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Gavin Stevens and the Chivalric Tradition

by Cleanth Brooks

Gavin Stevens makes his early appearances in Faulkner's work as a quite unimportant character. Through the late 1930's and the early 1940's, Faulkner used him in a number of detective stories, later to be incorporated in the volume entitled Knight's Gambit, or as a minor figure in stories like "The Tall Men" or "Tomorrow." Stevens does not become anything like a major character until we reach Intruder in the Dust (1949) and Requiem for a Nun (1951).

It can be argued, however, that in one story published before 1949, Stevens becomes something more than a detached observer. If not yet a really major character, at least he does more than comment and speculate on the actions of others. I refer to his role in the story entitled "Go Down, Moses," first published in 1941. Stevens dominates what little action there is. It is he who arranges to bring home the body of Samuel Worsham Beauchamp. It is the same kind of service that he had performed for Mrs. Hines when he saw to it that the body of Joe Christmas was sent back to Mottstown for burial. Stevens is a kindly man: he has a vein of disinterested concern for people in distress. Through him the community often finds a voice and sometimes a leader in some appropriate action, such as raising the funds to insure that old Mollie Beauchamp's grandson can come home and be buried "right."

In fact, Faulkner must have fairly soon discovered that he needed a character who could express the sometimes inarticulate feelings of the community and give it utterance. That is to say, Faulkner's very concern for a community made it highly convenient, if not actually necessary, for him to construct a character like Gavin. You will recall that in my previous lecture I argued that the very nature of a true community, especially a genuine folk community, insures that its feelings are traditional and may even appear so unreflective as to seem spontaneous. The community does not have to call a special town meeting to find out how it feels and how it means to react to this or that event. There is all the more need, therefore, for the presence of a highly self-conscious person who can cogitate on events and try
to interpret them to himself and to the reader. Note that I do not imply that Gavin always interprets them correctly. Frequently he does not. For example, Faulkner, in talking to the students at the University of Virginia, stated quite clearly that Gavin’s explanation for Joe Christmas’s peculiar conduct on the last day of his life was not necessarily the true explanation.

Yet as an interpreter Stevens does enjoy special advantages. He is literate. Though he has refused to break his ties with Jefferson, he has seen something of Europe and of Boston and New York. He is thus both outside the community and inside it. He has read deeply and widely. He likes to talk, but he is also willing to listen, and he evidently enjoys listening. We are told that though he “could discuss Einstein with college professors,” he could also be seen “now and then squatting among the overalls on the porches of country stores . . .”

Even before Faulkner created Gavin, he must have felt the need of a literate consciousness within the world of Yoknapatawpha. Thus we find such a character in the person of Horace Benbow in Faulkner’s third novel, Sartoris. In what Faulkner had originally intended to be the published version, Flags in the Dust, though it achieved publication only two years ago, Horace attended Sewanee, and later Oxford University, as a Rhodes Scholar. Give or take a little, Sewanee and Oxford are not a bad equivalent to Gavin’s Harvard and Heidelberg. In Flags in the Dust, we also learn that Horace had for a time toyed with the idea of becoming a priest in the Episcopal Church. Fortunately, he eventually gave up the idea and went in for the law instead. I say “fortunately,” for I think that the Reverend Mr. Mahon in Soldiers’ Pay suggests the kind of parish priest Horace would have turned out to be: kindly, civilized, quite tepid, and rather more of a stoic than a Christian.

If this last conjecture amounts to futile speculation, it is nevertheless quite plain that Horace Benbow is made of softer metal than Gavin. He is more of the aesthete, the dreamer, and in aspiration at least, he is a third-rate decadent poet. Moreover, he is half in love with his sister Narcissa, whereas the relation between Gavin and his twin sister Maggie is healthily normal.

I shall not, therefore, press for similarities between Gavin and Horace. Yet it is apparent that both men stick out above the surface of the Yoknapatawpha community like a pair of sore thumbs.
Moreover, they are sufficiently alike for Faulkner to have made sure that the two never appear together in the same piece of fiction. *Sanctuary*, the last novel in which Horace Benbow does appear, was published in February, 1931, whereas "Smoke," the first story in which Stevens appears, was not published until April, 1931. As it turned out, then, Gavin Stevens succeeds Horace Benbow as Yoknapatawpha's resident intellectual. There is further evidence that Faulkner did associate the two men. In World War I, it is Horace who takes with him to an overseas post in the YMCA Montgomery Ward Snopes. That is the way it is reported in *Sartoris*, but in *The Town* it is Gavin Stevens who takes Montgomery Ward Snopes with him.

Our concern this evening, however, is not with Horace Benbow but with Gavin Stevens, and so let us dismiss from further consideration Horace and, for that matter, other introspective and sensitive characters such as Quentin Compson, who, like Gavin and Horace, belongs to the company of Yoknapatawpha's introverts and sensitive idealists.

As we have already remarked, Gavin is not only an intellectual, but a serious scholar. His pet project is to translate the Greek version of the Old Testament (that is, the Septuagint) into classical Greek—a project that has absolutely no scholarly value. It would amount to a philological tour de force. I assume that Faulkner was quite aware that he had set Gavin on a sort of dilettantish exercise and that he meant for his reader to recognize as much.

Gavin also has political concerns and has arrived at his own views on the Negro, the race question, the relation of the South to the rest of the country, and other matters.

On the matter of the black man and civil rights, Gavin is enlightened beyond most of his fellow citizens of Jefferson. He insists that the white Southerner grant forthwith the black Southerner his full civil rights, not only because such action is just, but because it is actually in the white Southerner's own self-interest. Yet Gavin's insistence that the Southern blacks could be truly freed only by the actions of the Southern whites puzzled, in 1949, and perhaps continues to puzzle today, readers of *Intruder in the Dust*. And in the same book, Gavin's description of the population of the coasts of the northeastern states as the "coastal spew of Europe" has won for neither Gavin nor Faulkner (who was assumed here to be using
Gavin for his mouthpiece) any Brownie points from the liberals.

Gavin is not only a scholar, but a born teacher. I have in mind his long talks with Chick Mallison in Intruder in the Dust and especially his tutelage of Linda Snopes in The Town. He feeds this schoolgirl not only ice cream sodas, but books and, in effect, his own lectures on art, music, and general culture. Gavin’s sister Maggie refers to this business rather sardonically: Gavin is concerned with what he calls “forming her mind.” But Maggie’s tone of voice aside, she is dead right, and this is precisely what Gavin is doing. I mean to recur to this matter later on when we look once more at The Mansion.

Just now, however, I want to turn from Gavin as intellectual, as do-gooder, as scholar and thinker, to something that concerns not merely his intellectual but his passionate nature. What did he ask of love? What kind of woman did he love? What kind of woman did he marry? These are always important considerations for Faulkner, and they are important considerations for most of the rest of us. For to discuss a character merely in terms of his head, without saying anything about his heart, is to present a half man. Most of us are interested, whether in fiction or real life, with the whole man.

When we first meet Gavin, he is unmarried, and has the air of a confirmed bachelor. Gavin must have been born around 1890, and since he didn’t marry until 1942, he remained a bachelor for some fifty years. But this is not to say that Gavin never fell in love. In fact, in The Town we learn that when he was in his early twenties he had fallen overwhelmingly and pathetically in love with Eula Varner. This would have been some time after he had graduated from Harvard and before he left for Heidelberg in the spring of 1914.

By this time, of course, the beautiful Eula Varner had already been married for some years to Flem Snopes, and moreover had already taken as her lover, Manfred de Spain. Thus, Gavin’s pursuit of Eula is from the outset hopeless. He clearly misjudges the situation. Against the confident, tough-minded, handsome, virile de Spain, Gavin has not a chance.

A single example will have to suffice: at the Cotillion Ball Gavin is made furious at watching the way in which Manfred is dancing with Eula. Gavin steps up and jerks Manfred away from his partner. In a moment they are out in the alley to settle the difficulty and, as we expect, Gavin gets his face well bloodied for his pains.

A very shrewd assessment of Gavin’s behavior is made by his
nephew, Chick Mallison, who observes: "What he was doing was simply defending forever with his blood the principle that chastity and virtue in women shall be defended whether they exist or not." Gavin's picking a fight to defend Eula's chastity is surely quixotic. Eula had established a comfortable relation with de Spain. It is Gavin who is insisting that Eula's honor has been impugned, not the level-headed and matter-of-fact Eula. When there is a husband who feels no need to defend his wife's honor and a wife who doesn't insist that she has any honor worth defending, a stranger's insistence on defending it is folly compounded. Besides, Manfred and Eula were not caught in flagrante delicto. They were simply dancing rather shamelessly, or as Chick Mallison rather admiringly puts it, with "splendid unshame."

Gavin's sister Maggie is furious at what has happened, and most of all at Eula's conduct. She thinks that Eula might at least have sent Gavin a flower. But Eula, according to her lights, is to do something more generous than that. Having come to realize Gavin's hopeless love for her, she goes up to his law office one evening and offers Gavin not a flower but herself—herself for at least the evening.

So we have the romantic young man of twenty-three, trembling with a desperate love for his Guinevere, and Eula who does not see herself as a Guinevere and who, indeed, couldn't be more direct and explicit in her handling of the situation. Her first words of explanation for her visit are: "I thought it would be all right here. Better here." And when Gavin in shocked amazement repeats the word, "Here?" his goddess goes on to say: "Do it here. In your office. You can lock the door and I don't imagine there'll be anybody high enough up this late at night to see in the window. Or maybe—" And with this sudden new thought, she breaks off speaking and starts pulling down the shades.

Gavin is aghast. Unless he stops her, in a moment she will be pulling off her clothes. He does stop her—with a bitter taunt about her adultery with Manfred de Spain, and tries to show her the door. But Eula refuses to take umbrage, remains calm and practical, and in the course of the conversation that ensues, makes it plain that she has offered herself to Gavin not to persuade him to drop his law suit against her lover Manfred. She has come to Gavin simply because she knows that he is unhappy, and she goes on to say, "I don't like unhappy people. They're a nuisance."
This, from Eula, is the unkindest cut of all, and Gavin remarks, bitterly, "So you came just from compassion, pity." Gavin is crushed, but he is also in a state bordering on terror. Twice, he blurts out, "Don't touch me." And when Eula orders him to "Lock the door," Gavin says "I might—would—have struck her with my out-flung arm, but there was no room...."

In its shocking contrasts, in its sudden reversal of expectations, in its utter deflation of the passionate lover, the whole scene is comic; but it is much more than comic. It is blindingly revelatory of Gavin's character. What is his conception of love, after all? Note that Gavin is no high-minded young Joseph tearing himself out of the clutches of a Potiphar's wife, for he has known all along that Eula is a married woman. He is even sure—in his bones, at least—that Manfred de Spain is her accepted lover. Moreover, up to this moment on the very brink of consummation, he has claimed to be passionately in love with Eula. What kind of man is Gavin?

Note further that this confrontation with Eula is no temporary aberration. Gavin's attitude, as exhibited here, presumably has some relation to other aspects of his love life; for example, his failure to marry until he is fifty years old, and his failure to propose marriage to Eula's daughter Linda, though he had always manifested a great concern for her and though Eula had begged him to marry Linda.

Gavin's relation to women and his concept of romantic love, then, does call for some explanation. If it can be made comprehensible, it may throw light on his general idealism, his tendency to assume a posture of detachment, and his general preference for the contemplative life rather than active participation. Indeed, it has a bearing on his whole view of reality.

I do not, however, propose at this point to engage in a psychological analysis of Gavin. I doubt the efficacy of the method and, anyway, I lack the requisite expertise. What I plan to do instead is to relate Gavin's notion of love to the general tradition of the romantic passion as it has developed in the last millennium of Western civilization. In that millenium one can find it everywhere—in the troubadour poets of Provence, in the stories that developed in the Arthurian cycle of romances, such as the love of Lancelot for Guinevere or of Tristan for Iseult, as it shows itself in the nineteenth century in some of Wagner's music dramas, and as it is treated by many of the great English and French novelists, or—to come down to our own
century—as it informs the life and poetry of William Butler Yeats.

The best analysis of such romantic or chivalric love that I know of, however, is to be found in two books by Denis de Rougemont. They are, to give them their titles in English, *Love in the Western World* and *Love Declared: Essays on the Myths of Love*. I must beg your indulgence, therefore, if I take a few minutes to sketch Rougemont’s theory. I think that I can promise you that it will not be dry and pedantic, but interesting and even exciting.

In the first place, Rougemont agrees with most of the other authorities in holding that chivalric love is a phenomenon of the last millenium in the West. You do not find it, for instance, in ancient Greece. It has apparently never existed in the Orient. Take note that Rougemont is not talking here about sex or about affection for a mistress or a wife, emotional patterns that are ubiquitous and universal. He is speaking of a special idealization of sexual love, a transcendent passion in which, for the man, the beloved woman becomes a kind of goddess. Romantic or chivalric love has—through its intense idealization—an affinity with the medieval cult of the Virgin Mary, and through its deprecation of all mere legalisms, an affinity with free love, the passion that scorns all the restraints imposed by society. Thus, Lancelot and Guinevere are chivalric lovers as Guinevere and her duly wedded and lawful husband, King Arthur, could not be.

In short, the courtly or chivalric lover wants something far more ethereal and transcendent than any mere union of the flesh, for his erotic longing is finally lodged in his head and not in his loins. Gavin Stevens, then, proves himself to be the true chivalric lover in refusing such a fleshly consummation when Eula offers herself to him, for Gavin is in love with a dream, a dream, to be sure, that Eula seems to incarnate, but a dream nevertheless, and he refuses to relinquish that dream. It has far greater value to him even if the impossibility of realizing it renders him desperately unhappy. Eula’s practical wish to ease his pain and make him happy misses the point completely.

Now, I do not mean that Gavin is necessarily fully conscious of all this. He need not be, and his emotional state on the evening that Eula entered his office was indeed obviously confused. But there need not be any confusion in our own minds about what is going on in this instance. Eula is, in Gavin’s eyes, Guinevere or Isuelt, the impossible she whom he must perform worship from afar. But when
she refuses to play Iseult to his would-be Tristan, when she refuses to be impossible—when she steps down from her pedestal and makes herself almost matter—of-factly available, we are not to be surprised that Gavin recoils in bitterness, anger, and even something like terrified revulsion.

A few moments ago I remarked that chivalric love refused what we would call a normal fulfillment in marriage. Rougemont argues that the troubadour poets were influenced by the heretical sect of Cathars. The Cathars, because of their ascetic distrust of the flesh, would have nothing to do with it; but less Puritanical chivalric lovers, those who did not abjure sex as such, also had their case against marriage. For marriage, in the Middle Ages, among the ruling classes in particular, was often a marriage of convenience—a means for allying one family to another, for transferring lands and wealth, for securing coveted possessions. Certainly among the nobility, marriages were usually arranged, and if love developed, well, that was a pleasant dividend, but not essential. But for the chivalric sensibility, true love was soiled by considerations of social and economic advantage. True love must be spontaneous and free.

Marriage, even to this day, has not stood very high in the tradition of romantic love. One of the section headings in Rougemont's *Love in the Western World* is entitled “Marrying Iseult?” Marriage with Iseult is inconceivable, for to marry her is to have her “dwindle into a wife,” as Congreve's Millamant phrased it. Or, as Rougemont puts it: “In countless nauseating novels there is now depicted the kind of husband who fears the flatness and the same old jog-trot of married life in which his wife loses her 'allure' because no obstructions come between them.”

This tradition comes right on down into our own time. Hemingway, for example, cannot conceive married love's being able to maintain the brilliant flame of romantic love. It is no accident, therefore, that he sees to it that his true lovers are incapable of union (as in *The Sun Also Rises* since the hero has been emasculated by a war wound), or else that he has the heroine die in giving birth to her first child (as in *A Farewell to Arms*), or that events of the war limit the lovers to a mere three days of bliss (as in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*).

One finds a similar situation in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Gatsby is the true chivalric lover who lives in a dream and in a sense dies for a dream, whereas his beloved, Daisy, and her wealthy
husband are not romantic lovers at all. They have a convenient arrangement together and they are eminently practical. Nick Carraway reserves his bitterest comment for them. He says: "they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness or whatever it was that kept them together. . . ." We may be sure that it was not a romantic love that kept them together.

To return to Rougemont for a moment: he remarks that there is one requirement absolutely necessary for chivalric love. It must not risk losing its intensity. Fulfillment threatens to diminish it. Continual fulfillment is almost certain to tame and domesticate it. Hence the need for some barrier that will make consummation difficult if not impossible. For the heretical Cathars of twelfth-century Provence, the very flesh itself, as we have seen, was a barrier to the almost morbidly "spiritual" love to which they aspired. The two souls strove to unite in one clean transcendent flame, and the very materiality of the bodies of the lovers got in the way. For the more fleshly troubadour poets, marriage itself proved a sufficient barrier: chivalric love was the all—but—hopeless adoration of the young landless knight, yearning for the lady of the castle whose husband was his liege lord. For Lancelot, it was his dangerous love for the king's wife, a love that had to be kept secret, yet to enjoy which he and Guinevere risked everything. The fact that such love was forbidden and dangerous gave it its special spice—and still does, as the darker side of American suburban life testifies.

In sum, the real enemy of chivalric love, with its ardors and intensities, its finespun idealisms and quixotic denials and postponements of gratification, is permissiveness and ready availability. When the beloved woman becomes not a goddess, but simply a mammalian organism conveniently at hand, then the transcendental element necessary to chivalric love evaporates. Yet, as our own age is beginning to find out, humdrum conventional marriage is not the only enemy of rapturous love: the sex manual, the pornographic novel, and the X-rated movie could conceivably reduce love between the sexes to mere triviality.

In spite of the reputation of the rural South for violence and for earthiness, anyone who has known this region in Faulkner's day knows that it also tends to be strait-laced and prim on one social level, and fundamentalist and puritanical on another. Even today, it
is probably the only section of the United States that still believes in the doctrine of Original Sin and, accordingly, perhaps the only section that takes sex really seriously—as a life—and—death proposition.

Rougemont’s attempt to account for the development of chivalric love among the troubadour poets by adducing the influence of the puritanical and Manichaean Cathars has been criticized; and in his second book he plays down this earlier emphasis on such disparagement of the flesh. Nevertheless, the suggestion that chivalric love needs a certain kind of puritanism for its full burgeoning fits Faulkner’s South like a glove. After all, who are Faulkner’s great chivalric lovers? Labove, who belongs to a spartan family living up in the hills and who is something of an ascetic—he is described again and again as a kind of monk; Harry Wilbourne of The Wild Palms, who belongs to a hardworking, God-fearing Protestant background; little Byron Bunch, who for years methodically rode to a little church miles out in the country to direct the singing; and Quentin Compson, who is, whether or not God-fearing, thoroughly squeamish and oversensitive on the whole issue of sex. In Quentin’s case there is also the powerful barrier of incest—which he tries once to break through but cannot. Quentin is indeed one of Faulkner’s chivalric lovers.

Another barrier that is still formidable even today is impuberty—as witness the stir raised a few years ago by the publication of Nabokov’s Lolita. Rougemont takes note of it in his Love Declared, and actually borrows from Lolita the term nymphet. Is Linda Snopes for Gavin a kind of nymphet? Is Gavin doubly a chivalric lover in virtue of his curious ice-cream-parlor courtship of the daughter of Eula Snopes?

Well, yes and no. Gavin clearly never thinks of surmounting the barrier. He is careful to take no liberties with the young girl. Moreover, he is by nature generous and helpful. His feelings toward Linda are kindly, and they may be merely avuncular. I have no desire to try to make him out a dirty old man. But his relationship with Linda is obviously a very peculiar one—and later even more so when Linda has become a grown woman.

When Linda returns to Jefferson as a young widow, Gavin still does not propose to her, even though she tells him “I just must be where you are,” and later, more passionately, “Gavin, Gavin. I love you. I love you.” What are his barriers? Men have in the past
achieved happy marriages with women more than eighteen years younger than they. Eula begs Gavin to marry Linda. A number of Gavin’s friends believe for a time that he will.

But Gavin does not marry her because, as I would judge, he does not dare to tamper with a romantic dream. Maggie, Gavin’s very perceptive and practical sister, observes that one does not “marry Yseult.” Linda is for Gavin at least Yseult’s daughter—and he has already long before predicted for her the life of an Yseult: she will love once romantically and intensely, he insists, but will lose her love and mourn him for ever after, unwilling to accept any second-best. Gavin has in this instance made one of those self-fulfilling prophecies. In love with the romantic dream himself, he has no intention—by marrying Linda himself—of preventing the prophecy’s coming true.

Maggie has made her own prophecy: namely, that her brother will eventually marry a widow with four children. She misses absolute accuracy by only two children. Not bad, I should say; for in 1944 Gavin does marry Melisandre Backus Harriss, whom he had known as a girl. In short, it would seem that Gavin felt in his bones that romantic love, in the grand passionate manner, should not mix with married love. Anyway, he doesn’t risk it, and his perhaps unconscious sense that they are, or ought to be, incompatible, is the best proof of the power that the myth of romantic love exerts on him.

Did Faulkner get these insights into the nature of chivalric love from reading Rougemont? No, he couldn’t have, and he didn’t need to. For Rougemont is simply summarizing and systematizing—though how brilliantly—what has been endemic in the culture of the West for a thousand years. Faulkner could have got what he needed to know from Gautier’s *Mlle. de Maupin*, which we know he read, or from the early poetry of his favorite poet, W. B. Yeats, or from Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*, or from Wagner’s operas, from the love songs of Tin Pan Alley, or even from the movies shown at Tyler’s Air Dome picture show here in Oxford, Mississippi.

Leaving Gavin Stevens aside, how important to Faulkner was the concept of chivalric love? Quite important, I should say. Look at *Soldiers’ Pay*, or *Light in August*, or *The Hamlet*, or *The Wild Palms*—where the story of Harry Wilbourne and Charlotte Rittenmeyer deals almost exclusively with this theme.

What was Faulkner’s attitude toward chivalric love? Did he take it
seriously? Did he believe in it himself? These are good questions, too
good to be answered with a confident yes or no. If we are trying to be
accurate, we can say that Faulkner recognized chivalric love as a
pervasive and important feature of our culture. It has given rise to
some very great poetry, including Dante’s *Vita Nuova*. And it has
been the principal subject matter of the novel from its beginnings.
Chivalric love has its tragic aspect, and in a novel like *The Wild Palms*,
to take a notable example, Faulkner has allowed his lovers their
tragic dignity. If chivalric love can be regarded as a kind of sublime
folly—a passion so transcendent that for its sake the world is well
lost, since no price is too great to purchase it—it can also be seen as
foolishness unmitigated. Faulkner is thoroughly aware of the comic
aspects of chivalric love. At times he is willing to laugh at the chivalric
lovers, as he does when Eula’s night visit to Gavin’s law office knocks
the stuffing out of that astonished young man. Even in *The Wild Palms* Faulkner has not avoided certain comic implication. In the
mining community in Utah to which Harry and Charlotte have
retreated to avoid the infections of respectability and bourgeois
society, they are driven by the intense cold to share the same bed
with the lusty and uncomplicated Buckners. This pair shamelessly
satisfy their sexual urges, but Harry and Charlotte, the romantic
lovers that they are, are too fine-grained, too fastidious to do so. But
they have fled to the wilderness to keep their love pure and unspotted
from the world only to find that they have taken the world into bed with them.

Yet, whether considered to be a sublime transcendence, or a
foolish denial, of the flesh, the lover’s tendency to etherealize his
experience is one of the important elements in Faulkner’s work.
Consider the variety of chivalric lovers presented to us. I’ve already
mentioned the young schoolmaster of Frenchman’s Bend, Labove.
Though one could hardly exaggerate the differences in background
and personality between him and Gavin Stevens, Eula casts much
the same spell upon them both; or perhaps we put it more accurately
if we say that both men project upon Eula the same aura of divinity.
For Labove, she is not the Iseult of Arthurian romance, but some
divinity out of the Greek pantheon. But a divinity she is, and Labove
is obsessed. Moreover, much more is involved than powerful sexual
feelings. They are sexual and they are powerful, but they cannot be
eased simply by visiting a brothel. They are driven up into Labove’s head: they have become an obsessional erotic dream.

I could go on with other examples: Byron Bunch, the gallant little unhorced knight who selflessly comes to Lena Grove’s rescue, is at once comic and admirable, and in his own way, as mad—or irrational—as is Labove himself. I could even add Ike Snopes, the idiot, who is in love with Houston’s cow. Even here, however, more than mere sex is involved. Ike rescues her from the grass fire; he garlands her head with a coronet of wild flowers. For Ike, the cow becomes a kind of goddess, like ox–eyed Juno, the wife of Jupiter, the queen of the classical pantheon.

Faulkner summons his greatest prose–poetry to the task of making the reader see the cow as she appears in the idiot’s adoring eyes. And here Faulkner needs his greatest prose poetry to enable us to grasp the fact that Ike too is a chivalric lover. For between this lover and his beloved there yawns the most formidable barrier of all—more forbidding even than incest—bestiality, man and animal in sexual congress.

It is high time, however, to return to Gavin Stevens. In considering him as a lover, I have neglected other important aspects of his character and personality. But, of course, there is only so much that can be covered in one lecture. Yet, Gavin’s conception of love does have a relation to the larger and more general issues and it will not hurt to make one or two brief suggestions about them.

First, Gavin’s idealism (of which chivalric love is an aspect) is deep. Gavin is somewhat given to theorizing—as in his account of what Joe Christmas’s white blood and his black blood compelled him to do.

Second, there is the matter of Gavin’s view of women and of reality in general. I believe that Faulkner would not have frowned on my coupling so closely women and reality: he would agree that the idealist’s ability to understand women—who constituted, in Faulkner’s opinion, the basic, the essential, the practical half of humanity—is a reasonably good index of an idealist’s grasp of reality itself. Maggie loves her brother Gavin and is aware of his solid virtues, but she worries about the way in which he fails to see what women are like, and she finds him unable to understand humanity in general.

Our last view of Gavin—it occurs at the end of The Mansion—is of a flabbergasted man. He had badly miscalculated Mink’s undeviat-
ing determination to call Flem Snopes to account for repudiating clan loyalty. Gavin had really believed it was safe to get Mink pardoned and that for a bribe of five hundred dollars he would agree to leave the state of Mississippi. Worse still, Gavin had completely misunderstood Linda. He is utterly shocked to find that Linda, the woman whom he feels must be protected from even the knowledge that Mink has refused the bribe and that her stepfather is in danger, has in reality connived all along to get Mink out of prison just so that he would have a chance to shoot Flem.

Gavin, who had so carefully formed Linda’s mind and had got her to that romantic place, Greenwich Village, in order to fulfill his own romantic dream of what she should be and do, is very close to collapse at the end. We are told that Ratliff is as “Gentle and tender as a woman” in opening the door of the car in which he will drive Gavin home. He asks Gavin: “You all right now?” and, though Gavin exclaims, “Yes I tell you, goddammit,” Ratliff is still solicitous of him, though in proper Ratliff style, he turns his concern into a piece of jesting badinage. He remarks that he hopes that Linda has no daughter “stashed out somewhere,” and that if she has, he hopes Linda will never bring her to Jefferson, for, as Ratliff puts it, “You done already been through two Eula Varners and I don’t think you can stand another one.”

Gavin, the idealist and do-gooder, the man who would like to believe the best of everybody, here ends up as a somewhat discomfited Don Quixote. (If you fancy the analogy, you can regard Ratliff as his realistic, no-nonsense, squire Sancho Panza.) Actually the general analogy is not too far—fetched. In fact, I shall claim that it fits my announced topic precisely. For surely Cervantes’ Don Quixote de la Mancha is one of the great chivalric lovers of all time. His wonderful imagination turned a plain country girl (not nearly so beautiful as that staggeringly beautiful country girl Eula Varner) into the noble Dulcinea del Toboso, for the love of whom he embarked on all sorts of knightly adventures. Don Quixote is loveable and gallant, a true gentleman, but, like Gavin Stevens, somewhat impractical and not noted for realistic discernment. But what more pleasant compliment could Faulkner have paid to Gavin than to give him a slight resemblance to the courtly Don, the hero of one of his favorite novels, one which he tells us he read regularly once a year.