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The Cow, the Rhinemaiden, and the “Supreme Primal Uterus”: Love, Worship, and Tribute Language in William Faulkner’s The Hamlet

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I begin with a quote from William Faulkner’s The Hamlet, regarding a suitor of Eula Varner’s:

“This was he against whom, following the rout of the Memphis drummer, the youths of last summer’s trace galled mules rose in embattled concert to defend that in which apparently they and the brother both had no belief, even though they themselves had failed signally to disprove it, as knights before them have probably done.” (Faulkner 1991, 151)

William Faulkner creates his Yoknapatawpha County to explore the “curse of the South”. The Hamlet is the first book in the Snopes trilogy, which chronicles the rise and fall of Flem Snopes and his family. Because of its genealogical aspect, The Hamlet allows Faulkner to continue his study of the “curse of the south” – the inability of family members to love each other. This curse is a result of the Old South’s obsession with legacy and chivalry, two concepts that are thrown into confusion in post-bellum Yoknapatawpha. It is not surprising, then, that Faulkner’s work is full of the language and imagery of courtly romance, and that this language is constantly embattled in criticizing and lamenting the fate of the South. This paper studies the imagery and language Faulkner uses around three characters. The first is Eula Varner, later Eula Snopes, who is the object of worship of the men of Frenchman’s Bend. Faulkner consistently refers to Eula in
mythological terms, and he endows her with the status of a
goddess at a young age. The other two characters – Ike Snopes
and Jack Houston’s cow – form a counterpoint to the town’s
obsession with Eula. Ike is the mentally challenged cousin of Flem
Snopes who is ignored by his family and cared for by Mrs.
Littlejohn, an innkeeper. Ike starts sneaking away to watch the
cow and eventually falls in love with her, even attempting to run
away with her. Ike’s obsession with the cow can be read as a
repetition of the obsession with Eula that the young men of
Frenchman’s Bend ritualistically developed each summer.
However, since the relationship between Ike and the cow is
exclusive compared to the mass-courtship of Eula, the town’s
fascination takes on an obscene voyeuristic quality, which ends
tragically. I show that Faulkner uses the story of Ike and his cow
to show the ultimate failure of love in the South, and the
impossibility of a Southern courtly romance, especially when
Eula’s story is read as a parallel.

i. The Uterus

Faulkner’s ideal woman has been discussed in Faulkner
studies as the “Natural Woman,” a sharp contrast to the remote,
deformed Southern Lady. However, the Natural Woman does not
escape Faulkner’s critical gaze. As Faulkner’s criticism is
frequently delivered through his humor, a brief study of humor is
important to a reading of The Hamlet, or any other Faulkner work.
The Natural Women are just as likely to fall victim to Faulkner’s
humor as any of his other female characters. He often relies on
comic strategies found in Southwest humor when talking about his
Natural Women. He plays with Southwest Humor’s techniques of
flamboyant exaggeration and hyperbole, while incorporating his
own ironic and satirical voice (Collins 1975, 262). The result is
what François Pitavy calls comic “inflation” and “deflation” – an
alternation of overstatement and understatement to create a
mocking voice (Pitavy 1984, 195). Pitavy develops this argument
in the context of Shreve’s voice in Absalom! Absalom!, where
Shreve’s language belittles “Aunt Rosa” because he fails or refuses
to recognize and understand the very different cultural
significance between the Southern terms of address “Miss” and
“Aunt”. These techniques of comic inflation and deflation are
employed in other works by Faulkner. In regards to his women,
especially the Natural Women, Faulkner insists more on the
inflating aspect of this device, but the result is always an inflation-
which-deflates, or undercuts itself.

Perhaps the most consistent example of this inflation-
which-deflates is in the language surrounding Eula Varner in The
Hamlet. This accompanies her textual birth – in the first paragraph
of the book dedicated to her, Faulkner offers the following
description: “even her breasts were no longer the little, hard,
fiercely-pointed cones of puberty or even maidenhood. On the
contrary, her entire appearance suggested some symbology out of
the old Dionysic times” (Faulkner 1991, 105). Although this
depiction of Eula as suggesting some sort of divine female
decadence at the age of “not quite thirteen” is an exaggeration, it is
not entirely outlandish (Faulkner 1991, 105). It is easy for the
reader to explain that Eula was simply an early bloomer, and that
her physical maturity coupled with her actual youth accentuates
the freedom of childhood, while rendering it decadent through the
flesh.

Faulkner depicts Eula as a corporeal and thus sexual object.
Faulkner writes that any time Eula had to go out with her mother
after outgrowing her perambulator, “she would be carried by their
negro manservant. [...] the negro man staggering slightly beneath
his long, dangling, already indisputably female burden like a
bizarre and chaperoned Sabine rape” (Faulkner 1991, 105). While
Eula is first depicted as having an extraordinary sense of self, she
is unable to articulate it, and becomes reduced to the “indisputably
female burden” that is moved and fed when necessary. The fact
that she is “indisputably female” points the reader to some
sexualized image of the child, which is reinforced by the
comparison to a “Sabine rape.” Faulkner attempts to force the
humor, saying this rape is “bizarre and chaperoned.” The inflation
granted by the allusion to the mythic rape of Sabine women is
deflated by the fact that Faulkner has made it clear to his readers
that Eula is not bothered by the forced transportation of her body;
unlike the Sabine women, she would definitely not be screaming,
flailing, or otherwise resisting her abduction. She simply will not
show complicity by walking. She is encumbered by her growing
body, but doesn’t yet know what to do with it aside from nothing.

The first description of the disillusioned Eula and Eula-the-
body also juxtapose different types of maturity against Eula’s real
youth. Her consciousness of the monotonous, cyclical nature of
life that masks the trajectory she knows her life will take is silenced throughout the novel, as Eula rarely speaks. Depictions of Eula as a sexual object do evolve over the course of the novel, gradually growing more complex from object, to idol, to oracle. Here, Eula is the entirely passive object – contrary to the image of a Sabine rape. She lets herself be carried because she does not care to move herself, and sees no difference between movement and stasis. She has not figured out what movement she herself wants to take, and ignores whatever expectations others have for her actions. She does not resist the objectification undertaken by her mother and the servant as a violation of her identity, but accepts it because her identity is internal, not prescribed, and not tied to any action. Rather, for Eula, her actions are tied to her internal identity.

This lack of purpose changes once Eula matures and is forced to leave her home to go to school. She is driven back and forth to the nearby schoolhouse because she “declined to walk there,” but she still does not participate in an active refusal to fill the script written for a young Southern Lady (Faulkner 1991, 109). If anything, Eula is being forced out of the script because receiving a classical education is not necessarily a part of being a Southern Lady. This chauffeuring required Eula’s brother Jody to make many extra trips between the school and his store, a mere 200 feet away. After a month, he refuses to continue the nonsense of picking her up at lunch, only to drive her back afterwards, and then pick her up again at the end of the day. Jody and the reader are both astonished when Eula agrees to walk back and forth from the school and the store at lunch. However, on the second day of the arrangement, Jody discovers why Eula had been willing to comply. He exaggerates the explanation to his mother, “‘If you could arrange to have a man standing every hundred feet along the road, she would walk all the way home! She’s just like a dog! Soon as she passes anything in long pants she begins to give off something. You can smell it! You can smell it ten feet away!’” (Faulkner 1991, 110). Her description moves from the state of being a simple, even victimized, object that is transported by others, to being recognized as an animal, a dog, a bitch. Not pristine, or ideal, Eula’s sexuality is temporarily deflated to a brutish, primal, instinctive state that invokes the senses rather than an image from mythology. This exaggeration of Eula’s sexuality through Jody’s explosive reaction is undercut by Eula’s being only eight years old, and most likely not yet sexual at all.

Yet, the primal aspect of Eula’s sexuality that Jody and
Faulkner here evoke also lends itself to abstraction and the
creation of an empty symbol where Faulkner and others can
deposit their views of pure female sexuality. It is exactly the dual
nature of the word “primal” as being something uncivilized and
thus wild, but also uncivilized and thus pure and untainted by
culture that allows for Eula to be rebuilt as an object once more.
This time, however, she is reconstructed as an idol, complete with
her first worshiper. Faulkner presents a portrait of Eula on her
first day of school at age eight through the eyes of her male
schoolteacher Labove:

Then one morning he turned from the crude blackboard and saw a face
eight years old and a body of fourteen with the female shape of twenty,
which on the instant of crossing the threshold brought into the bleak, ill
lighted, poorly-heated room dedicated to the harsh functioning of
Protestant primary education a moist blast of spring’s liquorish
corruption, a pagan triumphal prostration before the supreme primal
uterus. (Faulkner 1991, 126)

On a first glance, the tribute language Faulkner employs
describing Eula’s physique perhaps seduces the reader, in the
same way the image of Eula seduces Labove. The image of Eula
“crossing the threshold” immediately brings images of marriage,
tradition, and ceremony to the reader’s mind; Eula is presented for
Labove to gaze upon. The discipline connoted by the “harsh
Protestantism” of the room, and Labove’s status as the teacher,
incorporates the chivalric ideas of control, propriety, and
forbidden love. This idea of chivalric tribute is heightened by the
last image of “pagan triumphal prostration before the supreme
primal uterus,” which draws up images of Labove bowing down
at some altar, or directly to a goddess. However, upon a closer
reading, the passage becomes comical in its flamboyant,
exaggerated tone. Faulkner begins with a reduced blazon of Eula;
he describes her face, and then her body as a traditional blazon
would describe a woman from the top of her head, down. As the
description progresses, Eula’s physical age becomes exaggerated,
going from eight, to fourteen, to twenty. This progression leads to
the final equation of Eula to “the supreme primal uterus.” Eula
becomes the woman-as-uterus, or woman-as-body – she becomes a
complete goddess, and yet merely a corporeal organ. She has been
stripped of her excess flesh – the arms and legs that she formerly
had no use for – and so has been spared becoming an animal, as
Jody described her, because she has been reduced to a single
essential organ.
ii. The Cow

Then he would hear her, coming down the creekside in the mist. It would not be after one hour, two hours, three; the dawn would be empty, the moment and she would not be, then he would hear her and he would lie drenched in the wet grass, serene and one and indivisible in joy, listening to her approach. He would smell her; the whole mist reeked with her; the same malleate hands of mist which drew along his prone drenched flanks palped her pearled barrel too and shaped them both somewhere in immediate time, already married. (Faulkner 1991, 183)

It is hard to imagine that this passage, with its overblown language and sensuality is actually written about a cow. In the love story between Ike Snopes and Jack Houston’s cow, love and sexuality become embodied in an animal in a way that is the direct opposite of the vision of Eula-as-dog that Jody Varner presents. The love between Ike and the cow at first appears to be an ideal courtly romance – Ike is mentally retarded and the cow is not human, so no love could possibly be consummated between the two. Additionally, the cow is exalted and idealized, appearing, “blond among the purpling shadows of the pasture, not fixed amid the suppurant tender green but integer of spring’s concentrated climax, by it crowned, garlanded” (Faulkner 1991, 186). She is surrounded by purple shadows, purple being the color of nobility, and also crowned. Ike acts as an obedient servant to her, following her and watching. His attempts to make physical contact with the cow are refused with a bellow, or interrupted by the cow’s owner.

Ike even attempts to rescue the cow from a brushfire in one scene. However, a horse is also caught in the fire and keeps charging at the pair. The horse eventually causes Ike and the cow to fall down into a small ravine, with the cow landing on top of Ike. Ike quickly gets himself up but,

When he moved toward her, she whirled and ran […] in a blind paroxysm of shame, to escape not him alone but the very scene of the outwagerment of privacy where she had been sprung suddenly upon and without warning from the dark and betrayed by her own treacherous biological inheritance, he following again, speaking to her, trying to tell her how this violent violation of her maiden’s delicacy is no shame, since such is the very iron imperishable warp of the fabric of love. (Faulkner 1991, 192)

This scene of falling into the ravine and “violation of her maiden’s
delicacy” is the first sexual encounter between Ike and the cow.¹ It important that even for Ike, sexual activity is not transgressive as long as it is pursued in the spirit of love; whereas, for the rest of Frenchman’s Bend, sexuality is completely divorced from any idea of love, and is worshiped for its own sake.

Faulkner later plays on the gender ambiguity of the cow as being not-human, but also as a being which possesses both a vagina and multiple phallic organs. After the fire, Ike attempts to run away with the cow. After a day of walking, the cow becomes irritated, and Ike realizes that it is because she has not been milked — her bag is full. Ike proceeds to milk her:

> At first she would not let him touch her bag at all. Even then she kicked him once, but only because the hands were strange and clumsy. Then the milk came down, warm among his fingers and on his hands and wrists, making a thin sharp hissing on the earth. (Faulkner 1991, 198-9)

This reinforces the image of Ike as the inexperienced, virginal lover, but also feminizes him, and posits the cow as the virile, experienced male lover.

Once Houston has recovered Ike and his cow from their attempted elopement, he decides that he will give the cow to Ike so he will be rid of the problem. Mrs. Littlejohn gives Houston Ike’s only money (which Ratliff had previously given to her), as payment for the cow, and Houston reluctantly accepts. Mrs. Littlejohn then gives the cow its own shed, and Ike spends the bulk of his time there. When Ratliff, a traveling salesman, returns to town after a prolonged absence, he finds that the men have been whipped into a frenzy, incomparable to anything seen before. People are asking him if he is “going to watch” and telling him that he “has to watch”. At first Ratliff is oblivious, but he quickly comes to realize

> He was walking a path, a path which he had not seen before, which had not been there in May. Then that rear wall came into view, the planks nailed horizontally upon it, that plank at head-height prized off and leaning, the projecting nails faced carefully inward, against the wall and no more motionless than the row of backs, the row of heads which filled the gap. He knew not only what he was going to see but that, like Bookwright, he did not want to see it, yet unlike Bookwright, he was going to look. (Faulkner 1991, 216-217)

The entire male population of the town has become obsessed with
Ike and the cow. It is one of Ike’s own cousins who is charging admission to watch the “show.” This obsession is very much a replacement for the men’s obsession with Eula, who has been sent off on her “honeymoon.” In fact, Eula does not reappear until after the cow is gone. To cure Ike of his “sinful” inclination, his relatives try a folk remedy – they kill the cow and feed a piece of its meat to Ike to rid him of his taste for it. However, this forced internalization of his other does not cure Ike, and he is eventually bought a toy cow to make him less lonely.

iii. The Rhinemaiden

When Eula returns after her marriage and the birth of her child, she is much less visible in The Hamlet, and portrayed very differently. There is no longer the frenzied ritual of courtship, but rather a reverence, as of an oracle. This reverence is very different from the adoration she formerly received, and can even be read as a mockery of the excess that was lightheartedly laughed at in the beginning. At the end of the story of the wild horses, V.K. Ratliff leads a group of the men to Will Varner’s house to fetch him to tend to Henry Armstid who has been injured as a result of the horses running through town. The men arrived at the Varner home and

They stood, clumped darkly in the silver yard and called up at the blank windows until suddenly someone was standing in one of them. It was Flem Snopes’ wife. She was in a white garment; the heavy braided club of her hair looked almost black against it. She did not lean out, she merely stood there, full in the moon, apparently blank-eyed or certainly not looking downward at them – the heavy gold hair, the mask not tragic and perhaps not even doomed; just damned, the strong faint lift of breasts beneath the marblelike fall of the garment; to those below what Brunhilde, what Rhinemaiden on what spurious river-rock of papier mache, what Helen returned to what topless and shoddy Argos, waiting for no one. (Faulkner 1991, 338)

The passage begins with an image comparable to some pagan ritual calling for the appearance of an oracle, and when the oracle does appear, she is without identity. It is “Flem Snopes’ wife,” not Eula, and her face is not clearly visible to the men below; even if it were, she is wearing a mask. Eula is no longer the idol and object of admiration that appeared early in the story, in full flesh, but is now a cold distant figure – marble and statue-like. While the
image of Eula is presented as very symbolic and elevated to the status of Wagner’s Brunhilde, she is simultaneously reduced to her mortal reality by being seated on an imagined papier-mâché rock, which would disintegrate if it were placed in real water.

William Faulkner makes it very clear that public worship and adoration are integral to the system of courtship and chivalry of the Old South. This public nature serves a policing function for both the lovers presented, and the common person. For Eula, the public attempts to ensure that her courtship goes according to tradition, and that she remains property of the men of Frenchman’s Bend. When the town’s love affair fails and Eula is impregnated by a stranger, everything is thrown into disarray. The love between Ike and the cow serves as an analogy for the obsession the town had for Eula, who was constantly trying to escape convention and prescription, just as the cow initially avoided Ike’s touch. The cow eventually submits and becomes property of Ike in the same way that Eula is forced to marry Flem Snopes and become his property. The townsmen are there to gawk at Eula and ridicule Flem’s impotence just as much as they are present to jeer at Ike’s obsolete consummation with the cow.

ENDNOTES

1. As a side note, it is debatable whether or not there is any consummation in this scene because Ike is later referred to as still being virginal, although this may just be a condition of his mental state.

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