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FAULKNER'S RELATIONSHIP TO GAVIN STEVENS IN INTRUDER IN THE DUST

The nature of the relationship that exists between Faulkner and the character Gavin Stevens, as he appears in *Intruder in the Dust*, has produced an extremely lively critical debate. At the one extreme we are presented with the view, first expressed in the influential reviews of Hugh Gloster,[1] Edmund Wilson[2] and Elizabeth Hardwick,[3] then echoed by Irving Howe,[4] William Van O'Connor[5] and Eric Mottram,[6] that Stevens is simply a mouthpiece used by Faulkner to express his personal views on the Civil Rights issue. So far as these commentators are concerned there is no distance between author and character—in Mottram's words, "Faulkner practically was Gavin Stevens".[7] At the other extreme, critics such as Olga Vickery[8] and Cleanth Brooks[9] have argued that there is indeed a distance between Faulkner and Stevens and that the author often adopts an ironic attitude towards his character.

Two main points have been at issue in this debate. The first is an artistic one—if Faulkner is to be equated with Gavin Stevens, *Intruder in the Dust* can then be judged, at least in parts, as over-didactic and undramatic. Irving Howe, for example, claims that this novel, like all of Faulkner's later work, is unsuccessful because the author has indulged "his taste for heady abstractions and grand pronouncements".[10] On the other hand, if the kind of distancing claimed by the opposing school of criticism does exist, the novel can be viewed as a very subtle study in irony.

The second point is a social and philosophical one and involves the quality of Faulkner's attitudes towards man in general. Once we accept that Stevens, in pleading that special consideration be given to the feelings of Southern whites, in referring to the U.S.A.'s urban immigrant population as

"the coastal spew of Europe" (153)[11] and in his reiterated use of the derogatory term "Sambo" (149, 150, 153 etc.), is speaking for his author, it becomes very difficult to sympathise with Faulkner's social views or with some of the broader assumptions that must underlie such views. Hugh Gloster, for example, concludes from his examination of Gavin Stevens' arguments that in *Intruder in the Dust* Faulkner's prejudices as a Mississippian come very close to overwhelming his concern with human justice.[12] However, if we separate character and author we are free to look elsewhere within the novel for an authorial viewpoint that is perhaps closer to the concern with the dignity and claims of the individual, whether he be black or white, that Faulkner displays in his other works.

Perhaps because they have felt a strong need to defend Faulkner from the charges of racism that have sometimes been attendant upon an identification with Gavin Stevens, critics like Olga Vickery have tended to be extremely assertive in stressing the distance between author and character. As a result of this, while their analyses of Gavin Stevens' role in *Intruder in the Dust* have often been extremely persuasive and have served on the whole to make much better sense out of the total novel than have the studies of Gloster, Wilson, Hardwick and their supporters, these critics have failed to take account of, or to explain the purpose of, the very real similarities that do exist between Faulkner and Stevens. Anyone familiar with Faulkner's non-fictional statements about Civil Rights could hardly fail to realise that in much of what he says, Gavin Stevens could indeed be speaking for his author. Thus, the question left unanswered by those who have explored the ironic dimensions of *Intruder in the Dust* is, why does Faulkner allow a character whom he is satirising to express views very similar to his own? It will be the task of my paper to answer this question and, by thus elucidating Faulkner's rather complex relationship with his character, to clarify the point that he is trying to make and to emphasise the artistic skills that he employs in making it.

In the course of the extended monologues that he directs towards Chick Mallison, Gavin Stevens voices opinions that sound very like those expressed by Faulkner during the Civil Rights furor in the 1950s. Stevens' argument is based on the tenet that the South must resist the North's attempts to settle its racial troubles by imposing integration through legislation (154-155). He sees this resistance as part of a larger struggle to prevent the North from destroying a homogeneous community that embraces both the Southern white man and the Negro, whose main contribution seems to be his powers of endurance (153-154, 155-156). The preservation of this homogeneity is vital

not only to the South, but also to the nation as a who'e (154). However, having successfully repudiated Northern interference, the South must then take it on itself to set the Negro free (154).

Faulkner, of course, frequently spoke out with equal hostility against the legalistic tactics of the Civil Rights movement:

> The rest of the United States assumes that this condition in the South is so simple and so uncomplex that it can be changed tomorrow by the simple will of the national majority backed by legal edict. . . .
>
> What the [Civil] war should have done, but failed to do, was to prove to the North that the South will go to any length, even that fatal and already doomed one, before it will accept alteration of its racial condition by mere force of law or economic threat.[13]

Like Stevens he felt that the Southerner must be allowed to expiate his own sins:

> Ninety years of oppression and injustice are there, but it is a lot for the white man to have to admit. It takes an extremely intelligent man to stop dead after ninety years of wrongdoing, and the Southerner isn't that intelligent. He has to feel that what he is doing (when he reforms) is not being forced on him but is spontaneous.[14]

On the question of homogeneity, Faulkner often expressed a concern that the old closely-knit society of the South, based on an agrarian economy and strong family ties, was being eroded away by the forces of capitalism and the values of city life which were infiltrating from the North. In his brief history of Mississippi, he states:

> And presently pullmans too, all the way from Chicago and the Northern cities where the cash, the money was, so that the rich Northerners could come down in comfort and open the land indeed: setting up with their Yankee dollars the vast lumbering plants and mills in the southern pine section, the little towns which had been hamlets without change or alteration for fifty years, booming and soaring into cities overnight above the stump-pocked barrens which would remain until in simple economic desperation people taught themselves to farm pine trees as in other sections they had already learned to farm corn and cotton.[15]

In the same context, the tone and stress of Gavin Stevens' attack on the mercenary values, superficiality, dishonesty and shabbiness of a Northern society dedicated to "cheap shoddy dishonest music, . . . cheap flash baseless over-valued money" and "foundationed on nothing like a cardhouse over an abyss" (155) is echoed by Faulkner when he condemns the same society because it has no

use for the artist, the man "who deals only in things of the human spirit except to use his notoriety to sell soap or cigarettes or fountain pens or to advertise automobiles and cruises and resort hotels, or (if he can be taught to contort fast enough to meet the standards) in radio or moving pictures where he can produce enough income tax to be worth attention".[16] For Faulkner, like Stevens, salvation for this decaying nation depends upon developing a sense of homogeneity rather than destroying it: "We [USA] must be free not because we claim freedom, but because we practise it; our freedom must be buttressed by a homogeny equally and unchallengeably free, no matter what color they are."[17]

Finally, Faulkner clearly agrees with Stevens' claim that endurance is the Negro's major virtue. For example, in his essay "Mississippi" he traces back the poor whites' hatred and fear of Negroes to an awareness that because of their history of suffering, they have developed powers of endurance that make them their superiors:

> These elected the Bilboes and voted indefatigably for the Vardamans, naming their sons after both; their origin was in bitter hatred and fear and economic rivalry of the Negroes who farmed little farms no larger than and adjacent to their own, because the Negro, remembering when he had not been free at all, was therefore capable of valuing what he had of it enough to struggle to retain even that little and had taught himself to do more with less.[18]

Although, as I will try to show later, there is at least one important discrepancy between the development of Stevens' argument and that which Faulkner advanced in the 1950s, the parallels are close enough to make it tempting to identify the two and to conclude that in allowing his character to speak disparagingly of Negroes and immigrants, Faulkner was indeed revealing hitherto concealed racialist tendencies. However, if we yield to this temptation we are, I think, misinterpreting Faulkner's intentions. In order to arrive at an accurate evaluation of these intentions we must first re-examine Stevens' total argument—this time with regard to its context rather than its content. So urgently and authoritatively does Stevens speak that it is easy to forget that the problems facing him involve the identity of Vinson Gowrie's murderer and the validity of his community's reaction to Lucas Beauchamp rather than the attempts of Northern Civil Rights legislators to coerce the South into accepting integration. Stevens' deficiencies are particularly evident when he tries to defend the Southern community against Chick Mallison's charge that, in leaving Jefferson *en masse* after the real murderer has been unmasked, they are refusing to recognise the obligations that they have incurred towards

the unjustly accused Lucas Beauchamp simply because to apologise to a Negro would be to admit that he is a human being. After trying rather feebly to argue that the behaviour of the white community re.eals a laudable abhorrence of Crawford Gowrie's fratricide rather than a racially prejudiced attitude towards Lucas, Stevens suddenly seems to lose all grasp of the issues at stake and quite arbitrarily claims that the whole point is that the South must resist Northern interference in its racial problems:

> "Nobody lynched anybody to be defended from it", his uncle said.
> "All right", he said. "Excuse them then."
> "Nor that either", his uncle said. "I'm defending Lucas Beauchamp. I'm defending Sambo from the North and East and West—the outlanders who will fling him decades back into grief and agony and violence too by forcing on us laws based on the idea that man's injustice to man can be abolished overnight by police." (203-204)

The non-sequitur is blatant and the reader is intended to join Chick, who stubbornly repeats "you're still excusing them" and "they ran" (204), in refusing to accept his arguments.

Stevens' conduct during the novel's main action demonstrates very clearly how this inability to focus on specific problems distorts his view of reality and makes him totally ineffective. When Lucas Beauchamp attempts to explain what happened during his encounter with Vinson Gowrie, Stevens repeatedly cuts him short in order that he might offer his own imaginary version of events based on the *a priori* assumption that Lucas is guilty:

> "That's all", Lucas said. "He was just stealing a load of lumber every night or so."
> His uncle stared at Lucas for perhaps ten seconds. He said in a voice of calm, almost hushed amazement: "So you took your pistol and went to straighten it out. You, a nigger, took a pistol and went to rectify a wrong between two white men. What did you expect? What else did you expect?"
> "Nemmine expecting", Lucas said. "I wants --"
> "You went to the store", his uncle said, "only you happened to find Vinson Gowrie first and followed him into the woods and told him his partner was robbing him and naturally he cursed you and called you a liar whether it was true or not, naturally he would have to do that; maybe he even knocked you down and walked on you and you shot him in the back --"
> "Never nobody knocked me down", Lucas said.
> "So much the worse", his uncle said, "so much the worse for you. It's not even self-defense." (63-64)

Because of his refusal to listen to the accused's story, Stevens fails, despite the keen concern that he expresses for Lucas as the type of his race, to do anything for Lucas the man until Chick and Miss Habersham have established his innocence irrefutably.

Once we comprehend the gap that exists between what Stevens has to say and the real point at issue, it becomes clear that Faulkner is not identifying with his character but is satirising him for his congenital tendency to philosophise abstractly rather than to deal with the matter at hand. The impact of this satiric treatment is intensified considerably for the reader who is aware of how closely Stevens' irrelevancies re-iterate some of his author's most crucial statements about the South. He is able to see that Faulkner is stressing, in an extremely self-effacing way, that he does not exclude even his personal opinions from his belief that any viewpoint is worthless unless it derives from and can be related back to actual experience.

Since Faulkner is using even the similarities between his own and Gavin Stevens' viewpoint for satiric ends it is easy to accept that he disassociates himself from his character's unpleasant references to Negroes and immigrants as "Sambo" and "the coastal spew of Europe". Having established this we are now faced with a new problem since the picture of Gavin Stevens that has emerged from our examination up to this point is of a misguided rather than an unethical man who would seem at first sight no more likely to use such derogatory expressions than Faulkner. The inconsistency suggested here is only apparent, however, since, in allowing Stevens to speak in this way, Faulkner is simply developing further the implications of his character's tendency to think in abstract terms. When he makes use of such stereotyped and insulting terms as "Sambo", Stevens shows quite clearly that even a man consciously dedicated to racial equality can, if he adopts a generalising habit of mind, quickly translate generalisation into dehumanisation and deprecation, a mental progression which forms the basis of much racial prejudice. Stevens is quite capable at one point of elucidating for Chick the stereotypical nature of Mr. Lilley's reaction to Lucas:

> "He has nothing against what he calls niggers. If you ask him, he will probably tell you he likes them even better than some white folks he knows and he will believe it. . . . All he requires is that they act like niggers. Which is exactly what Lucas is doing: blew his top and murdered a white man—which Mr. Lilley is probably convinced all Negroes want to do." (48)

Yet, soon afterwards Chick finds his uncle taking recourse to exactly the same glib definition of the crime as a specifically racial one that he is extremely

conscious of having heard from the other whites:

> . . . now he heard for the third time almost exactly what he had heard twice in twelve hours, and he marvelled again at the paucity, the almost standardized meagreness not of individual vocabularies but of Vocabulary itself, by means of which even man can live in vast droves and herds even in concrete warrens in comparative amity: even his uncle too:
>
> "Suppose it then. Lucas should have thought of that before he shot a white man in the back." (80)

One other aspect of Stevens' argument must be cited in order to complete this examination of the ways in which Faulkner makes his point by subtly discriminating between his own and his character's point of view. Again,what emerges is that in his approach to experience, Gavin Stevens fails to give the individual the kind of stress that Faulkner believed to be essential. When Stevens argues that Northern interference in Southern racial affairs must be resisted out of a need to preserve the South's homogeneity and, consequently, the freedom of those individuals who adhere to the particular ideals that bind this society together, he is consistent with his author in that Faulkner was in general very concerned about the loss of personal liberty attendant upon the central government's attempts to widen its sphere of influence. For example, he has this to say about the welfare system and governmental economic and industrial control:

> He [the enemy of our freedom] faces us now from beneath the eagle-perched dome of our capitols and from behind the alphabetical splatters on the doors of welfare and other bureaus of economic or industrial regimentation, dressed not in martial brass but in the habiliments of what the enemy himself has taught us to call peace and progress, a civilization and plenty where we never before had it as good, let alone better; his artillery is a debased and respectless currency which has emasculated the initiative for independence by robbing initiative of the only mutual scale it knew to measure independence by.[19]

However, while being broadly in agreement with Faulkner, Stevens fails to express the more affirmative aspect of his opposition to the Civil Rights movement. This involves a positive alternative programme of individual action based on the unique structure of Southern society. Ashamed as he was of the South's neo-feudal past, Faulkner believed that it had at least one good effect in that out of the paternalistic relationships upon which such a society is based very real friendships sometimes developed between the white masters and black servants. It was an extension of such personal relationships, rather than in legislation, that Faulkner placed his hopes for improved understanding between

the races. As a result of this belief Faulkner is able to argue that bad as the racial situation is in the South, it is, in fact, rather more hopeful than that in the North:

> But I do know that we in the South, having grown up with and lived among Negroes for generations, are capable in individual cases of liking and trusting individual Negroes, which the North can never do because the northerner only fears him.[20]

Because it focuses on contact between individuals rather than on the larger units of race, such a programme of reform would of course have been beyond the comprehension of an abstract thinker like Gavin Stevens. Yet, without this programme his demands that the South be left to settle its own problems become mere empty platitudes.

Faulkner's aim then in drawing these subtle distinctions between Gavin Stevens' position and his own is to emphasise the importance of dealing with individuals and of taking account of circumstances. These are, of course, precisely the concerns that are manifested more directly and positively in the portrayal of the novel's other main character, Chick Mallison. Chick starts without any of Gavin Stevens' well-articulated concern with black-white relationships. Indeed, in so far as he has any conscious attitudes towards Negroes, he shares his society's prejudices and readily accepts that Lucas, as a Negro, must be guilty of the murder. The sight of Lucas sleeping is sufficient to make him echo the further stereotyped view that Negroes have no conscience:[21]

> *He's just a nigger after all for all his high nose and his stiff neck and his gold watch-chain and refusing to mean mister to anybody even when he says it. Only a nigger could kill a man, let alone shoot him in the back, and then sleep like a baby as soon as he found something soft enough to lie down on.* (58)

Nevertheless, Chick does help Lucas because of the intangible but extremely close relationship that has developed between them dating from the time that the old Negro took him into his home and gave him food after rescuing him from the water. It is as a result of pursuing this specific relationship with a man who also happens to be a Negro instead of trying to act in accordance with a preconceived moral code that Chick eventually learns something of the more general issues involved in the white race's treatment of the black and is able to challenge Stevens' point of view. Thus, what Faulkner illustrates negatively through Gavin Stevens, he demonstrates positively through Chick Mallison, each character serving to counterpoint the other.

It is not necessary to be acquainted with Faulkner's own viewpoint in

order to understand the basic flaws in Gavin Stevens' character—an examination of the relationship of his views to the action of the novel is sufficient to accomplish this. However, only the reader who is aware of the rather complex ways in which the distance between author and character is manipulated, is able to comprehend fully either the point that Faulkner is making or the subtlety of the ironical portrait that carries the burden of his meaning.

NOTES

1. "Southern Justice", *Phylon*, X(1949), 93-95.
2. "Faulkner's reply to the Civil Rights Program", *Classics and Commercials: A Literary Chronicle of the Forties* (New York, 1950), pp. 460-470.
3. "Faulkner and the South Today", *Partisan Review*, XV (1948), 1130-1134.
4. *William Faulkner. A Critical Study* (New York, 1962), p. 99.
5. *The Tangled Fire of William Faulkner* (Minneapolis, 1954), pp. 136-142.
6. "Mississippi Faulkner's Glorious Mosaic of Impotence and Madness", *Journal of American Studies*, II (1968), 125-126.
7. Mottram, p. 125.
8. "Gavin Stevens: From Rhetoric to Dialectic", *Faulkner Studies*, II (1953), 1-4.
9. *William Faulkner. The Yoknapatawpha Country* (New Haven, 1963), pp. 279-294.
10. Howe, p. 104.
11. Page references cited in parentheses throughout text are to the Random House edition of *Intruder in the Dust* (New York, 1948).
12. Gloster, p. 94.
13. "Letter to a Northern Editor" (1956), in *William Faulkner. Essays, Speeches and Public Letters*, ed., James B. Meriwether (London, 1967), pp. 88-89.
14. "Interview with Russel Howe" (1956), in *The Lion in the Garden*, ed., James B. Meriwether and Michael Millgate (New York, 1968), p. 261.
15. "Mississippi", (1954), in Meriwether, *Essays*, pp. 20-21.
16. "On Privacy", (1955), in Meriwether, *Essays*, p. 75.
17. "On Fear: Deep South in Labor: Mississippi" (1956), in Meriwether, *Essays*, p. 106.
18. "Mississippi" (1954), in Meriwether, *Essays*, p 13.
19. "Address to the Delta Council" (1952), in Meriwether, *Essays*, p. 157.
20. "A Word to Virginians" (1958), in Meriwether, *Essays*, p. 157.
21. The sheriff in "Pantaloon in Black" ascribes Rider's odd behaviour after the death of his wife to a similar lack of basic human feeling.