Defaulting Fathers in Faulkner's Knight's Gambit

Alain Geoffroy

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Published in 1949, *Knight's Gambit* [1] is not generally considered one of William Faulkner's major works and as a consequence has only scarcely been commented on by the critics. Often regarded as a mere collection of detective short stories staging the author's favorite man of law Gavin Stevens,[2] the book is often seen as lacking the unity of other composite works such as *Go Down Moses* (1942) or *Intruder in the Dust* (1948) for which Faulkner also largely borrowed from texts he had already published.[3] However, despite its limited prestige, the reader feels inclined to admit that the "volume does have a certain thematic unity" (Millgate 265) and that surely "Faulkner had more artistic reasons for collecting [these stories] than furnishing for scholars a systematic record of his experiments with the character of Gavin Stevens" (Klinkowitz 151). Even if Michael Millgate reduces this series of "forensic fictions" (Watson) to "a more or less deliberate exercise on the way to [Faulkner's] final conception and characterization of Gavin Stevens" (267), the critics could easily identify beyond Stevens's sophisticated portrait major themes common to the six stories which contribute greatly to the book's undeniable consistency.

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[1] William Faulkner, *Knight's Gambit* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978). All further references are to that edition.

[2] If we are to believe Joseph Blotner, Gavin's portrait evokes Phil Stone, Faulkner's old friend and a man of law like Stevens. However, he makes it clear that "in terms of significant events, Gavin Stevens was more indebted to Faulkner than to Stone" (Blotner 1285).

[3] Namely "Smoke" (1932, 1934), "Monk" (1937), "Hand Upon the Waters" (1939), "Tomorrow" (1940), "An Error in Chemistry" (1946), and "Knight's Gambit." The first five narratives had already appeared in various publications and "Knight's Gambit" only had remained unpublished, although Faulkner had extensively revised the original version until it reached the dimensions of a short novel.

One of them is that of the contrast or conflict between the traditional residents of the Yoknapatawpha county and diverse aliens, so that it could legitimately be asserted that "the real theme of these stories is carried by the various outsiders to that community and the community's relation to them" (Klinkowitz 151). What is striking however is the fact that all of them are characterized negatively, as if the exterior world had the ability to corrupt or subvert; consequently, all of them behave inadequately and beyond the standards of the place. Anselm Holland, in "Smoke" is a heartless outrageous patriarch who came to Jefferson "many years ago. Where from, no one knew" (3); his remote cousin Granby Dodge, a bland swindler, was born in the county but lives outside Jefferson where he is looked down as if he were "a crippled worm" (19). Logically in this context, he hires the services of a gangster from Memphis whose "shaved wax doll" face calls to mind Popeye's, the murderer and rapist of *Sanctuary* (1931). Monk, a simple-minded murderer, in the eponymous story, comes from "a country impenetrable and almost uncultivated and populated by a clannish people who owned no allegiance to no one and no thing and whom outsiders never saw" (40-41). The Ballenbaugh brothers, though they were born in the county, left it for some time before they came back with dubious reputations as if the exterior world had corrupted them. Fentry's bigamous wife in "Tomorrow" does not belong to Jefferson either, but comes "from downstate" (95), like the child she is bearing. As to Joel Flint, the cynical illusionist and double murderer of "An Error of Chemistry", he is "the foreigner, the outlander, the Yankee who had come into our country two years ago as the operator of a pitch" (109). In the final and most substantial narrative, "Knight's Gambit," Harriss and Gualdres come respectively from New Orleans and Latin America and although they learned to behave, at least superficially if not officially, according to local standards, they eventually show themselves without their masks and are consequently doomed to disappear in a most Girardian scheme of expiatory victimization[4]: Harriss, a successful bootlegger, is shot in his office, and the deceitful Captain Gualdres forced to renounce the woman he planned to despoil and to run out of Jefferson, leaving a free hand to his very local rival: Gavin

[4] See René Girard, *La Violence et le Sacré,* Paris : Grasset, 1972.

Stevens. In the six stories, the community "played gambit" to regain its peace and as a consequence a victim had to be killed. Although Gualdres was not actually sacrificed — Stevens managed to prevent his murder — , he had to go back to Argentina after he had married the daughter of the woman he was ready to betray, which for him amounted to being symbolically killed in accordance with his country's proverb which says: "married; dead" (227).

Marriage is another recurrent theme which contributes to the coherence of the book. Not unlike Thomas Sutpen in *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), the outsiders of *Knight's Gambit* can only aspire to a legitimacy in Yoknapatawpha if they marry a woman of the county, for women and land are inseparable vectors of identification with the neighboring community and constitute the only palliatives to the absence of local roots. But many of those marriages are bound to be unhealthy unions, which does not fail to trigger off aberrant family behavior, like that of Anse Holland who, although he "had married the only daughter of a man who owned two thousand acres of some of the best land in the country" (3), was unable to make the unity of his family survive his unfortunate wife's early death. Monk, "a moron, perhaps even a cretin," who "had been digging into the grave" where his grandmother lay is the fruit of a misalliance between "a son who had been too much even for that country and people" and "a woman with hard, bright, metallic, city hair and a hard, blond, city face" (41). Even locals can go beyond the limits of law, like Bookwright, a "well-to-do farmer, husband and father, too" (85), who kills cold-bloodedly the man who ran off with his daughter. Jackson Fentry marries a pregnant woman who already has a husband and raises alone a child who is not his own. Joel Flint is no procrastinator and "two months [after his arrival he] was married to Pritchel's only living child: the dim-witted spinster of almost forty who until then had shared her irascible and violent-tempered father's almost hermit-existence on the good though small farm which he owned" (109), before he murders both his wife and irascible father-in-law to lay his hands on the family farm. In the final story, marriage and land are intimately linked once more: Harriss, after the death of his wife's father, resolves to "t[ake] command of the plantation" (152) but is not more at home than before; as to Captain Gualdres, coveting the

fortune of Harriss's widow, he tries to seduce his sole heiress and that of her father, not for herself but because she is the one "who already control[s] the money" (166). This last narrative is quite emblematic of what is actually at stake throughout the book and the happy ending in which Stevens, the "one [living] representative of the three names" (66) of the founders of the county, eventually marries the rich Melisandre, corroborates the necessity of respecting one of the axioms ruling the Yoknapatawpha county: avoid marriages with outsiders.

Married or not, women or mothers often appear as weak characters in the six stories of *Knight's Gambit* as they are represented as fragile, inadequate or ephemeral creatures. Holland's wife died young "while [her] twin sons were still children" (3). As to Monk's mother, she is shown staring stubbornly at "the green solitude with an expression of cold and sullen and unseeing inscrutability: and deadly, too, but as a snake is deadly," while his adoptive mother, "an old woman living like a hermit" (41), dies untimely when Monk had not even reached the age of seven. There is no full-fleshed female character in "Hand upon the waters," but only a feminine voice negatively introduced as she refuses to help Gavin Stevens in his quest for justice. The mother of Fentry's boy who died in childbirth is shown as "sick," "gaunted," (sic) and "starved-looking" (99) while in the same story the woman who pretends to be Buck Thorpe's wife only reappears to "claim what money or property he might have left" (86). Joel Flint marries a "dim-witted spinster" (109) whose abilities seem to be limited to cooking and raising chickens. This depreciatory vision of women is eventually made explicit, no doubt on behalf of the other male characters, by Stevens and the sheriff:

> It's women who murder their spouses for immediate personal gain — insurance policies, or at what they believe is the instigation or promise of another man. Men murder their wives from hatred or rage or despair, or to keep them from talking since not even bribery not even simple absence can bridle a women's tongue. (112)

In the last narrative women seem to have a less restricted place than in the previous stories, as the Harriss and Cayley girls

express themselves abundantly in Stevens's office, while part of the story rests on the memories of Charles Mallison's mother and grandmother. Moreover, the story revolves around Melisandre Harris, a too obvious recurrent object of desire for Harris, Gualdres and first and foremost Stevens. But the Harriss daughter quickly loses her airs after she has aggressed her supposed rival in a rather ridiculous fight inspired by jealousy, being reduced later on to a mere stake in the gambling opposing Stevens and Gualdres; as Charles Mallison sarcastically says to his uncle: "You bet him the girl.[...] And he lost" (218). In the first unpublished version of the story,[5] she is manipulated by her brother who forces her to cheat about her age so that *he* can get his share of their father's heritage earlier. When she enters Stevens's office, she stares at him "with that frozen sickness of dread terror" just to tell one more lie, still under the hold of her brother, both of them conjuring up the relevant image of "the policeman with his wringing captive or the victory-flushed soldier with his shrinking Sabine prey" (136).

Even their mother, although she is the pivot of the plot, is depicted as an improbable ethereal woman, who "could not exist, and [that] Faulkner does not present [...] as a real person" (Volpe 169), someone who "maybe didn't need to be bright, having been created for simple love and grief" (150), and who "still look[ed] like a girl even at thirty-five, not looking much older in fact than her own children" (161). Even Stevens, her first suitor, remembers the image of a "child playing house," so evanescent that he sees her in his mind's eyes like "an archaic miniature, sober and sedate and demure ten years beyond her age and fifty years beyond her time" (233), "like something preserved from an old valentine or a 1904 candy-box" (234).

This unrealness may account for Stevens's inexplicable blunder when he sent from Europe the wrong letter to his fiancée,

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[5] The original text of about twenty pages was, according to Faulkner, only a story "about a man who planned to commit a murder by means of an untameable stallion" (Letter to Malcolm Cowley, 5 October 1945, in *Selected Letters,* 203). Written as early as 1942 and told in the first person by Stevens's nephew, then called Charles Weddel — or Chuck, but not Chick like in the published version —, this prototype version however contained in embryonic form all the ingredients of the final plot.

consequently losing her for more than twenty years, before he could decide himself to conquer her again, but this time against a rival who had based his designs on the confusion of the generations, unscrupulously courting the daughter to win not only the mother's heart but her money. For Captain Gualdres played on safe ground with a woman who had had no serious opportunity to learn about family roles and genealogy, having had a father who "paid little or no attention to her and who [...] charged against the life of the daughter, the death of the wife who apparently had been his own life's one monogamous love" (144). It is no wonder then if Melisandre remained an eternal adolescent, frozen on the threshold of adulthood and never really entering it, affectively crippled by a father who could not see in her the fruit of his love for his deceased wife but the person who was supposed to make up for the loss of her. Logically, Mrs. Harriss appears later on as the symbolic appendage of a man who was "more than twice her age, *old enough himself to be her father*" (our emphasis), whom she married "in one burst, one breath" (145) when at the age of seventeen she became "Mrs. Harriss," wife then widow, with no other name or even Christian name throughout the whole narrative than the one conferred on her by marriage.[6] Fortunately, Stevens's authoritarian intervention to get rid of his rival has a structuring effect on the Harriss family: by doing so, he literally displaces the sophisticated cupboard lover from the rank of equal to that of son by forcing him to marry Melisandre's daughter, which Charles Mallison impishly but rightly underlines when he proposes to report Gualdres's words to his uncle: "I've got a message from *your son*" (241, our emphasis). It is precisely that humorous reference to fatherhood which constitutes the major axis linking the six narratives to one another, revealing a progression in the building up of a more and more convincing symbolic father figure embodied by Gavin Stevens, whose function it is to enforce the various aspects of Law in a variety of real, adoptive or symbolic family contexts in which it is subverted: malfunctioning families, violent or transgressive families, all of them lack the legitimacy and the authority of an acceptable father.

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[6] It is only later in *The Town* (1957) that we learn her patronymic: Melisandre Backus.

As suggested by the plot of the last narrative, the issue of fatherhood can hardly be raised without considering that of the nature of family links and roles and Faulkner's vision of them in *Knight's Gambit* is worth a close look. Even a casual Freudian reading soon reveals that some sort of inborn recurring disorder, often perturbing generational or genealogical relationships, seems to affect the functioning of all families,[7] to which Stevens endeavors to bring drastic remedies not only as a representative of the law, but as a symbolic father whose authority only can re-establish order: like a psychoanalyst, Stevens unveils the truth, which puts everyone back to his or her legitimate place. And as in "Knight's Gambit," the failing pivot of the family structure in the preceding narratives recurrently proves to be a faltering father.

We saw previously that women and consequently mothers are often at fault, but fathers generally do no better. Old Anse, an irascible and stubborn father, raises his twin boys alone and nastily drives them to break off with each other out of pride and selfishness. He dies when they are forty, and we learn then that their outrageous father "had been digging up the graves in the family cemetery where his wife's people rested, among them the grave in which his wife had lain for thirty years" (4). After his wife's death, he "refuse[s] violently" to give young Anse "his share" (5) of the family estate, before he expels both his sons from the house where they were born. At his death, he bequeaths "[his] property to [his] elder son Virginius" (sic) and unfairly disinherits his "younger son" (10), taking the two brothers away from each other until Stevens manages to reconcile them by revealing the truth about the murder of their father.

Monk has a father every person who has known him seems eager to get rid of and understandably in such a deleterious environment people consider that "he never should have lived" (40). After his grandmother's death, he is taken in by old Fraser, a childless widower, who adopts him and teaches him the only thing he will ever learn to do correctly in his life: to distil whisky, significantly an illegal activity. Even if the penitentiary warden embodies another

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[7] Gavin's is no exception as the uncle seems to complement the role of an almost invisible father... Generational order is respected however, which seems to be the stamp of a traditional local family.

substitute father for him, Monk never actually learns anything from him but "fidelity to the man who fed him and taught him what to do and how and when" (43): a dog's life, far from what a father is supposed to bequeath his son... Let us notice that in that same story, Stevens's sharp sense of justice comes up against the dubious authority of a corrupted judge, another harmful symbolic father figure.

"Hand upon the water" stages Lonnie Grinnup, a simple-minded man cut off from his ancestors, "an orphan too, like Stevens" (66), who takes care of "the deaf-and-dumb orphan he had taken into his hut [...] and clothed and fed and raised" (66), and who is for him "*brother* and *father* both" (67, our emphasis), which reveals the indetermination of generational structures in the surrogate father's mental and affective attitude. Logically, Lonnie cannot succeed — "Lonnie" sounds almost like "loony" — in raising his protégé to adulthood and it is no surprise if that "touched" (66) man cannot make his adopted son "even grow mentally as far as he himself had" (ibid.).

The Fentry family in "Tomorrow" seems at first less visibly on the fringe of society for they work hard and "pa[y] their taxes and ow[e] no man" (92). But this integrity has an exorbitant price which women pay with their lives, men with their youths and both with any possibility to produce another generation:

> Jackson worked it, too, in his time, until he was about twenty-five and already looking forty, asking no odds of nobody, not married and not nothing, him and his pa living alone and doing their own washing and cooking, because how can a man afford to marry when him and his pa have just one pair of shoes between them. If it had been worth while getting of a wife a-tall, since that place had already killed his ma and his grandma both before they were forty years old. (92)

It is no wonder then if Jackson Fentry, the destitute heir of this sterile family, has no scruples to living with another man's wife, sick and pregnant, who has eventually stopped "hunting for the husband that has deserted her" (99). Plausibly, as one more defaulting father figure, the latter "cut and run soon as she told him about the baby" (ibid.); as to Fentry, he has probably not the psychological means to realize that his desire to marry someone else's wife and to

make her child his son goes against the law: by doing so, he satisfies his long frustrated wish not only to have a wife, but above all a descendant, which is probably enough to make him blind to common sense. However, the unfortunate woman dies in childbirth after having illegitimately married Fentry, sullying their union with bigamy. So he raises the child alone for two years, refusing Mrs. Pruitt's help as his family has always refused anyone's, persisting in his solipsistic refusal of any contact with society, until the child's legitimate family comes to take him by force with an argument which cannot be easily overlooked: "he is our kin" (101). Some twenty years later, Fentry still considers himself the father of his illegitimate wife's son, stubbornly struggling during the trial to avenge his death and symbolically sticking to the father function, which Stevens does not fail to point out for his nephew: "you wouldn't have freed him either. Don't ever forget that. Never" (105). We understand here that Stevens is not only Charles's master in the game of chess, but that he plays the role of a symbolic father for him as well, and that the successive narratives of *Knight's Gambit* are so many lessons delivered to his nephew.

Another faltering father, Old Pritchel in "An Error of Chemistry" treated his only daughter like a servant and displayed no paternal love for her. Although she eventually got married, her lot was not much improved and their family life remained as barren as before, for "the only reason [her father] allowed the son-in-law to enter the house even then was so that his daughter could prepare him a decent hot meal once a week" (101). Pritchel's behavior foreshadows that of old Backus, in "Knight Gambit's," one more failed father, who stops seeing a child in his daughter after his wife's death and exploits her cynically as if she were his maid. When he eventually goes bankrupt, she is the one who saves the farm by marrying a rich man much older than her "to lift the mortgage on the homestead" (148). As Stevens notices bitterly, "the whole pattern [is] upside down" (147), for the failure of the father leads to the confusion of the roles: "the child acting and reading what should have been the parent's lines and characters" (148). This is how Harriss enters the family, but as a father himself, he does no better than his father-in-law, being absent from Jefferson for months in a row and transforming the family

home into a luxurious place, more public than private with the crowd of his anonymous guests and more anonymous still the swarm of onlookers who come there almost every day as if they were going to the show.

Dispossessed from her own house, Mrs. Harriss runs away from the place as often as possible, wandering from one country to the next as if she had no longer a home for herself and her children. But the destructuration of the family reaches its peak after the sudden death of the husband, when Melisandre and the children come back from Latin America with a mysterious Captain Gualdres who once in Jefferson shamelessly courts both the mother and the daughter, subverting the order of the generations and driving the bewildered son, Max, to extremes. There appears then the almost classical incestuous complex so recurrent in Faulkner's works, weighing particularly heavily on Max's shoulders in the absence of any kind of fatherly authority, a situation which echoes *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and above all *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) for "like Henry Sutpen and Quentin Compson the intensity of his feeling for his sister made him supersensitive to anything that touched her" (Blotner 1285). But unlike his literary predecessors, Max Harriss reacts most adequately by calling at Stevens's office with his sister, claiming for justice and the application of the law. Stevens's intervention proves to be a total success for by marrying Mrs. Harriss, he does not only erase the twenty-year old bitter consequences of his personal failure as her first lover — he has remained a bachelor — but he asserts himself as a credible father whose place he gains by asserting his desire for the mother. As a lawyer he symbolically incarnates and enforces Law as the ultimate separator in the oedipal triangle, taking away the brother from the sister and from the mother — he forces Max to enroll in the army — and restoring the hierarchy of the generations by making Gualdres his son-in-law. Moreover, he manages to prevent a murder from being committed, which is basically conform to the very spirit of the Law. In the last narrative, Stevens undoubtedly embodies the father function at its best, notably because his exemplary application of the Law combines itself with the urge and satisfaction of long repressed personal desires.

Seen from that perspective, the six narratives of *Knight's Gambit* betray a psychological consistency which makes the succession of them more than a mere collection of heterogeneous short stories. A Freudian reading reveals Gavin Stevens's progression toward maturity from one narrative to the next until he reaches the status of a full-grown symbolic father in the last pages of the book, an accomplishment which he proudly admits when his nephew asks him why it took him twenty years to find a wife: "How did just the years do all that?" "'They make me older,' his uncle said. 'I have improved.'" (246). If the leading thread of the faltering father which unites the six narratives provides the necessary contrast for Gavin's progress, it also seals distinct stories into one work that evokes some kind of "late" construction novel. This progression rises Faulkner's book to the literary standard of quality he had himself defined for "any book and so even [for] a collection of short stories, [in which] form, integration, is as important as to a novel — an entity of its own, single, set for one pitch, contrapuntal in integration, toward one end, one finale." [8] In this particular domain, *Knight's Gambit* is undoubtedly more of a success than many critics have been ready to admit.

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[8] Letter to Malcolm Cowley, 1. November 1948, in *Selected Letters*, 277.

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