

Mink Snopes of *The Mansion*, Faulkner's Devoted Character (4)

Yuumi Sasaki

William Faulkner's *The Mansion* (1959), as the author claims in the note of the volume, is "the final chapter of, and the summation of, a work conceived and begun in 1925."¹ Indeed, writing of the "Snopes Trilogy" took the author almost all through his productive years as a writer. It took fifteen years until the publication of the first volume, *The Hamlet* (1940), still seventeen more years until the second volume, *The Town* (1957), and additional two more years until the final volume, *The Mansion* appeared. But why? Why did Faulkner have to wait for so long as thirty-four years to complete the trilogy while he has produced such great works as *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *Light in August* (1932), *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) and many more in the meantime? A clue to this simple but significant question seems to lie in what he wrote and what he said. That is, he needed that long time to learn "more about the human heart and its dilemma"², or to write about "problems of the human heart in conflict with itself"³ through his Yoknapatawpha County and its dwellers. In *The Mansion*, which he considered to be "the last of my planned labors"⁴, Faulkner writes about plain white Mississippi farmers whom he has loved and sympathized most on his apocryphal county which he knew best. Searching into the matter by a close study of his letters leads us to assume that the trilogy was the long-cherished work the author so wished and desired to write and complete throughout his life as a writer.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is a search for the reason why it took Faulkner thirty-four years to finish the trilogy, never even thinking of giving it up, by looking into his private life and letters. Putting aside the authorities' criticism

¹William Faulkner, *The Mansion* (New York: Random House, 1959).

²Faulkner, note to *The Mansion*.

³"Faulkner's Nobel Prize Speech", Stockholm, December 10, 1950.

⁴Joseph Blotner, ed., *Selected Letters of William Faulkner* (New York: Random House, 1978), 433.

concerning his genius, the argument will be focused mainly upon the author's own point of view. As far as he is concerned, Faulkner seems to have valued *The Mansion* as the best of all his works. Otherwise, he would not have written it at all. A couple of his letters indicate that Faulkner was confident that his later works were better than his earlier ones; in his letter, written to Else Jonsson, in June 1955, he tells her:

...I am busy. I mean, I am nearing sixty, a writer, artist, at that age doesn't have much time left while the work will be good, sound; I won't live long enough to do all I have in mind even if I live to be 100.⁵ (Underline, mine)

Also, in May, 1959, he writes to his editor, Albert Erskine, answering his concerns about the various kinds of discrepancies between stories in *The Hamlet* and those retold in *The Mansion*:

Premise: I am a veteran member of a living literature. In my synonymity, 'living' equals 'motion, change, constant alteration,' equals 'evolution,' which in my optimistic synonymity equals 'improvement.' So if what I write in 1958 aint better than what I wrote in 1938, I should have stopped writing twenty years ago; or, since 'being alive' equals 'motion,' I should be 20 years in the grave....⁶ (Underline, mine)

Thus, by analogy, *The Mansion*, which Faulkner placed as his last work as a professional writer, was considered to be his best at least from his own point of view.

In addition, it leads us to the extended argument as to whether the hero character of *The Mansion*, Mink Snopes, the proud poor white murderer of Flem Snopes, is honored and sympathized by the author. We can easily find some links between Mink Snopes, a minute poor white country folk, who has been alienated from the modern world by the penitentiary wall for thirty-eight years, and the

⁵Blotner, 381.

⁶Blotner, 429.

author, William Faulkner, who liked to consider himself also as a “country folk”⁷ and who, too, had had a strong sense of “buried” alienation from the world until he gained Malcolm Cowley’s attention.

I. Faulkner’s Private Life and the Writing of the Snopes Trilogy

Faulkner’s private life during his writing career can be roughly divided into four phases. First, from 1924 to his marriage on June 20, 1929. It is the period he enjoyed freedom as a young artist. That is, he could write or work whenever he wanted.

The drastic change came with his marriage. Joel Williamson, one of the foremost historians of the South, of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, explains it to the point:

For the male, marriage meant that he became - among other things - a provider. Before marriage, Faulkner might well throw away his post office job, he might live in a room in his father’s house, eat at his mother’s table, and earn five dollars by odd jobs when he felt the need. After marriage there had to be a house to live in and a steady income. Marriage also brought in-laws, and in-laws of in-laws, all of whom were counted in the familial firmament. When Bill married Estelle, he also married the Oldhams, and when his first child came, he married Oxford and the community.⁸

Therefore, the second phase begins with his marriage, and ends with the absolute release from the contract with Warner Bros. in 1949. It is the period which he had to bear all the financial burden to support his clan as the oldest son of the family;

⁷In his letter to his mother written in Paris on 16, August, 1925, he complains about the nice place he is staying, and talks about moving out to some cheaper place, because “It’s full of dull middle class very polite conventional people. Too much like being at a continual reception. Country folks are my sort, anyway.” (Blotner, 12)

⁸Joel Williamson, *William Faulkner and Southern History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 226.

after his marriage, he has supported Estelle's children by her ex-husband, his own mother after the death of his father in August, 1932, his own precious daughter Jill, born June, 1933, his brother Dean's widowed wife and her daughter after his death in a plane crash in November, 1935, and partly Estelle's parents. In time of financial need, he signed the seven-year-contract with Warner Bros. wrongly in 1942, which restricted his freedom to write until 1949.

The third phase would be the period between 1949 and 1956 when he was invited to University of Virginia as a writer-in-residence. After he received the Nobel Prize in 1950, he became a public man, and did his best as a social being. It was the time of racial violence and Civil Rights movement, and Faulkner naturally got involved in the issue as a celebrity living in the South. For what he had said in his speeches and interviews, he "kept receiving hate mails and phone calls in the wee hours of the night"⁹.

Finally, the fourth phase marks the last six years of his life from 1956 until his death in July, 1962. It was not until this last phase of his life in Virginia that Faulkner obtained peace, that is, his place in the community, sufficiently high reputation as a Nobel Prize winner, release from the commitment to society as a public white man living in the South, as well as his own grandsons and freedom from financial worries and sexual drive.

The first of the trilogy, *The Hamlet*, was published in the second phase, however, it had taken him fifteen years after he began working at it in 1925. By going through his letters as we do later, we see how he had struggled to write it but in vain. While writing it, he talks about publishing it together with the other two volumes as one Snopes book, intending to write the others immediately after he has finished the first volume¹⁰ However, it was not until the final phase when he could take up the trilogy again and write *The Town* and *The Mansion*. The reason seems quite clear; he could finish it only when he was free both spiritually

⁹Williamson, 304.

¹⁰In his letter to his editor, Bennet Cerf, received on 19, Jan. 1939, he writes, "... I am close to half done with the first volume of this proposed Snopes book, and I have been so busy at it that I have just got around to correspondence.... This volume will be about 80,000 to 100,000 words I think. I'll send it in as soon as I finish it, which should be about April. Do you think you will publish it at once, or wait for the other two? You could print them as I write them,...., later print them all in one volume, about 1,000 pages, call it SNOPEs" (Blotner, 109)

and financially. He needed to take time to write them without any worries about earning money or worldly events. As we go through the letters, it becomes more and more obvious that he did not want to do it just for the sake of money, but for the sake of his sincerity as an artist.

II. Faulkner's Writing Attitude: Sincere and Serious Writing

Faulkner's attitude toward writing is always sincere and serious. One example to support this assumption is the fact that although he has asked for advance payment ever so often for unfinished works, he never accepted any for works he did not have any prospect. When suggested to write a book on the Mississippi River through Ben Wasson in the summer, 1933, his response is cautious and sincere:

I have your letter about the Miss. river book. I think I would like to write a book like that, but I believe it would take some time; first, to write something as outside of my line as nonfiction; and second, to get done with what I have on hand now to start it.¹¹

In February, 1935, he writes to Morton Goldman:

About Mississippi River book. I dont believe I can do it. I am a novelist, you see: people first, where second....¹²

In 1944 when the offer of a \$5,000 advance from Doubleday, Doran for a book on the Mississippi River emerged again, intending to rescue Faulkner from Hollywood, he explains:

... The reason I dont seem yet to know my own mind on the subject is as follows:

¹¹Blotner, 73.

¹²Blotner, 89.

I have never done a book of that sort, never had the notion to do one, and so I dont know exactly where to begin. So in a sense that means to learn a new trade at age of 47 ... let me think about it a little longer ... I would not insult the men who made the offer possible by taking the money for anything less than my best; If I did that, the whole purpose of the offer would be exploded, as I would still be morally and spiritually in Hollywood....¹³ (Underline, mine)

So tempting the offer of the advance must have been, however, he writes to Harold Ober in January, 1945:

My feeling about the River book right now is, I wont commit myself yet, even at risk of losing the offer.¹⁴

Writing from Hollywood to Harold Ober again in September, 1945:

Yes, I have thought about the Doubleday matter ... I would like to do it, if I believed I could do a first rate job. I would have no qualms about the first rate job, if I had thought of the idea myself. But as I have not thought of such a book in my 47 years, perhaps the job is not for me. I'll sell myself here to do what I am not sure I can do, but I have too much respect for my ancient and honorable trade (books) to take someone's money without neither of us will be ashamed of the result. I will keep it in mind though. I will probably need money

So please keep the Doubleday matter in status quo That is, dont refuse or accept it either until you have heard from me later.¹⁵

In his letter to Harold Ober, in February, 1946, he maintains his sincere respect for writing while he is desperately in need of money:

¹³Blotner, 187.

¹⁴Blotner, 189.

¹⁵Blotner, 201-2.

In 6 months there (Cal) I can save enough to live six months here. This is a hand to mouth existence, But I seem to have reached the age where I no longer have the courage to face the prospect of borrowing advances against what I have not yet done, or of beating out what is to me hack work on speculation. If I accepted \$5,000.00 advance on that river book, I would spend all the time worrying about what I would do when that was spent

I am about broke again, I may go on out to Hollywood anyway....¹⁶

In this way, he has always been sincere about his writing, and careful that all his works be first rate. On 22 May 1946 when Robert Linscott wrote Faulkner that they found the introduction to *The Sound and the Fury* which he had written in August 1933 for the special edition Random House planned to publish and Linscott proposed using it in the forthcoming Modern Library edition, Faulkner answers promptly:

Bless you for finding the introduction and sending it back to me. Random House paid me for it and ... I would be willing to return double the amount for the chance of getting it out of danger and destroyed

Meantime, have the House charge me with what they paid me for this other one, I think it was \$500.00 though I hope less.¹⁷ (Underline, mine)

This, in spite of his financial difficulties. He never loses his pride as a first rate artist, and it is because of this very sincerity that we can keep track of why the writing of the Snopes trilogy was so delayed; he had taken advance on the trilogy, and seems to have felt obliged to report the reason for the delay and how it has been proceeding to the publisher.

¹⁶Blotner, 227.

¹⁷Blotner, 235-6.

III. Reasons for the Delay

Faulkner's main reason for the delay is either having to write short stories because of the shortage of money or having other novels in mind for fast money. Ever since his marriage to Estelle, he had been always in need of money to support his clan, and was constantly tormented by the feeling of financial crisis even after he has become "rich".

The critical question is why he had to delay the Snopes book, for which he had accepted advance money, instead of many others like *Light in August* and *Absalom, Absalom!* that were to win him glorious credit as a superb American writer. There is obviously something different in the Snopes book. In it, we find no such tragic heroes as Joe Christmas or Thomas Sutpen, or any sort of violence, either racial, physical or sexual. As generally valued, it is not a product of genius at its best. Rather, it was exactly what Faulkner so badly wanted to write, with his genius, about his own kind of people. Reading some of his letters from this point of view, we come to understand that he was not able to write it with his genius alone, but the genius needed to learn about life. In October, 1933, he writes to his editor, Harrison Smith that he does not think "the novel will be ready for spring. I have been at the Snopes book, but I have another bee now, and a good title, I think: REQUIEM FOR A NUN"¹⁸ In August, 1934, Faulkner writes to him again that he does not know when he can finish it because:

... I believe that the book is not quite ripe yet; that I have not gone my nine months, you might say. I do have to put it aside and make a nickel every so often, but I think there must be more than that. I have a mass of stuff, but only one chapter that suits me; I am considering putting it aside and going back to REQUIEM FOR A NUN, which will be a short one, like AS I LAY DYING, while the present one will probably be longer than LIGHT IN AUGUST. I have a title for it which I like, by the way: ABSALOM, ABSALOM; the story is of a man¹⁹ (Underline, mine)

¹⁸Blotner, 75.

¹⁹Blotner, 83-4.

In December, 1938, he writes a long letter to Robert Haas, Random House vice president, about his scheme of the trilogy. The difference between his plan at this point and what actually appears in *The Mansion* is quite interesting. In his original plan, he intends to write more about Flem and his kinsmen:

By this time Flem has eaten up Jefferson too. There is nothing else he can gain, and worse than this, nothing else he wants. He even has no respect for the people, the town, he has victimised, let alone the parasite kin who batten on him. He reaches the stage where there is just one more joke he can play on his environment, his parasite kin and all. So he leaves all his property to the worthless boy, knowing that no other Snopes has sense enough to hold onto it, and that at least this boy will get rid of it in the way that will make his kinfolks the maddest.

It ends like this. Flem is dead, all the kin have come in to the funeral, to see what they are going to get....²⁰

The difference is clear. After twenty years, he has developed Mink Snopes into a desperate but proud and lovable “man” who maintains and believes in clan loyalty, the virtuous Southernness. Indeed, this dramatic change should have come from the fact that the author has learned:

more about the human heart and its dilemma than he knew thirty-four years ago; and is sure that, having lived with them that long time, he knows the characters in this chronicle better than he did then.²¹

IV. Mink Snopes and Faulkner

Between Mink Snopes in *The Mansion* and its author, we find things quite common. First, their attitude toward family obligation. Like Mink, Faulkner believed in clan obligation; he did his best to fulfill it whenever he needed to. As

²⁰Blotner, 108.

²¹Faulkner, note to *The Mansion*.

he writes to Harold Ober in June, 1942, in spite of the fact that Faulkner had been so badly distressed and annoyed by financial pressure, he never gave up his responsibilities as:

oldest son to widowed mothers and inept brothers and nephews and wives and other female connections and their children, most of whom I dont like and with none of whom I have anything in common, even to make conversation about. I am either not brave enough or not scoundrel enough to take my hat and walk out.²² (Underline, mine)

Second, the fact that Faulkner gives Mink an ideal family with a supportive and obedient wife, with whom he had fallen in love in the woods, and daughters by her indicates that he liked this character, or at least that he wanted to make him more complete as a man. This is quite significant when we consider the fact in Faulkner's world that:

... if one looks at the crucial stage in the progression, marriage, one finds among the leading characters no reasonably perfect union - nor even, one might add, a reasonably happy couple outside of marriage.²³

While pointing out this way, Williamson places Mink and Yettie as "Faulkner's potentially most perfect couple."²⁴

Third, Faulkner gives Mink at the end of *The Mansion*, a name, MC Snopes. It cannot be accidental when we look into the author's family tree and find one MC Falkner in each generation beginning with his father, Murry Cuthbert Falkner, down to the fourth generation.

Fourth, Mink's age at the time of his release from Parchman is 63, which is roughly the same as Faulkner himself when *The Mansion* was published. And further more, both play the role of a trickster in the Southern community and departs from it; Mink for the west, and Faulkner for Virginia. Both Mink and

²²Blotner, 153.

²³Williamson, 367.

²⁴Williamson, 369.

Faulkner have been alienated from the world for such a long time. Mink's imprisonment for thirty-eight years reflects Faulkner's confinement in his own little postage stamp of native soil, where he was never appreciated as a great American writer. Robert Penn Warren gives us a glimpse of this in *Segregation: The Inner Conflict in the South*:

"Didn't they make another movie over at Oxford?" I ask.

The man nods, the woman says yes. I ask what that one had been about. Nobody had seen it, not the woman, neither of the men. "It was by that fellow Faulkner," the woman says. "But I never read anything he ever wrote."

"I never did either," the man behind the desk says, "but I know what it's like. It's like that fellow Hemingway. I read some of his writings. Gory and on the seedy side of life. I didn't like it."

"That's exactly right," the woman says, and nods. "On the seedy side of life. That fellow Faulkner, he's lost a lot of friends in Mississippi. Looking at the seedy side."²⁵

Conclusion

Although all the Snopes books were published after 1936, well past the years generally looked upon as Faulkner's most productive ten-year period as a genius artist, they had been always with him and in his mind throughout his writing career since 1925. After he received the first advance check for the Snopes novels from Random House in July 1933, he has repeatedly written to his editor and publisher about its progress. He writes in October 1933 that he "has been at the Snopes Book", in January 1934 that "SNOPES will take about two years of steady work", in August 1934 that "I believe that the book is not quite ripe yet", and in December 1938 that "I am working at the Snopes book." Also, the fact that Snopeses appear in his other stories, such as *Sanctuary* (1931) and

²⁵Robert Penn Warren, *Segregation: The Inner Conflict in the South* (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), 21.

The Unvanquished (1938), could be a proof that he kept the trilogy in mind all through the years.

Mink Snopes has grown to be the major character of the Snopes trilogy by the time *The Mansion* was published. In *The Mansion*, we see the absolute downfall and complete extermination of the Snopes lineage by the hand of socially weak poor white ex-convict character, Mink Snopes, aided by again a socially weak handicapped woman character, Linda Snopes. In a sense, it is a victory of the weak over the powerful, of the honest Southernness over the unfaithful utilitarian modern world represented by Flem. Here, we catch a glimpse of a trickster in action; Mink comes back to his home as an outdated stranger, successfully revenges himself, and disappears from the country stage.

In a way, we can assume that the reason why it took Faulkner thirty-four years to finish the trilogy was that in the course of writing it, he became more interested in writing “a living literature” about “the human heart” and that Mink Snopes had grown to embody the author’s devotion as his alter ego.