Flem's Trickery in *The Town* – His Exploitation of Women – (2)

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Introduction

The 'Southerner' is a social creation, just as "the nigger" is, writes Robert Penn Warren in his essay on the South. According to Warren, "if the 'nigger' is a social definition, a creation of white society..., then there is the problem of what is the realities behind the mask of such definition."[1] Likewise, the other side of the coin suggests to us that if "the southerner" is a social creation, then there should be also something behind the mask which is often called "noblésse oblíge" or "Southern Paternalism". Further, what we find bound together is the Southern Women, or ladies as they like to call themselves, who are burdened with their social roles at the edge of this patriarchal society. It is under such circumstances that W. J. Cash gives some description of the cult of Southern Womanhood in the early twentieth century South in *The Mind of the South*:

> ... in the bottom of the minds of even the most flauntingly "emancipated" of ... youth, the old sentimentality and Puritanism bred in their bones from birth still lurked, and often started up to torture the young woman with longing for the old role of vestal virgin, the young man with longing for the old gesturing worship of a more than moral creature – to make them continually restless with the subconscious will to escape into being more nearly whole again. And one result of this was that they usually kept right on giving lip service to the ancient tradition and forms.[2]

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1 Robert Penn Warren, "Faulkner: The South, the Negro, and Time" in R.P. Warren ed., *Faulkner: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966), 261.

2 W.J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: Vintage Books, 1941, 1968, 1991), 331.

Here, he suggests that in spite of its gradual social changes according to the recent industrialization of the South, Southern Puritanism with its ethics and code of behavior which was "religious in origin"[3] persisted in the region. Indeed, the image of the white Southern lady, "beautiful, fragile, good, and ultimately irrelevant to reality" is persistently "at the core of the region's self-definition"[4] well into the contemporary South.

In this paper, focusing my argument upon the second book of Faulkner's "trilogy", *The Town*, I have tried first to show the general morality of the agrarian community imposed upon women by presenting some of Faulkner's characters, second to examine the ground of Flem's trickery through Eula and Linda, and finally to show how the trickster, Flem, is challenging the town. Here, Flem uses his 'family' as a means of trickery, more specifically, the women whose place is at the margin of the patriarchal society. By using women, together with the fact that he himself had his place precariously at the edge of the community, we are forced to realize the obstinate and stubborn townfolks who are vainly clinging to the old tradition as if ignorant of the recent remarkable social changes outside the town.

I. Southern Ladies and Tradition

In the fate of Faulkner's women, we can see this clinging to the 'social roles' of both men and women, which are peculiarly dichotomic; on one hand, women are suppressed and squeezed into the margin of patriarchal agrarian society, and on the other, they show strength and endurance in playing their domestic part, ruling the family.

Let us have a brief look, before going into the main discussion, at how women are expected to play their part at the periphery of patriarchal society and how, on the while, they dominate the domesticity through the eyes of some of the Faulkner's characters. For Henry Sutpen in *Absalom, Absalom!*, who was "a young man grown up and living in a milieu" peculiarly southern, the women were:

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3 Richard Gray, *Writing the South: Ideas of an American Region* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 277.

4 *Ibid.*, 227.

> ... separated into three sharp divisions, separated (two of them) by a chasm which could be crossed but one time and in but one direction – ladies, women, females – the virgins whom gentlemen someday married, the courtesans to whom they went while on sabbaticals to the cities, the slave girls and women upon whom that first caste rested and to whom in certain cases it doubtless owed the very fact of its virginity...[5]

Besides Henry, other male characters, such as Quentin Compson, Horace Benbow, and Joe Christmas "all struggle gamely to protect their notion of Woman as a figure of stainless perfection: dressed in white, it may be, a temple or sanctuary for ideals, as free from the contaminations of time as Keats's Grecian Urn ."[6]

Tossed about in this circumstance, women are expected to behave accordingly. When Mrs. Compson in *The Sound and the Fury* laments over her misfortune with her children, she condemns that she "was only a Bascomb" who "was taught that there is no halfway ground that a woman is either a lady or not"[7] and never gives up her 'ladiness', insisting, "I'm a lady. You might not believe that from my offspring, but I am."[8] Her daughter, Caddie, is also made into a slave to tradition; she has "got to marry somebody"[9] in order to give her unborn baby a name, and when she is abandoned by her husband, she has to leave her daughter in charge of her brother Jason, only because he has "Father's name"[10]. Eula Varner in *The Town* also had to marry Flem Snopes in order to give her child a name.

In arguing 'women's place', it would be unfair only to speak of their weakness and leave out their strength in domesticity. However 'marginal' they may be in male society, women, ladies as they persist, constitute a great role in community. Unlike men, they are "undefeated undefeatable ..., vulnerable only to death, resisted, endured,

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5 Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (New York: Penguin Modern Classics, 1986), 90.
6 Gray, 190.
7 Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* (New York: Jonathan Cape and Harrison Smith, 1984), 127.
8 *Ibid.*, 374.
9 *Ibid.*, 139.
10 *Ibid.*, 260.

irreconcilable."[11] A good example is Miss Habersham, an old lady who helps the boys dig out the truth in *Intruder in the Dust.* Gavin Stevens comments on the toughness and strength of her:

> "Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings and old ladies.... Quite true, as a lot of truth often is, only a man just dont like to have it flung in his teeth at three oclock in the morning. And dont even forget your mother, which of course you cant; she has already long since seen to that. Just remember that they can stand anything, accept any fact (it's only men who burk at facts) provided they dont have to face it; can assimilate it with their heads turned away and one hand extended behind them as the politician accepts the bribe."[12]

So prevailing the manner is, "... you simply cannot go against a community" as Gavin Stevens sees it, representing the Southern gentlemen:

> "You can stand singly against any temporary unanimity of even a city full of human behavior, even a mob. But you cannot stand against the cold inflexible abstraction of a long-suffering community's moral point of view."[13]

Indeed, these commonly held cultural codes, values and norms have put a heavy burden on the Southern women. Kiyoyuki Ono explains it to the point when he says:

> the Southern idealistic view of women's chastity and virtue works two ways... men ought to fight to defend their chastity and virtue 'whether they exist or not' and to impose them on any lady whether she likes it or not from the "community's moral point of view."[14]

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11 Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* (New York: Penguin Modern Classics, 1987), 196.

12 Faulkner, *Intruder in the Dust* (New York: Signet Books, 1948), 82.

13 Faulkner, *The Town*, 312.

14 Kiyoyuki Ono "The Inviolable Principles of the Southern Spirit in the Snopes Trilogy"in Michel Gresset & Kenzaburo Ohashi ed., *Faulkner: After the Nobel Prize* (Kyoto: Yamaguchi Publishing House, 1987), 182.

While occupying only "a marginal position in patriarchal/paternalistic culture"[15], women play dominant roles in the community. As Gavin Stevens tells us, "that damned female instinct for uxorious and rigid respectability which is the backbone of any culture not yet decadent...," supports firmly the ethics of the society. In this way, when it comes to matters of family and its relationships to the community, including marriage, we cannot ignore women's position: how they are taught to behave, expected to appear and suffer to fit themselves in. We have, therefore, to take it into serious consideration how women feel, act and suffer when interpreting and discussing the general activities in *The Town*, for the whole of this work is a series of 'tricks' based on this very social codes.

Keeping this in mind, we are ready to discuss the main subject of this paper – Flem Snopes' trickery.

II. Ground of Flem Snopes's trickery

The purpose here is to show why Flem could manipulate the town's moral codes by exploiting 'women' as a means of his trickery, and how stubbornly the townspeople resist his challenge and as a result, they exhibit their obstinate adherence to 'tradition', that is, religious persistence on purity and strong insistence on the fixed notion of women's place and men's place in the patriarchal/paternalistic agrarian community. There are lines and incidents that show the town's bigotry and lack of flexibility. Just to list a few, Charles Mallison tells of the capture of Montgomery Ward Snopes who runs a photograph studio in town, evidently showing pornography:

> ...there simply wasn't any place in Jefferson, Mississippi, culture for a vocation or hobby or interest like the one Montgomery Ward had tried to establish among us. In Europe, yes; and maybe among the metropolitan rich

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15 Craig Werner, "The Framing of Charles W. Chesnutt: Practical Deconstruction in the Afro-American Tradition" in Jefferson Humphries ed., *Southern Literature and Literary Theory* (Athene and London: University of Georgia Press, 1990), 353.

> or bohemians, yes too. But not in a land composed mainly of rural Baptists.[16]

The history of the town also speaks for itself:

> ... ours a town established and decreed by people neither Catholics nor Protestants nor even atheists but incorrigible nonconformists, nonconformists not just to everybody else but to each other in mutual accord; a nonconformism defended and preserved by descendants whose ancestors hadn't quitted home and security for a wilderness in which to find freedom of thought as they claimed and oh yes, believed, but to find freedom in which to be incorrigible and unreconstructible Baptists and Methodists; not to escape from tyranny as they claimed and believed, but to establish one.[17]

Gavin Stevens, when he learns from Eula that V. K. Ratliff stands for Vladimir Kyrilytch, he outcries:

> "... nobody else on earth knows his name is Vladimir because how could anybody named Vladimir hope to make a living selling sewing machines or anything else in rural Mississippi? ... the secret he would have defended like that of insanity in his family or illegitimacy."[18]

It is in this town, where moral codes and ethics are highly valued as something never to be trespassed, that Flem's trickery takes place. In *The Town*, Jefferson's cultural codes are challenged by Flem through his closest 'kins', namely, Eula and Linda. It is necessary for us to be reminded that Flem married Eula already with a baby simply by buying a license. Considering the nature of the townfolks as we have seen above, it is quite easy to assume that this marriage was most probably arranged by Eula's father, Will Varner, the prominent man of the county who had a 'name' to be admired and

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16 Faulkner, *The Town*, 154.
17 *Ibid.*, 307.
18 *Ibid.*, 322.

respected. It would have been quite natural for him and Mrs. Varner that their family act as a model of the society according to the codes, and that Flem extort them to make him Eula's husband, or rather, the child's father, so that the Varners would be able to avoid the family disgrace and to save the honor and good name of their own. Hence, this marriage is quite reciprocating. It never was to the advantage of anyone in particular, but equally of all involved. For Flem, it provided a good chance to obtain a social status in the community, for Mr. and Mrs. Varner, it allowed them to save face, and for Eula, it gave a 'legitimate' name to the baby.

III. The Two Wills

Proceeding on the above ground, the following argument will be focused upon the 'wills' of the two women, one by a 'belle' and the other by a 'lady'. Linda's will was "her idea", according to Eula, "she did it herself... she believes she thought of it, wanted to do it, did it, herself"[19] because "he was her father"[20], and because "you—a girl anyway – dont really hate your father no matter how much you think you do or should or should want to because people expect you to or that it would look well ...."[21] At a scene quite familiar, which Eula discloses, "... we had finished supper, we were in the living room before the fire...," Flem allows Linda to go to the University:

> "I was wrong. I thought the Academy ought to be good enough, because I never went to school and didn't know any better. But I know better now, and the Academy's not good enough any more. Will you give up the Yankee schools and take the University at Oxford?"[22]

Flattered by this, Linda feels she wants to do something for him because as she tells her lawyer, Mr. Stone, "my father has been good to me and I love and admire and

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19 Faulkner, *The Town*, 321.
20 *Ibid.*, 324.
21 *Ibid.*, 322.
22 *Ibid.*, 325.

respect him"[23], and right after she reaches Oxford, she makes her will to give Flem all 'her money', as stated in her words:

> "my share of whatever I might inherit from my mother, Eula Varner Snopes, as distinct and separate from whatever her husband shall share in her property, to my father Flem Snopes."[24]

The arrival of her will marks the beginning of the catastrophe. That is, Flem takes this will to Mrs. Varner, instead of Mr. Varner. He even involves Ratliff, who knows 'the world' and yet "jest dont know"[25] what Flem is trying to do, to witness it by asking him for a ride to Mrs. Varner's house and back again. From Mrs. Varner, Will Varner formally learns about the 18-year affair of Eula and de Spain, and 'for his own good', storms into her bedroom at four o'clock in the morning; He wants both Flem and de Spain out of the bank, as Eula tells Gavin Stevens:

> "...Manfred for having been my lover for eighteen years, and Flem for waiting eighteen years to do anything about it. Papa didn't know about Manfred until this morning. That is, he acted like he didn't. I think Mamma knew.... But maybe she didn't. Because people are really kind..."[26]

The reason why Will Varner gets agitated 'now' is that Eula's violation of his moral codes springs out of obscurity, and he 'should' do something to it, for to the whole town, it was a "secret hidden unhealed nail buried in the moral tree of [our] community," Charles Mallison tells us:

> that nail not only corrupted and unhealed but unhealable because it was not just sin but mortal sin ... a sin which people seemed constantly and almost universally to commit with complete impunity....

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23 Faulkner, *The Town*, 328.
24 *Ibid.*, 327.
25 *Ibid.*, 142.
26 *Ibid.*, 329.

> In fact, the town itself was divided into two camps...: the one that said the sin must be exposed now, it had already lasted eighteen years too long; the other which said it dare not be exposed now and so reveal our own baseness in helping to keep it hidden all this long time.[27]

Will Varner curses Flem for his inability to establish 'a family', letting the daughter write a stupid 'will', and de Spain and Eula also, for creating a family disgrace. The only way for Eula to protect the family honor, at least to save her daughter, Linda, from disgrace, is her death which would "leave her child a mere suicide for a mother instead of a whore."[28] On the same day Flem brings Linda's will to Mrs. Varner, Eula, although orally, states her will to Gavin Stevens. In his office, she asks him, begs and demands him to marry Linda. It was the best she could do as a mother to her daughter, a 'belle' who should become a 'lady' by righteous marriage. By killing herself, Eula atones for her misconduct, and the townspeople accept it as her redemption:

> ... now they even forgave Mrs Snopes for the eighteen years of carnal sin, and now they could even forgive themselves for condoning adultery by forgiving it....[29]

Not only does the townfolks forgive her, they also represent Eula's intention:

> She had the whole town on her side now, the town and the country and everybody who ever heard of her and Mr de Spain or knew or even suspected or just guessed anything about the eighteen years, to keep any part of the guessing or suspecting or actual knowing (if there was any, ever was any) from ever reaching her,[30]

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27 Faulkner, *The Town* , 308-309.
28 *Ibid.*, 340.
29 *Ibid.*, 340.
30 *Ibid.*, 340.

although ironically enough, Linda is to return to Jefferson deaf and mute in *The Mansion*, and no word ever reaches her. In fact, Mrs. Mallison sharing the life philosophy of resignation with Eula, says to Gavin, "at first, I thought I would never understand why Eula did it. But now I'm beginning to believe that maybe I do"[31] as a lady.

In this way, through Eula and Linda, the whole town exposes itself; its bigotry and inflexibility in accepting the queer and unconventional. Gavin Stevens who represents a traditional ethical perspective of the town as a protector of law and order, manners and mores, is not the exception; we see how Flem uses these two women to manipulate him. Since Eula was "not just a local belle but a belle throughout that whole section"[32], Gavin feels it a man's duty to save and protect her name and honor. By doing so, he unwittingly helps Flem at least three times in *The Town*. The first is when he draws up a suit as an acting City Attorney against Mayor de Spain's bonding company, charging malfeasance in office and criminal connivance on that old quick-vanishing power-plant brass. When Eula visits Gavin in his office at night and offers herself, with the understanding that she is what Gavin wants by the suit, he realizes that she is trying to protect the honor of her husband, not that of Manfred de Spain. Hence, in order to save her place as a 'lady', he withdraws the charge. The second is when Gavin gives up conducting Eula's funeral in place of Flem. Asked by Mrs. Mallison whether he wants Linda to "have to say afterward that another bachelor had to bury her"[33], he again realizes that this time, he has to withdraw for Linda. And the third time is when Linda questions if Flem is really her father, he insists Flem Snopes is her father, by which he saves the honor of Flem, Eula and Linda.

IV. Conclusion

By successfully presenting us the three narrators, Gavin Stevens, Ratliff and Chick Mallison, to tell us the whole story in *The Town*, Faulkner tries to show the South as "projected onto the screen of (their) consciousnesses", writes Kiyoyuki Ono:

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31 Faulkner, *The Town,* 343-344.
32 *Ibid.*, 6.
33 *Ibid.*, 344.

> Faulkner tries to grasp not the mere facts but the truths of the chronicle which otherwise lie invisible behind the changing facts – the Southern tradition which lies speechless at the bottom of the Southerners' consciousness.[34]

Indeed, Faulkner is "dramatising and exploring a complex of feeling he shares, a code that was his as a (white, male) Southerner."[35] From the episodes in *The Town*, we know something continuous and consistent in human behavior, and we understand "just how stubbornly the old codes survive."[36]

Flem certainly is a great trickster, but the secret of his success is not that he is good at manipulating the minds of the townspeople, but the fact that he places himself in the midst of the community life undetected. Flem's trickery is all the more successful because he 'touches' the mind of the townspeople. Starting from a "stranger"[37] in a greasy apron behind the counter of a restaurant, living in a canvas tent with his working wife and a baby, he shares the poor whites' dream of social and economic rise and advancement. All of the events in *The Town* show us his desperate effort to steadily climb the social ladder from the very bottom of the society. We cannot but admit the fact that he is always hard working, and a good example which shows it is that when he becomes the vice president of the bank, he tries "to be what a bank vice president was or should be"[38] by learning how the bank is run and by furnishing his house with what a vice president should have. He devotes himself not only to economy, but also to becoming a fine member of the community in order to establish 'his place' there. In order to do so, he helps the townspeople get rid of two unmoral Snopeses, that is, he helps to send Montgomery Ward Snopes who was conducting an unethical business in town to prison, and orders I.O. Snopes, who was earning money by killing mules on the railroad, to go back to Frenchman's Bend for ever. In this way, he himself tries

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34 Ono, 174.

35 Gray, 190.

36 *Ibid.*, 227. Here, he examines the recent surveys conducted in the early 1980s, concerning women's place in the South, and concludes it this way. He also suggests that despite the rise of economic position of many Southern women, "men...continue...to treat them as 'ladies': that is to adopt protective rituals that are in effect forms of domination."

37 Faulkner, *The Town*, 4.

38 *Ibid.*, 137.

desperately hard to be promoted and to be accepted as a member of the community, no matter what his real intentions are. He speaks of his desire to the point when he says to Gavin Stevens, "I'm thinking of Jefferson",[39] "I'm interested in Jefferson.... We got to live here."[40]

In this way, Flem, the trickster, "reflects the processes inherent in the human mind" through "a symbolic inversion" which "help people see their classification systems, the culture's lineaments, for what they are."[41] The success of Flem's trickery is deprived from the fact that Jefferson is an agrarian community in the South which adheres to "the inviolable Southern spirit... peculiar to the land and impervious to the social change,"[42] in their understanding of 'women's place.'

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39 Faulkner, *The Town*, 166.

40 *Ibid.*, 176.

41 Ruthann Knechel Johansen, "The Narrative Secret of Flannaery O'Connor: The Trickster as Interpreter" (Michigan: U.M.I. Dissertation Service, 1983), 78.

42 Ono, 195.