, with which Ike is in perfect harmony.

Now, we are ready to discuss the quality of Ike Snopes as Trickster according to Abrahams' notion. First, the world which Ike lives is not the real world; he lives in a mythical world free from worldly affairs. To him, money means nothing; it is affirmed by the fact that he throws into the water the half-dollar coin which is given to him by Houston, and by the conversation between Ratliff and Mrs. Littlejohn, where the former is speaking, "He dont need money"²⁵. To Ike, what really matters is his relationship to the cow. He lives, in a true sense, in "the world as it was in the beginning or before man came to his present state."

Second, he is indeed given "the ability" to communicate with the cow, through his patience and deep affection for her. Added to it is his idiocy that makes him "somewhat removed from the sphere of man."

Third, he is by no means conscious of the fact that he is 'stealing' someone else's cow. Although so much abused and despised for his theft, he is incapable of understanding the vice of it, and repeats the 'innocent crime' again and again. The act is so pure and innocent that it urges Houston, the owner of the cow, to make up his mind to let him take care of the cow. This is all because Ike lives in a world of conceit and fantasy which transcends all the worldly law and criminality, where he shares with the cow the world of myth, nature, dream and folklore. In this way, Ike may reasonably be qualified as Trickster of a folklore.

III. Conclusion

²⁴ Faulkner, *The Hamlet*, 182-183.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 47.

Flem and Ike are two different types of Trickster, each fully meeting the necessary conditions in his own way. As a consequence, it may well be considered that Faulkner introduced folklore Trickster to compile his story of a small town in the South.

In spite of the fact that Flem and Sutpen have much in common as poor white characters, their activities and fatal death have quite different meanings. That is, while Sutpen's desperate effort to extricate himself from the poor white class and his death by a hand with rusty scythe are themselves tragic, the rise and the fall of Flem rather gives a comical and yet commiserative impression. This may be duly brought about by our compassion to the poor Flem who plays the role of a clown, or Trickster. Never accepted by the people of Jefferson as he was, Flem's actions are jolly and incisive for his indifference to background, history and consanguinity which conventional townspeople of Jefferson cherish and admire.

While exciting readers' sympathy and compassion in a different way, Ike, the idiot, also plays his role of Trickster of symbolizing nature, condemning industrialization, pioneers and settlers that had violently developed natural scenes and virtually destroyed his world.

In Faulkner's Snopes Trilogy, we find more Trickster qualities in various other characters such as Ratliff, Mink, Linda and others. The subject on these characters is left yet to be discussed on the first opportunity.