

The Hamlet, William Faulkner's Last Great Novel

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Abstract: The essay argues that William Faulkner's *The Hamlet* is the last of his great novels, and in many ways his best. It points out that this first volume of the *Snoopes* trilogy transforms the world of poverty-stricken countryside into a very literary world by means of allusions, names, and intertextual references. It describes the book as a dialogic novel, in which many voices are heard and different stories are told. Thus the very structure of the text, perhaps more so than its thematic concerns, must first be taken into consideration. To be given its proper due as the superb work of literary art it is, the book should be read and appreciated as an autonomous work of art – not as the first volume about the *Snoopes* clan.

Keywords: American studies – American literature – Southern literature – William Faulkner – *The Hamlet* – *Snoopes Trilogy*

“I am the best in America, by God.”

William Faulkner¹

“*The Hamlet* is a remarkable novel, and in my opinion, rarely given its proper due.”

Cleanth Brooks²

1. Faulkner's addition in handwriting in a letter to Robert K. Haas at Random House (received 24 April, 1939). See *Selected Letters of William Faulkner*, ed. Joseph Blotner, New York, Random House, 1977, p.113.

2. Cleanth Brooks, *William Faulkner: First Encounters*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1983, pp. 127-28.

The Hamlet occupies a unique position in Faulkner's total achievement. It is a very different book from *The Sound and the Fury* or *Absalom, Absalom!*, two of his superb masterpieces from the major years of his career in the late 1920s and early 1930s. *The Hamlet* was published on April 1, 1940, and is in all respects a less experimental and modernistic novel than the stories of the Compson children in *The Sound and the Fury* or the Bundrens in *As I Lay Dying*. These early books may well be described as "achieved designs" or "supreme fictions," yet in many respects the slow winding, richly humorous, yet at times also tragic narrative of *The Hamlet* ranges wider, is more inclusive, more varied in tone and style, and infinitely richer in subject matter and theme. Cleanth Brooks deals at length with this novel in his first major study of Faulkner's achievement, *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country* (1963), but only late in life, in a study called *First Encounters*, does he find the book to be on a par with the books Faulkner scholarship in general considers his best. Donald Kartiganer claims in his study, called *The Fragile Thread*, that *The Hamlet* is Faulkner's "last major novel," and that "it is in some ways the best of all: the widest ranging, the funniest, the most varied in tone, subject matter, and style."³

The Hamlet is a book of maturity, generosity, and wisdom. A book in which the outrage of the potential believer has been substituted by a much broader outlook on the world and the people who live in it. It is a book so much above and beyond simple questions of morality, of right and wrong, of greed and usurpation, that incidents and events all become but instances, examples, anecdotes in the much broader tale about what it means to be alive in this world. "Snopesism" may well be deemed universal, and we may all have to fight our ways out of the Snopes dilemma, but if anything is universal in Faulkner's first volume of the Snopes saga, it should be related to the fact that we here have the privilege of encountering the beginnings of stories before they have become stories; so to speak: in their making. We are present at the creation of myths, at the point at which events and actions are transformed into tales through the very telling. We meet people who seem to have been deprived of all but the most basic of cultivating or civilizing forces. What little they have

3. Donald M. Kartiganer, *The Fragile Thread: The Meaning of Form in Faulkner's Novels*. Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 1979.

shall be taken from them; what they achieve, shall be usurped and destroyed.

In the backwoods world of Frenchman's Bend, the world of *The Hamlet*, people usurp and swindle, and trade and deal, trying to get the best of those closest to them, in a society where there is so little to be taken and so little to be shared. Character after character is divested of everything but life and some sort of pride, and they are thus pitched against enormous odds. The most tragic of the experiences of these characters – basic, original, primitive – are not for the simple storytellers to relate. The master's voice takes over and creates possible stories and rich possibilities of understanding and explanation, where the onlookers or gossips could not offer anything but conjecture and simplification. Language and style change completely from teller to teller and become radically different when the narrator's voice takes over, which it does even in the midst of someone else's story.

The world of a poverty-stricken and ignorant countryside is thus transformed into a very literary world, a world made up of words on the page, of allusions, quotations, loans, intertextual references, mythical names, parallels and repetitions – ultimately creating a level of commentary which somehow spreads to all of the text and makes *The Hamlet* the most literary of all Faulkner's books. In this sense the novel also becomes a text about the necessity of tales and telling, in order to understand our lives and impose some meaningful design on them. Moreover, it becomes a text about our limitless need for love, beauty, deeper understanding, compassion – in opposition to and apparently bound to lose to the forces of greed and inhumanity. The desperate actions of so many estranged and lonely losers in the novel represent their fight for beauty and for a meaningful life, a lasting struggle in order to keep the dream alive against all odds. There must be something of value, something good and beautiful and true that shall not perish from the earth, but which they hardly ever encounter on their troublesome journeys through this valley of tears and laughter.

The Hamlet is a beautifully balanced and very carefully executed blend of the comic and the tragic. It works through oppositions on absolutely all levels, but never in the ordinary and simplistic manner where oppositions and tensions are resolved, so that tears give way to laughter. In the literary world of Frenchman's Bend the oppositions and contradictions

are inherent parts of character, of society, of life – everything is a both/and, never only black or only white – with one all-decisive exception: Flem Snopes.

The Hamlet is in all senses of the term a dialogic novel, even if the strong control behind and beyond and above the stories related to us, by individual participants or by story-tellers, is taken into consideration. The chief narrator, the one who lets many characters tell their own stories within his broader project, gives his tellers so much freedom that it is only by implication we may find that he guides and colors and structures everything, also when it is not told by him in a strict sense. Yet his narrative is only one among many, perhaps a master narrative with more probing and searching and thinking and wondering, but still a narrative alongside numerous others. He is setting the scene for Ratliff and others, letting them have the word, so he is clearly more powerful, more in command. But as a narrator within the text, never really materializing and never even close to becoming a participating character in his own story, he distributes the word, controls emphasis, and is mainly responsible for the very deliberate over-all structure of the novel. It is vitally important not to overemphasize the structure, finding links and bridges where they are *not* in order to create a flawless totality.

The Hamlet is in many and important ways an *episodic* novel, but whenever the main story line seems to be forgotten, it is done deliberately and with calculation. Not only do the satellite stories in the book underscore thematic concerns, which really is of minor significance; more importantly they emphasize the need for storytelling, the sheer pleasures of a good yarn and its role in a community of uneducated, simple people, which is to give a model narrative upon which they may tell the stories of their own lives, better to cope with the endless row of waiting tomorrows; but which also is to gather people around the campfire, and thus the fire can be kept burning even in the darkest of times.

Reading *The Hamlet* is not particularly difficult, but it should be a slow process. The narrator seems to have all the time in the world and is more than willing not only to tell stories that at least at first glance are only minimally connected to the development of the main story, he is also more than willing to make extensive use of nature descriptions, to give alternative explanations of actions and events, or to add background information in capsule stories of extensive length. One should not call

any of this material digressive, because it is difficult to assess the relative importance of episodes before the reading has come to a close, and our *response* – and interpretive work – takes over where a reading, following the text, ends. Having followed the text is different from the attempt to follow the text and thus watch the reading as a process, not as an end product. In the transaction that takes place between text and reader, while reading and afterwards, we have an intertextual exchange in which the text presents limits for possible meanings and our reading encounters and challenges these limits. Reading and interpreting *The Hamlet* calls for many kinds of contextualization – the novel is for instance enormously rich if seen in sociological terms – but the most general and the most significant context will always be that of our own lives. To understand reading as a rewriting of the text within the text of our lives implies much more than the traditional understanding of intertextuality which limits it to the text itself, without including the intertextual field the reader brings with him to the text.

One of the very special joys of reading *The Hamlet* is to discover that, despite the dialogic character of the narrative, it is less *open* as a text than this would normally indicate. It is open in the sense that it is a dense, detailed, rich, many-faceted text and hence subject to many possible interpretations. This inevitably also makes it a closed text since it demands much more from its reader than a straightforward narrative rushing towards the resolution of its plot. At times the text itself, through its very inquisitive, sensitive, and insistent narrator, seems to limit the reader's options severely by suggesting possible and reasonable interpretations of an action, a situation, a confrontation. The text follows the traces of its own primary narrative path through extensive comments, elaborate nature descriptions, repeated speculations and reiterated attempts at reaching a final understanding. Thus the text sets clear limits for its possible interpretations, and the reader must therefore choose context on the basis of the possibilities, which the text makes permissible. Contextualization is an act of the will, a conscious choice on the part of any reader. Yet *The Hamlet* should not be read in such a general context as "our lives" – not any more than we read any literature in that context. The central thematic concerns in the book are such that we invariably and inadvertently look for its relevance in our lives, in the real world.

So here we have a very elaborate book about poor and illiterate people in the most backwoods of areas, which also is a very complex narrative structure and an extremely literary text, so much in fact that the plain people of Frenchman's Bend transcend their debilitating borders and are lifted up to a plane with the Gods and demigods of ancient Greece. The novel definitely does not offer a description of a 'real,' outside world, but a transformation of that world on paper, in words, that makes it even more real and more important, precisely because it is different from the real world. It may be a truer account of human conduct under certain conditions than any predominantly realistic description. More importantly: it is a very convincing story about human misery and folly, gluttony and rapacity and greed, love and sacrifice and compassion – and poetry.

The Hamlet has "rarely been given its proper due" according to Cleanth Brooks. If this was true then, it is probably as true today. The problem has been that critics and scholars always seem compelled to deal with the Snopes Trilogy – i.e. to include the much weaker sequels *The Town* and *The Mansion* – and hence they deal with a much more complex narrative structure and with a very long story line and story time. Thus *The Hamlet* is reduced to being the first volume, the place where it all begins, but where nothing ends or is finished. In articles, essays, and book-chapters scholars have only had space enough to cover single aspects of the novel or they have presented its place within Faulkner's greater "design" and hence given it rather superficial treatment as a work of art. An extended discussion of this particular novel, in its own right, is still needed. The most ambitious, most detailed, and longest studies of *The Hamlet* deal with the text as a part of the Snopes trilogy, which shifts emphasis and perspective and places *The Hamlet* in a natural and inevitable context which, nonetheless, takes attention away from the first volume which I most certainly think deserves extended treatment as an individual novel, on a par, say, with *Absalom, Absalom!* Because of what has been called the "Snopes dilemma" and "universal Snopesism" most readings of *The Hamlet*, brief or sustained, have concentrated on thematic concerns, in particular on moral questions. Without forgetting such matters, a study of the novel primarily as a work of art, as literature, may add to our understanding even of the moral conflicts, and such a study has not yet been written.

The closest any critical assessment of *The Hamlet* has come to my own understanding of this novel, is probably Donald M. Kartiganer in his chapter on this novel in the study referred to earlier. Kartiganer's main point is that in *The Hamlet* we find "a source of order that none of Faulkner's major works up to this point avails itself of: the unquestioned reality of an existing structure which the various events in the novel epitomize and confirm. This is a structure that is recognized but not invented by minds within the fiction" (Kartiganer 111-12). We have thus a precedent in the novel, a structure lying there, waiting to be confirmed by the imitation of it by the characters in the novel. The structuring principle, the mythic mode, may simply be called "the community" in *The Hamlet*, the village and the land, but most of all the idea of a community and of a collective of individuals who struggle, not "to invent but rather to implement the necessary actions of myth." The community has a code for everything and a communal rhetoric – "from business dealing to fruitful fornication" (Kartiganer 111) – and so the individuals share the imaginative life in the Bend. Everyone seems to be familiar with the stories and fantasies of the region, capable of retelling them in their own way, in a kind of play where the individual may assert his position and individuality. For one of the significant characteristics of the village of Frenchman's Bend is that individual freedom is valued above everything else. Self-reliance is important; every man must fend for himself, "it's none of our business," is a standard phrase. The code of individualism transcends the communal sense, and freedom – even irrational or vicious behavior – is a vital part of the openness, the flexibility of the structuring mythos in the novel.

It is my conviction that *The Hamlet* is a very literary book, that it is a dialogic novel, and has broader or different thematic concerns than "universal Snopesism." I also think that a new reading, or interpretation, of the novel should leave the two other volumes in the trilogy alone, and study the book from the perspective of the exchange or transaction that takes place between text and reader. Reading and interpreting cannot but be a close study of the text in front of us, in the light of general literary poetics and hermeneutics, to which we must turn our attention regularly as we move on, paying close adherence to the text.

The openness and richness of *The Hamlet* may perhaps be better understood if we study the novel on the basis of three hypotheses about

this book, all of which may be found to be contrary to most readings so far, but which really are only slightly or even minimally against the grain of scholarly studies of this novel:

(1) *The Hamlet* is the most *literary* of all of William Faulkner's books. This means that the strategies by which this tale about plain people in a backwoods corner of Yoknapatawpha County is transformed into something else and more, include a wide use of intertextuality, of poetic language and rhetorical devices, allusions and parallels, and myths and symbols.

(2) *The Hamlet* is a dialogic novel, with one serious qualification: The reader is not only given the organized and structurally meaningful narratives of an episode, a line of action, or a conflict, but also additional interpretations of that episode or action. The story material is, so to speak, given tentative analysis through the discursive practice and pattern – in particular when the outside narrator tells his part of the story without letting Ratliff or others (who also suggest possible interpretations, of course) take over narration.

(3) *The Hamlet* has, with good reason, been read with heavy emphasis on its thematic significance; this is, after all, the first volume of the Snopes trilogy! But *The Hamlet* is an autonomous work of literature, and I am convinced that it has been a critical mistake to read so much into the book from the two other volumes on the Snopes family. Sociological aspects and the economic theme remain at the core of the first Snopes novel, but with heavy emphasis on the literariness of the novel and on the strategies by which its structure is achieved, the Snopes dilemma, although inevitably retaining its centrality, becomes one among many contradictory themes in the novel; contradictory, that is, until seen in relation to the implied author's role in the distribution of textual meaning.

“The last of Faulkner's major novels, and in many respects the best.” – In *The Hamlet* the reader is taken by surprise all the time; surprised by the leisurely pace of the narrative, of the best of gossip, of old tales, and talking that seem unrelated to the main story line. The reader is also surprised by the strange turns of events, even when they in hindsight appear to be inevitable, and may even be provoked and shaken out of his habitual thoughts and his everyday security and commonsensical understanding of the world and the ways of its strange people. Yet Faulkner's best narratives, and *The Hamlet* most certainly is one of them, offers hope if not solace and comfort. In the darkness of his tales there is also a magic force, inexplicable, inaudible, inaccessible perhaps, a voice above and beyond the ways of this world and the sins of the fathers and mothers and sons and daughters, a voice insistent, troubled, and still in good faith.

There is no doubt that despite influences, sources, intertextual dependency, and internal interrelatedness, Faulkner's writing has one source, a rare one, seldom acknowledged, seldom understood: the generosity of the human spirit at its best and fullest.