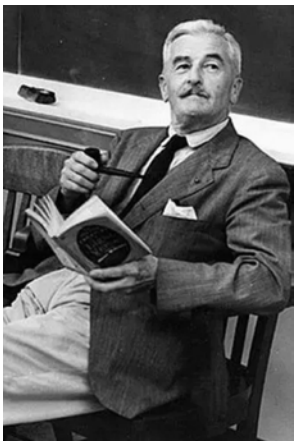
COMMENTARY

"Spotted Horses" (1940)



William Faulkner

Caroline Gordon

William Faulkner's "Spotted Horses" will bear comparison with Flaubert's story, "A Simple Heart." It does not come as near formal perfection--there is a flaw in its structure--but it is a question whether it is not, on the whole, a more significant story. The action takes place on a larger stage and at the same time attains the same high degree of objectivity which Flaubert attained, and the same dramatic and symbolic unity. The unity of both stories is achieved through the powerful operation of a controlling symbol, in one case God, in the other the Devil. Both stories are accounts of a simple heart in relation to supernatural forces. Felicite, in "A Simple Heart," loves God all her life and when she nears death is rewarded by a vision of Heaven. Faulkner's Simple Heart--that of Mrs. Henry Armstid--is shown in conflict with the Devil and his allies, and the Devil wins.

Faulkner's viewpoint throughout is that of the Omniscient Narrator, with two exceptions when the viewpoint is suddenly shifted for a breathing space. The first shift occurs when the men are sitting on the gallery after supper and "Only Ratliff and Quick sat in chairs, so that to them the others were black silhouettes against the dreaming lambency of the moonlight." And again, the Texan, about to start the bidding for the horses, "began to have the feeling that each face had stopped looking at him the second before his gaze reached it." At no other time are we privy to what is going on in the mind of either Ratliff or the Texan. The two shifts remind us of a similar rapid shift of viewpoint in Flaubert, when Emma Bovary conceives the idea of solving her difficulties by committing suicide, and "in an ecstasy of heroism" runs to the chemist's shop. She taps on the window and the little servant, Justin, looks out at her, astonished, and she seems to him extraordinarily beautiful and "majestic as a phantom." In all three cases the rapid shift of viewpoint--really an almost instantaneous use of the Concealed Narrator method--serves not so much to reveal what is going on in the minds of the persons as to bring the whole scene into sharper focus.

With the two exceptions just mentioned, Faulkner's story is told from the viewpoint of the Omniscient Narrator. Only a master is able to achieve immediacy by the use of this method, and many a master has come to grief in the attempt. Balzac's story, "The Executioner," is unforgettable but not satisfying. One believes that the members of the family of the Marquis de Leganes met death with extraordinary composure, but one is not convinced that their heads were cut off. Clara's white neck seems "to appeal to the blade to fall," but when the blade falls no blood seems to flow. Balzac, who always moved ponderously, is not close enough to his scene.

In "Spotted Horses" Faulkner inclines to Flaubert's method rather than to that of James. The omniscient narrator is himself so passionate and meticulous an observer that he does not need to view the scene through the eyes of any of the characters. The Texan, backing a pony into a corner, hammering its head with his pistol butt or grasping its forelock with one hand, its nostrils with the other and wringing "the long, evil muzzle back over its shoulder," is repeating desperate, unerring motions that men have watched for generations. A Southern tenant farmer (if he were not "bemused" by Faulkner's rhetoric!) could find no flaw in his knowledge of country ways. Henry Armstid's wagon wheel is repaired exactly the way a man of his kind and condition would repair a wagon wheel, "with crossed planks, bound to the spokes with baling wire." Mrs. Armstid's garments are grey and shapeless from age, work stains and frequent washings. Her stained canvas gymnasium shoes, striking a slightly ridiculous note, add to her human dignity.

This kind of mastery comes as the result of a lifelong devotion to a particular scene. The writer has to contemplate the objects or persons described over a period of years, at all times of year, in all kinds of weather before he can unerringly select the detail which will convey their essence. Flaubert was eminently successful at this as long as he stayed on his--to him so detestable--home ground. Every blade of grass, every cobblestone in "A Simple Heart" has an air of reality. He used the same method of attack in "Herodias" but the incidents do not carry the same conviction. He was not himself convinced of the brute fact that Saint John the Baptist's head had ever lain on a salver and so could not wholly convince us.

Faulkner, writing, with a tact that is rare in our age, about scenes he has known from childhood, is able to carry Flaubert's method a step farther, to do, in fact, the thing that Flaubert himself longed to do: to unite concrete historical detail with lyricism. His temperament and his heredity--for his style is a sort of distillation of the eloquence of old-fashioned Southern oratory--incline him to poetic images and rhetorical flights, but the "underpinnings" of his story are usually substantial enough to sustain them. The reader has subscribed at every turn to the illusion, and the narrator, freed from the constant obligation to convince, can, as it were, pause for comment. There is no novelty for us in the notion of Mrs. Armstid as "a grey and blasted tree trunk, moving, somehow intact and upright, upon an unhurried flood." This vision of her has been prepared for the reader's mind from his first sight of her. Faulkner's comment frees it, sets it in motion. He thus adds another *activity* to the whole story, giving to the observed detail a symbolic dimension that Flaubert was able to give his story only at the end.

The speech of the characters contributes powerfully to the effect of verisimilitude. The Texan's dramatic under-statements--"Seems to have held all right," or "I misdoubted that shelled corn all along"--and his eyes, which when he looked at any one "became like two pieces of flint turned up suddenly in dug earth," reveal the shattered spirit behind the brittle, as yet impenetrable surface. Mrs. Armstid voices hopelessness: "He ain't no more despair than to buy one of them things..." The men, sitting on the porch after supper, talk of other Western heroes they have known: "Anse McCallum made a good team outen them two of his. They was a little light. That was all... When a man don't have to invest so much into a horse or team, he don't need to expect so much from it." The cadences announce their "stubborn, convinced and passive advance" into the trap Flem Snopes has set for them.

Ratliff, the sewing machine agent, and Mrs. Littlejohn, the boarding house keeper, are part of the Enveloping Action of the story. They serve as foils to each other, reminding us that it is possible for human beings to think intelligently and act wisely. Mrs. Little john turns her head away when the spectacle of the men's folly becomes too much for her but keeps her head when she herself confronts one of the horses in her house. The long speech in which Ratliff recounts what goes on between Mrs. Littlejohn and Mrs. Armstid, when Mrs. Littlejohn realizes that Snopes won't give the money back, is the least successful passage in the story, the one place where Faulkner has failed to solve the problem of Authority. Ratliff is here trying to convey the emotions of other persons, Mrs. Littlejohn, Mrs. Armstid and her daughter. The passage is not equal to the weight the narrative puts upon it, but for the most part Ratliff enacts successfully the role of a Greek chorus to the madmen's antics.

The Enveloping Action is twofold, however. The Devil also makes his comments. "Well, it's a good bright cool night for running them," Old Jody Varner, Flem Snopes's father-in-law, remarks as the madmen swarm over the countryside in pursuit of the spotted ponies. He explains that such madness is salutary: "A night like this one, when a man ain't old enough yet to lay still and sleep, and yet he ain't young enough

anymore to be tomcatting in and out of other folks' back windows, something like this is good for him." His own daughter, Eula, Flem's wife, was begotten on such a night and is, therefore, a creature of the same moon: "Mrs. Varner taken and laid every night with the moon on her nekid belly...I could...hear Eula kicking and scrounging like all get-out, feeling the moon."

The passage in which this Helen, "returned to what topless and shoddy Argos," stands blank-eyed at the window in her long white garment, "not doomed, just damned," is poorly written--a flight that failed--but the passage serves the story structurally. Flem Snopes, who is in league with the Prince of Darkness (though the Devil is somewhat puzzled to know what to do with him when he goes to Hell in another story), must have a moon woman for wife.

There is a skillful use of what James called undercutting. As a mountain peak is defined by its valleys, Snopes' character is portrayed through its effect on others and through emanations from his adherents. The few remarks Snopes makes are ritualistic: "Gentlemen," when he joins the other men on the porch; or factual: "Them ain't my horses." In the crucial encounter with Mrs. Armstid his face remains masklike. We see him fully revealed there. And yet it is hard to believe that any human being is wholly evil. Faulkner makes us believe that Flem Snopes is such a man. After his talk about the moon Old Jody Varner looks out from under his slanting brows and gives way--as a lesser disciple, Lump Snopes, the clerk, has given way at intervals during the action--to Mephistophelean mirth over human credulity.

Faulkner rounds out the picture of Flem Snopes by a skillful use of "psychic distance." This is symbolized by physical space. When Flem stands at the fence to watch the horses, nobody stands directly beside him; there is always a little space cleared about him. The omniscient narrator does not lead the reader inside this magic circle. Flem leaves the story as he entered it, a man of mystery. But the triumph of evil is complete. The Texan is ruined, adrift in the world. Henry Armstid's leg is broken, his wife or his neighbors will have to make his crop. Tull has lost two young mules. Everybody who has had anything to do with the horses has suffered--except the Devil's disciples--and in the end, Justice itself raises its hands to Heaven. "I can't stand no more!" the old judge cries. "I won't! This court's adjourned! Adjourned!"

Caroline Gordon
The House of Fiction
(Scribner's 1950, 1960) 331-34