Gavin Stevens in Knight's Gambit, Light in August, Go Down, Moses, and Intruder in the Dust

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Gavin Stevens in *Knight's Gambit, Light in August, Go Down, Moses,* and *Intruder in the Dust*

Nobuyo Unagami 1)

Abstract

As Gavin Stevens’ first appearance in “Smoke” of William Faulkner’s *Knight’s Gambit* (a collection of six mystery stories) shows, we can suppose that Gavin Stevens’ original character is based on a detective in a detective story. After his first appearance in *Knight’s Gambit*, Gavin deals with racial problems as a lawyer in *Light in August, Go Down, Moses* and *Intruder in the Dust*. In these works, however, his characterization is similar to that of *Knight’s Gambit*. In *Knight’s Gambit*, he solves a mystery as a detective and his judgment is accepted as infallible. Nevertheless, in the other three works whose style is different from a detective story’s, Gavin’s detective-like character is not ideally described and his judgment becomes unreliable. In these stories whose themes are so complicated and socially realistic as racism, it is difficult to solve a problem like a detective in a detective story. In this paper, I would like to look into the figure of Gavin Stevens not only in *Light in August, Go Down, Moses* and *Intruder in the Dust* but also in *Knight’s Gambit*, and the interconnection between his detective-like character in *Knight’s Gambit* and his role as a spokesman for a Southern community in *Light in August, Go Down, Moses* and *Intruder in the Dust*.

I. Introduction

As Kelley Hayden’s *William Faulkner’s Knight's Gambit : a study*, a detailed study of *Knight’s Gambit*, shows, *Knight's Gambit* has been underestimated but is worth discussing seriously.1 Many critics discuss the character of Gavin Stevens, who appears in Faulkner’s fiction for the first time.2 In this paper, I would like to look into Gavin Stevens in *Knight’s Gambit*, which is the first appearance of his character. Although Gavin Stevens develops in the following works of Faulkner, his original character seems to be described well in *Knight’s Gambit*. And I hope this study promotes the reevaluation of *Knight’s Gambit*.

In this paper, I would like to deal with *Light in August, Go Down, Moses*, and *Intruder in the Dust* as well as *Knight’s Gambit*. The reason is that in *Light in August, Go Down, Moses*, and *Intruder in the Dust* Gavin Stevens deals with racial problems without losing his detective-like character first introduced in *Knight’s Gambit*. It seems that in these three works Gavin Stevens acts like a detective and has not lost the beliefs and theories shown in *Knight’s Gambit*. Examining the relationship between *Knight’s Gambit* and *Light in August, Go Down, Moses*, and *Intruder in the Dust*, I will reevaluate Gavin Stevens’ ideas about racial problems, which have not been treated in connection with his figure in *Knight’s Gambit*.

II. Gavin Stevens in *Knight’s Gambit*

In “Smoke”, the first short story of *Knight’s Gambit*, a collection of “six mystery stories”, Faulkner introduces Gavin Stevens for the first time. *Knight’s Gambit* was published in 1949, but Faulkner wrote “Smoke” from 1929 to 1930 and it was completed earlier than *Light in August, Go Down, Moses*, and *Intruder in the Dust*.3 Therefore, we can suppose that Gavin Stevens was first created as a detective in a detective story.

In this section, I analyze each of the six stories and consider the dialogue and theories of Gavin Stevens, who plays the role of a detective in *Knight’s Gambit*. By doing so, I would like to confirm that his character is peculiarly distorted in the world of detective stories, and not a serious literary work.

It is true that many critics have discussed his character as a detective4, but few have mentioned other Faulkner’s

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works where Gavin Stevens appears, and have discussed Gavin Stevens in *Knight's Gambit* as an original character. If we try to see him in a new light, it would be useful to refer to some studies on detective stories.

Here I would like to confirm the point that a detective story is based on its own style, which is different from other genres of fiction. The world of a detective story is an extremely rationalized and simplified one, and the characters’ words and acts are simplified because it focuses on the solution of a mystery. Therefore, the characters’ feelings are disregarded because they are often unrelated to the solution. In *Der Detektiv-Roman: ein philosophischer Traktat*, Siegfried Kracauer describes some characteristics of a detective story. About the world of a detective story, he states as follows:

> ...die Idee der durchrationalisierten zivilisierten Gesellschaft, die sie mit radikaler Einseitigkeit erfassen und in der ästhetischen Brechung stilisiert verkörpern. Nicht um die naturgetreue Wiedergabe jener Zivilisation genannten Realität selber ist es ihnen zu tun, vielmehr von vornherein um die Hervorkehrung des intellektualistischen Charakters dieser Realität:... (Kracauer 9)

His view clearly emphasizes the rationalized aspects. This view is connected with his understanding of the characters:

> Im allgemeinen indessen setzen die Autoren ein dem Detektiv-Roman homogenes Milieu, ein Beisammen von Figuren, die sich in der konventionellen Geste erschöpfen und nicht ihrem Sein nach gezeichnet werden müssen, um Vertrauen und Sicherheit zu erwecken. (Kracauer 33)

This view shows that stereotyped characters become more common in a detective story than in other fiction. On the role of “a detective”, which Gavin Stevens plays in *Knight's Gambit*, Siegfried Kracauer points out that a kind of absolute power is given to him: “...daß er das Gestaltete en trätselt, ohne es gefaßt zu haben, und alle Wesenszüge durch intellektuelle Ableitung bezwüngt, stampelt ihn zum Lenker hier” (Kracauer 53). Taking Siegfried Kracauer’s view and others into consideration, we can conclude that detective stories are not aimed at an exact portrait of the real world. I would like to look into the text of *Knight's Gambit*, paying attention to these characteristics and some metaphors of “game”, which are often used in detective stories as if to symbolize the one-dimensional and unrealistic world.

The first story in *Knight's Gambit*, “Smoke”, has placed absolute trust in a detective's judgment. Gavin Stevens is virtually authorized to use an “unfair” trick in order to make a criminal confess his guilt. As he describes Joe Christmas as a combination of “white blood” and “black blood” in *Light in August*, Gavin Stevens calls Granby Dodge the combination of “shrewd” and “ignorant” in “Smoke” (*KG* 34). And he declares, “...since he could not convict the man, the man himself would have to” (*KG* 24). Besides, when he is asked about his morality, he answers as follows: “But isn’t justice always unfair? Isn’t it always composed of injustice and luck and platitude in unequal parts?” (*KG* 24) Because these words escape criticism, Gavin Stevens succeeds in justifying himself. Certainly Gavin's trick is a climactic scene in “Smoke”, but this way of thinking is allowed only in a world which places absolute trust in the authority of the law. In such a world, the reader is encouraged to share the view of an authority, in this case, Gavin Stevens.

Gavin Stevens’ sense of morality leaves room for discussion in “Smoke” but this tendency can be found in the other stories of *Knight's Gambit*. In “Monk” Gavin solves the mystery of Monk's murder, paying attention to the fact that what Monk says contradicts what he does: and what Terrel says also contradicts what he does: “the fact that neither Terrel nor Monk had ever farmed anything, anywhere” (*KG* 55). None the less, after Gavin talks with a governor who thinks only of getting more votes in an election, he gives up punishing Terrel legally. *Knight's Gambit* is set in a world which gives the law absolute power as if it were equal to God’s authority. Nevertheless, while Terrel, who disgraces the name of God, is set free, Monk is hanged as if he were discarded by God. In “Monk” this moral question remains unsolved. Gavin briefly mentions the land of God, “..., riding across the broad, heart-miraged land, between the cotton and the corn of God’s long-fecund, remorseless acres, which would outlast any corruption and injustice” (*KG* 60). And, like the last scene in “Go Down, Moses”, he thinks everything goes well for the time being if he can escape from the inconvenient situation and feel safe: “He was glad of the heat, he said; glad to be sweating, sweating out of himself the smell and the taste where he had been” (*KG* 60).

From “Hand Upon the Waters” to “Knight's Gambit”, metaphors of a game are increasingly used, and Gavin Stevens bargains with the brothers of the Ballenbaughs as if they were playing poker. The metaphor of poker is
used partly because people knew the brothers were actually gamblers. Also, like a game, Joe, who is almost like a brother to Lonnie, reverses the situation and takes revenge on the Ballenbaugh brothers, who are on bad terms. Like *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Intruder in the Dust*, fratricide occurs, but this moral issue is not brought into question even in the last scene. As if to do “justice” Gavin pretends not to know Joe’s revenge, and he shows the murderers are the Ballenbaughs. And the story ends with his solution of the murder mystery.

“Tomorrow” and “An Error in Chemistry” highlight Gavin’s authoritative talks. In the last part of “Tomorrow” he talks so confidently as to convince the reader that it is “right” not to free Bookwright: “It was because somewhere in that debased and brutalized flesh which Bookwright slew there still remained, not the spirit maybe, but at least memory, of that little boy, that Jackson and Longstreet Fentry, even though the man the boy had become didn’t know it, and only Fentry did. And you wouldn’t have freed him either. Don’t ever forget that. Never” (*KG* 105). In “An Error in Chemistry” Gavin and the sheriff are investigating the mystery of Joel Flint’s crime and confession, and they play chess when they talk about the case. Gavin adequately indicates that he can recognize only two family members’ presence even if there should be three, in short, Joel Flint, his wife and his father-in-law. Joel, the criminal, makes a mistake in making toddy and unveils himself. So Gavin does not directly catch the criminal, but the error of making toddy overlaps with the image of a game. After Gavin and the sheriff are faced with Joel’s destruction, the sheriff cites the words, “Know thyself” in the last scene. Gavin and the sheriff talk about the maxim and make persuasive the idea that the solution of a mystery restores law and order.

In “Knight’s Gambit” we can find both the plot of a detective story and the plot of a romance. None the less, the plot of the romance has the framework of a detective story. The mystery of a suitor of Melisandre Backus Harriss attracts people around her, but the plot looks like “the unfolding story in the magazine installments” (*KG* 149). And not only the people around them but Gavin and Melisandre, do not grieve over it. The romance develops while Gavin and Charles are playing chess. After Max Harriss and his sister suddenly visit Gavin and leave Gavin’s home, Gavin returns to the chess board and tells Charles to move his piece:

> Yet there were the people – the puppets, the paper dolls; the situation, impasse, morality play, medicine show, whichever you liked best – dropped out of a clear sky into his uncle’s lap at ten o’clock on a cold night four weeks before Christmas, and all his uncle saw fit or felt inclined or even needful to do, was to come back to the board and move the pawn and say ‘Move’ as though it had never happened, never been: not only dismissed but repudiated, refused. (*KG* 173)

In the plot of a romance, we can find some characteristics of a detective story like stereotyped characters, mystery, detective-like observers, the scene of a game play.

In “Knight’s Gambit”, Gavin takes various positions while he deals with the trouble over Melisandre’s and her daughter’s romantic relationship with Captain Gauldres. His way of dealing with the problem differs from his way in the other five stories of *Knight’s Gambit*. Max visits Gavin because he is “a servant of the law” and involves Gavin in his family trouble. In addition, as “a former suitor of Melisandre,” Gavin voluntarily helps her by settling her children’s trouble as if he were “their father.” Finally Melisandre marries Gavin and he becomes “her second husband.” Although the development of “Knight’s Gambit” is different from those of the other five stories because of the complexity of the plots, “Knight’s Gambit” also shows how absolutely perfect Gavin’s judgment is. And the various characters look up to his judgment likewise.

Gavin’s excellent skill at chess leads to his sharp insight, and makes the reader believe his judgment is infallible. In addition, the metaphor of chess overlaps with the image of a romance. In “Knight’s Gambit”, the chess pieces mean three characters: “queen” means Melisandre, “castle” the daughter of Harriss, and “knight”, Captain Gauldres. By determining how these characters act, in other words, moving “the pieces” as he likes, he increasingly looks like an absolute authority.

While moving chess pieces skillfully, Gavin succeeds in controlling the other characters including Max and Melisandre. He prevents Max’s murder of Captain Gauldres, and the Captain, who knows he nearly loses his life but is helped by Gavin, decides to marry the daughter of Harriss. Moreover, Gavin persuades his future son to enlist and succeeds in marrying Melisandre, a woman he loved in his youth.

In “Knight’s Gambit”, Gavin becomes both an authority of the law and the head of a family, “a father.” Interestingly, in order to make his son-in-law enlist, he uses the metaphor of a game, which is effectively used in a
detective story. To convince his son-in-law that he must be responsible for his decision, he uses the metaphor of poker: “Just enlist. Look. You are playing poker […]. You draw cards. When you do that, you affirm two things: […]. You don’t draw and then throw the cards in because they are not what you wanted, expected, hoped for; not just for the sake of your own soul and pocket-book, but for the sake of the others in the game, who have likewise assumed that unspoken obligation” (KG 225). Max is convinced of the justice of “that unspoken obligation” and decides to enlist. As a man who can not only win a game but teach the game’s rules and strategy, Gavin impresses the reader as a man of perfect intelligence. In the scene of playing chess, Charles notices he made a mistake and says, “Maybe I should have taken the queen twenty minutes ago when I could, and let the castle go,” Then Gavin explains the move of a knight: “And a knight can move two squares at once and even in two directions at once. But he can’t move twice.” And he (Gavin) shoves “the black pieces across the board toward him” (Charles) and says, “I’ll take the white this time and you can try it” (KG 176).

In another scene, after “Cayley girl” and the daughter of Harriss leave Gavin’s home, Charles and Gavin start to play chess and talk over the chess board. Gavin says to Charles, “Move then” and Charles answers, “I already have.” And “matching the white pawn” Gavin says, “Then move again” (KG 191). Gavin watches Charles move his piece and make the same mistake, and then he sweeps the board clean and “set[s] up a single problem with the horses and rooks and two pawns.” When Charles says, “It stops being a game then,” Gavin declares, “Nothing by which all human passion and hope and folly can be mirrored and then proved, ever was just a game” (KG 192). And he tells Charles to move his piece again.

The first scene of chess play shows that Charles tries to get two things (pieces) at the same time and fails to win the game. After Gavin points at Charles’ mistake, and hands his black pieces to Charles, he encourages Charles to move according to his instruction and gain a victory. It is possible to exchange white pieces with black pieces and any chess player can imitate another player’s way to win a chess game. Though it is the game’s rule, the rule of chess is used as a metaphor to express human relationships in Knight’s Gambit.

In the second scene of chess, Gavin puts only a few pieces on the chess board and puts away the other pieces. Even when Charles says, “It stops being a game then”, Gavin compares chess with the human world and makes chess more than just a game. “Nothing by which all human passion and hope and folly can be mirrored and then proved, ever was just a game.” Considering this is said by Gavin, a white man of high social standing, it sounds like a meaningful remark.

As we have observed in the text of Knight’s Gambit, the metaphor of a game is adequately used to express a character’s (a detective’s) bargain with another character (a criminal). While a detective tries to solve a mystery, a criminal tries to keep the mystery unsolved. A detective tries to reverse a situation where a criminal keeps his crime unsolved and takes a superior position. On the other hand, by making a detective fail to solve his crime, a criminal tries to reverse a hierarchical situation which places a detective in a superior position. A detective and a criminal are two persons in opposite positions, but both of them enter the same world of a mysterious crime. They try to outwit each other and aim to reverse their positions. So, in a sense, their relation is essentially similar to that of those who play a game. What is more, the possibility of reversing the present situation is an important condition of both a detective story and a game.

III. Gavin Stevens in Light in August and Go Down, Moses

After he starts to appear in non-detective stories such as Light in August and Go Down, Moses, Gavin is critically as well as ideally described. None the less, Knight’s Gambit’s characteristics such as Gavin’s image as an authority and a metaphor of a game are also found in Light in August and Go Down, Moses. Gavin appears only in one scene of Light in August, and theorizes about why Joe ends his life in an unexpectedly mysterious way (LA 448-9). His theory of contrasting “Joe’s white blood” and “his black blood” reminds us of his way of calling Granby Dodge “both shrewd and ignorant at the same time: a dangerous combination” in “Smoke” (KG 34). However, Joe’s ambiguous and tragic birth and his mental pain are portrayed in detail before he ends his life and Gavin theorizes about his death. So the racial problem must be too complicated to be described in such theoretical language. In the context of Light in August, Gavin’s theory sounds like an extremely simplified and rationalized one.
In addition, what is remarkable is that Percy Grimm’s pursuit of Joe follows Gavin’s theory. It seems that an authority of the law has some connection with a blind believer in the power of the state. For Gavin, Joe’s escape and death is merely one topic to talk about with “a college professor”, his friend at Harvard “on the veranda of Stevens’ home” on “vacation” (LA 444-5). Just before his pursuit of Joe, Percy Grimm’s subordinates play poker to kill time during the intervals between patrols. The image of a game overlaps with the coming pursuit of Joe. Percy Grimm pursues Joe as if he had turned into a “pawn” and was moved on the “Board” by a “Player” and appears to become one with the absolute power of the state (LA 462-4). Following Gavin’s theory, the power of the state is called “Player”, which associates us with the game of chess. And Percy Grimm, “the pawn” infallibly hunts down Joe. So we can consider this development as a satire on authorities under a Southern social system.

Again, only in “Go Down, Moses” of Go Down, Moses, Gavin appears, but because of being “the Law” he is chosen to be “in formal component complement to the Negro murderer’s catafalque: the slain wolf” (GDM 364) and deal with the death of a black descendant of the McCaslins. Although he pays some expenses and makes every effort to hold a memorable service for the descendant, Gavin regards the service as the most important element and fails to understand the feelings of the bereaved blacks. All Gavin wants is to return to his desk, where he can indulge himself in “translation of the Old Testament back into classic Greek” (GDM 353). He considers the world of blacks to be outside his world and does not think it necessary to have words to express “the outside world.” When he visits Miss Worsham and sees Mollie’s and the other blacks’ grief with his own eyes, he hurries out of the place and thinks there are “air, space, breath” outside (GDM 362). And he confesses, “I shouldn’t have come” (GDM 363). Irrational people and an irrational situation strike him as incongruous. Gavin, who Mollie calls “the Law”, can believe “the old Negress’ instinct” (GDM 354-5). Nevertheless, he fails to understand her feelings. He simply concludes that if he wants to conceal the death of Samuel Worsham Beauchamp, he just has to prevent editors of newspaper companies from carrying the news: “I have already talked with Mr Wilmoth at the paper. He has agreed not to print anything” (GDM 357). He sticks to his rational way of solving a problem in a racially prejudiced world and fails in his attempt.

It is true that both in Light in August and in Go Down, Moses, Gavin appears in only one part, but as in Knight's Gambit, Gavin’s authoritative figure and game-related metaphors are recognized. As in the scene of Percy Grimm, a metaphor of hunting is used throughout Go Down, Moses, like the above-mentioned expressions such as “slain wolf” (GDM 364). What is different from Knight's Gambit is that the power of the Law is no longer absolute. Moreover, even when a metaphor of a game suggests a hierarchic relationship between a person in a superior position and one in an inferior position, in Light in August and Go Down, Moses, the hierarchic relationships refer to the relationship between whites and blacks in the South. As a result, losing their entertaining aspects, Light in August and Go Down, Moses turn into tragic stories.

IV. Gavin Stevens in Intruder in the Dust

In terms of “an authoritative figure of the law” and “a metaphor of a game”, it is possible to recognize that Gavin develops from Knight’s Gambit to Light in August, Go Down, Moses, and Intruder in the Dust. When he first tries to write Intruder in the Dust, Faulkner thinks about the style of a detective story. Actually, the framework of Intruder in the Dust is that of a detective story: a murder, a suspect and the pursuit of a true criminal are characteristic of a detective story. However, when Faulkner thinks of Lucas as a suspected murderer, he realizes that the style of a detective story is not adequate for the story and decides to change the style. This fact shows that there is a limit to what a writer can deal with in a detective story, and it is almost impossible to deal with racism in an entertaining literary style.

Because of this process of writing, Intruder in the Dust has some connection with the elements of a detective story. In Intruder in the Dust, “a white man who is entitled to punish people under the law” and “a black man who commits a crime and is supposed to be punished” bargain with each other. To describe this, a metaphor of a game is effectively used. For example, Charles compares Lucas’ way of asking Gavin to defend him to “a poker game”: “Now it was no childhood’s game of stakeless Five Hundred. It was more like the poker games he had overlooked. ‘Are you or aint you going to take the job?’ Lucas said. […] ‘So you dont want the job,’” Lucas said. ‘You aint said yes or no
yet.’ ‘No!’ his uncle said, ‘Because you aint got any job to offer anybody’ (ID 61). Gavin is enraged by Lucas’ request, but the reason is that Lucas tries to get better conditions without disclosing to Gavin his intentions. A black man tries to bargain with a white man. Gavin gets angry with the black man’s game-like way of making a request.

In order to establish his innocence, Lucas bets on the possibility that Charles will repay his favor and act as directed. Charles realizes that Lucas reads his mind and tells him to dig up a grave. Charles compares “Lucas’ way of bargaining with him” to “a game”: “He’s not only beat me, he never for one second had any doubt of it” (ID 73).

In conversations with Charles, Gavin insists that white people and black people can live together peacefully in the South. Nevertheless, Gavin does not consider the possibility that black people are not satisfied with the present social rules which are advantageous only to white people. Gavin believes that the present situation is adequate enough for both white people and black people to live in: “…both of them observing implicitly the rules: the nigger acting like a nigger and the white folks acting like white folks and no real hard feelings on either side…” (ID 48-9). So, even if he can convince his nephew that his idea is also favorable for black people, Gavin does not recognize that “the rules” between the two races are disadvantageous to black people in the South.

These things considered, a metaphor of a game is used through Gavin’s dialogue and the events in Knight’s Gambit, Light in August, Go Down, Moses and Intruder in the Dust. And consistently he settles various matters by theorizing or talking, not by his actions. His authoritative talk shows that in order to keep order in a society, the language of a person in authority needs to be simple and absolute (ID 89).

Distorted aspects of the power structure in the South overlap with the distorted view shown through Gavin’s language. Gavin’s language in Intruder in the Dust simplifies complicated problems and we can trace the tendency back to Gavin’s character in Knight’s Gambit. In “Knight’s Gambit” Gavin sweeps chess pieces off the board, and places only some pieces on it. And Charles, a competitor, was told to use the black pieces in another scene. Nonetheless Gavin tells Charles to use the white pieces this time and win the game according to Gavin’s instructions. Gavin’s language in these scenes seems to show that an authority of the law is given absolute power.

In Intruder in the Dust, white people’s language itself is a focus of discussion. Most white people are unaware that their language is distorted in order to support a racially hierarchic society. In their language, black people are “harmless” when they do not destroy the social structure of white supremacy, but they become “dangerous” when they do. And Gavin’s language develops from Knight’s Gambit to the other stories, and when the power of the law is described, a metaphor of a game is used. A change of “the rules”, which a change from white pieces to black pieces on a chess board symbolizes, is the privilege of white people. However, when a white murderer is investigated in order to save a black man’s life, the power structure in the Southern community is threatened. A black man is supposed to be investigated by a white man. If their roles are reversed and a white man is to be investigated, “the rules” are no longer in effect. In this situation, a metaphor of a game is not used as if the situation were too serious to be called “a game.”

In Intruder in the Dust, a true criminal, Crawford Gowrie, is called “the amateur gambler” and Gavin thinks that he “believes first not in his luck but in long shots, that the long shot will win simply because it’s a long shot…” (ID 232). As for Lucas’ accusation against a white man, a metaphor of a game is not used. Lucas tells Mr. Workitt that his nephew is stealing from him. Nonetheless, when a black man accuses a white man of stealing, he is scolded and is told, “Dont you know what would have happened to you?” (ID 226)

In Knight’s Gambit, Gavin says, “Nothing by which all human passion and hope and folly can be mirrored and then proved, ever was just a game” (KG 192), and in Faulkner’s works dealing with racism, a metaphor of a game is frequently used. And “the rules” are advantageous to white people. By choosing his nephew, Charles, as his listener, Gavin can make him listen to what he says and present his view as a person in authority. Nonetheless, in Faulkner’s works other than Knight’s Gambit, Gavin’s language tends not to be persuasive. This shows the point which is not considered in Knight’s Gambit, in other words, the contradictory situation where the power structure in a Southern community gives white people good treatment and puts others in an unfavorable position.

Notes
The main theme of this paper is based on my presentation at the 11th General Meeting of the William Faulkner Society of Japan at Fukuoka University on October 10, 2008.

Key to Abbreviations


3  See, Joseph Blotner’s Faulkner: a biography, 644.
6  Faulkner in the University, 141-2.
7  Ibid, 142.

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