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Painting the Negative Space: How Faulkner Silhouettes the Living Ghost of Flem Snopes

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Like porch lights, mosquito bites, and last-minute glasses of sweet tea, ghost stories are an experience innate to the South after dark. Whether or not a person believes them, these tales have the ability to characterize houses, streets, even entire cities. For the citizens of Frenchman’s Bend in William Faulkner’s The Hamlet, convoluted stories of Antebellum and Civil War ghosts permeate the area. Distracted by the buried men of the past, the people of Frenchman’s Bend fail to realize that they themselves are living in one of the most sprawling, epic ghost stories ever to unfold in Mississippi: the story of the rise of Flem Snopes. As Snopes, a veritable living ghost, wreaks havoc on the town with his invisible, untraceable hands, Faulkner offers his readers a valuable truth: sometimes, the only way to see a ghost is to observe its effect on others.

Although Faulkner’s narrator is sparing with his physical descriptions of Flem as compared to his descriptions of characters such as Eula Varner Snopes, the words he does use when referring to Flem’s appearance and actions are decidedly wraithlike: “One moment the road had been empty, the next moment the man stood there beside it, at the edge of the small copse . . . materialized apparently out of nothing, . . . His eyes were the color of stagnant water” (Faulkner 24). The narrator’s use of the words “materialized” and “stagnant” establishes Flem, in the reader’s first glimpse of him, as shifty and unchanging, both common attributes of ghosts. Flem is also similar to a ghost in that he is something of an enigma to the townspeople, a figure they notice but do not understand. No one knows what he is planning or what he wants, as one of the men at the horse auction observes when he comments, “Flem Snopes don’t even tell himself what he is up to. Not if he was laying in bed with himself in an empty house in the dark of the moon” (309). Additionally, Flem makes it a habit to stand “just exactly where couldn’t nobody see him,” (26) which gives the reader the image of a ghost lurking in the shadows, waiting to jolt out at an unsuspecting victim. Later, after the shotgun wedding scene in which Flem marries Eula in order to obtain the deed to the Old Frenchman’s Place, her father’s property, the narrator gives a grotesque description of Flem that is absolutely haunting, calling him “the froglike creature which barely reached her [Eula’s] shoulder” (164). Another trait commonly associated with ghosts is that they appear in the same garb and complete the same motions and actions night after night, reliving scenes from their lives as part of the haunting process. Likewise, Flem Snopes only ever appears wearing “the same cloth cap, the minute bowtie against the white shirt, the same gray trousers” and, throughout his haunting of Frenchman’s Bend, performs the same actions over and over: whittling on a piece of wood, chewing on his tobacco, then spitting (300). The narrator also describes Flem as “a shadow, a thicker darkness, moving against the slope,” which invokes images of a ghost prowling the hills (376). A final physical indicator of Flem’s ghostliness is his habit of drawing more malignant spirits, in the form of dozens of distantly related Snopeses, to the area until it is completely overrun. One incident of paranormal activity tends to stir up further paranormal activity, exemplified when Flem’s actions in the town seem to stir up his impoverished cousin, Mink, to murder Houston, a widower farmer, simply because Houston allows his cow to graze in Mink’s field.

As well as looking and moving like a ghost, Flem “ghosts” other people in the sense that he always vanishes right when he is needed most. After Mink is arrested for the murder of
Houston, Flem does nothing to prevent the imprisonment of his own flesh and blood. He is simply absent; as the critic Elizabeth M. Kerr notes, “Flem, the Snopes who had made good, ignored the ties of kinship and neither aided nor visited Mink when he was on trial” (194). Later, Flem teams up with the nameless Texas man to auction off a herd of wild, dangerous ponies, flees the scene just before the paid-for ponies violently escape, and still manages to shirk his way out of legal responsibility for the auction and resulting injuries. By making sure that he is never officially linked with the auction, and then by refusing to appear in court, he makes sure that nothing can be traced back to him. Martha Armstid, Mrs. Tull, and the other characters in the courtroom who suffer financial and physical harm as a result of the horse auction, think that they are finally going to win against Flem Snopes, but to their disbelief and despair, Snopes manages to twist his way out of any responsibility, as the Justice of the Peace confirms when he remarks, “you just heard a case here this morning that failed to prove that Flem Snopes had any equity in any of them [horses]” (Faulkner 366). The whole courtroom scene is reminiscent of a child who, after being attacked by a ghost in a haunted house, takes his father to the site to show him proof, only to find that the ghost will not reappear in the presence of the father. The father then pats the child on the head and tells him to stop making up such silly stories.

Though his actions and appearance bespeak human malevolence to the reader, Flem is nevertheless able to infiltrate Frenchman’s Bend with a subtlety almost inhuman. Like a particularly sneaky ghost, he does not reveal the true horror of who he is until his victims are so far inside the haunted house that there is no hope of escape. When the citizens of Frenchman’s Bend first look at Flem, they see a bland, dough-faced, sexless, harmless cashier who always gives correct change. When a person takes her eyes off Flem, however, and instead observes Flem’s surroundings, she quickly realizes that he encourages the rot of things—human souls included—from the inside out. He is the dark, damp corner to the spores of mold inside their souls; he doesn’t put the evil there, but he fosters conditions in which it can grow. The critic Frances Louisa Knack puts it well: “Some critics argue that Flem is the one who corrupts Frenchman’s Bend and Jefferson, but Frenchman’s Bend is corrupt before he arrives. The outstanding citizens of Frenchman’s Bend are all adept at skullduggery or dissimulation.” Knack is correct. The citizens of Frenchman’s Bend already have plenty of fear, greed, and pride inside of them—all attributes that compromise their moral immune systems and allow the virus of Flem’s corruption to gain a foothold. In other words, they are abandoned houses primed for haunting by an evil spirit. Take, for example, Will Varner, owner of the general store, blacksmith shop, and the Old Frenchman Place. The only reason Flem can infiltrate the town—and therefore the minds of the people living in it—in the first place, is that Varner fears Abner Snopes’s reputation as a barn-burner: “Hell fire! . . . Do you mean he set fire to another one? Even after they caught him, he set fire to another one?” (Faulkner 14). Ironically, this fear of losing one item of value results in Varner’s losing his daughter, property, and monopoly on the town’s economy, in addition to everyone in the hamlet losing many other items of value. This fear also allows Flem to get his ghostly hooks into the town by silently, almost effortlessly, blackmailing Varner into letting him work at the store. It may seem like a small acquiescence for Varner at the time, but as Rudyard Kipling writes, “If once you have paid him the Dane-geld / You never get rid of the Dane.” By giving in once, Varner inadvertently gives in to Flem’s wishes for good; he pays the Dane-geld by selling out to his fear, and now the town will never be able to exorcise itself of the undead Mississippi Dane.

Like Varner, Henry Armstid, a struggling farmer with a gaggle of children, falls victim to Flem’s scheming. Unlike Varner, however, the vice that allows Flem to possess Armstid is pride,
not fear. Before Flem arrives in town, Armstid appears to be the average poor farmer, no better or worse morally than any of the other men in town. Unfortunately for Armstid, however, Flem has the seemingly supernatural ability to identify people’s weak points and then poke at them until the worst parts of their characters emerge. For Armstid, as for many of the men in town, that weak point is the perceived manly prestige of owning a horse. As the critic Lance Langdon points out, “The horse is for the hamlet’s men what the sewing machine or butter churn is for its women: a desired status object. It follows that Houston’s neighbors, confronting Flem’s ponies, recognize them as a chance to gain ‘polygamous and bitless masculinity through purchase’” (37).

Armstid and his family have almost nothing—their wagon is “battered and paintless,” with one wheel “repaired by crossed planks bound to the spokes with baling wire”—yet, just as Flem must have intuitively predicted, Armstid’s pride will not allow him to walk away from the auction (Faulkner 320). Perhaps it is because of this poverty, not just in spite of it, that Henry so desires the freedom and masculinity he associates with horses. Armstid is only “five dollars away from the poorhouse,” but Flem knows exactly how to manipulate Armstid and the dozens of town men like him, by appealing to their pride (Faulkner 321). In a matter of moments, like a man hypnotized or possessed, Armstid crumples completely. He becomes abusive to his wife, swatting at her and shouting, “Shut your mouth and get back in that wagon. . . . Do you want me to take a wagon stake to you?” thus showcasing the evil influence of Flem’s spectral presence on the behavior of others (321). Ironically, Armstid doesn’t even end up with the inexpensive horse he wants. Instead, he breaks his leg when the horses escape from the pen, leaving Armstid’s dejected wife to take on even more responsibilities around the house and farm.

After the pony auction, Flem sets another trap. He digs on his legend-shrouded property every night, knowing that someone will eventually see him and believe that he is hunting for buried Civil War gold, thereby adding value to the Old Frenchman Place without his even having to lie; because he understands what makes people tick, Flem realizes that men will see what they want to see, and the greed inside of them will take care of the rest. This greed is what causes a third victim, V.K. Ratliff, to fall under Flem’s spell. Ratliff, an amiable sewing-machine salesman who rolls in and out of town spreading gossip and goodwill, is able to resist the pull of Flem’s phantom presence most of the time, but he allows visions of wealth to get the better of him in this particular instance. The day after he watches Flem dig, Ratliff is practically drooling all over Flem for the deed to the land: “The Old Frenchman place. . . . What are you going to ask me for it?” (392). Two other men, Armstid and Bookwright, follow Ratliff in the deal, each making a large financial sacrifice in the process, and together they begin to excavate the area where they believe the treasure to be hidden. When the men finally realize they have been fooled, their reactions are markedly different. Ratliff, humbled, returns to his usual life, disappointed but able to laugh at himself. Armstid, on the other hand, seems most desperate of all the men to find the treasure in the first place, perhaps to make up for the loss of the five dollars he bid on the horse: “He would be digging when they stopped; he would still be digging, unflagging and tireless, when they started again” (395). Refusing to accept that he has been fooled, cut his losses, and move on, Armstid ignores Ratliff and Bookwright and carries on digging with dogged, determined ignorance. When the narrator states, “He came straight back to the trench, hurrying back to it with that painful and laboring slowness, the gaunt unshaven face which was now completely that of a madman. He got back into the trench and began to dig”, he is referring to more than just the physical trench in which Armstid crouches (466). Haunted by notions of buried treasure, Armstid plunges himself into an increasingly deeper, darker hole because the man does not know how to respond properly to being fooled. Unlike Ratliff, who
admits that he made a mistake, pulls himself together, and resolves to do better in the future, Armstid allows his bitterness to pull him down physically, spiritually, and morally. The man begins to waste away, his “gaunt” face becoming more and more skeletal as he transforms into a living ghost just like Flem (466). Flem, malignant spirit that he is, drags another soul closer to hell.

Although Flem’s influence is especially noticeable in the cases of Armstid and Ratliff, the narrator makes it a point to demonstrate that his ghostly fingers reach out to chill the hearts of the entire town, not just those of a few men. The most poignant culmination of Flem’s effect on the town takes place the day after the horse auction, when Mrs. Armstid follows the Texas man’s advice and goes to the store in an attempt to retrieve her husband’s wasted money from Flem Snopes. Pathetic in her “shapeless gray garment” and “stained tennis shoes,” folding her hands into her apron, she begs Flem in front of a group of men for her money back: “He said that day he wouldn’t sell Henry the horse. . . . He said you had the money and I could get it from you” (348). At this point, the men’s hearts are so hardened by the wraithlike Flem that no one, not even Ratliff, is moved by her plea enough to stick up for a helpless woman and demand justice. Instead, Snopes disappears into the store and returns with a nickel’s worth of candy, “a bit of sweetening for the chaps,” giving Mrs. Armstid empty calories with which to feed her children rather than any actual sustenance (350). This scene provides a perfect example of another of Flem’s ghost-like qualities: he takes good, wholesome things—like the money a mother earned for her “chaps” “weaving by firelight after dark”—and replaces them with flimsy ghosts of themselves, like bags of worthless candy (322). The reader sees this tendency again when Snopes spits on the sanctity and passion of marriage by wedding the illegitimately pregnant Eula Varner, turning “almost everything into an exchange value for his economic gain. In his marriage to Eula, fulfilling his personal and emotional needs or satisfying his male ego is of his least concern. Rather, the marriage reveals Flem’s ‘willingness to take someone’s cast-off pregnant woman as a way of gaining leverage’” (King 498). The ceremony that is supposed to represent one of life’s most meaningful and soul-changing events is, to Flem, nothing more than a stepping-stone, for he has none of the qualities that make a man a man. Like a ghost, he desires only to live out his sole purpose: taking over bodies with a cold, unstoppable ruthlessness far more terrifying than actual hate or ill will. This lack of feeling, of humanity, is the very quality that allows Flem to climb the social ladder with ease, unencumbered by the weight of normal emotions. As the critic T.Y. Greet observes, “in his cunning, he [Flem] stands beyond appetite, passion, pride, fidelity, exploiting all of these things” (332). He is truly a ghost of a human being.

So, is the entire town trapped in the damning clutches of Flem and his undead haunting? Almost. The reason Flem so easily gains access to the minds of almost everyone is that he takes a major conflict already present in the town—the struggle between frustrated, enduring women such as Martha Armstid and Houston’s wife, and hyper-masculine, irresponsible men, such as Henry Armstid and Houston—and exacerbates it, using the abundant raw material he finds in Frenchman’s Bend to advance his own evil cause. For example, try as she might, Martha Armstid cannot convince Henry to save the five dollars instead of giving in to the temptation of Flem’s horse auction; Flem recognizes this dynamic in the marriages of Frenchman’s Bend and allows his horse scheme to feed off of the problem. As Kerr asserts, “Only V.K. Ratliff, a bachelor on affable terms with both sexes, and Mrs. Littlejohn, a self-supporting widow, represent the male-female contrast without notable grotesqueness” and they appear to be the only two individuals of Frenchman’s Bend impervious to Flem’s wiles (188). Although Ratliff is momentarily possessed by greed, he manages to exorcise Flem with a good dose of humility. If
Flem is a phantom, the ring of salt surrounding these two characters, guarding them from ghostly possession, is their ability to genuinely care for others. This compassion is clear when Ratliff practically donates a sewing machine to Mink Snopes’s wife, simply because he feels sorry for her and her children and wants to make their lives a little easier. It is even clearer in the actions of Mrs. Littlejohn, in the way she watches over and cares for the mentally deficient Ike Snopes and tries to prevent his cow from being taken away and slaughtered. Although his ghostly powers are supernatural, Flem’s malevolent aura cannot penetrate this shield of goodwill. In contrast, the quality that makes the rest of the town so vulnerable to Flem’s haunting is that the individuals care more about themselves than they do about each other; each one, after being fooled and cheated by Flem, is perfectly content to sit back and watch his neighbor be fooled and cheated in the same manner.

Flem kills the honor in people, and from the corpses of this honor rise up more vengeful ghosts in the form of embittered townspeople. Because of the selfish, cyclical mindset he encourages, Flem’s haunting is able to spread from its humble beginnings in Varner’s store, to the blacksmith’s shop, to the entire area. According to the artist Marion Boddy-Evans, “Negative space is the space between object or parts of an object, or around it.” (For an example of negative space, see Figure 1.) So why would an artist ever choose to paint the area around a subject rather than the subject itself? As Boddy-Evans notes, “Often by working from the negative spaces rather than focusing on the object, you end up with a much more accurate painting.” Although the concept of negative space had not yet taken hold of the art community during Faulkner’s lifetime, he recognized that the best way to showcase the true shape of Flem was to paint around the character, using colorful brushstrokes to bring forth the inner lives of individuals in Frenchman’s Bend. By focusing on the warping of the world around Flem like matter being sucked into a black hole, Faulkner is able to expose Flem’s silhouette and tell a truly chilling Mississippi ghost story. He allows the reader to experience the shame of being fooled right along with V.K. Ratliff and Henry Armstid, demonstrates the various ways in which one can respond to being humiliated, and then leaves the reader to make a choice in her own life: give in to the pull of greed, pride, and fear, or get up, shake off the dust, and resolve to learn from her mistakes.

On a larger scale, Faulkner is admonishing and warning the post-Civil War South in which he lives. By creating Frenchman’s Bend as a microcosm for the South as a whole, he shows that the South must let go of the past or else decay slowly into a ghost of itself; he watched many of his fellow Southerners wallow in what could have been, dragging themselves deeper and deeper into a pit of bitterness and hatred with the blind, furious desperation of Armstid. Like Ratliff, the only way for the South to recover is to stand up, shake off that plantation dust, accept that it was wrong about the inferiority of non-white races, and admit that it lost the Civil War. The question that Faulkner asks his South can still be asked of the South today: will it accept change and let go of the past, or will it embrace malignant possession by the still-living, ever-lurking ghost of Flem Snopes?
Works Cited


“Chair.” Accessed September 17, 2018.


Appendix

Figure 1 (Chair)