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William Faulkner's Southern Knights:  
*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,  
Sir Galwyn of Arthgyl, and Gavin Stevens

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The end of wisdom is to dream high enough not to lose the dream in the seeking of it. (WILLIAM FAULKNER, *Flags in the Dust*)

I

Gavin Stevens appears more frequently than any other character in William Faulkner's fiction, yet he remains one of Faulkner's most enigmatic figures. Though often "alleged to be the voice of Faulkner," Stevens more accurately functions, as Marion Tangum points out, as a "spokesperson for the good, just, but limited Southern gentleman: limited by upbringing, education, and the history of the South."<sup>1</sup> David M. Monaghan adds that some scholars identify "a distance between Faulkner and Stevens" that allows the author to adopt "an ironic attitude towards his character."<sup>2</sup> Yet many Faulknerians retain a strong affection for Stevens, at least in part because he seems so closely connected to Faulkner himself; indeed, Joseph Blotner notes that Estelle Faulkner "saw in Gavin Stevens quixotic qualities which reminded her of her husband."<sup>3</sup> Frequently, Faulkner has Stevens voice opinions similar to those in his own public speeches and letters; and, like Faulkner in Oxford, Stevens stands out like an intellectual sore thumb among small-town folk who, though they like him, fail to

1. Marion Tangum, "Stevens, Gavin," in *A William Faulkner Encyclopedia*, ed. Robert W. Hamblin and Charles A. Peek (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1999), 382.

2. David M. Monaghan, "Faulkner's Relationship to Gavin Stevens in *Intruder in the Dust*," *The Dalhousie Review* 52 (1972): 449.

3. Joseph Blotner, "Continuity and Change in Faulkner's Life and Art," in *Faulkner and Idealism: Perspectives from Paris*, ed. Michel Gresset and Patrick Samway, S.J. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1983), 20.

understand him. Most scholars no longer think of Stevens as merely Faulkner's mouthpiece, but many still take him as the character most resembling Faulkner in all of Jefferson.<sup>4</sup> Noel Polk perhaps puts the matter best when, in *Children of the Dark House*, he speaks of the similarities and, more important, of the differences between Faulkner and Stevens in *Intruder in the Dust*: "We may indeed see many similarities between Stevens's fictional and Faulkner's public rhetoric; but Stevens's abstractions, his preference for talking instead of doing, his overriding interest in Sambo rather than in Lucas, point directly to the differences between Stevens and the public Faulkner."<sup>5</sup>

Accordingly, Stevens also functions as one of what Philip Cohen calls Faulkner's "failed idealists."<sup>6</sup> Generally passive characters, these idealists "are much given to introspection and tend either to withdraw from life or to engage in quixotic quests—frequently they do both." Cohen elaborates: "Such characters are occasionally used by Faulkner to examine different negative concepts of art and the artist. Faulkner's pity for the plight of such a figure in a world which has no room for him is usually tempered by his awareness that this character is too effete, too lost in the labyrinth of his own consciousness, to live a meaningful existence or to create any lasting art." These figures "are also usually troubled about women and about sex. Their psyches are torn between acknowledging repressed sexual urges and upholding an idealistic veneration of chaste women."<sup>7</sup> Faulkner frequently depicts these failed idealists as medieval knights, courtly lovers engaged in dubious quests that involve crusading for the honor of their ladies, seeking justice, and opposing such perceived evils as "Snopesism."<sup>8</sup> Cervantes' *Don Quixote*

4. For a more detailed discussion of critical perceptions of Stevens as a character, especially those concerning his actions within *Requiem for a Nun*, see Lorie Watkins Fulton, "Justice as He Saw It: Gavin Stevens in *Knight's Gambit*," *The Faulkner Journal* 19 (2004): 25–48.

5. Noel Polk, *Children of the Dark House: Text and Context in Faulkner* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), 230.

6. Philip Cohen, "Horace Benbow and Faulkner's Other Early Failed Idealists," *South Carolina Review* 18 (1986): 78.

7. *Ibid.* See also Gresset and Samway, *Faulkner and Idealism*.

8. The figure of the knight might initially seem an odd choice, but it extends logically from the cavalier tradition's influence on the southern romance. For concise discussions, see Ellen Weinauer's entry for "Romance Genre" in *The Companion to Southern Literature: Themes, Genres, Places, People, Movements, and Motifs*, ed. Joseph M. Flora and Lucinda H. MacKethen and associate ed. Todd Taylor (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002), 744–50; and G. R. Thompson's short essay, "Edgar Allan Poe and the Writers of the Old South," in *Columbia Literary History of the United States*, ed. Emory Elliot et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 262–77. As Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner, editors of *Faulkner in the University: Class Conferences at*

seems one obvious influence, but Marta Powell Harley has claimed that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is the early text “most significantly reflected in Faulkner’s works.”<sup>9</sup> Although Faulkner’s fiction draws on a variety of myths, he exhibits a pointed interest in the character of Gawain.<sup>10</sup> In fact, he even christens two of his “knights,” Sir Galwyn of Arthgyl and Gavin Stevens, with derivatives of the name.<sup>11</sup> Together,

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*the University of Virginia 1957–1958* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1959), note, during one of his class lectures at the University of Virginia, Faulkner said of the “cavalier spirit”: “By cavalier spirit, I mean people who believe in simple honor for the sake of honor, and honesty for the sake of honesty.” Though he did not name Stevens specifically, he probably had Stevens in mind and hinted at such a configuration by juxtaposing such cavaliers against the “Snopeses” and their capacity to “cope with the new industrial age” (80).

9. See Gwynn and Blotner, *Faulkner in the University*, 50, 145, and 150, regarding Don Quixote. Marta Powell Harley, “Faulkner’s Medievalism and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” *American Notes and Queries* 21 (1982–83): 111. Though Harley’s reading is not alone, there is, as Taylor Hagood points out in “Faulkner’s ‘Fabulous Immeasurable Camelots’: *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Le Morte Darthur*,” a “surprising paucity of scholarship . . . regarding William Faulkner’s use of the Arthurian legend” (*Southern Literary Journal* 34 [2002]: 61). In addition to Hagood’s essay, see Michael N. Salda’s “William Faulkner’s Arthurian Tale: *Mayday*” (*Arthuriana* 4 [1994]: 348–75). In focusing on *Sir Gawain*, I do not mean to imply that the Gawain legend exists as an isolated source. For example, as Hagood notes, *King Arthur in America* by Alan Lupack and Barbara Tapa Lupack (Rochester: D. S. Brewer, 1999) shows that “William Faulkner used the Arthurian legend to articulate many of the major themes and motifs in his works” (45).

10. Harley notes that Faulkner might have read Jessie L. Weston’s popular prose version of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (New York: New Amsterdam Book Company, 1903) and draws textual similarities between it and “The Bear” (“Faulkner’s Medievalism,” 112). I have not been able to ascertain which translation Faulkner would most likely have used. I work from the edition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* edited by J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon (corrected impression, Oxford: Clarendon, 1930) because I could establish two possible points at which Faulkner might have encountered versions of it: John Cloy, bibliographer for the humanities at the University of Mississippi, confirmed that the library acquired its 1930 corrected impression of the text in 1944; the British edition debuted in 1925, the year that Faulkner traveled through Europe and most likely began to conceive of his own Arthurian tale, *Mayday*. On September 13, 1925, Faulkner wrote home to his mother, mentioning “a sort of fairy tale that has been buzzing in my head.” Blotner speculates that the “fairy tale” might have become *Mayday*, which Faulkner likely completed during the spring or summer of 1926 (*Selected Letters of William Faulkner*, ed. Joseph Blotner [New York: Random House, 1977], 22). For clarity’s sake, I refer to Tolkien’s later translation (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, and Sir Orfeo* [Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1975]). I have added line numbers to this translation; all subsequent references to the volume are parenthetical and arranged according to Tolkien’s division of *Sir Gawain* by fit, stanza, and line.

11. Gowan Stevens’s name may constitute another derivative, though he shares little else with the Gawain figure. In *Sanctuary*, Gowan functions as another of Faulkner’s knights, with his chivalric drunken cries regarding Temple Drake’s plight: “‘Got proteck . . . .’ Gowan muttered ‘. . . girl. ’Ginia gem . . . . gemman got proteck . . . .’”

these two characters practically span the breadth of Faulkner's career; Galwyn appears in the apprentice piece, *Mayday*, and Stevens gradually develops throughout much of the later fiction, most visibly in the last two books of the Snopes trilogy.<sup>12</sup> Both characters qualify as failed idealists and share much in common; nevertheless, they operate with very different philosophies and make very different choices. An examination of the two figures in light of their relationship to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* highlights an aspect of the evolution of idealism in Faulkner's fiction, and provides additional clues as to how we might continue to evaluate the role that Faulkner assigns to Stevens.<sup>13</sup>

## II

Faulkner originally created *Mayday*, one of the hand-lettered booklets he crafted during the 1920s, as a courtship gift for Helen Baird.<sup>14</sup> It finally became widely available with the publication of a trade edition in 1980.<sup>15</sup> Yet very few Faulknerians have written seriously about it. Calvin S. Brown echoes a fairly standard opinion when he describes it as "a lightly allegorical medieval pastiche" that "is no disgrace to

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(*William Faulkner: Novels, 1930-1935*, ed. Joseph Blotner and Noel Polk [New York: Library of America, 1985], 229). Later, in *Requiem for a Nun*, Gowan claims that this same sense of honor compelled him to marry Temple even after Popeye had held her for a month in Miss Reba's Memphis whorehouse; Gowan says, "Marrying her was purest Old Virginia" (*William Faulkner: Novels, 1942-1954*, ed. Joseph Blotner and Noel Polk [New York: Library of America, 1994], 521).

12. Faulkner's preface to *The Mansion* describes the last novel of the Snopes trilogy as "the final chapter of, and the summation of, a work conceived and begun in 1925" (*William Faulkner: Novels, 1957-1962*, ed. Joseph Blotner and Noel Polk [New York: Library of America, 1999], 331). Subsequent references to *The Mansion* appear parenthetically. It is important to point out that Stevens seems deluded on some level even from his initial appearance in Faulkner's fiction (see Fulton, "Justice as He Saw It," 32-34). In his last novel, *The Reivers* (1962), Faulkner presents another potential knight in training, a gentleman squire of sorts, in Lucius Priest.

13. Since I deal with specific, isolated manifestations of idealism in Faulkner's fiction, it is important to acknowledge the larger complexity of the topic. As Blotner points out in "Continuity and Change in Faulkner's Life and Art," the range of idealism in Faulkner's fiction "is so broad as to elude easy definition" (17). In fact, André Bleikasten ("For/Against an Ideological Reading of Faulkner's Novels," in Gresset and Samway, *Faulkner and Idealism*) contends that "most, if not all of Faulkner's novels, from *Flags in the Dust* to *A Fable*, are at once reflections of and reflections on idealism" (37-38).

14. See Salda, "Faulkner's Arthurian Tale," for the publication history.

15. Faulkner, *Mayday*, ed. Carvel Collins (University of Notre Dame Press, 1978). Faulkner dated the original January 27, 1926. Because this trade edition is by far the most accessible version, I refer to it exclusively and cite all further references parenthetically.

Faulkner.”<sup>16</sup> The critical efforts that do exist tend to examine biographical tensions in the text, to trace Faulkner’s textual sources, or to draw parallels between it and his next fictional effort, *The Sound and the Fury*.<sup>17</sup> The “pastiche” begins in a chapel shortly before dawn on the day that Galwyn becomes a knight. We learn only later that this scene marks the beginning of a reincarnation of sorts; Galwyn has chosen to relive a portion of life, and, as Michael N. Salda notes, Faulkner uses this process to blur reality with vision “time and time again in an almost dizzying fashion” so that neither Galwyn nor the reader can distinguish dream from reality.<sup>18</sup> Whether “real” or not, Galwyn’s experience begins as he glimpses a vision of his ideal woman in a “dark hurrying stream” (*Mayday*, 48), a woman with a “face all young and red and white” and “long shining hair like a column of fair sunny water,” who reminds Galwyn of “young hyacinths in the spring, and honey and sunlight” (50). He and his constant companions, Pain and Hunger, then embark on a quest for the woman that takes them through an enchanted forest where Galwyn happens upon three princesses, each of whom he seduces and quickly abandons. After seducing the first princess, Yseult (and, incidentally, killing Tristram), Galwyn concludes, “It is not the thing itself that man wants, so much as the wanting of it” (71). He finds no more satisfaction with the other two princesses, Elys and Aelia, so Hunger offers to introduce him to another woman, Hunger’s sister, whom he guarantees “will smoothe that look of hunger from your face” (81).

Rather than this woman, though, Hunger introduces Galwyn to the Lord of Sleep, who promptly asks Galwyn to choose between reliving another phase of life (but not his own) and submersion beneath the waters that he gazed into as the story began. If Galwyn chooses the first option, his future will include more of the same, although he cannot return as himself because apparently, as Salda suggests, “only those whose lives have been ‘washed clean’ are available for habitation.”<sup>19</sup> Submersion beneath those cleansing waters constitutes the second option, a process that would leave Galwyn’s memory “as a smooth surface after rain.” He will remember “nothing at all” and will exist beyond the reach of corporeal needs such as Hunger and Pain; moreover, he will attain “Fame” (84).

Understandably, neither a return to the delusional cycle of someone else’s dreams nor the nothingness of submersion appeals to Galwyn.

16. Calvin S. Brown, “Faulkner, Criticism, and High Fashion,” *Sewanee Review* 88 (1980): 632.

17. For brief summaries of the primary critical essays that address *Mayday*, see Salda, “Faulkner’s Arthurian Tale,” 349–50.

18. *Ibid.*, 356.

19. *Ibid.*, 363.

As he gazes into the waters contemplating his decision, he sees the ideal woman he has sought in vain, later identified as "Little sister Death," in their depths; he chooses death and goes to her as "one sinking from a fever into a soft and bottomless sleep" (87). Salda points out, though, that Faulkner's "metacommentarial running heads" call into question the certainty of Galwyn's choice.<sup>20</sup> Even as Galwyn chooses suicide, the headings state that he "MEETS ONE HE HAD SEEN IN HIS DREAM AND / HE ENTERS HIS DREAM AGAIN" (86–87). Salda determines that the "choice to die while dreaming is not a choice to die. It is *all* a vision, from first to last, and we have been gazing into Galwyn's dream." Fate's "final cruel joke" appears on the manuscript's endpaper; regardless of "Sleep's promise, the shadow of Galwyn stands behind his tombstone flanked still by the inescapable shadows of Hunger and Pain."<sup>21</sup> The narrator's observation that as Galwyn enters the water "it seemed to him that he knelt in a dark room waiting for day" also supports such an interpretation (*Mayday*, 87), because with those words Faulkner returns to exactly the point where *Mayday* began, thus beginning the cycle anew.

Whereas critics have mostly either neglected *Mayday* or found it a mildly interesting piece of apprentice work, many have long regarded *The Town* as the weakest of Faulkner's Snopes trilogy. Cleanth Brooks remarked in 1963 that it "will seem to some readers a rather frail and limber board placed across two firmly based stools," and he opined that "in thus avoiding the central novel of the trilogy, one would lose nothing very essential, though he would forgo some incidental comedy that is interesting on its own account."<sup>22</sup> Brooks perhaps overstates the point, but some readers do experience what Woodrow Stroble describes as a "sense of expectations disappointed" after reading the trilogy's middle volume.<sup>23</sup> This disappointment stems, at least in part, from *The Town's* limited style of narration. The other books of the trilogy combine techniques of first-person and omniscient narration to lend a somewhat more solid (though still tenuous) sense of the novel's events. In *The Town*, readers must rely solely on the perceptions of three narrators: Chick Mallison, the ostensible "voice of Jefferson" who never even witnesses many of the stories that he narrates; his uncle, Stevens, the good-hearted, yet less than perceptive, attorney for Yoknapatawpha County; and V. K. Ratliff, the folksy traveling sewing

20. *Ibid.*, 365.

21. *Ibid.*

22. Cleanth Brooks, *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1963), 216.

23. Woodrow Stroble, "Flem Snopes: A Crazy Mirror," in *Faulkner: The Unappetized Imagination: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Glenn O. Carey (Troy, NY: Whitston, 1980), 196.

machine agent, self-proclaimed observer of human behavior, and by far the most astute of the three narrators.

While this inside narration lends an attractive sense of immediacy, it also causes a loss of certainty that leaves readers unsure of what exactly happens in *The Town*, although the basics seem clear enough. The novel describes Flem Snopes's rise to prominence in Jefferson despite Stevens's quest against "Snopesism"; Faulkner gradually reveals the various levels of Flem's plan and shows how he eliminates those who stand in the way of his assimilation into Jefferson's upper echelons as president of one of the town's two banks. Indeed, this prolonged buildup could be another reason for the initial widespread dissatisfaction with the second volume; essentially, readers spend most of the novel anticipating Flem's activities. Ratliff compares Flem's feigned ignorance of his wife's affair with Jefferson's mayor, the hidden knowledge that his plan ultimately turns on, to "that twenty-dollar gold piece pinned to your undershirt on your first maiden trip to what you hope is going to be a Memphis whorehouse," and readers, like the narrators, spend most of the novel waiting for Flem, as Ratliff puts it, to "unpin it."<sup>24</sup> When Flem does effectively "unpin it" by threatening to reveal the affair, the shock of Eula's ensuing suicide and Manfred de Spain's hasty exit from Jefferson hardly make for a happy ending.

Of these limited viewpoints, Stevens's seems, by far, the most restricted. Joseph R. Urgo suggests that by the time of *The Mansion*, Stevens has begun to realize "late in his life, that for all his hypothesizing on good and evil and on justice and injustice . . . no purely good or purely evil actions" exist.<sup>25</sup> In *The Town*, however, Stevens still believes that the world has a strict moral framework; he thinks that good and evil exist independently of each other and fancies himself a knight seeking justice and equipped to distinguish between the two. Yet he lacks the judgment and ability needed to take effective action. His idealism reaches so deeply into his character that he often sees the world not as it is, but as he wishes it to be. For instance, when he says that rumors of Eula and de Spain's affair constitute only "lies—gossip," Maggie, Stevens's twin sister, who knows him best, pointedly remarks, "You can see things without looking at them, just like you can hear things without listening" (44).

Most notably, Stevens perpetually misestimates Flem. Theresa M. Towner speculates that Stevens focuses on "imaginative projections

24. William Faulkner, *The Town*, in Blotner and Polk, *William Faulkner: Novels, 1957–1962*, 26. Subsequent references are parenthetical.

25. Joseph R. Urgo, *Faulkner's Apocrypha: "A Fable," "Snopes," and the Spirit of Human Rebellion* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1989), 200.

of what Flem might be doing rather than clear descriptions of what he is doing. The truth of what Flem does therefore shocks him every time.<sup>26</sup> I would add that Stevens fails to focus on Flem's actions because he truly cannot see them. For example, when Stevens speculates as to exactly how Flem informed Will Varner of Eula's affair, he refuses to believe that Flem simply left the note for Mrs. Varner to give to her husband. Stevens knows that Flem could easily have done so, but he insists that Flem confronted Varner directly until Ratliff proves him wrong with his eyewitness account (258–59). As Ratliff points out, Stevens thinks like a lawyer, and “to a lawyer, if it aint complicated it dont matter whether it works or not because if it aint complicated up enough it aint right and so even if it works, you dont believe it” (260). In short, Stevens misestimates Flem because he assumes that Flem would do things the way that he, Stevens, would do them: choose the highly complicated, yet most satisfying, course of action and directly confront Varner. Stevens's mind-set traps him so fully that, try as he might, he cannot even begin to think like a Snopes, or, for that matter, like anyone else.

### III

Even such brief considerations of these two works of fiction make it clear that Faulkner's early and late knights both suffer from forms of willful ignorance, Galwyn from an oblivion of his own (or so he thinks) choosing and Stevens from a deluded state from which he cannot escape. They, like the hero of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* after his adventure in Bertilak's court, fail to understand fully what transpired. The three characters share other traits—like excessive verbosity and a heightened concern with their reputations and manners—that make it likely that Faulkner fashioned his “knights” after Sir Gawain.<sup>27</sup> Other

26. Theresa M. Towner, “‘It Aint Funny A-Tall’: The Transfigured Tales of *The Town*,” *Mississippi Quarterly* 44 (1991): 331.

27. As Salda points out, Galwyn is “not the Gawain of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* or Malory,” yet “Faulkner does have good reasons for choosing Gawain as his model rather than many other possible knights—Gawain is young, untried as the story begins, ‘glib,’ attracted to and pursued by women, sexually and morally tempted/compromised in the course of the story, easy to anger, rash in his actions, and wiser by the end of the tale” (“Faulkner's Arthurian Tale,” 354). Christopher Dean also says of Gawain, “On the one hand, he has been seen favorably as an ideal warrior of almost saint-like purity and as a Christ figure, on the other, he has been regarded unfavorably as a rash, passionate soldier, the epitome of reckless folly serving as a warning to all headstrong men who turn their backs on reason” (“Sir Gawain in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*,” *Papers on Language and Literature* 22 [1986]: 115). Dean's description could easily describe either Gawain or Stevens, further highlighting a basic similarity in their characters.

resonances between the Gawain poet's work and *Mayday* and *The Town* suggest that Faulkner had *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in mind as he constructed these narratives. Gawain's adventure begins when Bertilak, disguised as the Green Knight, challenges Arthur's youthful court to a Christmas game of exchange, one axe blow for another, with Bertilak taking the first blow. In the face of his court's silence, Arthur feels compelled to accept the challenge, but Gawain quickly takes it from him. When Gawain severs the Green Knight's head from his shoulders, the Green Knight retrieves it and says that he will administer his blow in one year at the green chapel. While traveling to meet the Green Knight that next year, Gawain takes shelter in Bertilak's castle and engages in another game of exchange, one in which each man gives the other whatever he got that day. Bertilak's wife tries to seduce the young knight; Gawain mostly resists her charms, but accepts her gift of a green girdle that supposedly will protect him from harm during his upcoming encounter. Gawain goes on to meet the Green Knight (Bertilak), and Bertilak mildly rebukes him for concealing the gift. When Bertilak finally reveals that Arthur's sister, Morgan le Fay, engineered the entire episode, Gawain returns to Camelot. Similarities are apparent among these three quests that turn on seduction. For example, the various narrators relate all three tales at some sort of remove. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* begins as the narrator promises to "tell it at once as in town I have heard / it told" (1.2.12-13); *Mayday* begins with the words "And the tale tells" (47); *The Town* begins with Chick's admission that when the story he narrates began he "wasn't born yet so it was Cousin Gowan who was there and big enough to see and remember and tell me afterward when I was big enough for it to make sense" (3). A single individual also controls the events of all three narratives (Morgan le Fay, Flem, and St. Francis), and they depend upon the complicity of the other characters—especially the guides (Bertilak, Ratliff, Hunger, and Pain), who always know more about the meaning of crucial events than do the knights. These guides attempt to lead their knights to knowledge through experience, but all three heroes consistently fail to interpret the many clues as to what actually occurs, despite such careful instruction.

A list of such similarities could continue, but Faulkner's deliberate deviations from and inversions of the Green Knight tale present far more interesting possibilities.<sup>28</sup> Most obviously, Faulkner reworks the

28. After noting the similarities between Galwyn and Gawain, Salda reiterates, "All these things do not make Galwyn and Gawain identical. In fact, the contrary is true: Galwyn is *not* Gawain, a point that Faulkner will take some trouble to demonstrate in *Mayday*" ("Faulkner's Arthurian Tale," 354).

three scenes in which Lady of Hautdesert tests Gawain's chastity. *Mayday* alters this set of scenes drastically; Galwyn meets with three different women and has no qualms about seducing them. Essentially, he reacts much as the later Gawain, the renowned ladies' man, probably would have, such as when he betrays Sir Pelleas by sleeping with his mistress, Lady Ettard.<sup>29</sup> Like Gawain with Bertilak's wife, Galwyn becomes instantly enthralled when he first glimpses each of the three princesses, and just as Gawain thinks Bertilak's wife "more lovely than Guinevere" (*Sir Gawain* 2.39.18), Galwyn reflects when he first spies Yseult, "all his life before this moment was a stale thing" (*Mayday*, 66). In contrast to Gawain's timidity, though, Galwyn takes a much bolder approach and eliminates his opponent by killing Tristram. Whereas Gawain feigns sleep and attempts to avoid the lady's advances by enquiring what "she wishes" (*Sir Gawain* 3.48.22), Galwyn uses words as tools of seduction when he utters his standard line and compares Yseult to "honey and sunlight and young hyacinths"; her beauty has, he says, "robbed him of peace and contentment as a gale strips the leaves from a tree" (*Mayday*, 67). His speech "wove such a magic that the Princess Yseult purred like a kitten" (68), and she thinks him a "nice-spoken young man"; her words, however, almost instantly put him off. She begins her chattering diatribe by asking Galwyn, "Do you really think I am beautiful?" The scene quickly and humorously degenerates to a discussion about her hair (67-68). After the two "sojourned in the shade of a tree," Galwyn realizes "that young hyacinths were no longer fresh, once you had picked them" (68). He then convinces Yseult to "put something on" other than "the green veils of this twilight" in order to ward off a "spring cold," and he steals away, reflecting that he "preferred seeing her back to her front, naked or otherwise" (69-70).

Galwyn's next two encounters play out in much the same fashion. He meets Princess Elys, Faulkner's feminine incarnation of the evening star, presumably seduces her, and sneaks off yet again, this time as she sleeps: "Young Sir Galwyn looked upon her in a vague sadness, and he kissed her sleeping mouth with a feeling of pity for her and of no particular pride in himself, and he rose quietly and passed without the tent" (72). As Galwyn leaves Elys, he meets Princess Aelia, an even more impressive incarnation of the morning star. She sweeps him into her golden chariot, and he initially thinks her the woman from his dream. When they first kiss while plummeting toward the earth, the narrator observes of Galwyn, "Never had his heart known such ecstasy! he was a god and a falling star, consuming the whole world in a single long swooping rush through measureless regions of horror and delight

29. Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur* (New York: Modern Library, 1999), 138.

down down, leaving behind him no change of light nor any sound" (78–79). Yet after this experience, he nevertheless awakens alone in the forest with a sigh of relief. Hunger observes his dissatisfaction and remarks: "Ay, Sir Galwyn, and yet and yet. You have known the bride of a king before ever her husband looked upon her, you have possessed, in the persons of the daughters of the two most important minor princes in Christendom, the morning and the evening stars, and yet you have gained nothing save a hunger which gives you no ease" (79–80). Hunger then observes, "Man is a buzzing fly beneath the inverted glass tumbler of his illusions" (80).

In contrast to Galwyn, Stevens reacts during his three meetings with Eula much as the younger Gawain of the Green Knight tale does when the Lady of Hautdesert visits his chamber.<sup>30</sup> Stevens's first glimpse of Eula enchants him, but, as Ratliff remarks in *The Mansion*, "when Eula Varner taken that first one look of hern at Lawyer—or let him take that first one look of hisn at her, whichever way you want to put it" it was like "when you finally see the woman that had ought to beed yourn all the time, only it's already too late" because she "is already married to somebody else." Ratliff also acknowledges a sense of possibility similar to that pervading the scene between Gawain and the lady and adds, "Except it wasn't too late. It aint never too late and wont never be" (434). But, Ratliff adds, "Lawyer didn't know all that yet neither" (435). Like the lady's pursuit of Gawain, Eula's attention takes Stevens totally by surprise; when she sends the note requesting that he wait for her in his office that evening, Stevens "didn't even know who it was from" (*Town*, 78). And just as the lady steals into Gawain's room and "quickly" catches him (*Sir Gawain* 3.49.3), Harley points out that Faulkner also utilizes the metaphor of the hunt in his initial scene between Eula and Stevens.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, Stevens thinks before Eula even arrives that he "would probably bolt, flee, run home to Maggie" (*Town*, 79), and he takes care to leave the door open, despite the cold, to preserve the opportunity for such an escape.

Stevens barely manages to survive the encounter without physically fleeing after Eula arrives and offers herself to him in as bold a fashion as that of Bertilak's wife. The lady tells Gawain, "To my body will you welcome be / of delight to take your fill; / for need constraineth me / to serve you, and I will" (*Sir Gawain* 3.49.30–33); Eula far less poetically proposes that she and Stevens "do it here. In your office," but her offer nonetheless terrifies Stevens. He repeatedly questions, "'Here?' . . .

30. Harley notes that, as in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Stevens's "dealings with Eula offer a series of three's" ("Faulkner's Medievalism," 111).

31. *Ibid.*

like a parrot" (*Town*, 81) and later exclaims, "Dont touch me" when he feels trapped by her request that he simply "shut the door before it gets so cold" (82). Stevens, given his analytical nature, tries to ascertain her motives, whereas Gawain never thinks to ask what motivates Bertilak's wife. Stevens speculates that Eula came to him because either Flem or de Spain sent her, and she admits that "maybe I did. . . . Maybe at first." An earlier question, though, hints at another reason Eula might pursue Stevens. When he rebuffs her, she asks, "You mean you dont want to? . . . I thought that was what you wanted," and then wonders, "What did you do it for?" (82). The "it" could refer either to Stevens's challenging de Spain at the Christmas ball or to the lawsuit that he files against him on behalf of the city, but they both amount to pathetically ineffective attempts to defend Eula.

Eula's behavior stymies critics almost as much as it does Stevens, and they have read her actions in a variety of ways.<sup>32</sup> While Faulkner gives us too little to know Eula's motivations or mind-set definitively, this deviation from the Gawain story may imply that regardless of what Stevens believes, Eula visits his office of her own volition and offers to repay his kindness in the best way she knows how. Practically every man she has ever met wants to sleep with her, including Stevens, and she simply offers him what she thinks (and he thinks) he wants. When pressed, Eula says that she came to Stevens because she thought him "unhappy," and she does not "like unhappy people. They're a nuisance. Especially when it can—." At that point, Stevens cuts her off and launches into a righteous rejection of the "pity" that he thinks she offers. His tirade, though, only gives voice to his interpretation of her offer, one Eula neither confirms nor denies; for all he knows, she might have completed her thought with something to the effect of "especially when it can be so wonderful for both of us." When he finally stops talking, she implies that he has it all wrong when she says, "Dont expect. You just are, and you need, and you must, and so you do. That's all. Dont waste time expecting." She then offers another possible reason for her visit when she says, "Maybe it's because you're a gentleman and I never knew one before" (*Town*, 83).

32. In the sort of reading that remained standard for decades, Brooks noted as early as 1963 that Eula's offer "is so direct as to seem brutal" (*William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country*, 196). Dawn Trouard, however, evaluates this scene in light of Eula's limited options given the novel's patriarchal culture and believes that she is "debilitated and frustrated." Trouard suggests that Eula's "emotional reserves" allow her to offer herself to Stevens "practically, despite sanctions—including Gavin's—prohibiting her exercise of freedom and power" ("Eula's Plot: An Irigararian Reading of Faulkner's Snopes Trilogy," *Mississippi Quarterly* 42 [1989]: 281–97, 289).

Admittedly, this comment could mean a number of things: for example, that Stevens rejected her advances or defended her honor out of some gentlemanly impulse. It could also mean that she came to his office because she thinks him a gentleman and she finds that status attractive. After all, Bertilak's lady tells Gawain

if I should exchange at my choice and choose me a husband,  
for the noble nature I know, Sir Knight, in thee here,  
in beauty and bounty and bearing so gay—  
of which earlier I have heard, and hold it now true—  
then no lord alive would I elect before you.

(*Sir Gawain* 3.51.9–13)

When Eula says that she “never knew” a gentleman before, she admits that although she may sleep with de Spain, she does not think that he belongs to the same social or moral class as Stevens. Perhaps she seeks from Stevens something her relationship with de Spain lacks; that would certainly make more sense than Stevens's theory (pity), and near the novel's conclusion Faulkner suggests as much. As Stevens and Ratliff return from Eula's graveside, Stevens, desperately trying to figure out what motivated Eula to take her own life, thinks aloud, “She loved, had a capacity to love, for love, to give and accept love. Only she tried twice and failed twice to find somebody not just strong enough to deserve, earn it, match it, but even brave enough to accept it” (*Town*, 315). Stevens, unaware of the implication of his own words, believes that Eula tried to love two men, ostensibly Hoake McCarron and de Spain. While those lovers may not have deserved, earned, or matched her love, they did accept at least the physical expression of it. Perhaps Eula tried and failed to love three times, the third failure because Stevens lacked the courage to “accept it.”

Stevens did not believe that Eula genuinely found him attractive, and he, like Gawain, managed to talk his way out of the situation.<sup>33</sup> The Gawain poet writes, “She was an urgent wooer, / that lady fair of face; / the knight with speeches pure / replied in every case” (3.50.19–22). One of Gawain's many resistance tactics involves pleading inadequacy; as he tells the lady, “I am a knight unworthy, as well indeed I know” (3.50.4). She, however, will have none of it. She appeals to his vanity and invokes his reputation for courtesy when she remarks that a knight as “courteous” as Gawain “so long with a lady could hardly have lingered / without craving a kiss” (3.52.10–11). Stevens expresses a similar concern for courtesy in Faulkner's parallel scene. After he

33. Brooks speculates that Stevens fails to recognize Eula's comment as a compliment because “evidently Gavin fears that a gentleman is something less than a man, his power and vigor enfeebled by refinement” (*William Faulkner*, 212).

accuses Eula of attempting to seduce him at Flem's or de Spain's urging, he retracts the allegation, saying, "I didn't mean that," and asks Eula to forgive him (*Town*, 82). Stevens's concern for courtesy, though, does not even permit Eula to touch him, so here Faulkner again deviates from the Green Knight story. When Stevens all but leaps away from Eula, exclaiming, "Dont touch me!" she asks, "Why are you afraid?" He then escapes "out of the trap now and even around her" and practically runs for the door (83–84). He fails, however, to answer her question. What, indeed, instills such fear? He indicates a couple of possible reasons, though only in a roundabout way, when he says to Eula: "You told me not to expect; why dont you try it yourself? We've all bought Snopeses here, whether we wanted to or not; you of all people should certainly know that." Stevens goes on, "But nothing can hurt you if you refuse it, not even a brass-stealing Snopes. And nothing is of value that costs nothing so maybe you will value this refusal at what I value it cost me" (84). Stevens, then, implies that he refuses her to circumvent rejection. He believes that a physical relationship would have meant nothing to her, and he rejects her to avoid suffering that devastating realization. Ratliff intuits as much and observes, "There was more folks among the Helens and Juliets and Isoldes and Guineveres than jest the Launcelots and Tristrams and Romeos and Paris." He concludes, "Not ever body had Helen, but then not ever body lost her neither" (89). Stevens later claims to regret not having "been brave enough not to say No then" (189).<sup>34</sup>

Ten years pass before Stevens is alone with Eula again; the second meeting inverts elements of the Gawain story. Bertilak's wife calls on Gawain quite early in order to "wear away" his "will" (*Sir Gawain* 3.58.22). He, however, has prepared for her arrival and "graciously then welcomed her first" when she "passed to the curtain and peeped at the knight" (3.59.1–2). Stevens and the Lady of Hautdesert effectively change places when Faulkner revises this scenario; when Stevens arrives on Eula's doorstep promptly at nine, ready to plead his case for why Eula should allow her daughter Linda to go away to college, Eula "was prepared, self house and soul too" (*Town*, 193). By repositioning Eula, Faulkner emphasizes how restrained, or perhaps contained, Eula has become during the ten years following Stevens's rejection. Flem has, to his way of thinking, turned her into an accessory, the living, breathing equivalent of his bow tie. Moreover, she knows how little power she

34. After the fact, Stevens, of course, thinks of himself as rejecting Eula's advances to maintain his ideal of her in the tradition of courtly love that Brooks articulates, but even Brooks notes that Stevens "only partly understands his motives" during "his encounter with Eula at his office" (*William Faulkner*, 199). Stevens's fears of inadequacy seem to remain firmly behind his ideological framework.

holds, as becomes clear when Stevens sees the furniture-shopping expedition in relation to Flem's becoming vice president of de Spain's bank: "To be exactly what he needed to exactly fit exactly what he was going to be tomorrow after it was announced: a vice president's wife and child along with the rest of the vice president's furniture in the vice president's house? Is that what you tried to tell me?" Eula agrees and says, "Something like that" (197). She similarly has no control over Linda's future and tells Stevens, "It's not me that wont let her go away" (196).

Linda's fate presents the second way that Faulkner inverts this scene from its counterpart in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. During her second visit, Bertilak's wife proposes that Gawain tutor her in the ways of love:

Surely, you that are so accomplished and so courtly in your vows  
 should be prompt to expound to a young pupil  
 by signs and examples the science of lovers.  
 Why? Are you ignorant who all honour enjoy?  
 Or else you esteem me too stupid to understand your courtship?

(*Sir Gawain* 3.60.18–22)

Gawain replies that he can teach her nothing because she possesses "far more skill / in that art by the half than a hundred of such / as I am, or shall ever be while on earth I remain" (3.61.8–10). In *The Mansion*, Ratliff sincerely thinks of Eula in similar fashion when he reflects that she "never needed to be educated nowhere because jest what the Lord had already give her by letting her stand up and breathe and maybe walk around a little now and then was trouble and danger enough for ever male man in range" (435). When Stevens meets her again, he implies that he holds the same opinion and doubts that Eula "was ever in her life unready for anything that just wore pants" (*Town*, 193). Eula, though, seeks an education not for herself but for her daughter. By this time, Stevens has already transferred a portion of his devotion to Linda and has spent several years "forming her mind" as he first did with Melisandre Backus years before (*Town*, 158). In light of Stevens's attentions, Eula's suggestion that he marry Linda is not unreasonable, as Stevens thinks.<sup>35</sup> Marriage would allow Linda to get out from under

35. In *The Mansion*, several characters think marriage a viable option for Stevens and Linda. Ratliff even asks Stevens, "Why didn't you marry her?" When Stevens replies, "Because she wasn't but nineteen," Ratliff retorts, "And you are all of thirty-five, aint you" (467). Later, Chick recalls Ratliff's telling him of Stevens's prediction that Linda's "doom would be to love once and lose him and then to mourn" and says that Stevens refused to marry her because "he had his own prognosis to defend, make his own words good no matter who anguished and suffered" (528).

Flem's thumb and would free Eula to do the same. Stevens, though, either cannot or will not see the obvious. He exclaims, "Dont you see, that's what I'm after: to set her free of Jefferson, not tie her down to it still more, still further, still worse, but to set her free?" Eula, immediately sensing the true source of Stevens's reservation, tries to convince him that "marriage is the only fact. The rest of it is still the poet's romantic dream. Marry her. She'll have you. Right now, in the middle of all this, she wont know how to say No. Marry her." Stevens replies only, "Goodbye" (*Town*, 199).

Eula continues trying to convince Stevens to give up his romantic notions and offer his practical assistance during her final meeting with him. This meeting, like the corresponding one in the Gawain story, features "great peril" between the lady and her knight (*Sir Gawain* 3.70.19). The Lady of Hautdesert arrives in Gawain's chamber and "pressed him so closely, / led him so near the line, that at last he must needs / either refuse her with offence or her favours there take" (3.71.1-3). She even says, "Now shame you deserve, / if you love not one that lies alone here beside you" (3.71.10-11). Gawain, of course, refuses her, declaring, "Nay! lover have I none, / and none will have meanwhile" (3.71.21-22). By rejecting her, he chooses the option that he thinks presents the lesser of two evils—he declines to betray Bertilak and accepts the cost of offending his wife with discourtesy. Gawain does not emerge totally unscathed, though. The wife attempts to give him two gifts, the first a costly ring, which he refuses (3.73.1), and then the green girdle that prevents its wearer from being "killed by any cunning of hand" (3.74.9). The protection the girdle could supposedly provide during his impending encounter with the Green Knight proves too strong a temptation for Gawain, and he accepts the gift, agreeing to the lady's request that he break his covenant with Bertilak by concealing it (3.74.16-20).

Similarly, Eula initiates her final meeting with Stevens when she has Chick deliver the note to him that reads, "*Please meet me at your office at ten tonight*" (*Town*, 274). Stevens instinctively realizes that this meeting will involve another test and wonders, "*What more can you want of me than I have already failed to do?*" (275). A few pages later, he seems to view the impending meeting as a final chance to reject rather than to save Eula, and he thinks of it as "the one last chance to choose, decide: whether or not to say *Why me? Why bother me? Why cant you let me alone?*" (279). He, of course, says nothing of the sort when Eula enters his office and begins to tell him the specifics of how Flem triumphed over Linda by using her filial affection to gain control of her inheritance. Linda, however, "didn't even know there had been a battle and she had surrendered" (285); Eula says that Linda "believes she thought of it, wanted to do it, did it, herself. Nobody can tell her otherwise" (282).

Eula hints that Stevens's influence over Linda could potentially balance Flem's when she says that the conflict erupted over the "school business. When you [Stevens] told her she wanted to go, get away from here" (*Town*, 282). As Eula talks, she keeps reminding Stevens of Flem's sway over Linda, that he "was her father, you see. You've got to remember that. Can you?" (284). Stevens, though, shifts the conversation back to Eula's responsibility and points out that if Eula and de Spain leave, Linda "is lost," whatever action Eula takes: "Either to go with you, if that were possible, while you desert her father for another man; or stay here in all the stink without you to protect her from it and learn at last that he is not her father at all and so she has nobody, nobody" (289–90). Eula repeats her request again and offers Stevens a metaphorical ring of sorts when she implores him to marry Linda. He, like Gawain, flatly refuses her offer and suggests that Eula turn to de Spain for help. She, of course, has already tried that (290); Stevens truly represents her last hope, so she tries again. Using his given name for the first time, she pleads, "Marry her, Gavin," but Stevens only caustically paraphrases his interpretation of her reasoning and says, "Change her name by marriage, then she wont miss the one she will lose when you abandon her" (291). Eula persists, though, and he finally agrees to marry Linda only "if or when I become convinced that conditions are going to become such that something will have to be done, and nothing else but marrying me can help her, and she will have me. But have me, take me. Not just give up, surrender" (292).

Eula recognizes this offer as the best she will likely get and makes Stevens "swear" to marry Linda in that event, "even if she wont have you. Even after that. Even if she w—you cant marry her" (*Town*, 292). Eula surely realizes that Stevens's promise undoes itself, that he "cant" offer any real, practical assistance by marrying Linda because he cannot give up what she earlier referred to as "the poet's romantic dream" of ideal love (199). Stevens tells Eula that he wants Linda to choose him, not just "give up, surrender" to marriage and a safe life in Jefferson (292), but in *The Mansion* we learn that he also refuses marriage because agreeing would mean abandoning his dream of Eula. Apparently, Stevens has spoken to Ratliff about this last meeting.<sup>36</sup> Ratliff says that when Eula asked Stevens to marry Linda, "it was like she had said right out in public that he wouldn't a had no hope [of having a

36. Ratliff and Stevens must have discussed the matter. Even though Ratliff claims to "presume on a little more than jest evidence" (*Mansion*, 456), he does so with accuracy and mentions many specific details of this final meeting. For example, Ratliff speculates that Eula "likely" called Stevens by his "first name for the first time" when she said, "Marry her [Linda], Gavin" (*Mansion*, 457). In *The Town*, Eula repeats that exact phrase several times, and Stevens marvels that she uses his given name when "not once had she ever called me even Mister Stevens" (291).

relationship with Eula] even if Manfred de Spain hadn't never laid eyes on her." Stevens reacts as he does because "if he could jest get that 'No' out quick enough, it would be like maybe she hadn't actively said what she said, and he would still not be destroyed" (*Mansion*, 457). Thus Stevens inadvertently dooms the woman he most loves because he cannot abandon his romantic dream of her. Perhaps, like young John Sartoris in this essay's epigraph, Stevens does not wait "for Time and its furniture to teach him that the end of wisdom is to dream high enough not to lose the dream in the seeking of it."<sup>37</sup> Given Stevens's age and disposition, though, it seems more likely that he is incapable of learning such a lesson. Faulkner further emphasizes Stevens's misplaced priorities when he insists on driving Eula home, saying, "A lady, walking home alone at—it's after midnight. What will Otis Harker [the night marshal] say? You see, I've got to be a man too; I cant face Otis Harker otherwise since you wont stop being a lady to him until after tomorrow's south-bound train" (*Town*, 292). Rather than taking the one action that could save both Eula and Linda, Stevens bumbles along with his misplaced gesture of courtesy, safely insulated from reality.<sup>38</sup>

#### IV

Faulkner also complicates the Gawain story in quite interesting ways as it relates to the outcomes of the tests that his characters face. Wendy Clein points out that Gawain fails Bertilak's final test because his "instinctual fear of death rises to the surface, leading to his violation of chivalric rules."<sup>39</sup> In *Mayday*, Galwyn, though, chooses death and

37. Faulkner, *Flags in the Dust*, first Vintage Books ed. (New York: Random House, 1974), 74–75.

38. In a 1955 interview with Cynthia Grenier, Faulkner spoke to the value of direct action. Grenier asked Faulkner about his favorites among his own characters and he turned the question back on her, asking "Who are *your* favorite characters?" She said that she admired Isaac McCaslin because "he underwent the baptism in the forest, because he rejected his inheritance." Faulkner questioned further, "And do you think it's a good thing for a man to reject an inheritance?" She replied, "Yes," and asked Faulkner, "You don't think it's a good thing for him to have done so?" Faulkner said, "Well, I think a man ought to do more than just repudiate. He should have been more affirmative instead of shunning people." Grenier asked, "Do you think that any of your characters succeed in being more affirmative?" Faulkner, perhaps still thinking of inaction, replied, "Yes, I do. There was Gavin Stevens. He was a good man but he didn't succeed in living up to his ideal" (James B. Meriwether and Michael Millgate, eds., *Lion in the Garden: Interviews with William Faulkner, 1926–1962* [New York: Random House, 1968], 224–25).

39. Wendy Clein, *Concepts of Chivalry in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"* (Norman, OK: Pilgrim Books, 1987), 101.

goes to it willingly. Cohen posits that Galwyn, “disillusioned,” finally “commits suicide by drowning himself in a river in which he sees the face from the vision” rather than accept the fatalistic view of his existence that Hunger and Pain describe, one in which he “is but a handful of damp clay” that his two companions “draw hither and yon at will until the moisture is gone completely out of him” (*Mayday*, 57–58).<sup>40</sup> I would argue that, instead of suffering from disillusionment, Galwyn chooses suicide because he has become “unillusioned,” or free from illusion, in the sense that Polk uses the term to describe Flem in *Outside the Southern Myth*.<sup>41</sup> Galwyn finally sees the pointlessness of his efforts as he wonders “if his restless seeking through the world had been only a devious unnecessary way of returning to a place he need never have left” (*Mayday*, 82). He also realizes the damage he has done to others as he gazes into the river and the “glittering wreckage” of the women he has wronged passes before his eyes (86). Salda, to be sure, points out that Galwyn’s decision offers only the illusion of choice, but Galwyn nevertheless thinks that he makes it.<sup>42</sup> As such he, along with the likes of Quentin Compson, becomes one of the early Faulknerian tragic heroes who, when faced with the choice between grief and nothingness, chooses nothingness.

With their unillusioned (or perhaps only less illusioned) choices, Galwyn and Gawain seem very much Stevens’s opposites. This becomes apparent as Faulkner moves into the final section of *The Town*, and Stevens, along with the rest of Jefferson, waits for a very different kind of axe stroke than the one of the Green Knight tale. Chick compares the community’s awareness and passive acceptance of Eula and de Spain’s affair to a “barked over” nail driven into a tree. The entire town continues to wait for Flem finally to acknowledge the affair and force them to do the same. As Chick puts it, they continue to wait “until one day the saw or the axe goes into it [the tree] and hits that old nail” (266).

That moment, though, never comes; Eula’s suicide circumvents it. Faulkner connects Stevens’s role in Eula’s suicide to Gawain’s experience with the Green Knight. When Gawain is about to meet the Green Knight, he sleeps little and “at the crow of every cock he recalls well his tryst” (*Sir Gawain* 4.80.11). Similarly, after Stevens leaves Eula, he returns home and spends the night listening to “the damned mock-

40. Philip Cohen, “Faulkner’s Player and His Pawns: The Source of a Metaphor,” *American Notes and Queries* 23 (1984): 18.

41. Noel Polk, *Outside the Southern Myth* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), 47.

42. Salda, “Faulkner’s Arthurian Tale,” 362–65.

ing bird" that "for three nights now" has made "his constant racket in Maggie's pink dogwood just under my bedroom window" (*Town*, 293). Stevens thinks that the "trick" to not hearing the bird would "be to divide, not him but his racket, the having to listen to him" by splitting into "one Gavin Stevens to cross his dark gallery too and into the house and up the stairs to cover his head in the bedclothes, losing in his turn a dimension of Gavin Stevens, an ectoplasm of Gavin Stevens impervious to cold and hearing too to bear its half of both, bear its half or all of any other burdens anyone wanted to shed and shuck" (293–94). His meditation has less to do with the mockingbird than with his discomfort over assuming the burden of "a young abandoned girl's responsibility" (294); his desire to divide himself into separate physical and spiritual dimensions recalls Gawain's struggle between the physical temptation presented by the Lady of Hautdesert and his moral desire not to betray Bertilak on the eve of his conflict with the Green Knight.

Because of Eula's suicide, Stevens never reaches such a moment of decision. Early in *The Town*, Maggie says of her brother's adulation of Eula, "You dont marry Semiramis: you just commit some form of suicide for her" (44). The "form" of that suicide emerges quite unexpectedly when Stevens fails Eula's final test. Gawain's acceptance of the green girdle leads only to his own minor injury, a nick as punishment from Bertilak for lacking "loyalty" (*Sir Gawain* 4.95.9); Galwyn's choice injures (perhaps) only himself; but Stevens's failure to act beyond his frail excuse for a promise to marry Linda leads to Eula's suicide.<sup>43</sup> Eula did not definitely plan to kill herself before meeting Stevens. When she met Chick and passed on the note summoning Stevens, Chick noticed that "she really did look both ways along the street before she turned and started toward me" (*Town*, 271–72). With Chick's observation, Faulkner oddly, even awkwardly, inserts a bit of information to highlight a level of caution hardly characteristic of a woman with a death wish.

43. Several critics have alluded to this possibility. For example, John Lewis Longley Jr. speculates that Stevens's "refusal to promise to marry Linda may have brought on Eula's decision to save Linda from Flem in the only way she can, by killing herself, to leave Linda 'a mere suicide for a mother instead of a whore'" (*The Tragic Mask: A Study of Faulkner's Heroes* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1963], 45). Jay Watson likewise concludes that Stevens's "reticence is undoubtedly what drives Eula to more desperate measures, for that very night she takes her life" (*Forensic Fictions: The Lawyer Figure in Faulkner* [Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993], 228). Raymond J. Wilson III also believes that Eula sees the "necessity for suicide" after Stevens convinces her that her departure will "finish" Linda ("Imitative Flem Snopes and Faulkner's Causal Sequence in *The Town*," *Twentieth Century Literature* 26 [1980]: 441).

Stevens fails Eula but emerges in the eyes of the town as “the pure one, the only pure one” in contrast to de Spain and Flem. De Spain leaves town in disgrace, and the town condemns Flem for not taking more decisive action, blowing “them both, his wife and her fancy banker both, clean out of Jefferson” (300). Chick says that because all of Jefferson knew that Stevens desired Eula but “hadn’t been Mrs Snopes’s lover too,” the townspeople recognize him as “the bereaved, the betrayed husband forgiving for the sake of the half-orphan child” (300). The ever-dramatic Stevens accepts this assessment and even thinks himself the only one qualified to lead Eula’s funeral service (301). Faulkner almost certainly uses this odd fantasy to signify that Stevens imagines himself purified, after the fashion of Launcelot, who “did all the observance of the service himself” while burying Guinevere.<sup>44</sup> Maggie points out the inappropriateness of Stevens’s proposition when, in exasperation, she exclaims, “Gavin, at first I thought I would never understand why Eula did it. But now I’m beginning to believe that maybe I do. Do you want Linda to have to say afterward that another bachelor had to bury her?” (301).

Stevens does not conduct the service, but he plays a much more pivotal role in creating Eula’s “monument.” As Ratliff says, he “helped Linda hunt through that house and her mother’s things until they found the right photograph and had it—Lawyer still—enlarged, the face part, and sent it to Italy to be carved into a . . . yes, medallion to fasten onto the front of the monument” (306). Ratliff remains adamant that the monument belongs and pays tribute to Flem, as it most certainly does; Flem “paid for it, first thought of it, planned and designed it, picked out what size and what was to be wrote on it—the face and the letters” (307). As Dawn Trouard notes, Eula’s epitaph memorializes “the dark irony of Flem’s utter triumph”: “In the discourse of the fathers, inscribed on materials that are intended to last, homage is paid to the qualities that benefit the deceased wife of the new president of the bank. The monument is to Flem.”<sup>45</sup> Flem accordingly chooses an epitaph that, in death, flattens Eula and forces her to occupy a position that she declined in life:

EULA VARNER SNOPEs

1889 1927

A virtuous Wife is a Crown to her Husband  
Her Children rise and call Her Blessed

(312)

44. Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, 933.

45. Trouard, “Eula’s Plot,” 284.

Or, as Trouard puts it, "Eula, much like 'My Last Duchess,' is frozen in and by male discourse."<sup>46</sup> Linda may well rise and call her mother blessed in *The Mansion*, but Eula never played the role of "virtuous Wife," at least in the traditional sense, that Flem wants to superimpose upon her. Ratliff continues:

That marble medallion face that Lawyer had picked out and selected . . . never looked like Eula a-tall you thought at first, never looked like nobody nowhere you thought at first, until you were wrong because it never looked like all women because what it looked like was one woman that ever man that was lucky enough to have been a man would say, "Yes, that's her. I knowed her five years ago or ten years ago or fifty years ago and you would a thought that by now I would a earned the right not to have to remember her anymore." (311-12)

In *The Mansion*, Ratliff similarly describes the medallion as "the same face that ever young man no matter how old he got would still never give up hope and belief that some day before he died he would finally be worthy to be wrecked and ruined and maybe even destroyed by it" (465). Ratliff's description makes clear that, in death, Stevens has finally managed to force Eula into the role of goddess that she refused in life.<sup>47</sup> As Brooks first pointed out, Stevens never sees the real Eula:

Gavin is determined to regard Eula as a kind of Mississippi Madame Bovary. But Eula, healthy, earthy, and strong-minded, is the least romantic person in town. The numinous haze that she wears, the special aura that witnesses to her divinity, resides in the eye of the beholder. Throughout her life she confounds Gavin by not behaving as he expects the heroine of a romantic novel to behave: she is dispassionate and practical. And at the end, she confounds him once more by killing herself: the dispassionate woman is capable of the heroic act, though Gavin persists in interpreting her act in terms of his romantic dream.<sup>48</sup>

Eula's monument, then, pays tribute to Stevens's unawareness at least as much as it does to the construction of Flem's respectability.<sup>49</sup>

46. Ibid.

47. Trouard also references a passage of *The Hamlet* in which Faulkner describes Eula almost as a statue, using "the language of mortuary, effigy, even death mask," and she points out that "Faulkner reads Eula, early in her career as Mrs. Snopes, into the tradition of waiting women, women who preside over graveyards, stilled women, who are captured into legends and male myths" (ibid.).

48. Brooks, *William Faulkner*, 217.

49. In "Taken Men and Token Women in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," Sheila Fisher suggests that the Gawain poet erases the Lady of Hautdesert from the text in a similar fashion. Fisher notes that when Gawain returns from his quest, Arthur's "court makes a magnanimous move that completes the erasure of the Lady and her meaning(s) from the girdle" when they attempt "to relieve Gawain of his apparently morbid

## V

On reflection, the gulf that separates Galwyn from Stevens seems quite wide. Galwyn is a figure characteristic of Faulkner's early, nihilistic heroes, an untried knight who, as he gradually gains experience and loses his illusions concerning the meaning of life, comes to choose the oblivion of death over the pointless repetition of a meaningless existence. In *The Town*, though, because Stevens retains the very illusions that Galwyn loses, he causes far more destruction than does Galwyn. Just before the conclusion of *Mayday*, the Lord of Sleep tells Galwyn, "Man should beware of Experience as he should beware of all women, for with her or without her he will be miserable, but without her he will not be dangerous" (85). It would seem that the Lord of Sleep is wrong, at least as far as Stevens is concerned; he remains in his fog of illusions even as *The Town* concludes, and, though his intentions seem pure enough, his actions seem questionable indeed. The evolution of Faulkner's Gawain figures suggests that critics such as Towner, Polk, Urgo, and others who champion Faulkner's later fiction are correct in that the nihilist had neither reformed nor fallen victim to the perils of didactic fiction, even as late as the composition of *The Town*.<sup>50</sup> Stevens, rather than simplistically speaking for Faulkner, instead becomes the perfect vehicle for demonstrating the havoc that a well-meaning, though ill-informed, crusader can wreak. I suspect that Faulkner's political forays during the 1950s taught him a bit about the dangers of reformers such as Stevens, men unwilling to listen to or perhaps even incapable of considering viewpoints that fall outside their own idealistic vision. In *The Mansion*, Linda effectively uses Stevens's romantic bent to turn him into an accomplice to murder. Before she leaves for Pascagoula, she offers herself to Stevens even more boldly than her mother did. Stevens ostensibly recalls Linda's proposal as a direct quotation, but he cannot bring himself to record, even as a euphemism or with a blank space, the four-letter word Linda uses to refer to intercourse that shocks him so: " 'But you can me,' she said. That's right. She used the explicit word, speaking the hard brutal guttural."<sup>51</sup> The horrified Stevens actually blushes at Linda's frank

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obsession with a rather small sin" by agreeing "to wear the girdle, to take it as a collective symbol" (*Seeking the Woman in Late Medieval and Renaissance Writings: Essays in Feminist Contextual Criticism*, ed. Sheila Fisher and Janet E. Halley [Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989], 97).

50. For studies of Faulkner's later fiction, see Theresa M. Towner, *Faulkner on the Color Line: The Later Novels* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000); Polk, *Children of the Dark House*; and Urgo, *Faulkner's Apocrypha*.

51. Although a blank space about five ems long did appear in the first edition, Noel Polk assured me in an e-mail that it was the result of an editorial decision at Random

language and, when she asks him to tell her what other word he prefers, he writes on her tablet: “*There is no other that the right one only one I am old fashioned it still shocks me a little No what shocks is when a woman uses it & is not shocked at all until she realises I am Then I wrote: that wrong too what shocks is that all that magic passion excitement be summed up & dismissed in that one bald unlovely sound*” (546).

After shocking Stevens far more than her mother did, Linda buys into, or at least agrees to share in, his vision of chivalric love; she agrees that they can continue to exist as “the only two people in the world that love each other and dont have to” (548).<sup>52</sup> A scant ten pages later, she even plays the role that Eula never would when she joins Stevens in his myth making during his visit to Pascagoula. Although she must already have a room somewhere, Linda secures two adjoining hotel rooms so that she and Stevens can act out their own version of the myth of Pyramus and Thisbe. She tells Stevens that she wants him to marry another because “then it will be all right. We can always be together no matter how far apart either one of us happens to be or has to be” (558).<sup>53</sup> She then kisses him and tells him to “go back home” tomorrow morning. Stevens protests that he “*was going to Stay all day*” and Linda replies: “No. Tomorrow. Early. I’ll put my hand on the wall and when you’re in bed knock on it and if I wake up in the night I can knock and if you’re awake or still there you can knock back and if I dont feel you knock you can write me from Jefferson tomorrow or the next day. Because I’m all right now. Good night, Gavin” (559).<sup>54</sup>

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House, perhaps made with Faulkner’s approval and even collaboration. No extra spacing appears in the typescript or in the corrected Library of America text.

52. Most critics presume that some physical expression of love constitutes the logical completion of this line. For example, in “*The Hamlet, The Town, and The Mansion: A Psychological Reading of the Snopes Trilogy*,” Nancy Norris speculates, “Surely the end of her infinitive was ‘make love’” (*Mosaic* 7 [1973]: 230). Linda’s wish for Stevens to marry another could also echo Guinevere’s plea in *Le Morte D’Arthur* that, after the fall of Camelot, Launcelot leave her in the nunnery and “go to thy realm, and there take thee a wife, and live with her with joy and bliss” (Malory, *Le Morte D’Arthur*, 930).

53. Stevens apparently even enters into a marriage that allows him to continue thinking of himself in such a fashion. In *The Town* Chick describes Stevens’s future wife, Melisandre Backus Harriss, as a woman “whose terrible power was that defenselessness and helplessness which conferred knighthood on any man who came within range, before he had a chance to turn and flee” (157).

54. Faulkner’s use of the story of Pyramus and Thisbe seems particularly apropos because it takes place during the rule of Semiramis, whom Faulkner often identifies with Eula. In the edition of *Bulfinch’s Mythology* from Faulkner’s library, the entry for Pyramus and Thisbe begins, “Pyramus was the handsomest youth, and Thisbe the fairest maiden, in all Babylonia, where Semiramis reigned” (Thomas Bulfinch, *Bulfinch’s Mythology*, ed. Bennett A. Cerf and Donald S. Klopfer [New York: Modern Library, 1934], 24).

Whether or not Linda has already thought of murdering Flem at this point, she ensures Stevens's complicity in that plan, or any other she might concoct, by catering to his fantasies. Indeed, Stevens ludicrously thinks of writing to Linda near the end of *The Mansion*, "I have everything. You trusted me. You chose to let me find you murdered your so-called father rather than tell me a lie." He thinks that he "could" and "perhaps should" write, "I have everything. Haven't I just finished being accessory before a murder." Instead, he chooses the romantic middle ground and simply writes, "We have had everything" (711), when, actually, he has had nothing save his impossible dreams.

Stevens may, as Urgo suggests, finally begin to enter into a more complex state of moral awareness in *The Mansion*, but his actions belie his words and show that he hardly attains any measurable level of self-actualization.<sup>55</sup> Stevens may determine that "there aren't any morals" and "people just do the best they can" (*Mansion*, 715), but he nevertheless refuses to abandon his willful ignorance concerning Linda and allow that she, too, simply acts as best she can given the circumstances. Ratliff likens her plan to murder Flem to a game, one quite similar to that the Green Knight proposes to Arthur's court. Ratliff realizes that as a "town-raised" boy, Stevens probably never played this game, "Give-me-lief," so Ratliff describes it for him:

You would pick out another boy about your own size and you would walk up to him with a switch or maybe a light stick or a hard green apple or maybe even a rock, depending on how hard a risk you wanted to take, and say to him, "Gimme lief," and if he agreed, he would stand still and you would take one cut or one lick at him with the switch or stick, as hard as you picked out, or back off and throw at him once with the green apple or the rock. Then you would stand still and he would take the same switch or stick or apple or rock or anyways another one jest like it, and take one cut or throw at you. That was the rule. (716)

Ratliff then constructs the analogy between this child's game and the conflict between Linda and Flem:

"So jest suppose—"

"Drive on!" Stevens said.

"—Flem had had his lief fair and square like the rule said, so there wasn't nothing for him to do but jest set there, since he had likely found out years back when she finally turned up here again even outen a communist war, that he had already lost—"

"Stop it!" Stevens said. "Dont say it!"

"—and now it was her lief and so suppose—"

"No!" Stevens said. "No!" But Ratliff was not only nearer the switch,

55. Urgo, *Faulkner's Apocrypha*, 200.

his hand was already on it, covering it.

“—she knowed all the time what was going to happen when he [Mink] got out, that not only she knowed but Flem did too—”

“I wont believe it!” Stevens said. “I wont! I cant believe it,” he said. “Dont you see I cannot?” (716)

Ratliff, though, refuses to “give” Stevens “lief.” He points out that Linda acted deliberately to avenge her mother’s death and took an active role in Flem’s murder by securing Mink’s pardon, even though the situation would have almost certainly played out in much the same fashion when Mink finished serving his sentence in another two years. Ratliff’s observation presumably reduces Stevens to tears because Ratliff “took out the immaculately clean, impeccably laundered and ironed handkerchief which the town said he not only laundered himself but hemstitched himself too, and put it into Stevens’ blind hand and turned the switch and flicked on the headlights” (717). Stevens, though, refuses to see the metaphorical light that Ratliff tries to bring to the situation and continues to do Linda’s bidding by delivering the cash to Mink along with the promise that more will follow (718).

In *The Mansion*, we last see Stevens as he and Ratliff leave Mink. In this scene the narrator suggests a similarity between the three men, describing Ratliff and Stevens as “two old men themselves, approaching their sixties” (719). Faulkner links them to Mink again in the glorious language of the novel’s conclusion. As Mink presumably prepares to die and imagines his life seeping “down and down into the ground already full of the folks that had the trouble but were free now” (720), Faulkner writes:

It was just the ground and the dirt that had to bother and worry and anguish with the passions and hopes and skeers, the justice and the injustice and the griefs, leaving the folks themselves easy now, all mixed and jumbled up comfortable and easy so wouldn’t nobody even know or even care who was which anymore, himself among them, equal to any, good as any, brave as any, being inextricable from, anonymous with all of them: the beautiful, the splendid, the proud and the brave, right on up to the very top itself among the shining phantoms and dreams which are the milestones of the long human recording—Helen and the bishops, the kings and the unhomed angels, the scornful and graceless seraphim. (720–21)

Many scholars, such as George Garrett, think this excerpt serves as Mink’s “final and authentic vision of himself among the dead.”<sup>56</sup> But it

56. George Garrett, “Introduction,” in William Faulkner, *Snopes: “The Hamlet,” “The Town,” “The Mansion”* (New York: Modern Library, 1994), xii.

also functions as a passage of free indirect discourse shared between Mink and some unnamed narrative voice, perhaps even Faulkner's, and while Mink may very well share the sentiment of the conclusion, it seems unlikely that he would articulate it in such eloquent fashion. Stroble notes that these final lines make "Mink—and *Flem*—equal with everyone at the end of the trilogy" and recognizes that "an ethical evaluation is constantly evoked by the internal narrators, but that it is Faulkner's evaluation cannot be claimed."<sup>57</sup> I would add that the conclusion also implicitly equates Stevens, and, more important, the very stuff of his dreams with the murderous Mink, a circumstance that perhaps comes as close to any sort of ethical evaluation as Faulkner found himself willing to venture.

While at the University of Virginia, Faulkner described Stevens as a "knight that goes out to defend somebody who don't want to be defended and don't need it."<sup>58</sup> Of course, this also means that Stevens neglects those who most need defending, as when he stands up for Eula at the Christmas ball yet fails to act later when she so desperately needs rescuing. Faulkner suggests that Stevens reacts as he does because he "had got out of his depth" in *The Town*: "He got into a real world in which people anguished and suffered, not simply did things which they shouldn't do. And he wasn't as prepared to cope with people who were following their own bent, not for a profit but simply because they had to. That is, he knew a good deal less about people than he knew about the law and about ways of evidence and drawing the right conclusions from what he saw with his legal mind. When he had to deal with people, he was an amateur."<sup>59</sup> Indeed an amateur until the very end, Stevens remains perhaps Faulkner's most errant knight and certainly his most deluded, forever questing after a dream that he dooms in the dreaming of it.

57. Stroble, "Flem Snopes," 210.

58. Gwynn and Blotner, *Faulkner in the University*, 141.

59. *Ibid.*, 140.