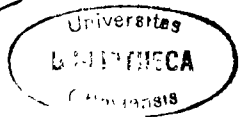


A STUDY OF SNOPEPESISM IN THE NOVELS
OF WILLIAM FAULKNER

by Phyllis Marguerite Grosskurth

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CURRICULUM STUDIORUM

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INTRODUCTION

Snopesism in the novels of William Faulkner is the unprincipled pursuit of self-aggrandizement. This thesis is an attempt to explore, explain, and demonstrate this definition. It seeks to indicate that for Faulkner, the Snopes family, in whom this quality is principally embodied and from whom the name derives, is a problem not only peculiar to the Southern United States, but is also symbolic of the amoral materialism corrupting modern life. This theme seems to merit study because, although Faulkner is vitally concerned with the problem presented by the Snopeses, there has been no full-scale critical attempt to trace their ascent, define their qualities, and evaluate their significance.

Faulkner's concern with the Snopeses has developed gradually. They appear as minor characters in some of his early novels and short stories but his first full study of them was The Hamlet (1940). In 1957, he continued his examination in The Town. He has stated that he intends to complete his study of the Snopes family in a third book to be entitled The Mansion. Although his work will not be complete until The Mansion appears, it does not seem precipitous to examine the significance of the Snopeses at this point, particularly in view of the fact that so long a period separated the first two novels of the trilogy.

Until Faulkner created the Snopeses, he had found no adequate objective correlative to describe his repugnance to the decay of traditional morality. Like the Elizabethan humanists, Faulkner's ideal world is one in which men live in an ordered civilization, governed by a coherent set of ethical values. As human beings they would live with dignity and integrity in an association of mutual deference and responsibility. But the full potential of such a society has always been destroyed by the advent of ambitious and ruthless individuals governed only by their own selfish interests. These are mechanical creatures for they are no more than blind instruments of their acquisitive passions. They are the entrepreneurs who reject all traditional standards of conduct in the ruthless pursuit of their own goals. It is these people whom Faulkner has named the Snopeses.

This thesis attempts to trace the ascent of the Snopeses, to examine their qualities, and to analyze the various means by which they attain power. Chapter I is a survey of the Southern milieu as it appears to Faulkner and his attempts to penetrate the legends connected with its past. In his early novels, Faulkner appears to be searching for the causes of the moral breakdown of Southern society which provided the breeding-ground for Snopeses. One of the basic characteristics of the members of ante-bellum Southern society was an emotional identification with their homeland.

Snopeses, on the other hand, feel no loyalty to or affection for their native region. Chapter II attempts to indicate that this rootlessness is a fundamental characteristic of the Snopes's alienation from other human beings. Rapacity, the quality they display in their pursuit of their self-centred goals, is the subject of Chapter III. Chapter IV, entitled Respectability, is a study of their hypocritical pretence to provide a moral basis for their ravages on society. The following chapter, The Mechanical Man, is an examination of those qualities which differentiate the Snopeses from those members of society motivated by a vital ethical code. The term "mechanical" encompasses those qualities associated in Faulkner's mind both with the impersonality of the machine and also with the soullessness of the animal. In Chapter VI an attempt is made to determine the characteristics of the various people through whom the Snopeses are observed. The passivity inherent in these "observers" is seen to make the triumph of the Snopeses possible.

The Conclusion seeks to evaluate the total significance of the Snopes family and to refute those critics who have accused Faulkner of nihilism. Faulkner has succeeded in presenting what Ben Jonson calls in the Prologue to Every Man in His Humour, "an image of the times." Our present civilization seems to Faulkner to be one in

which mere contemporaneity is valued, a present which is more important in itself than life's organic connections with the past. It is a civilization which has the arrogance to disown the heritage of human history. Faulkner suggests that the only possibility of combatting materialism lies in a return to traditional moral values.

CHAPTER I

THE SOUTHERN MILIEU

"There is no such thing as was--only is. If was existed, there would be no grief or sorrow." William Faulkner made this statement in an interview recently¹ and it contains, in essence, Faulkner's view of life. We are what we are because of what our grandfathers were; and they, in turn, were conditioned by their ancestors. "The past is consumed in the present and the present is living only because it brings forth the future."²

The American South, as a region, is acutely aware of its own past. When Faulkner was a boy, there were still many survivors of the Civil War and he has recalled that, during his childhood, he and his friends played Civil War games under the guidance of old men who told them how the famous battles had been fought. There is a lyrical reconstruction of these experiences in Intruder in the Dust:

For every Southern boy fourteen years old, not once, but whenever he wants it, there is the instance when it's still not two o'clock on that July afternoon in 1863, the brigades are in position behind the rail fence, the guns are laid and ready in the woods and the furled flags are already loosened to break out and Pickett himself with

¹Malcolm Cowley (ed.), Writers at Work (New York: The Viking Press, 1958), p. 141.

²James Joyce, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (New York: The Viking Press, 1947), p. 523

his long oiled ringlets and his hat in one hand probably and his sword in the other looking up the hill waiting for Longstreet to give the word and it's all in the balance, it hasn't happened yet, it hasn't even begun³

Faulkner's own family had been prominent in Mississippi history. His ancestors had settled the land, had fought in the Civil War, and had tried to salvage something out of the rubble of defeat. His great-grandfather, Colonel William Falkner⁴, had become something of a legendary hero. He had fought in the Mexican War and then served as head of a Confederate regiment during the Civil War. When the war ended, instead of slipping into the lethargy of defeat, he built a railroad from Oxford to Memphis. In 1881, he published a popular romance, The White Rose of Memphis, brimming with high sentiments, brave gentlemen, and pure ladies; and within thirty years the book sold over 150,000 copies. The Colonel died in 1889, killed in a pistol duel with a business partner. Colonel John Sartoris, who is modelled on him, meets his death in the same violent manner in The Unvanquished; in fact, the whole book is an imaginary reconstruction of the Faulkner family history.

³William Faulkner, Intruder in the Dust (New York: Random House, 1948), p. 194.

⁴The family later added the 'u' in the name.

This legend of a romantic past peopled with ancestors who lived by a code of gallantry and honour is part of the myth of the South. This can, of course, be traced directly to its defeat in the Civil War. While the economy of the rest of the nation was expanding almost without limits, the South remained crushed and destitute. Its only recourse was to retire into a sullen shell of pride, nurturing itself with the legend that it had been defeated not by superiority of arms or men but by carpetbaggers and scalawags and Northern capitalists.

It is an interesting fact that, from the end of the Civil War until the nineteen twenties, the South produced no literature of any merit. The general despair and poverty engendered by the defeat may possibly explain this phenomenon. Introspection led to constant, tiresome romanticizing of its own past. But with the First World War, Southerners' eyes were opened to a world beyond their own tight little boundaries; and in turn, they were able to view their own world with greater perspective. Thus, one can point to the emergence of serious writers like Erskine Caldwell, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren. William Faulkner is part of this renaissance of writing in the southern United States.

When William Faulkner returned from the First World War, he wrote his first novel, Soldier's Pay. This is a

typical post-war novel of disillusionment caused by the vacuity that seemed to follow victory. This spiritual emptiness is symbolized in the figures of the brittle Cecily and the motor car. Irving Howe suggests that both wars-- "the old war of his homeland and the recent war in France melted into one desolation, one hopelessness."⁵

Although the setting of Soldier's Pay is in the South, its locale might have been anywhere. Sherwood Anderson advised Faulkner to concentrate on the particular part of Mississippi from which he came:

I learned that, to be a writer, one has first got to be what he is, what he was born; that to be an American and a writer, one does not necessarily pay lip-service to any conventional American image such as his or Dreiser's own aching Indiana or Ohio or Iowa corn or Sandburg's stockyards or Mark Twain's frog. You had only to remember what you were. "You have to have somewhere to start from; then you begin to learn," he told me. "It don't matter where it was just so you remember it and ain't ashamed of it. Because one place to start from is just as important as any other. You're a country boy; all you know is that little patch up there in Mississippi where you started from. But that's all right too."⁶

Accordingly, in his next novel, The Sound and the Fury, he concentrated on his birthplace, Lafayette County, which he fictionalizes as Yoknapatawpha County. He expresses his general distaste for the post-war world in strictly

⁵Irving Howe, William Faulkner: A Critical Study (New York: Random House, 1952), p. 11.

⁶Quoted by Robert Coughlan, The Private World of William Faulkner (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954), p. 62.

Southern terms in his examination of the decadent Compson family. The Compsons had once been leaders of the community but had been unable to cope with the difficulties of the Reconstruction period. The various members of the family have escaped from reality by means of alcohol or hypochondria or brooding nostalgia. The only one who survives is Jason whose unabashed rapacity marks him as a legitimate member of the new materialistic society.

Family decadence had personal implications for Faulkner. His own father was by no means the man his great-grandfather had been. Robert Coughlan says: "The fire that drove the old Colonel had burnt itself almost to an ash."⁷ His father had worked fitfully at odd jobs such as clerk in a hardware store and conductor on the family railroad. Faulkner saw that this was the pattern of most of the families around him. Henceforth, the motive behind many of his novels is an attempt to penetrate and explain this feature of Southern life.

The Sound and the Fury was followed by the notorious Sanctuary. This novel might be interpreted as a myth in which Temple Drake symbolizes the decadence of the South. She has lost her sense of honour and responsibility and is

⁷Ibid., p. 44

raped by amoral forces in the guise of Popeye, a mechanical figure who is compared to stamped tin.

Absalom, Absalom is the study of one of the founders of the South, Thomas Sutpen. He is a rootless, ruthless figure who exploits everyone who will serve his purposes to ensure his "design" that his son and his descendants shall have all that he has lacked--wealth, power, untainted respectability.

Light in August is the tragic story of a mulatto, Joe Christmas. Although Faulkner treats Joe with a certain degree of sympathy, he remains a figure remote and alien from society, one who lives by no code except sporadic impulses to vindicate his manhood.

Go Down, Moses is a series of stories in which various members of the McCaslin family are paying the price of suffering because one of their ancestors had sexual relations with a slave girl.

Through these various studies of his background, Faulkner was led to certain conclusions which were far different from the romantic notions of the South with which he had been brought up. He could cry with Byron's Cain: "I never could reconcile/What I saw with what I heard!" The first of these conclusions was that the South had committed a grievous crime in sustaining itself by the insti-

tution of slavery. Slavery made the Civil War inevitable, and the poverty and despair associated with the defeat spawned an amoral, ambitious, new, exploiting class. His second conclusion was that the Old South was not all moonlight and magnolias and chivalrous gentlemen, but also included figures like Thomas Sutpen. However, most of its men lived by a vital code of decency and honour. Faulkner appears in history at a moment when it seems to him that the moral values of the Old South are crumbling. What were once vital truths have ossified into mere tradition. Once a man was a Colonel William Falkner or a General Jeb Stuart because he was a living embodiment of truth, courage and virtue. Now men seemed to pay lip-service only to these values. The aristocrats have relinquished their privilege and their responsibility to be leaders because they have relinquished their right of natural superiority. They have lost the land which was once handed down from father to son and cherished as a heritage. In their place, a new exploiting class has arisen. These people are not carpet-baggers or northern capitalists, but products of the Southern environment. If nature abhors a vacuum--and the Sartorises and the Compsons have become completely ineffectual--the new group "on the make" is only too eager to take their place.

While America as a whole prospered and progressed materially, the South remained an anachronism. When the

Southern planters were deprived of their chattel labour supply, they were no longer able to maintain their estates. Husks of rotting mansions, like the Old Frenchman Place, in The Hamlet, stood desolate. Consequently, many poor whites and freedmen were able to acquire much of this land. Many of these were the red-necked bushwhackers of the Civil War, who did not fight and who did not take sides but exploited both sides for their own advantage. Those who were ambitious moved to the towns and many of these were responsible for the rise of manufacturing in the South. Leadership in Southern manufacturing enterprise, as Charles A. Beard has pointed out, was taken by industrialists who came, in overwhelming proportions, from Southern families outside the former slave-owning group.⁸ It was from this mercenary, ambitious group that the Snopeses arose.

For some time after the Civil War, the descendants of the landowning class did continue to exert political influence over the masses of small tenant-farmers. They ran their own conventions and nominated their own Democratic candidates; but with the advent of the primary election system, the day of the "red-neck" arrived. Henceforth, the people did their own nominating and their vote counted as much as that of the former landowners. Unscrupulous

⁸Charles A. Beard, A Basic History of the United States (Philadelphia: The Blakiston Co., 1944), p. 300.

politicians played on the grievances and gullibility of uneducated folk like Henry Armstid in The Hamlet. It is from ambitious people such as these that Huey Long emerged in Louisiana and about whom Robert Penn Warren wrote in All the King's Men. The rise of the red-neck was an emotional and political issue during Faulkner's childhood, and it is easy to understand how a sensitive mind would be repelled by the pushing, acquisitive qualities of the new group. Faulkner sees the real defeat of the South, not in war, but in a growing rot from within its own borders.

Irving Howe compares this emerging class to one which arose in Russia after the Revolution:

After the Russian Revolution the traditional relationships in the countryside were destroyed, but the poverty and cultural primitivism that had been congealed in those relationships remained. Because the Revolution could not realize its egalitarian claims in the villages, there arose in place of the old landowners a new stratum of peasant leaders: uncouth and ignorant yet vigorous and ambitious, the very flesh of the Stalinist reaction. In the post-Reconstruction period of Southern history, which has its points of resemblance to a counter-revolution, there was a similar social vacuum, the result of the decay of traditional relationships and the absence of workable new ones. This vacuum the Snopeses fill, and insofar as they are also its product, Faulkner's description of them as "sourceless" is extremely brilliant. The uncouth yet vigorous muzhiks of the new South, they are, in turn, descendants of the bushwhackers, source of the red-neck demagogue, and tomorrow's compradors for Northern capital.⁹

In Faulkner's work, we also find studies of poor

⁹Howe, op. cit., pp. 60-61.

whites who do not succeed like the Snopeses. The most outstanding example is the Bundren family in As I Lay Dying. Faulkner is not interested in them as an economic class, but as representatives of a natural spontaneous humanity who accept an ethical responsibility towards each other. Anse Bundren promises his dying wife that she will be buried in her birthplace of Jefferson and the ragged little band brave fire, flood and scorn to discharge their obligation. This mission is a dramatic contrast to the amorality of the Snopeses who are governed only by self-interest.

The poverty of the inhabitants of Frenchman's Bend is implicit in the story of the rise of the Snopeses as it is related in The Hamlet. Mrs. Armstid says that her children will go without shoes in the winter if her husband buys one of Flem's wild horses. All the farms in the district are mortgaged to the hilt. But Faulkner never claims poverty as the cause of the poor whites' defeat by the Snopeses. They are victimized because they do not summon up sufficient courage to fight this new class.

If Faulkner's books were works of social criticism, the Negroes would provide a heaven-sent opportunity to inveigh against economic inequality. In actual fact, the Negro plays only a minor role in Faulkner's novels. The Negroes who do appear provide a standard of heroism and endurance in unflattering contrast to the white people. Such

a one is Dilsey in The Sound and the Fury. In the same book, Quentin says, ". . . a nigger is not a person so much as a form of behavior; a sort of obverse reflection of the white people he lives among."¹⁰ As Robert Penn Warren rightly points out, it is the crime of slavery, not the Negro himself, that is Faulkner's theme.¹¹ Slavery was wrong because it involved treating human beings as though they were things. The effect of this crime is strongly underlined in Intruder in the Dust, in which the old Negro, Lucas Beauchamp, pretends to be a murderer to intensify the burden of the white man's guilt.

The taint of slavery which is attached to the members of the old order is vital to an understanding of Faulkner. Slavery had tainted the founding of the South. In Absalom, Absalom, General Compson declares that, in the Civil War, the South, ". . . was now paying the price for having erected its economic edifice not on the rock of stern morality but on the shifting sands of opportunism and moral brigandage."¹² It is this curse of "original sin" which is

¹⁰William Faulkner, The Sound and the Fury (New York: The Modern Library, 1929), p. 105.

¹¹Robert Penn Warren, "William Faulkner," William Faulkner: Two Decades of Criticism, eds. Frederick J. Hoffman & Olga W. Vickery (East Lansing: Michigan State College Press, 1954), p. 82.

¹²William Faulkner, Absalom, Absalom (New York: The Modern Library, 1936), p. 260.

haunting the present generation. The sins of the fathers are visited upon their sons. "The wages of sin is death," and in this case, the Compsons and the Sartorises and all those who had been involved in slavery are suffering a spiritual death. Thus, it is not a simple contest between the traditionalists and the anti-traditionalists, or even between good and evil, for the traditionalists themselves are tainted. They are damned and the only way in which they can expiate their guilt is in suffering. Time and again Faulkner describes them as "ghosts" and, like ghosts, their suffering is rigidly controlled by the evil of the past. It is little wonder that these phantom-like, ineffectual figures are losing rapidly to the overpowering forces of mechanization. It is these people who are pitted against the Snopeses in The Town.

Thus, Faulkner's novels, even those dealing with the Snopes family, are not social criticism. They are not a comprehensive study of a segment of society in the sense that Balzac's Comédie Humaine was. In Faulkner, there is no precise social point of view; his attitude towards the South varies from book to book. It ranges from the sentimentality of The Unvanquished to the denunciation of The Sound and the Fury. His studies of families belonging to the aristocratic group such as the Compsons and the Sartorises, and to the poor whites like the Bundrens and the Armstids, are not so much examinations of social conditions

as a probing into the moral nature of man.

Faulkner speaks of his novels as a chronicle, as "the book." The novels dealing with the Snopes family cannot be read in isolation. They must be read against the background of Faulkner's previous books. Neither in The Hamlet nor in The Town does Faulkner specifically describe the Snopeses as a social or moral phenomenon peculiar to the South. They can be understood as such only if one has already saturated oneself in the moral environment of the earlier books.

Until Faulkner wrote The Hamlet, he had found no adequate concept to express his horror and dismay with the pervading atmosphere of modern life. He wished to combine the rapacity of Jason Compson, the mechanization of Popeye, the ruthless drive of Sutpen, the rootlessness of Joe Christmas, and other similar characteristics into a single figure or group of figures. The members of the Snopes family had appeared from the beginning of the Yoknapatawpha series in short stories and as minor characters in the novels. Concentrating fully on them for the first time in The Hamlet, Faulkner found a powerful objective correlative to embody the disorders that were prevalent in present-day Southern life. He continues to trace the pattern of their rise in The Town and in The Mansion, the projected final novel of the trilogy.

Snopesism represents the unprincipled quest for money and power. All Snopeses are not equally bad but most are symbols of deviousness and amorality. Flem Snopes is the sum of all the Snopeses. In him, rapacity can go no further. He has no ethical sense and his greatest successes are gained at the expense of people who represent the best of the Old South. They usually act in accordance with a moral code but yield momentarily to the temptation to adopt Snopesian morality. In that moment, Flem is able to get the better of them. The first example of this pattern is found in The Unvanquished. Miss Rosa Millard stoops to dishonest horse-trading with Flem's ancestor, the bushwhacker, Ab Snopes. She had been able to stand up to the Union general because both recognized a fundamental ethic of decency and honour. But in allowing herself to be used by the unscrupulous Ab for self-interest, she invites her own downfall. Another example is Ratliff's purchase of the Old Frenchman Place in The Hamlet. Faulkner seems to imply that Ratliff is the best the South has to offer and yet even he succumbs to greed when Flem tricks him into believing that there is gold hidden on the property.

Some Snopeses achieve positions of power and prominence but they remain Snopeses to the end. Senator Snopes in Sanctuary is willing to sell Horace Benbow information concerning Temple Drake's whereabouts. Flem Snopes becomes

president of the bank in Jefferson, but only by using and discarding his wife in the process.

Robert Penn Warren points out that, in Faulkner, the right attitude towards nature is associated with the right attitude towards man; that the mere lust for power over nature is associated with the lust for power over other men.¹³ As the Snopeses treat human beings, so they abuse and discard land when it is of no further use to them. That this treatment of land has urgent personal implications for Faulkner is borne out by repeated reference to the impoverished condition of the land throughout his novels. Mississippi has become the poorest state in the Union. Snopesism is the face of the new South.

In conclusion, Faulkner has expressed his reaction to his Southern environment in a series of novels which are not only a depiction of Southern life, but also an expression of his intuition of experience itself. Rooted in the concrete reality he knows best, Faulkner's books are not social criticism but a profound commentary on life. The Snopeses are a feature peculiar to the South and Southern conditions. But, as parasites, they batten on every society.

¹³Warren, op. cit., p. 91

CHAPTER II

ROOTLESSNESS

Faulkner has been able to view his Southern past with remarkable detachment. This is particularly striking in one who was immersed in the romance of the "Southern twilight." In novel after novel, he has been able to shed the romantic shibboleths which have surrounded its legend.¹ But there is one aspect of it to which he has clung with tenacious pride: that, in the War Between the States, the South was not fighting primarily for the economic principle of slavery, but was defending its homeland. This love of home and of one's roots is part of the dying tradition of which Irving Howe describes Faulkner as "the last grieving recorder."² Perhaps it is an indication of the general rootlessness of the modern world that so many critics have been bewildered by the fact that Faulkner has chosen to spend his life in his hometown of Oxford, Mississippi. Even in his one major work in which the action is located outside Mississippi--A Fable--there is a long irrelevant episode about horses in Mississippi. It was as though he could not bear to be away from home so long.

¹vide The Unvanquished and Absalom, Absalom

²Irving Howe, William Faulkner: A Critical Study (New York: Random House, 1952), p. 25.

One of the features which Faulkner finds most contemptible about the Snopes family is that they either lack roots or disown those they have. They are descendants of the cunning bushwhackers--those who sat on the fence during the Civil War and exploited both sides for their own profit. Ab Snopes, the horse-trader, is the first Snopes we hear about in Faulkner's writing.³ Where he comes from no one knows. He appears in order to exploit the economic instability of the old South represented by Miss Rosa Millard. He inveigles her into some crooked horse-trading, a pursuit which eventually leads to her own destruction. What Ab's other activities have been during the War we later learn from Ratliff in The Town. Apparently he had been employed by the Confederate forces to rustle Union horses; but he had been discovered stealing horses from the Southern lines. He was subsequently sentenced to hang by a Confederate provost-marshal but at this point he fades into oblivion again.

He next appears a number of years later in Frenchman's Bend in The Hamlet. This time he wants to buy a worthless farm from the prosperous store-keeper, Will Varner. Varner hesitates because of his suspicious appearance and mysterious background, and tries to elicit some information

³In The Unvanquished.

about his past:

"Where you been farming?" Varner said.
 "West." . . . He . . . pronounced the one word with
 a complete inflectionless finality, as if he had
 closed a door behind himself.
 "You mean Texas?"
 "No."
 "I see. Just west of here."⁴

On another occasion when Varner still seems to hesitate, Ab
 makes one final sinister allusion to his past:

"I can get along with anybody. I been getting
 along with fifteen or twenty different landlords
 since I started farming. When I can't get along
 with them, I leave."⁵

After Ab and his son Flem appear in Frenchman's
 Bend they are followed by successive waves of relatives,
 all named Snopes, none of whom makes any reference to his
 past. There is I.O. Snopes, Eck Snopes, Mink Snopes; there
 are short Snopeses, tall Snopeses, fat Snopeses, thin
 Snopeses; but all close-mouthed about their background.

One characteristic they share is a determination to
 rid themselves of any connection they have with the past.
 The career of Flem Snopes marks their common pattern. In
The Hamlet he appears in Frenchman's Bend while in his
 middle twenties, but, like the other Snopeses, his origins
 are obscure. It is never clear whether Ab is actually his

⁴William Faulkner, The Hamlet (New York: Random
 House, 1931), p. 8.

⁵Ibid., p. 21.

father, and it seems that Faulkner intended this ambiguity. After Ab has served his purpose of introducing Flem to the Varners, he disappears again. There is no reference to Flem's mother. Ratliff says that he had a brother but "he must a been mislaid in one of them movings."⁶ There is mention of two sisters, but they disappear early in the story. Like Thomas Sutpen in Absalom, Absalom, who discards his family when they are no longer of any use to him, Flem deliberately seeks to cut himself off from any blood ties. Sentimental attachment to kin is something completely beyond his understanding.

The Snopeses lack all that is implied by that common Southern expression, "kin." As a region the South is particularly conscious of family and of its roots reaching back into the past. Kin presupposes a sense of belonging to a particular family and the consequent responsibility that such a relationship entails. The Snopeses are prolific but their only bond of kinship seems to be hatred of each other. They use one another for individual ends and there is a long chain of one having something on another. Even a Snopes is not safe from another Snopes. Faulkner says: "They were just Snopeses, like colonies of rats or termites."⁷

⁶Ibid., p. 26.

⁷William Faulkner, The Town (New York: Random House, 1957), p. 40.

And again: ". . . there were probably more people named Snopes or married to a Snopes who owed sums ranging from twenty-five cents to five dollars to a Snopes than any other name in that section of Mississippi."⁸ The idiot, Ike Snopes, is exploited by his relatives and is saved only by the kindness and humanity of Ratliff and Mrs. Littlejohn. After Mink Snopes has murdered Houston, he and his cousin (which one is never clear) sit all night playing checkers, while the latter tries to persuade Mink to go back and pick up the fifty dollars he has flung on the ground.

"Listen. There is that fifty dollars that dont belong to nobody because he never had no kin, nobody to claim it. Just laying out there for the first man that comes along to--"

"Move," the other said.⁹

This is an ironical account of what kinship means to a Snopes. The eerie game continues all through the night until finally Mink gets up quietly and murders his cousin.

After Mink is taken to jail, none of his relatives goes to see him. His wife, on the other hand,--a Snopes in name only--shows a passionate devotion to him. Flem is in Texas and Mink waits hopefully for his return. Flem is considered the titular head of the clan because more Snopeses owe money to him than to anyone else. Mink is therefore

⁸Ibid., p. 279.

⁹The Hamlet, p. 252.

convinced that Flem will save him. Bookwright, one of the villagers, says: "Shucks, even Flem Snopes aint going to let his own blood cousin be hung to save money."¹⁰ But he is wrong; Flem feels responsibility and loyalty to no man unless he owes him money.

This lack of kinship can be contrasted with the close relationship of the Bundrens in As I Lay Dying. Their pilgrimage to Jefferson with the body of their mother is valid according to the code by which they live. Addie's desire to be buried among her kin seems quite reasonable to them and they suffer the hardships of their journey to fulfil their obligation to her. George Marion O'Donnell describes their journey as "not unlike that of the medieval soul towards redemption."¹¹ It is evidence of a vital ethic of which kinship is an accepted obligation.

The Snopeses feel no obligation towards or interest in any other human beings. They lack what Conrad has described as "the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation . . . the subtle but invincible conviction of

¹⁰Ibid., p. 270.

¹¹George Marion O'Donnell, "Faulkner's Mythology," William Faulkner: Two Decades of Criticism, eds. Frederick J. Hoffman & Olga W. Vickery (East Lansing: Michigan State College Press, 1954), p. 55.

solidarity that knits together the loneliness of human hearts."¹² In The Hamlet, the people of Frenchman's Bend are depicted as knit together by this common bond of solidarity; they share interests and gossip and even poverty. Faulkner poses Flem Snopes against them as a solitary integer. He never sits on the verandah of the store swapping yarns. He walks alone. He is seen only twice with his wife Eula: once as they leave for Texas; and only once again, as they move to Jefferson, neither exchanging a word. During the pitiful exhibition at the horse-auction when Armstid turns on his wife with the whip, the other men turn away, moved by a shared pity and horror. Only Flem continues to watch, "standing in his little pool of isolation."¹³ He makes friends with no one for friendship appears to him to be nothing but a burdensome obligation. He does not want "to be cluttered with them, be constantly vulnerable or anyway liable to the creeping sentimental parasitic importunity which his observation had shown him friendship meant."¹⁴ The Snopeses maintain an attitude of habitual wariness towards others, and Flem hesitates to accept even a cigar

¹²Joseph Conrad, Preface to "The Nigger of the Narcissus," A Conrad Argosy (New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co., 1942), p. 81.

¹³The Hamlet, p. 300.

¹⁴The Town, p. 279.

from Will Varner lest the gesture place him under some obligation or might be interpreted as an acknowledgement of their common humanity. Faulkner sets up the friendly Ratliff as a strong contrast to Flem. The itinerant sewing-machine salesman travels an area with a radius of fifty miles and is welcome wherever he goes because of his interest in people and his sympathy. A vivid study in contrasts is presented in The Town when Ratliff drives Flem out to Frenchman's Bend:

"So I druv him by Frenchman's Bend. And we had the conversation too, provided you can call the monologue you have with Flem Snopes a conversation. But you keep on trying. It's because you hope to learn. You know silence is valuable because it must be, there's so little of it. So each time you think Here's my chance to find out how a expert uses it. Of course you wont this time and never will the next neither, that's how come he's a expert. But you can always hope you will. So we druv on, talking about this and that, mostly this of course, with him stopping chewing every three or four miles to spit out the window and say 'Yep' or 'That's right' or 'Sounds like it'"¹⁵

Flem's conscious alienation from other human beings might also be contrasted with two of Faulkner's earlier studies of rootless characters, Joe Christmas and Thomas Sutpen. In Light in August, Joe displays many Snopesian characteristics, the most notable of which is his sense of alienation which stems from his rootlessness. In Joe, however, there is a certain pathos in these qualities for they

¹⁵The Town, p. 297.

are associated with his role as mulatto, a marginal man forever seeking some identity. Our first view of him emphasizes this impression:

He did not look like a professional hobo in his professional rags, but there was something definitely rootless about him, as though no town nor city was his, no street, no walls, no square of earth his home.¹⁶

His childhood had been spent in an orphanage, which may justly be interpreted as a symbol of the isolation of man in modern life. For a time he is taken into the foster-home of the fanatical Presbyterian, McEachern. He runs away and wanders from city to city. For a time he tries to live with Negroes, but this attempt at identification is doomed because he looks like a white man. His fate to be a sort of Wandering Jew is a tragedy of circumstance rather than a conscious alienation from other humans as in the case of Flem Snopes.

Thomas Sutpen's rootlessness in Absalom, Absalom is the driving-force behind his "design"; and hence, the main-spring of the action of the novel. As a small boy he was moved with his family from a primitive communal society in the mountains to settle in the Tidewater. The young boy is bewildered by this new society of social castes. He is sent with a message to the owner of a plantation and is humiliated

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William Faulkner, Light in August (New York: The Modern Library, 1932), p. 27.

by a "monkey nigger",¹⁷ who orders him to go around to the back door. He is so disturbed and angered by the incident that he determines to become as rich and powerful as the man from whose door he has been turned. This ambition develops into his "design" to create a kind of immortality for his descendants so that they can have all that he has lacked: wealth, power, and respectability--all of which seem to him to be concomitants of a settled place in society. He rides into Jefferson, and Miss Rosa Coldfield describes him as "a man who so far as anyone . . . knew either had no past or did not dare reveal it--a man who rode into town out of nowhere."¹⁸ His past, prior to his arrival in Jefferson, he treats almost with indifference. When General Compson prevails on him to tell something of it, it is as if he were just:

. telling a story about something a man named Thomas Sutpen had experienced, which would still have been the same story if the man had no name at all, if it had been told about any man or no man over whiskey at night.¹⁹

With no past and no background of his own, his eye is fixed on the future. He marries Ellen Coldfield, who belongs to one of the oldest and most respected families in the town.

¹⁷William Faulkner, Absalom, Absalom (New York: The Modern Library, 1936), p. 234.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 16.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 247.

He seems to think that by marrying tradition, he will automatically absorb it. Through unscrupulous methods and sheer force of will, he builds up the plantation, Sutpen's Hundred, which is to be a foundation for his son. His son is to belong wholly to the future and is to be the means of his father's disowning the past.

Like Sutpen, Flem Snopes is confident that he can disown his past and carve his future in his own image. But it is a future bound up wholly in himself. Furthermore, Sutpen's fixation on his own ambition has a certain grandeur about it--megalomaniacal as it may be; certainly the pettiness and meanness of a Flem Snopes would be something quite outside the sweep of his bold activity. Indeed, Faulkner compares him to an Attila or a Tamerlane.

Memories of the carpetbagger and his exploitation of the South during the Reconstruction period are still vivid in the minds of Southerners. The carpetbagger batted on a community and then, when its resources were exhausted, moved on to the next one. It seems that Faulkner had such an image in mind in his creation of the Snopes family. Flem discards Frenchman's Bend when it is no longer of any use to him and moves on to Jefferson.

Homes are also treated merely as stepping-stones. In The Hamlet, Flem first lives in Varner's old farmhouse with

Ab. When he becomes clerk in Varner's store, he moves into a boarding-house. As he gains control over Will's finances, he actually moves right into his home. Then, when he makes his momentous march on Jefferson in The Town, he first camps out in a tent, almost like one about to lay siege to a town. In his exalted position as superintendent of the power-plant, he rents a small house on a back-street. Here he lives for many years during his watching and waiting period. The day he becomes president of the bank, he starts work on the construction of a Southern mansion with the largest-size pillars across the front. Ratliff describes it thus:

" and it was going to have colyums across the front now, I mean the extry big ones so even a feller that never seen colyums before wouldn't have no doubt atall what they was, like the photographs where the Confedrit sweetheart in hoop skirt and a magnolia is saying good-bye to her Confedrit beau just before he rides off to finish tending to General Grant."²⁰

Flem Snopes moving around in such an incongruous setting is the ultimate expression of his complete ignorance of tradition. Like Sutpen, he regards such a house as the pinnacle of success.

There may be in Faulkner's attitude towards the rise of the Snopeses something of the aristocrat's condescension

²⁰The Town, p. 352.

towards the "nouveau riche." However, this is but a slight element in the breadth of his viewpoint. Faulkner despises Flem, not because he represents a rustic who has become wealthy, but because he has cast aside all the ties that have bound him to other human beings. By and large, the other country people of Frenchman's Bend are treated with sympathy and affection. A case in point is Houston. One of his schoolmates, a girl as wedded to the land as he is himself, has marked him for her own. Houston tries to escape:

He fled, not from his past, but to escape his future. It took him twelve years to learn you cannot escape either of them.²¹

But Houston must return eventually to the girl and to the "earth which had produced him to be its born and fated thrall forever until he died."²² He cannot detach himself from his roots.

To Faulkner roots imply not only an attachment to a certain piece of land or to a group of people, but also adherence to a set of traditional values. These values are held in common by people as different in their educational

²¹The Hamlet, p. 214.

²²Ibid., p. 366. This phrase actually describes Armstid but is equally true of all the people of Frenchman's Bend except the Snopeses.

background as Ratliff and Gavin Stevens, holder of a Phi Beta Kappa key and a degree from Heidelberg. These men are drawn together by a common set of values. The Snopeses appear to them as the embodiment of the complete antithesis of these values. In his speech when accepting the Nobel Prize, Faulkner described these values as "the old verities and truths of the heart," and among these he includes "love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice." Frequently he describes these truths as "practical." In the past men had actually lived by this code and, in so doing, as Mr. Compson says in The Sound and the Fury, they "had the gift of living once or dying once instead of being diffused and scattered creatures drawn blindly from a grab bag and assembled."²³ The Snopeses are diffused half-beings. For love, honour and courage, they have substituted expediency, self-interest and material success. They lack roots that are joined to those of other human beings because they do not share their community of values.

The class represented by the Snopeses has arisen in the South because respect for and pride in certain values are dying. Jason, in The Sound and the Fury, is almost a worse villain than Flem Snopes. He does come from a family rooted in the past and has had the benefit of a tradition

²³ William Faulkner, The Sound and the Fury (New York: The Modern Library, 1929), p. 89.

of ethical values; but these he repudiates completely. Money is the only thing in life that has any real value for him. His roots mean so little to him that he sells the old family mansion without a qualm and moves into a rented room. His inhumane treatment of his niece, Quentin, and his idiot brother, Benjy (to whom he refers as "The Great American Gelding"), reflects not only an absence of any feeling of kinship but also a lack of common humanity. His repudiation of traditional values is symptomatic of a general spiritual malaise in the South which has allowed the anti-ethic of the Snopeses to prevail.

In Southern terms, the Snopeses represent the class that arose in the South after the Civil War and took advantage of its poverty and despair. They lack any real attachment to the region and are interested only in what it can give them. In broader terms, the Snopeses to Faulkner are symbolic of the general rootlessness of modern life. People are constantly on the move, motivated only by what promises the best material return. No one stays long enough to develop bonds with either the land or its people. And just as one shifts from environment to environment, so values become fluid as expediency dictates.

Faulkner has always been strongly attracted to Keats, particularly to his Ode on a Grecian Urn. In a note written in 1925, Faulkner said:

I read "Thou still unravished bride of quietness" and found a still water withal strong and potent, quiet with its own strength and satisfying as bread.²⁴

And there is a very significant passage in The Bear:

"All right," he said. "Listen," and read again, but only one stanza this time and closed the book and laid it on the table. "She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss," McCaslin said: "Forever wilt thou love, and she be fair."

"He's talking about a girl," he said. "He had to talk about something," McCaslin said. Then he said, "He was talking about truth. Truth is one. It doesn't change. It covers all things which touch the heart--honor and pride and pity and justice and courage and love. Do you see now?"²⁵

This is why Faulkner regards the Snopeses with horror and despair. Their rise represents the defeat of those values which he cherishes and he is the "grieving recorder" of their decline.

²⁴Quoted by John Arthos, "Ritual and Humor in the Writing of William Faulkner," William Faulkner: Two Decades of Criticism, eds. Frederick J. Hoffman & Olga W. Vickery (East Lansing: Michigan State College Press, 1954), p. 104.

²⁵William Faulkner, "The Bear," Go Down, Moses (New York: Random House, 1940), pp. 296-297.

CHAPTER III

RAPACITY

The most characteristic feature of the Snopeses is their rapacity. This rapacity takes the form of a grasping, predatory lust for money. In the saga of the Snopeses, with few exceptions, the members of the family display a "long tradition of slow and invincible rapacity."¹ This rapacity attains the stature of an elemental force in its obsessive ruthlessness.

The first description Faulkner gives of Flem Snopes, the quintessential Snopes, is a sombre warning for us to be on our guard:

. a thick squat man of no establishable age between twenty and thirty, with a broad still face containing a tight seam of mouth stained slightly at the corners with tobacco, and eyes the color of stagnant water, and projecting from among the other features in startling and sudden paradox, a tiny predatory nose like the beak of a small hawk. It was as though the original nose had been left off by the original designer or craftsman and the unfinished job taken over by a radically different school or perhaps by some viciously maniacal humorist or perhaps by one who had only time to clap into the center of the face a frantic and desperate warning.²

Other descriptions of him reinforce this impression of cold, cunning rapacity. All the other Snopeses are but pale reflections of him. Faulkner gives only meagre descriptions

¹The Town, p. 33.

²The Hamlet, p. 52

of them for they serve only as tentacles of an avaricious octopus. And the name "Snopes" itself suggests something snooping and acquisitive.

Faulkner emphasizes repeatedly Flem's greed and respect for money. Money is not a means of acquiring power. On the contrary, Flem sees that the acquisition of power will enable him to gain more money. Money takes on the quality of a living thing. Flem believes that "money itself, cash dollars, possessed an inherent life of its mutual own like cells or disease."³ Only a man who had come from less than nothing--a worn-out tenant farm--could be governed by such an obsession:

. . . . from that very first day when he realized that he himself had nothing and never would have more than nothing unless he wrested it himself from his environment and time, and that the only weapon he would ever have to do it with would be just money.⁴

In The Hamlet, when Flem becomes a clerk in Varner's store, a new policy with respect to money is initiated. Hitherto the customers had wandered in and served themselves if Jody were absent from the store, and credit had been extended liberally. Now they have a clerk who is always there and who never makes mistakes in any matter pertaining to

³The Town, p. 267.

⁴Ibid., p. 263

money and who does not want "to credit anyone with anything."⁵ Money is too precious to be treated lightly. It should be noted that Flem's first hold over the people of Frenchman's Bend is as one with whom in future they will have to deal for the necessities of living. What better means of attaining a stranglehold over their finances?

In The Town, Flem's attitude towards the bank is the strongest evidence of his veneration for money. In his naïve conception of a bank, he sees it as an institution created solely for the purpose of being robbed--"the only reason why anybody would go to the trouble and expense of organizing and keeping it running."⁶ His vigilance for his money which he has acquired "terrible and picayune nickel by nickel"⁷, causes him to fear for his money in a bank which has already been robbed by his cousin Byron. He withdraws it and, at first, is in a quandary where to put it; if people believe that it is hidden in his backyard, "every man and his cousin in the country would be his threat and enemy."⁸ Accordingly, even though he is now vice-president of the bank, he takes a calculated risk and transfers his account to the other bank, the old Bank of Jefferson. As

⁵The Hamlet, p. 57.

⁶The Town, p. 265.

⁷Ibid., p. 263.

⁸Ibid., p. 267.

a bank, like any bank, it is "that clump of bushes at the forest's edge behind the one-room frontier cabin, which the pioneer had to use for an outhouse since he had no other."⁹

Faulkner even introduces a note of humour into the Snopesian greed for money. I.O. Snopes, in The Hamlet, names one of his children Wallstreet Panic in the pious hope that the name will serve as a magnet for attracting money.

Flem manifests various qualities in his rapacious pursuit of money. One must grudgingly concede him intelligence, although perhaps it could be described more fittingly as a perversion of intelligence. Still, for one lacking any formal education, he learns quickly. The first indication he gives of this quality is in The Hamlet in his quickness in learning how to run Varner's store. In a very short time he is keeping the books and when the farmers bring the cotton to the gin, it is he who is on the stool behind the scale-beam. Then when the time comes for Will Varner to make his yearly settlement with his tenants and debtors, Flem is beside him with the open ledger. Faulkner compares them to the white trader and his native parrot-taught headman in an African outpost:

⁹Ibid., p. 269.

That headman was acquiring the virtues of civilization fast . . . this man who five months ago was riding eight miles back and forth to work on a plow mule and a cast-off saddle with a tin pail of turnip greens or field pease tied to it, was now not only sleeping in a rented bed and eating from a furnished table like a drummer, he had also made a considerable cash loan, security and interest not specified, to a resident of the village.¹⁰

When Flem moves to Jefferson and takes on the job of superintendent of the power-plant--a job for which he had not the slightest knowledge or training--within a very short period, Faulkner tells us, he had learned to read the gauges and fill the oil cups. Furthermore, he learns so much about the operation of the plant that he is able to appropriate the brass safety-valves and replace them with steel screw plugs.

Therefore, it is not with utter disbelief that we learn that he eventually becomes vice-president of the bank. We realize that he knows nothing about banking but that it won't take long. At first he stands in the lobby watching the customers withdrawing and depositing their money. When he learns "all there was to learn about that,"¹¹ he retires to the vault to learn how the books are kept. No wonder Manfred de Spain is no match for him and will eventually

¹⁰The Hamlet, p. 61.

¹¹The Town, p. 138.

have to hand over the presidency to him. Flem is smart enough to have the "humility"¹² (sic) to know that he will have to defend his money from those whose education would despoil him of it. His only weapons are "the will and the need and the ruthlessness, and the industry and what talent he had been born with."¹³

One of these "talents" is cunning, a perversion of intelligence and a talent he might well have inherited from his so-called father, Ab Snopes. When Ab first appears in Frenchman's Bend, in The Hamlet, he tries to rent a poor farm from the prosperous storekeeper, Will Varner. Will has a reputation for shrewdness and business acumen and is known to drive a hard bargain. Before the deal is completed, the gossip is all over Frenchman's Bend that mysterious barn-burnings have accompanied Ab whenever a landlord proved recalcitrant. Varner, in a panic lest Ab burn down his buildings, lets him have the farm on his own terms. There is no proof that Ab has ever actually been involved in the barn-burnings, but one is left to assume where the rumour has originated.

One of Flem's greatest triumphs of cunning is his defeat of Ratliff in The Hamlet. It is a triumph because

¹²Ibid., p. 264.

¹³Ibid.

the other folk of Frenchman's Bend are only too eager to be dupes, and Flem has nothing but contempt for fools. For Ratliff, however, he feels respect since Ratliff has stood up to him in his exploitation of his idiot cousin, and also has tried to talk his neighbours out of buying the wild horses Flem has brought back from Texas. There has been a legend in the neighbourhood that gold was buried somewhere in the Old Frenchman Place during the Civil War; and when Ratliff one night sees Flem digging in the garden, he hurriedly buys the property from him for an exorbitant price. He discovers too late that Flem has salted the hole. Flem had known that if he went out and dug for several nights the rumour would get about. But even he did not realize that Ratliff would be tempted by such an ancient gimmick. Ratliff is a man who has always lived by a code of decency and honour, but he has been corrupted by greed--that is, he has stooped to the level of the Snopeses.¹⁴ Faulkner seems to warn that one must be on constant guard against the Snopeses. Even the Snopeses recognize this fact. When Houston complains to Mink Snopes that his yearling has been trespassing on his property, he says:

¹⁴Irving Howe, William Faulkner; A Critical Study (New York: Random House, 1952), p. 184. Howe believes that there is not sufficient motivation for Ratliff's downfall. The fact that Ratliff is taken in so suddenly by Flem's ruse is, he believes, "another mark of the carelessness that accompanies Faulkner's prodigious talent."

"You know the law in this country. A man must keep his stock up after the ground's planted or take the consequences."

Snopes replied: "I would have expected you to have fences that would keep a yearling up."¹⁵

As might be expected, dishonesty is an element of Snopesian rapacity, but it is of a type governed by a cold cunning. Byron Snopes, the bank robber, represents a very primitive type of Snopesism indeed. The Snopeses assume that the rest of the world is motivated by the same dishonest impulses as themselves. Flem takes it quite for granted that the respected Colonel Sartoris had stolen from the bank during his presidency and that Manfred de Spain will continue with this pilfering while he remains on top. He realizes that they do it "decently, with decorum,"¹⁶ not "like a boy snatching a handful of loose peanuts while the vendor's back was turned, as his cousin Byron had done."¹⁷ What is necessary is to learn how to do it "so cleverly and quietly that the very people whose money had been stolen would not discover it until after the looter was dead and safe."¹⁸

¹⁵The Hamlet, p. 91.

¹⁶The Town, p. 265.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid.

It is not that Flem does not stoop to petty pilfering. Anything is justified in the acquisition of a few extra dollars. In The Town, he steals the brass safety-valves from the power-plant--although he makes sure that Tom Tom will bear the blame if the theft is discovered. Shortly after Flem arrives in Jefferson, he buys a restaurant; and one day the innocent Eck Snopes remarks: "Aint we supposed to be selling beef in these here hamburgers? I dont know jest what this is yet but it aint no beef."¹⁹ Such a Snopes cannot be tolerated for he is a loose link in the unbroken chain of rapacity. Not long after, Eck mysteriously loses his life in an oil-tank explosion.

A cold-blooded ruthlessness is an integral part of Snopesian rapacity. Not even kinship gives one special consideration if money is involved. In The Hamlet, Flem is the "guardian" of the idiot Ike Snopes and allows Lump Snopes to sell space for people to watch him making love to his cow. He also holds a ten dollar note left to the idiot by his grandmother and, in Ike's name, uses it as a promissory note to add to his own reserves. As one of the townsfolk notes: "Flem would trim Eck or any other of his kin quick as he would us."²⁰

¹⁹Ibid., p. 33.

²⁰The Hamlet, p. 284

One of the most blood-curdling examples of Flem's ruthlessness is the incident of the wild horses which he brings back from Texas. Armstid, despite his wife's pleas that they will not have enough money for shoes for the children in the winter, spends all their meagre savings on a crazy horse which runs away. When Mrs. Armstid goes to Flem to plead with him for the return of the money, he spits past her contemptuously. As she is leaving in despair, he calls her back. He goes into the store and returns with a small striped paper bag. "'Here,' he said . . . 'a little sweetening for the chaps.'" Then, oblivious to the supreme irony of the gift, she murmurs, "'You're right kind.'" A Snopes cousin who has been standing in the doorway as a witness to the scene, suddenly cackles explosively and slaps his thigh: "'By God,' he said, 'You cant beat him.'"²¹ As William Van O'Connor points out: "Theirs is a harsh, even demoniac glee over human stupidity."²²

Flem's marriage to Eula is motivated only by the desire to gain a tighter control over Varner's finances. Although they have lived in the same house, they have never exchanged a word and Eula refers to Flem as "the man."²³

²¹Ibid., p. 322.

²²William Van O'Connor, The Tangled Fire of William Faulkner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1934), p. 122.

²³The Hamlet, p. 148.

When she becomes pregnant by one of the hot-blooded local boys, Flem takes advantage of the situation by offering to marry her in exchange for the deed to the Old Frenchman Place. He even manages affairs so that old Varner pays for the wedding license and buys their train tickets to Texas. When they move to Jefferson, Flem is well aware that Eula is having an affair with Mayor de Spain. His toleration of the situation is only another example of his rapacity. He uses it to force de Spain to get him the job as superintendent of the power-plant and then the vice-presidency of the bank. Even after he has gained all that he can from de Spain, he does not divorce Eula or expose her because then she would leave him and he would be unable to benefit from her share of Varner's will.

The quiet, intense persistence of a Snopes in pursuit of his goal is an indispensable feature of his rapacity. Symbolic of this feature are Flem's rubber-soled tennis shoes, which he wears as he moves up noiselessly behind his victims. The only sound they make is a "mute hissing."²⁴ The whole Snopes' infiltration of Frenchman's Bend is done suddenly and silently. Varner's own son, Jody, who has worked in the store for years for his father, is quietly

²⁴Ibid., p. 147.

replaced by Flem. Flem is followed by other members of the clan who appear noiselessly to take over control of the hamlet. The blacksmith, who has been at his trade for over twenty years, disappears without warning and forever and his shop is taken over by Flem's cousin Eck. Within two months, Eck has married one of the daughters of the family with whom he boards. I.O. Snopes takes over as school-teacher. There seems to be no limit to them. No sooner do the villagers think they have accounted for all of them, than more pop up. Faulkner compares them to vermin that are infesting the land. By a "sort of osmosis" they take over Frenchman's Bend, "the chain unbroken, every Snopes in Frenchman's Bend moving up one step, leaving that last slot at the bottom open for the next Snopes to appear from nowhere and fill."²⁵ Without the inhabitants realizing it, Flem quietly buys up most of the mortgages in the area. The invasion is silent and sinister. It is frightening for it lacks what Charles Mallison describes in The Town as "the signs and portents which should have warned, alerted, sprung us into frantic concord to defend our town from him."²⁶ Irving Howe suggests that this shift of power from Varner to the Snopeses is "in an oblique sort of way, a social

²⁵The Town, p. 18.

²⁶Ibid., p. 15.

revolution; while the Varners may be amiable parasites, the Snopeses are deadly reptiles."²⁷

The Snopeses have the tenacity and cunning to be willing to wait until the plum is ripe. In The Town, Flem is determined to gain the very presidency itself of the bank from de Spain. During his years as vice-president, Flem is always unobtrusively in the background. For eighteen years he watches quietly as his wife conducts an affair with de Spain. Finally, when his step-daughter reaches an age when she wants to go away to college, Flem blackmails Eula into signing over to him her share of Varner's will in exchange for Linda's freedom. Eula is now of no further value to him, so he exposes her. De Spain has to leave town in disgrace and Flem takes over the bank. Flem has quietly out-waited and outwitted them all.

Snopesian rapacity is like an elemental force for nothing seems able to resist it. Its drive is so overpowering because the lust for money engenders only further greed. In a separate section in The Hamlet, Faulkner has contrived a chilling little allegory to emphasize the intensity of Snopesian rapacity. Flem arrives in Hell to

²⁷Irving Howe, op. cit., p. 181.

redeem his soul. It is impossible to find it, so the powers of darkness try to get rid of him; but he persistently stands his ground, clutching his straw suitcase. He will not leave until he gets what he wants; and all he wants is Hell itself. Even the Devil himself cannot withstand his ruthless determination and finally flings himself on the ground, shrieking, "'Take it! Take it!'"²⁸

²⁸The Hamlet, p. 155.

CHAPTER IV

RESPECTABILITY

As a man and as an artist, Faulkner has always displayed a fierce independence. As an artist he has declared that his only responsibility is to his art: "Everything goes by the board: honor, pride, decency, security, happiness, all, to get the book written. If a writer has to rob his mother, he will not hesitate; the Ode on a Grecian Urn is worth any number of old ladies."¹ As an individual he has always been regarded as something of an eccentric in the small Southern town in which he lives. With the advent of success his townsfolk have granted him a certain grudging respect, but his individual manner of life has always caused them to regard him with a measure of distrust. As a young man he was suspect because of his untidy way of dressing and his habit of standing transfixed in the town square absorbed in meditation. At the University of Mississippi, he never obtained his degree because he took only those courses which interested him particularly. He flouted public morality by marrying a divorcee. He lost his job as postmaster at the university because he spent too much time reading books and the office degenerated into chaos. With the publication of

¹Malcolm Cowley (ed.), Writers at Work (New York: The Viking Press, 1958), p. 124.

the scandalous Sanctuary, many people stopped speaking to him; and those who bought the book hurried home with it wrapped in a brown paper cover. Finally, his attitude towards the Negroes has brought him into sharp disagreement with his fellow Southerners. No state is more intense in its determination to maintain white supremacy than Mississippi; yet Faulkner has spoken out forcibly against the segregationists and has declared that America cannot survive unless it presents to the world "one homogeneous and unbroken front."²

Although Faulkner loves Oxford, there are certain elements of small-town Southern life which he rejects uncompromisingly. He rejects its attitude of pious respectability and its attendant hypocrisy. The people seem to him to live according to a sham morality governed by what they want their neighbours to think of them. Faulkner has poured much of his contempt of such a shallow and insincere way of life into his depiction of the Snopes family. He makes his point most tellingly when he traces their ascent to respectable society. As long as they remained poor tenant farmers, there was no necessity for them to disguise their evil aims and impulses. The law of the jungle was recognized for what it was. However, with their rise to a more

²
Ibid., p. 140.

complicated level of society, they recognize that they must acquire the veneer by which people mask their more reprehensible actions.

The most basic manifestation of this rise to respectability is displayed in the externals of living. The Snopeses contemplate old respected families such as the Sartorises and the Compsons and conclude that a certain form of dress and a certain type of home seem to be concomitants of this respectable way of life. Therefore, these things must be acquired. And they are intelligent enough to realize that they must be acquired gradually, for sudden possession of them will destroy the illusion of credibility. In The Hamlet, Varner first meets Flem Snopes in "the littered grassless desolation"³ of the miserable farm, dressed in a cloth cap, soiled white shirt, and cheap gray trousers. On the Monday morning on which he comes to work as clerk in Varner's store, he appears in a brand-new white shirt. "It had not even been laundered yet; the creases where the cloth had lain bolted on a shelf, and the sun-browned streaks repeated zebra-like on each successive fold, were still apparent."⁴ It is obvious that it has been cut and stitched by an unaccustomed hand. On the following Monday morning,

³The Hamlet, p. 21.

⁴Ibid., p. 51.

he appears in another shirt exactly like the first. The next week he acquires a pair of soft-soled tennis shoes. A few weeks later, he appears in church in a necktie--a tiny machine-made black bow tie which snapped together at the back with metal fasteners. With the exception of the tie Will Varner himself wore to church, it was the only tie in Frenchman's Bend. In other words, Flem now considers himself to have acquired the respected status of Will Varner and must dress to fit the role of one of the leaders of the community. In The Town, when he becomes vice-president of the bank, he discards his old cloth hat for a broad-brimmed black felt one, such as Southern "colonels" wear. It is rumoured that he now orders his machine-made bow ties by the gross. Faulkner's concentration on this tie seems to invest it with symbolic importance. It seems to represent to him the acceptance of a mechanical artificial standardization of life.

According to Snopesian views on the hierarchy of society, houses also must reflect the individual's status in the community. When Flem first becomes clerk in Varner's store, he rides into work on a donkey from the farm which Ab has described as not "fitten for hogs."⁵ Within a few weeks, his new position seems to make it necessary for him

⁵ Ibid., p. 21.

to move into a rooming-house in the village. As he gains financial equality with Varner, he moves right into Varner's house. In The Town, he lives in a tent while he works in the restaurant. When he gets the job as superintendent of the power-plant, he rises a niche on the scale and moves into a small rented house on a back-street. The day he becomes vice-president of the bank, he buys the house. He becomes a property owner because of his stake in the community. Then when he becomes president of the bank, he immediately starts work on a mansion with a pillared portico, the type of house that would be occupied by a Southern aristocrat and represents the pinnacle of prestige and success in the South.⁶ This climb in domicile might be contrasted with the descent of Jason in The Sound and the Fury. Jason, a member of the old order, sells the old family mansion and moves into a rented room. He regresses into the Snopes world whereas Flem attempts to climb out of it into a respected place in society.

The furnishings of houses also seem to reflect one's place in society. The houses of the Southern aristocrats are filled with antiques inherited from their ancestors. The Snopeses realize that they cannot inherit tradition, but that they can have a spurious reproduction of it. When

⁶cf. p. 27 supra.

Gavin Stevens visits Flem's house, he notices that the coffee set is not silver but something which "the advertisements dont tell you is better than silver but simply newer."⁷ There is a synthetic metal cigarette-box but as yet no matching lighter. He looks around the room and realizes where he had seen the room and hallway before:

In a photograph, the photograph from say Town and Country labelled American Interior, reproduced in color in a wholesale furniture catalogue, with the added legend: This is neither a Copy nor a Reproduction. It is our own Model scaled to your individual Requirements.⁸

He learns from Eula that Flem had gone to Memphis to buy the furniture when he became vice-president of the bank. The man who had tried to sell it to him was not subtle enough to understand exactly what it was Flem wanted. At first he suggested something to reflect the successful businessman. Flem turned this down, and then when the salesman suggested the antique look and told him that he could make a piece look still older:

. . . Flem said, "Why?" and the man said, "For background. Your grandfather." And Flem said, "I had a grandfather because everybody had. I dont know who he was but I know that whoever he was he never owned enough furniture for a room, let alone a house. Besides, I dont aim to fool anybody. Only a fool would try to fool smart people and anybody that needs to fool fools is already one."⁹

⁷The Town, p. 220.

⁸Ibid., p. 221.

⁹Ibid., p. 222.

The salesman's wife was clever enough to realize the image Flem had in mind. The people of Jefferson were not going to be impressed with him if he tried to emulate those with inherited tradition. His respectability would have to be one he carved for himself, and he would have to surround himself with the credible appurtenances of his position.

A more complex attitude towards respectability is introduced in the jealous preservation of the Snopes's good name. This is first presented in its most primitive form in The Hamlet in the incident concerning the idiot, Ike Snopes. The family is faced with grave embarrassment for Ike is in love with a cow and, in his pursuit of the animal, he arouses the interest of the whole countryside. Faulkner treats the family conference with ironical graveyard humour. The ever-present Ratliff asks:

"When Caesar's wife goes up to Will Varner next month to get that ere school job again, and he aint pure as a marble monument, what do you think is going to happen?"¹⁰

In a burst of oratory, I.O. Snopes exclaims:

"A man cant have his good name drug in the alleys. The Snopes name has done held its head up too long in this country to have no such reproaches against it like stock-diddling."¹¹

I.O. and Eck become involved in an altercation as to how

¹⁰The Hamlet, p. 204.

¹¹Ibid.

much each should contribute towards the purchase of the cow in order to get it away from Ike. Eck asks:

"You mean we got to buy it?"

"Yes," I.O. said. "You sholy wont refuse a sacrifice for the name you bear, will you?"

"All right," Eck said. "If we got to."¹²

I.O. tries to persuade Eck that he should pay a larger share because he has a family and it should be on a proportional basis. Eck protests that he does not want fifteen dollars worth of beef. I.O. replies:

"It aint the beef and the hide. That's just a circumstance. It's the moral value we are going to get out of it."

"How do I need fifteen dollars worth of moral value and all you need is a dollar and eighty cents?"

"The Snopes name. Cant you understand that? That aint never been aspersed yet by no living man. That's got to be kept pure as a moral monument for your children to grow up under."¹³

Pity and affection for the poor idiot are of no importance compared to a dollar and eighty cents--and the Snopes's name, which in truth represents nothing but hypocrisy and rapacity.

When Flem Snopes moves on to Jefferson in The Town, he is acute enough to see that he will have to change the tactics that have enabled him to outmanoeuvre the boobies of Frenchman's Bend. Jefferson is too large to gain complete

¹²Ibid., p. 207.

¹³Ibid.

financial control over its citizens. He can achieve a measure of this, but he recognizes that it is only in the attainment of respectability that he can reach the position he desires. He is convinced that the respectable people whom everybody admires are as dishonest as he is, and that someone like Colonel Sartoris has used the bank for,

. . . . a steady and decorous embezzlement, its solvency an impregnable illusion like the reputation of a woman who everybody knows has none yet which is intact and invulnerable because of the known fact that every one of her male connections will spring as one man, not just to repudiate but to avenge with actual gunfire the slightest whisper of a slur on it.¹⁴

What is important, then, is the appearance of a good reputation. Accordingly, nothing must stain his good name and, in order to preserve its purity, he is responsible for the conduct of all the other Snopeses.

Shortly after he becomes vice-president of the bank, he is confronted with the problem of Montgomery Ward Snopes and the French pictures. After Montgomery Ward had returned from the War--where he had been running a behind-the-lines "canteen"--he opens a photographic store in Jefferson. Actually, his business did not involve taking pictures but showing them to customers who entered by the alley after dark. When the police close in, Montgomery Ward is defiant

¹⁴The Town, p. 265.

and confident. He knows that the respectability of the community will save him:

" where are your witnesses? All you got is Grover Winbush, and he dont dare testify, not because he will lose his job because he'll probably do that anyway, but because of the God-fearing holy citizens of Jefferson wont let him because they cant have it known that this is what their police do when they're supposed to be at work. Let alone the rest of my customers, not to mention any names scattered around in banks and stores and gins and filling stations and farms too two counties wide in either direction" ¹⁵

But Flem knows that Montgomery Ward is going to be convicted because he is to go before a magistrate who recently delivered a stiff sentence to another Snopes. He would be only too pleased to get rid of his unsavoury nephew; but he knows that it would damage his reputation in his new position if Montgomery Ward were sent to the penitentiary for running a peep show. Accordingly, he plants whiskey jugs around the store so that the charge can be changed to a more innocuous one. Gavin Stevens says to him:

"You dont give a damn about truth either. What you are interested in is justice."

"I'm interested in Jefferson," Mr. Snopes said, reaching for the door and opening it. "We got to live here." ¹⁶

As Flem draws near the respected position he seeks,

¹⁵Ibid., p. 163.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 176.

the Snopes herd becomes an even greater source of embarrassment, and he seeks to rid himself of them altogether. Ab Snopes is set up in a house in the country, and more and more Snopeses who had followed Flem to Jefferson are pushed back to Frenchman's Bend. It is an unending task he has set himself. The ubiquitousness of the Snopeses had helped him in his original climb, but now it is this feature of them that prevents him from gaining what he desires most. It is significant that the last chapter of The Town ends with the arrival in Jefferson of the three wild, animal-like children of Byron Snopes, the bank robber. They almost turn the town upside-down with their "Snopes out-and-out unvarnished behavior"¹⁷ and Flem has to arrange to have them sent back to El Paso. The price he pays for respectability is the unending vigil against the rest of the Snopeses.

Respectability, or a veneer of living, is represented in the Snopes's form of marriage. There is no love or affection between Flem and Eula. Flem has married her for material reasons and their marriage is an empty sham. Ratliff deploras the "waste" in such a barren marriage:

. . . . a situation intrinsically and inherently wrong by any economy, like building a log dead-fall and baiting it with a freshened heifer to catch a rat; or no, worse: as though the gods themselves

¹⁷Ibid., p. 370.

had funnelled all the concentrated bright wet-slanted unparadised June onto a dung-heap, breeding pismires.¹⁸

Eula enters into an adulterous relationship with Manfred de Spain, and the whole town is silently on their side; not because they condone adultery, but because this was a case of genuine passion. Gavin Stevens describes it as "the divinity of simple unadulterated uninhibited mortal lust which they represented; for two people in each of whom the other had found his single ordained fate; each to have found out of all the earth that one match for his mettle."¹⁹ Flem is well aware of the affair and lets it continue as long as it is convenient to him. It helps him to rise in the bank, and he is satisfied that the connection with de Spain gains Eula an entrée into the leading society of the town. Flem maintains the false facade of a respectable marriage; yet the marriage means so little to him that it is Gavin Stevens, not her own husband, who defends Eula's honour at the Christmas Cotillion. The inherent falseness of such a marriage is emphasized by Faulkner when Flem finally discards his wife when he has reached a position where she is no longer of any use to him. This regard for marriage as a mere convenience, a part of the furnishings of a respectable place in society, is reminiscent of Thomas Sutpen's marriage in Absalom, Absalom. Sutpen marries Rosa Goldfield because he believes that she will be

¹⁸The Hamlet, pp. 161-162.

¹⁹The Town, p. 15.

the means of his entering the settled society to which he wants to belong.

In The Town, everyone disregards the adultery of Eula and Manfred de Spain as long as her husband appears to be unaware of it. Flem knows very well what is going on and exploits this hypocrisy in order to undermine de Spain's control of the bank. When the bank is finally his, he is ready to discard and expose Eula. Then the town rises in wrathful indignation against the adulteress. Mr. Garraway echoes the town's sentiments when he says:

"She must go. They must both go--she and de Spain too."

"But why now?" Gavin asks. "It was one thing as long as the husband accepted it; it became another thing when somebody . . . catches them . . . ? They become merely sinners then, criminals then, lepers then? Nothing for constancy, nothing for devotion, unpoliced devotion, eighteen years of devotion?"²⁰

Devotion is only recognized if it is part of a respectable marriage, even if it is a loveless one.

The final hypocritical turn of the screw in Flem's role of a devoted and respectable husband is the expensive marble tombstone he erects in memory of Eula:

EULA VARNER SNOPEs
1889 1927
A Virtuous Wife Is a Crown to Her Husband
Her Children Rise and Call Her Blessed²¹

²⁰Ibid., p. 314.

²¹Ibid., p. 355.

Flem's relationship with his step-daughter Linda is completely devoid of affection and she represents to him only another item in the furnishings of a respectable life, "to exactly fit exactly what he was going to be."²² As long as he works in a back-alley café, it is of no consequence if she and everyone else knows that she is a bastard. However, as an officer of the bank it is necessary to him that they maintain the appearance of a devoted family. Thus, he sends Eula and Linda to Memphis to buy clothes for her graduation from high school; he offers to have a picnic for her graduating class; and he gives her a large weekly allowance. These are virtually bribes in an attempt to dissuade her from her wish to go away to college. He fears that if she leaves Jefferson, she may learn that she is illegitimate and, at all costs, he must keep this secret in order to perpetuate the myth of respectability he is building around himself.

A year or so after Flem has moved to Jefferson, Faulkner mentions briefly that he has joined the Baptist Church. He makes no further reference to it and apparently forgets about it because after Eula's death he says that neither Flem nor Eula belonged to any church. It is rather odd that Faulkner did not develop this theme in connection

²²Ibid., p. 224.

with the Snopes family because all through his novels and in The Town itself, evangelical religions such as the Baptist and the Methodist are identified with sanctimonious respectability. In Sanctuary, the perfidious Senator Snopes remarks: "'I been a decent Baptist all my life.'"²³ It is significant that Faulkner should say that Flem had become a Baptist at the stage in his career when he was sedulously collecting all the appurtenances of respectability. In The Town, Faulkner condemns the townspeople as much as the Snopeses. Their demeanor of pious rectitude is aped by Flem and exploited by Montgomery Ward. It is their hypocrisy which enables the Snopeses to flourish. It is their smugness and their determination that appearances must be maintained at all costs, which are more important to them than genuine Christianity, that Faulkner proscribes.

As early as Soldier's Pay, Faulkner indicated his scorn for Southern Christianity in this ironic description:

The Baptist minister, a young dervish in a white lawn tie, being most available, came and did his duty and went away. He was young and fearfully conscientious and kindhearted; so much so that he was a bore.²⁴

In The Town, after Eula's suicide, the ministers of the various churches call on Gavin Stevens, "all very grave and

²³William Faulkner, Sanctuary (New York: Signet Book, 1931), p. 157.

²⁴William Faulkner, Soldier's Pay (New York: Signet Book, 1926), p. 192.

long in the face, like horses, I mean, not looking unhappy: just looking long in the face like horses,"²⁵ with the offer of conducting the funeral service singly or jointly. Gavin loses his temper with them:

"That is, you were sent. Sent by a damned lot of damned old women of both sexes, including none. Thank you, gentlemen. I plan to conduct this service myself."²⁶

In Sanctuary, Faulkner flays Baptist righteousness. Horace Benbow is the only one who tries to help Goodwin, who has been accused falsely of murder. Miss Jenny, the ninety year old aunt, tells him smugly: "'You wont ever catch up with injustice, Horace.'"²⁷ And Horace's sister and the other righteous ladies force Ruby and her sick child to leave the haven of Horace's house for the sake of appearances. The irony underlying Light in August is that Joe Christmas is pursued throughout his life by the so-called forces of Christian righteousness. This theme may reflect Faulkner's own experience as a scout-master in Oxford when he was criticized by hard-shell Baptist opinion as unfit for the post.

To Flem, the pursuit of respectability becomes an even more covetous mistress than his simultaneous but less intense lust for money. As Ratliff observes:

²⁵The Town, p. 343.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Sanctuary, p. 68.

"When it's jest money and power a man wants, there is usually some place where he will stop; there's always one thing at least that ever--every man wont do jest for money. But when it's respectability he finds out he wants and has got to have, there aint nothing he wont do to get it and then keep it. And when it's almost too late he finds out that's what he's got to have, and that even after he gets it he cant jest lock it up and set--sit down on top of it and quit, but instead he has got to keep on working with ever--every breath to keep it, there aint nothing he will stop at, aint nobody or nothing within his scope and reach that may not anguish and grieve and suffer."²⁸

What the wise Ratliff says is only too true because it does not matter who suffers for Flem's fixation. It is a matter of complete indifference to him that he hurts his step-daughter, or that his own wife should be exposed to public shame and that her anguish should eventually cause her to take her own life. Happiness or contentment or peace of mind are beyond the ken of Flem's understanding. Respectability becomes an obsession and all he knows is "that he did want it, did need it, must have it, intended to have it, no matter what cost or who lost or who anguished or grieved."²⁹

Faulkner traces a very clear development in Flem's pursuit of respectability. With quiet irony, he casually enumerates the various means by which one acquires status. All this is very convincing but there is a serious lack of

²⁸The Town, p. 259.

²⁹Ibid., p. 224.

motivation in Flem's quest of respectability. In Absalom, Absalom, Thomas Sutpen has received a bitter blow to his pride in his childhood and, the rest of his life is devoted to acquiring the status where he will be immune from insult. But there is no such traumatic experience in Flem's career. He is never pitted directly against a member of the old order. No one ever condescends to him. His indifference to people rules out the possibility that he is trying to impress them. He simply quietly goes about seeking some personal goal; and Faulkner does not reveal enough of the inner workings of his mind to make this entirely plausible. Faulkner's vast untidy genius is responsible for this structural defect in The Town;³⁰ but this same genius makes Flem's story so enthralling that we are willing to forgive him for it.

³⁰cf. p. 38 supra (footnote 14, Chap. III)

CHAPTER V

THE MECHANICAL MAN

The underlying theme of the Snopes novels is the importance of the human. This theme is presented mainly by contrast for the Snopeses represent all that Faulkner considers non-human or mechanical. This mechanization is presented in two different aspects; in one sense, Faulkner sees it as the callous, metallic quality of a machine; in another sense he sees it as the barbarous, undirected will of an animal. He considers Flem Snopes as the embodiment of these non-human qualities; he is, in effect, the quintessential mechanical man.

It is in this mechanical aspect that Faulkner is least successful in his depiction of the Snopeses. The animal and the machine symbolism overlap in the novels; but the former is emphasized in The Hamlet and the latter in The Town. This dual symbolism tends to have unfortunate results because at times the reader is deprived of a clear picture of the Snopeses. If one first reads The Hamlet, one does have a concrete idea of their animal-like qualities. In The Town, one finds that the predominant image is a machine. One asks oneself--can an animal become a machine? Even a "willing suspension of disbelief" will not reconcile these disparate ideas. It is as though Faulkner, in his

indignation, is unable to stop at one epithet, but must pile image upon image to hammer home his point. Nathan Podoretz believes that his failure is due to the fact that time has dulled the conflict between the Snopeses and the Old South. The Snopeses have become domesticated and Faulkner is striving to find an adequate objective correlative to express his continuing repugnance to them:

. Faulkner is not content with recording so undramatic a development (as their domesticity); he must always be pretending . . . that the reality he cannot prevent himself from seeing is some other reality, involving other, more impressive issues. Perhaps he is right in feeling that the truth of to-day is less interesting than the truth of an earlier time and perhaps his tragedy is that the movement of history has robbed him of a contemporary subject equal to his passion.¹

We do get a very clear impression of the Snopes's non-human qualities as long as Faulkner confines his comparison to animals. Time and again Faulkner compares them to animals in order to underline their soullessness. Ratliff says that they differ one from another only as "a cotton-mouth is a different kind of snake."² Flem, in his early days as clerk in Varner's store, is compared to a spider, "of that bulbous blond omnivorous though non-poisonous species."³ Flem has a nose like the beak of a hawk and the

¹Nathan Podoretz, "Snopesishness and Faulknerishness," The New Yorker, XXXIII (1 June, 1957), pp. 101-104.

²The Hamlet, p. 92.

³Ibid., p. 59.

Snopeses as a group are compared to hawks. Again, they are like "a herd of tigers."⁴ Compared with the beautiful Eula, Flem is a "froglike creature which barely reached her shoulder."⁵ I.O. Snopes has a face like a rodent. Another is "weasel-faced."⁶ Lump's gaze has "the lidless intensity of a rat."⁷ In fact, the Snopeses are worse than animals for they move without warning. Ratliff says:

"Confound it, the trouble is we dont never know beforehand, to anticipate him (Flem). It's like a rabbit or maybe a bigger varmint, one with more poison or anyhow more teeth, in a patch or brake; you can watch the bushes shaking but you cant see what it is or which-a-way it's going until it breaks out. But you can see it then, and usually it's in time."⁸

Nathan Podoretz believes that Faulkner sums up his reaction to their animalistic qualities in the famous "Spotted Horses" section of The Hamlet:

. . . . the wild ponies Flem has brought into Frenchman's Bend from Texas are a symbol of what barbarism has done to the Snopeses; like the ponies, they are creatures of pure will, rushing madly and blindly and senselessly through the world heaping destruction on the foolish innocents who have been persuaded against the evidence of their own eyes, that these savage creatures are really gentle animals.⁹

⁴The Town, p. 102.

⁵The Hamlet, p. 149.

⁶The Town, p. 36.

⁷The Hamlet, p. 329.

⁸The Town, p. 143.

⁹Podoretz, op. cit.

There is only one uncomfortable objection one wishes one did not have to raise to this comparison: can we honestly reconcile the sly cunning of Flem Snopes with these "creatures of pure will, rushing madly and blindly and senselessly through the world?" Flem always knows exactly what he is doing.

The predominant symbol in The Town is the motor car. Both the motor car and the Snopeses make their impact upon Jefferson simultaneously. The connection between them is more than coincidental for their advent marks the end of a simpler, more natural way of life. Old Bayard Sartoris, president of the bank and representative of the old order, is killed in an automobile crash and his death makes possible Flem Snopes's rise to the presidency. For Faulkner, the motor car and the Snopeses are symbols of the destructiveness of exclusively mechanical forces.

The image of the automobile recurs so frequently throughout The Town that one feels at times that Faulkner is straining to find an adequate manifestation to express his distaste for the mechanical qualities he associates with the Snopeses. This mechanical aspect is mainly emphasized in their implied connection with the motor car. Actually neither Flem nor any of the Snopeses possess or are directly associated with an automobile. But the

acquisition of one by a member of the old order seems to Faulkner to be an indication of his espousal of the Snopes's values.

Flem is cuckolded by Manfred de Spain, owner of the first motor car in Jefferson. It is a flamboyant red E.M.T. roadster, and Faulkner suggests that there is something extremely vulgar about it. De Spain sells the horses out of the livery stable his father has left him and tears down the stalls and cribs to establish the first garage and automobile agency in town. His car is described as "alien and debonair, as invincibly and irrevocably polygamous and bachelor as de Spain himself."¹⁰ De Spain is a member of the old order, yet he repudiates its quieter, slower way of life which is symbolized by his father's stables. Not only does he repudiate the tenor of its life, but its values as well. His lust for another man's wife is so powerful that he coalesces in Flem's dishonesty in stealing the brass from the power-plant and buys him off by creating a position for him at the bank. Traditional morality is replaced by expediency and Faulkner deplors the manner in which materialistic ideals are vulgarized and spread.

This symbol of the automobile had more validity thirty years ago when Faulkner first used it in Soldier's

¹⁰The Town, p. 14.

Pay. To-day it seems a little anachronistic, an unsuccessful means of expressing Faulkner's repugnance to modern life. It fails too, because a car must have a driver. It cannot move without someone to direct it and this feature has no bearing on the mechanical qualities of the Snopeses.

Faulkner is most successful in his depiction of the Snopeses when he discards symbolism and shows them as they are. This is not an implied criticism of symbolism; but in Faulkner's hands, symbols often tend to be like kites which drag him up off the ground. In attaching himself to them he often lapses into the rhetoric of which he has been accused by so many critics.

In many memorable phrases, Faulkner emphasizes the mechanical or non-human features of the Snopeses by descriptions of their physical appearance. Sometimes he stresses their lack of vitality. Flem's face is as blank as "a pan of uncooked dough;"¹¹ his eyes are the colour of "stagnant water."¹² Another time Faulkner sees his eyes as "two gobs of cup grease on a pan of uncooked dough."¹³ Senator Snopes, in Sanctuary, has "thick, small opaque eyes."¹⁴

¹¹The Hamlet, p. 23.

¹²Ibid., p. 22.

¹³The Town, p. 22.

¹⁴William Faulkner, Sanctuary (New York: Signet Book, 1931), p. 103.

Similarly, Popeye, who shares many of the bloodless features of the Snopeses, has eyes like "rubber knobs,"¹⁵ and possesses "that vicious depthless quality of stamped tin."¹⁶ On occasion, Faulkner uses a description with mechanical implications, such as the sound of Ab Snopes's voice, which is "rusty from infrequent use."¹⁷ Senator Snopes with his "shaved neck and pressed clothes and gleaming shoes emanated somehow the idea that he had been dry-cleaned rather than washed."¹⁸ Faulkner emphasizes that Flem's bow ties are machine-made.

Flem displays the coldness and impersonality of a machine. He lacks the warm humanity of Ratliff who is always depicted as engaged in intimate conversation with those with whom he comes in contact. The people of Frenchman's Bend are instinctively generous and sense the comradeship to be enjoyed in sharing a meal. Faulkner tells us that Ratliff can move through the country for six months without having to buy a meal. Flem carries a pail of lunch "which no man had ever yet seen him eating."¹⁹

¹⁵Ibid., p. 1.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷The Hamlet, p. 7.

¹⁸Sanctuary, p. 109.

¹⁹The Hamlet, p. 53.

Flem is not moved to compassion by human suffering. He spits past Mrs. Armstid contemptuously when she pleads with him for the return of the money her husband has squandered on the wild horses so that she can buy clothing for her children. He gazes impassively at the tormented Armstid as he digs for the gold he will never find. He is not touched by the sweet innocence of Linda and her longings to go away to college. He is quite indifferent to Eula's suffering, an anguish so great that she is led eventually to take her own life.

Characteristic of the Snopes's callousness is one of our first glimpses of Ab Snopes. He is superintending his wife and sister-in-law as they carry their meagre furniture into Varner's farmhouse: "He druv them like a pair of heifers just a little too valuable to hit hard with a stick."²⁰ Eck is the only really human Snopes and therefore his relatives arrange to have him killed in a boiler explosion.

Ratliff comments:

"Eck wasn't a Snopes. That's why he had to die. Like there wasn't no true authentic room for Snopeses in the world and they made theirselves one by that pure and simple mutual federation, and the first time one slips or falters or fails in being Snopes, it dont even need the rest of the pack like wolves to finish him: simple environment jest watched its chance and taken it."²¹

²⁰Ibid., p. 14.

²¹The Town, p. 107.

The replaceability of the machine is also suggested in that there is always another Snopes to replace one that has outlived his usefulness.

With few exceptions, the Snopeses are a frightening breed, but all of them except Flem have at least some quality that marks them as human beings. The murderer, Mink Snopes, is more of a human being than the bloodless Flem. He feels physical passion for his wife and his murder of Houston is an act of anger. Even the idiot, Ike Snopes, with his fixation on his cow, is closer to a natural being. Faulkner emphasizes this in the long lyrical section, "The Long Summer," devoted to Ike in The Hamlet. But with Flem there is nothing to soften him, nothing to endear him to anyone. He has never been known to smile or to lose control of himself. Speaking of his impotence, Eula warns: "'You've got to be careful or you'll have to pity him.'"²² She points out that he is not human enough to want or to deserve pity. Flem rejects any opportunity to display humanity. He refuses to become implicated with any other human being. He has never accepted anything from anyone, and he will never offer anything to anyone. He even refuses the cigar offered by Will Varner:

²²Ibid., p. 331.

"I dont use them."
 "Just chew, hah," Varner said.
 "I chew up a nickel now and then until the suption
 is out of it. But I aint never lit a match to one
 yet." ²³

In sex relations too, we find mechanistic associations.
 In The Town, Faulkner uses the Montgomery Ward Snopes inci-
 dent to stress that furtive back-alley sex has replaced
 genuine passion between men and women. The fact that so many
 townspeople are involved indicates the spread of mechanical
 substitutions. If stirred by emotion, one no longer sings
 or writes a poem; as T.S. Eliot has put it in The Waste Land:

When lovely woman stoops to folly and
 Paces about the room again, alone,
 She smoothes her hair with automatic hand,
 And puts a record on the gramophone.

Again, the symbol of the motor car is used for this
 mechanical concept. In Intruder in the Dust, Gavin Stevens
 has said:

"The American really loves nothing but his auto-
 mobile: not his wife, his child nor his country
 nor even his bank account first . . . but his
 motor car first because the automobile has become
 our national sex symbol. We cannot really enjoy
 anything unless we go up an alley for it." ²⁴

Flem feels neither jealousy nor anger nor humiliation
 in being cuckolded. In short, he lacks any normal human

²³The Hamlet, p. 24 .

²⁴William Faulkner, Intruder in the Dust (New York:
 Random House, 1948), p. 238.

reaction; this is partly because he is impotent, unable to function as a human being. His wife's affair serves merely as a means to advance himself. When it is no longer of any use to him, he cold-bloodedly exposes Eula to his father-in-law and Eula is destroyed. Love is an emotion of which he is completely incapable.

A mechanical aspect of the Snopeses is their alienation from nature. They are completely cut off from the natural people among whom they live. This mechanical feature of Flem's make-up is underlined in a comparison of him with his first antagonist, Will Varner. Will is shrewd and often dishonest, but he is saved from Snopesism by his earthiness. Faulkner describes him as merry and of a Rabelaisian turn of mind. He has fathered sixteen children and is still sexually lusty in his old age. Flem Snopes, on the other hand, is impotent. Although the local people know that Varner often cheats them, they like him and enjoy his company when he sits with them on the gallery of the store telling earthy stories. Flem speaks to no one and has no friends. He never intends to have any because he does not want "to be cluttered with them."²⁵

The closeness to the earth of the people of Frenchman's Bend is exemplified in Houston, who lies with his wife

²⁵The Town, p. 279.

in the full moon of April to ensure fertility. This is in sharp contrast to Flem's marriage with Eula which is doomed to be barren. Ratliff is tormented by the "waste" of it, "with its implications of lost triumphs and defeats of unimaginable splendor."²⁶ Eula is like a fertility goddess in her unabashed sensuality, a goddess doomed to go to seed.

The Snopeses are also divorced from the earth itself. To point this up, Faulkner uses the device of juxtaposition of lyrical descriptive passages beside short laconic sentences alluding to Flem. A notable illustration of this is the conversation of the men on the verandah the night before the sale of the wild horses. Ratliff is speaking:

"A fellow can dodge a Snopes if he jests starts lively enough. In fact, I dont believe he would have to pass more than two folks before he would have another victim intervened betwixt them. You folks aint going to buy them things sho enough, are you?" Nobody answered . . . The pear tree across the road opposite was now in full and frost bloom, the twigs and branches springing not outward from the limbs, but standing motionless and perpendicular above the horizontal boughs like the separate and up-streaming hair of a drowned woman sleeping upon the uttermost floor of the windless and tideless sea.²⁷

This emphasis on the alienation of man from nature is reminiscent of a passage in Sanctuary. Popeye, like Flem, is

²⁶The Hamlet, p. 149.

²⁷Ibid., p. 281.

impotent physically, emotionally and spiritually. His natural habitat is the red-light district of Memphis, and he is terrified of the woods. When Benbow asks why they don't take a short-cut through the woods, Popeye exclaims: "Through all them trees Jesus Christ!"²⁸ A bird flies close to them and Popeye clutches frantically at Benbow's coat. "It's only an owl," Benbow said. "It's nothing but an owl."²⁹ Benbow's feeling for nature is contrasted with Popeye's when, despite the fact that the gangster is crouching beside him, he suddenly remembers the name of a bird that had been eluding him. "They call that Carolina wren a fishingbird. That's what it is. What I couldn't think of back there."³⁰

The only time that there is any implied connection between the Snopeses and a form of nature is when they are compared to willows:

"Willow aint a tree," Freeman said. "It's a weed."

"Well, I dont know what it is," the fourth said. "But it aint no weed. Because you can grub up a weed and you are done with it. I been grubbing up a clump of willows outen my spring pasture for fifteen years. They are the same size every year. Only difference is, it's just two or three more trees every time."³¹

^{28, 29, 30} William Faulkner, Sanctuary (New York: Signet Book, 1931), p. 3.

³¹ The Hamlet, p. 282.

Finally, the Snopeses are governed by purely mechanical values. These are money, power, and respectability, all of which lack any connection with a humane and vital ethic. Respectability is a shiny veneer, a sham morality, which is substituted for a code of decency and honour. Power, or concentration on self, is associated the destructiveness of a wayward mechanical force. Money is an inert and valueless goal, the pursuit of which breeds only further greed, not real enrichment of life.

Faulkner is a humanist and he deplores the substitution for human activity of passive mechanical forms, such as the telephone for the warm human contact between human beings. He would agree with Lewis Mumford, when the latter says in Technics and Civilization:

The brute fact of the matter is that our civilization is now weighted in favor of the use of mechanical instruments, because the opportunities for commercial production and for the exercise of power lie there, while all the direct human reactions or the personal arts which require a minimum of mechanical paraphernalia are treated as negligible.³²

Faulkner's reaction to the mechanization represented by the Snopeses is one of emotional protest. Had his emotions been controlled more by his artistry, the reader would not be so puzzled by the number of associations he

³²Lewis Mumford, Technics and Civilization (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1934), p. 274.

is asked to make in connection with the Snopeses. Faulkner might be described as a romantic in his sentimental nostalgia for a past which represented a simpler and more genuine way of life. He is right in so far as he desires to restore the essential functions of life to a central place in human activity. But he inclines to be regressive when he condemns the Snopeses for their acquisition of money in order to move out of their class. In this he reveals the deep-rooted feudalism of the Southern landowning class. Gavin Stevens stands on the ridge beyond Seminary Hill and muses on the "stratified", "concentric" rings of Yoknapatawpha County:

They are all here, supine beneath you, stratified and superposed, osseous and durable with the frail dust and the phantoms . . . the proud fading plantation names . . . Sutpen and Sartoris and Compson and Edmonds and McCaslin and Beauchamp and Grenier and Habersham and Holston and Stevens and de Spain, generals and governors and judges, soldiers . . . and statesmen failed or not . . . Then the roadless, almost pathless perpendicular hillcountry of McCallum and Gowrie and Frazier and Muir translated intact with their pot stills and speaking only the Gaelic and not much of that . . . then and last on to where Frenchman's Bend lay beyond the southeastern horizon, cradle of Varners and ant-heap for the northeast crawl of Snopes.³³

Gavin and Faulkner brood lovingly over the "record and chronicle" of their "native land" as long as it is "proffered for your perusal in ring by concentric ring like the ripples on living water above the dreamless slumber of the past."³⁴

³³The Town, p. 316.

³⁴Ibid.

However, life refuses to remain static even in Yoknapatawpha County, and the Snopeses cannot be held down on a poor tenant-farm. The uniformity and standardization which are part of their mechanical way of life must be opposed with qualities more vigorous than nostalgia and withdrawal.

CHAPTER VI

THE OBSERVERS

The Snopeses are presented to the reader through the eyes of various observers. In The Hamlet, their rise is related by direct narrative and also in terms of the impact they make upon the people of Frenchman's Bend. In The Town, the reader sees them through the "point of view" of three different observers, the "oblique" technique which Faulkner had previously used in The Sound and the Fury and As I Lay Dying. This method of presenting a situation through the eyes of various spectators illuminates it from different angles and thus enables Faulkner to widen our comprehension not only of the central situation but also of the observers themselves. In many cases, the observers of the Snopeses also happen to be their victims.

Who are these people over whom the Snopeses seem to triumph with such ease? In The Hamlet, with the exception of the Varners, they are small tenant-farmers with names such as Tull and Armstid and Bookwright and Houston. Faulkner has a power such as Dickens had for creating memorable minor characters, and each of these characters has his own distinctive flavour. Faulkner grants the reader very little description of them but gives them a dramatic life of their own with their speech. They are not

unintelligent for they appreciate Ratliff's witticisms. They are not completely gullible for they are aware that Jody cheats them in the store. They are suspicious of strangers but friendly with their own kind. Most of the women, like Mrs. Armstid and Mrs. Littlejohn, are kindly. Above all, the people are earthy. They listen to the mockingbird, and they know that the gumtree is the first to turn green in the spring. What Faulkner says of Armstid is true of all of them: he had been born of the earth and was its fated thrall forever until he died.

The Snopeses fascinate and repel them. They sit whittling and gossiping on the verandah of the store, watching Flem with the wariness with which one watches a dangerous animal. He disturbs them because, although they know that he cheats them just as much as Jody did, he is sly enough never to be caught.

"Nonsense," Ratliff said, "somebody's bound to catch him sooner or later. There aint a man woman or child in twenty-five miles that dont know what's in that store and what it costs as well as Will or Jody Varner either."

"Hah," the other said . . . "That's it."

"You mean aint nobody ever caught him once even?"

"No," Bookwright said. "And folks dont like it. Otherwise, how can you tell?"¹

¹The Hamlet, p. 57.

As much as they distrust Flem, in the end they all succumb to their greed and Flem is able to attack their Achilles' heel. Flem regards them as fools. At the end of The Hamlet, Armstid's gaunt unshaven face is that of a madman as he digs for the non-existent gold. Flem's contempt is apparent in the last lines of the book as he watches Armstid for a minute and then: "Snopes turned his head and spat over the wagon wheel. He jerked the reins slightly. 'Come up,' he said."²

Actually Faulkner does not allow the people of Frenchman's Bend a fighting chance against the Snopeses. Flem is able to outsmart them because he is so much smarter than his victims. They seem paralyzed by a curious inertia and there is never any attempt to halt his advance. When he has cheated or betrayed them, they are left standing in attitudes of helpless stupefaction.

The one man who could do something about the Snopeses is V.K. Ratliff. Throughout the career of their rise, they are observed and commented on by the itinerant sewing-machine salesman. Ratliff is the complete antithesis of Flem Snopes and is a masterpiece of characterization. Faulkner's distance from him is exactly right; he treats him

²Ibid., p. 373.

with both affection and irony. Irving Howe compares him to a cooling stream weaving in and out of The Hamlet, and says of him:

For the habitual Faulkner reader it must come as a very real pleasure to find at the center of the novel a truly intelligent and rational man who neither moons nor rants, who is not overwhelmed by neurotic fantasies, who is capable of disinterested observation, who has a highly developed moral sense yet extends his sympathy to those he judges, even to some of the Snopeses.³

Ratliff lives in Jefferson but travels through four counties with his sturdy team pulling a painted dog kennel on wheels in which a sewing-machine is neatly fitted. He never forgets a name and he knows everyone, "man, mule, and dog,"⁴ within fifty miles. He retails all the news from house to house, and carries personal messages about marriages and funerals and ways of preserving fruit. He sells some sewing-machines and the rest of the time trades in land and livestock and anything else which the owner does not want badly enough. He is welcomed everywhere for his friendliness and benevolence. He can be found anywhere--among the women surrounded by laden clotheslines and tubs, or squatting with the men at a crossroads store. He is anecdotal and humorous and loves to talk; but he actually does a good deal more listening than anyone realizes. His habitual expression is

³Irving Howe, William Faulkner; A Critical Study (New York: Random House, 1952), p. 183.

⁴The Hamlet, p. 13.

one "which would have been called smiling for lack of anything better."⁵

His sheer love of life and people mark him as completely different from Flem. The description of him while convalescing from an operation is an example:

He was on his way to Frenchman's Bend now, though he had not started yet and did not know just when he would start . . . He was looking forward to his visit not only for the pleasure of the shrewd dealing which far transcended mere gross profit, but with the sheer happiness of being out of bed and moving once more at free will, even though a little weakly, in the sun and air which men drank and moved in and dealt with one another.⁶

In both The Hamlet and The Town, Faulkner uses Ratliff as a means of filling in much of the Snopes's background. In The Hamlet it is he who gives Will Varner many of the details of Flem's horse-stealing and barn-burning ancestors. In The Town he corrects and brings up to date the knowledge that Gavin Stevens has of the Snopeses. Jefferson had already heard something of the Snopeses as there had been a Snopes in Colonel Sartoris's command in 1864. His occupation had been raiding Yankee picket-lines for horses; but he was eventually caught by a Confederate picket raiding a Confederate horse-line--and presumably hanged. Ratliff tells Gavin and Chick Mallison that this

⁵Ibid., p. 72.

⁶Ibid., p. 68.

information must be wrong because he was the same Ab Snopes, father of Flem, who originally rented Varner's poor, worn-out farm. Ratliff relates to them the story of the Snopes's conquest of Frenchman's Bend and warns them to be on their guard.

Ratliff's more important function is to comment upon and react to the march of the Snopeses. At first he regards Flem's advancement mainly with amusement and his role is strictly that of a disinterested observer. He makes witty remarks to his audience about the various Snopeses, treating them as game for laughter. This is how he describes the platitudinous, family-fleeing I.O. Snopes: "What's his name? that quick-fatherer, the Moses with his mouth full of mottoes and his coattail full of them already half-grown retroactive sons?"⁷

As the Snopeses gradually infiltrate Frenchman's Bend, the danger begins to alarm him.

"Aint none of you folks out there done nothing about it?" he said.

"What could we do?" Tull said. "It aint right. But it aint none of our business."

"I believe I would think of something if I lived there," Ratliff said.⁸

⁷Ibid., p. 327.

⁸Ibid., p. 72.

Ratliff is so disturbed that he makes a special trip to the Chancery Clerk's office in Jefferson, and discovers what he feared to find--some two hundred acres of land, with buildings, recorded to Flem Snopes. This meant that Flem had already gained control of many of Varner's mortgages and could control most of Frenchman's Bend by the threat of foreclosure.

Ratliff rises to anger when he discovers the pitiful condition of the idiot, Ike, and how he is being exploited by his "guardian", Flem. Launcelot (Lump) Snopes, with the full connivance of Flem, is selling space to the villagers to watch Ike making love to his cow. It is Ratliff who persuades Eck and I.O. to buy the cow so that Ike will be protected from being a public spectacle. Now that he has gauged the full extent of Flem's rapacity, he can predict almost his every move. When Eula and the baby arrive back alone from Texas, he alone realizes that Flem is staying away deliberately until after the end of Mink's trial.

When Flem arrives back with the wild horses, Ratliff tries to laugh his friends out of the folly of buying them. He makes it a point to be absent during the sale. He returns and hears of Flem's refusal to return the five dollars to Mrs. Armstid. Bookwright tells Ratliff that he suspects him of having made up the five dollars to Armstid himself.

His face changed--something fleeting, quizzical, but not smiling, his eyes did not smile.

"I could have," he said. "But I didn't. I might have if I could just have been sho he would buy something this time that would sho enough kill him . . . Besides, I wasn't protecting a Snopes from Snopeses; I wasn't even protecting a people from a Snopes. I was protecting something that wasn't even a people, that wasn't nothing but something that dont want nothing but to walk and feel the sun and wouldn't know how to hurt no man even if it would and wouldn't want to if it could, jest like I wouldn't stand by and see you steal a meat-bone from a dog. I never made them Snopeses and I never made the folks that cant wait to bare their backsides to them. I could do more, but I wont. I wont, I tell you!"

"All right," Bookwright said. "Hook your drag up; it aint nothing but a hill. I said it's all right."⁹

Ratliff is comparatively free from the passions that enslave the rest of the community. But even he is finally made a fool of by Flem. When he buys the Old Frenchman Place from Flem, he is prompted not only by greed, but also by the desire to put one over on the Snopeses. That this is so is borne out by his generosity in sharing the secret with Armstid and Bookwright. When he discovers his mistake, he takes it with characteristic good humour. He makes himself a hot meal and slowly savours both it and the comedy of the situation. As one of the local people remarks: "'Couldn't no other man have done it. Anybody might have fooled Henry Armstid. But couldn't nobody but Flem Snopes have fooled Ratliff.'"¹⁰

⁹Ibid., p. 326.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 372.

In The Town, three figures serve as chorus to explain and narrate Flem's progress: Ratliff; the lawyer, Gavin Stevens; and a young boy, Charles Mallison. Stevens is a member of an old family, the holder of a Phi Beta Kappa key and a degree from Heidelberg. Charles (or Chick) is his nephew. Whereas Ratliff, with his country shrewdness, was the only commentator necessary for the action in Frenchman's Bend, the size and complexity of Jefferson require a more sophisticated outlook such as Gavin contributes. The action of the book moves forward in the form of a spiral as the Snopeses are examined from different points of view. The problem of the Snopeses is contained in a sort of prism, so to speak, in that it is examined in different lights and reflections. This is a further use of Faulkner's famous "oblique" technique, and the change from Ratliff's blunt skepticism to Gavin's musing speculation and again to Chick's innocent acceptance of events gives the book unusual vitality and variety.

Chick tells us that Ratliff and Gavin were in the habit of talking together a lot, despite the differences in their education, because both were interested in people. But what draws them together particularly is their common interest and alarm over the Snopeses. They use each other as sounding-boards to clarify their own ideas about the Snopeses. In discussing the Snopeses, they interpret and

enlarge each other's understanding of Snopesism. But even together they are limited to a large extent in predicting Flem's next outrageous move because, as Michael Harrington points out, "Flem is always able to top their imagination."¹¹

Where Ratliff sees the Snopeses as the immediate concern of Yoknapatawpha, Gavin recognizes them as indicative of the general malady of mankind. From the beginning, the philosophic lawyer understands that the triumph of the Snopeses is possible because courage and honour are ossifying into mere tradition:

. suppose and tremble . . . (that) one generation more until that innocent and outrageous belief that courage and honor are practical has had time to fade and cool so that merely the habit of courage and honor remain; add to that then that generation's natural heritage of cold rapacity as instinctive as breathing, and tremble at that prospect; the habit of courage and honor compounded by rapacity or rapacity raised to the absolute nth by courage and honor . . . Genghis Khan or Tamerlane in the defenseless midst of indefensible Jefferson.¹²

He knows too, that he is a part of that empty tradition and that he will not defend Jefferson from the Snopeses, but that the Snopeses, "in defending themselves from Snopeses . . . must of necessity defend and shield us, their vassals and chattels, too."¹³

¹¹Michael Harrington, "An Uneven Addition to a Magnificent Whole," Commonweal, LXVI (21 June, 1957), pp. 306-307.

¹²The Town, p. 35.

¹³Ibid., p. 44.

Gavin is a latter-day Hamlet in his brooding hesitation and ineffectuality in acting against the Snopeses. Ratliff tells him that he used to laugh at the Snopeses too:

"Why not?" he replied. "What else are we going to do about them? . . . But give them time; maybe they have got one taking a correspondence-school law course. Then I wont have to be acting city attorney any more either."¹⁴

When he leaves for the war, Gavin asks Ratliff if he will watch out for the Snopeses in his absence. But Ratliff has almost reached the point where he wants to be rid of the burden of them forever:

"But why me? Why out of all Jefferson pick on me?"

"Because you're the only one in Jefferson I can trust."¹⁵

During Gavin's absence at the war, Ratliff reports on the Snopeses to him through Chick. As a young boy Chick regards watching Snopeses as a sort of game or war like watching an invasion of rattlesnakes or wildcats because nobody in Jefferson, except his uncle and Ratliff, seemed to recognize the danger. Chick is the only one who refers to Flem as Mr. Snopes, the deference a young boy shows to an older man. This is ironical for there is nothing about Flem to command respect.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 102.

When Gavin returns, he abandons his role of dispassionate observer. He meets Linda, Flem's sixteen year old step-daughter. He is impressed by her innocence and beauty --indeed, he almost falls in love with her--and is determined to save her from being a Snopes. He tries to cultivate her sensitive mind by lending her books of poetry.

His sister agrees to invite her to dinner:

"Thank you, Maggie," he said. "It will need all of us of good will. To save Jefferson from Snopeses is a crisis, an emergency, a duty. To save a Snopes from Snopeses is a privilege, an honor, a pride."¹⁶

He tries to interest her in distant universities in order to get her away from the influence of Flem. This is followed up with the gift of a suitcase for her high school graduation. Then her step-father forbids her to see him any more and, in desperation, he goes to Eula to see if she can use her influence to get her away from Jefferson.

It is at this point that Gavin and Ratliff need each other to probe Flem's inner motives. Gavin believes that Flem will not allow Linda to go away to college lest she learn that she is not his child; the vice-president of a bank cannot afford to have a bastard. Ratliff, on the other hand, is convinced that it is because Flem is afraid that Linda will get married; then Eula will leave him and he will lose out on her share of Will Varner's estate.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 182.

Whether Flem is motivated more by naked avarice or by his desire for respectability, Faulkner leaves for the reader to decide. Actually, it seems to be that Flem is now so secure in his position of prestige that he has nothing to lose by exposing his greed. While Linda remains in Jefferson, he has certain control over her future for he can threaten to call in or foreclose an usurious note or mortgage bearing the signature of the father or kin of the would-be-bridegroom. Thus, using Linda as a pawn, he forces Eula to sign over to him her share of her father's will if he allows his step-daughter to go away to college. Now that Flem is assured of the money, there is no longer any necessity for him to allow Eula and de Spain to continue their affair.

Gavin is now completely implicated in the action. Before her elopement with de Spain, Eula goes to Gavin and begs him to marry Linda. Gavin promises and, feeling that her daughter's future is safe from the Snopeses, she kills herself. After her death, Gavin helps to superintend the erection of her monument and arranges to have Linda go off to New York. He tells Ratliff that he cannot marry her for "she must have the best."¹⁷

Gavin has freed Linda from Flem by intervening on

¹⁷Ibid., p. 351.

her behalf, by taking on the risk of his humanity. As long as he remained merely an observer, Snopesism could flourish like the green bay tree. By assuming an active role against them, one can check the spread of Snopesism. Thus, The Town ends on a hopeful note. Gavin has realized that watchfulness is not enough; one must also be prepared to act. The success of the Snopeses is not inevitable, as the people of Frenchman's Bend had believed. Intelligence and courage are weapons powerful enough to defeat them. Had Ratliff engaged in a more active role than observer in The Hamlet, Flem might never have reached Jefferson. That he was able to rescue the idiot, Ike, is evidence of what his intervention could accomplish. His error lay in halting at this point, in refusing to combat obvious evil.

The observation of Snopeses is an observation and a commentary on the nature of society as well. We judge not only the Snopeses but also the people of Frenchman's Bend and Jefferson through these observers. It is Chick (whom Ratliff has described as not having yet been spoiled or corrupted by the "world of grown-up men into being his enemies"¹⁸) who has the final word on Jefferson. Through Ratliff's eyes and Gavin's eyes, the reader has been shown

¹⁸Ibid., p. 81.

its hypocrisy and how it can be corrupted by the rapacity of the Snopeses, but Chick tells the reader that its people will never let Linda know that Flem is not her real father or that they knew about the relations between her mother and Mr. de Spain:

Because I know now that people really are kind, they really are; there are lots of times when they stop hurting one another not just when they have to; even the most Methodist and Baptist of the Baptists and Presbyterians--all right, Episcopalians too-- . . .¹⁹

¹⁹Ibid., p. 340.

CONCLUSION

BEYOND YOKNAPATAWPHA

Throughout The Hamlet and The Town, we accept so implicitly the idea of Flem Snopes as a symbol of avariciousness that it is a shock to discover some human traits in him. When Gavin Stevens goes to see Eula, she tells him that her daughter has had a "scene" with Flem, though it seems impossible to think of Flem losing his temper. And when she tells him that her husband has chosen their furniture, we can only echo Gavin's amazement: "'Flem? Flem Snopes?'"¹

Paradoxically, this astonishment is a reflection of the measure of Faulkner's achievement. Flem is almost a grotesque, but he is always believable. He has been simplified in the way that Ben Jonson treated his figures in the comedy of humours. One human characteristic is stressed to the point that it gives the character a peculiar intensity. In Flem, the quality of avariciousness is stressed to the point that he is transformed into its symbol. But Faulkner does not use his symbolism consistently. What is remarkable about Flem is that he is a symbol living among very real persons. Gavin Stevens, V.K. Ratliff, and all the people

¹The Town, p. 221.

of Frenchman's Bend are real individuals. Any symbolic value they possess is only through their relationship with the Snopeses. This sense of reality is reinforced by the strong feeling for place with which Faulkner celebrates Yoknapatawpha.

William York Tindall suggests that a symbol usually represents something too large, too complex, or too ideal for direct expression.² He illustrates this definition with Dante's rose which suggests heaven, and Einstein's mathematical formulae which represent the universe. With the Snopeses, Faulkner found a most fitting symbol for the mechanistic materialism corrupting modern life.

Many of Faulkner's early critics complained that he was a nihilist. One French critic, I.I. Rabi, objected that throughout Faulkner's world, it is a Massacre of the Innocents: Benjy is castrated; Goodwin is lynched; Christmas is murdered and castrated; Miss Burden is decapitated; and Bayard Sartoris kills himself. Rabi says:

In Faulkner's world the struggle is intrinsically absurd, because the universe itself is absurd. Always the same tale and told by an idiot, full of sound and fury.³

²William York Tindall, The Literary Symbol (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955), 278 pp.

³I.I. Rabi, "Faulkner and the Exiled Generation," William Faulkner: Two Decades of Criticism, (East Lansing: Michigan State College Press, 1954), p. 134.

Jean-Paul Sartre compares Faulkner's vision of the world to that of a man sitting in a convertible always looking back:

At every moment shadows emerge on his right, and on his left flickering and quavering points of light, which become trees, men, and cars only when they are seen in perspective. The past here gains a surrealist quality; its outline is hard, clear and immutable. The indefinable and elusive present is helpless before it⁴

He complains that Faulkner, like Proust, has taken away man's future--his dimension of free choice and act. To Sartre, "man is not the sum of what he has, but the totality of what he does not yet have. And if we are thus immersed in the future, is not the irrational brutality of the present diminished?"⁵ Actually Faulkner's view is closer to Sartre's than the latter realizes. Sartre's criticism was written after he had read one of the earliest novels, The Sound and the Fury. It is true that Faulkner places particular emphasis on the influence of the past, but it is not "hard, clear and immutable," as Sartre suggests. On the contrary, it remains indefinite and muted, a point of reference rather than a documentary study. Even the slavery issue is never more than touched upon. Faulkner regards the past as that which has given us the particular conditions we are confronted with to-day. But that does not mean that we are

⁴Jean-Paul Sartre, "Time in Faulkner: The Sound and the Fury," trans. Martine Darmon, *ibid.*, p. 183.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 188.

"helpless." We can combat the mechanization of modern life if we are willing to use courage as an active weapon.

Except by Malcolm Cowley and Stephan Vincent Benet, The Hamlet was received with disfavour for obscenity and lack of purposeful direction when it was published in 1940. The reviewer in Newsweek said: "It's a nice bucolic idyll of insanity, avarice, cruelty, rape and murder, centering around the meanest passel of white folks this side of a nineteenth century novel."⁶ Most reviewers objected to the accumulation of evil with no relieving contrast; they completely ignored Ratliff. Even comparatively recently, Philip Toynbee described it as "the most stubbornly unreadable of Faulkner's novels."⁷ However, with the publication of The Town seventeen years after The Hamlet, critics began to understand the unfolding pattern of the Snopes family. James B. Meriweather, in The Saturday Review, described this latest work as a "masterpiece."⁸

Until Faulkner discovered the Snopeses, he had no adequate objective correlative to describe his feelings

⁶Review in Newsweek, XV (1 April, 1940), p. 32.

⁷Philip Toynbee, "William Faulkner, Alas!" The Observer, 1 February, 1959.

⁸James B. Meriweather, "Snopes Revisited," The Saturday Review, XL (27 April, 1957), pp. 12-13.

about what was happening to the life he saw around him. And until he created Ratliff, he had no adequate counter to pit against this evil. The word "feelings" is used advisedly, for Faulkner is essentially a romantic and his reaction is one of emotional protest rather than reasoned thought. Robert Coughlan describes his view of life as not so much a philosophy as a "mystique, a religious revelation." As such, Coughlan believes that it is "beyond definition and beyond criticism."⁹ That Faulkner is at ease in his subject and satisfied with his symbol is reflected in the smooth, fluent style of the Snopes novels in comparison with the tortured syntax of a novel such as Absalom, Absalom. What Henry James said of Hawthorne's Scarlet Letter could be applied to Faulkner and The Hamlet:

The subject had probably lain a long time in his mind, as his subjects were apt to do; so that he appears completely to possess it, to know it and feel it. It is simpler and more complete than his other novels; it achieves more perfectly what it attempts; and it has about it that charm, very hard to express, which we find in an artist's work the first time he has touched his highest mark--a sort of straightness and naturalness of execution, an unconsciousness of his public, and freshness of interest in his theme.¹⁰

It is true that many of Faulkner's characters seem

⁹Robert Coughlan, The Private World of William Faulkner (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954), p. 91.

¹⁰Henry James, "Hawthorne: The Scarlet Letter," The Portable Henry James (New York: The Viking Press, 1951), p. 442

to be inexorably bound to their fates: Nancy to murder Temple's baby in Requiem for a Nun; Quentin to drown himself; Christmas to murder and be murdered; and many more. Even Flem Snopes is described as "channelled to compulsions and customs fixed long before his advent."¹¹ Yet life is not entirely without hope, or men but pawns in the hands of the gods. Faulkner is a Manichean in that he believes that evil is an inherent part of the human condition, and that the evil we combat to-day is the result of wrongdoing in the past, perhaps even Original Sin. The wrong we do to-day, our children will have to struggle with in the future. But man has free will and, if he "endures"¹² he will be triumphant even though the Snopeses seem to have won the immediate victory. For Faulkner, "endurance" implies both an acceptance of life as it is and a fortitude in meeting its conditions.

In Light in August, Hightower and Byron Bunch have for years maintained a relationship governed by a rigid pattern and lived their lives within narrow limits. With the appearance of Lena Grove, Byron is faced with the problem of leaving his isolated little island and becoming involved in another life. He elects not to shut himself off

¹¹The Hamlet, p. 51.

¹²William Faulkner, The Sound and the Fury (New York: The Modern Library, 1929), p. 22.

from his fellow being and the book ends on a hopeful note as he accepts the responsibility that is part of the human condition by marrying Lena. At the beginning of The Town, Gavin Stevens accepts the fact that the Snopeses are going to triumph and that there is nothing that anyone can do about them. But when he becomes interested in another human being--Linda--he does everything in his power to save her from Snopesism. He risks his reputation as a respected lawyer in being seen constantly in Linda's company. He risks the torment to his feelings of having to face her mother, with whom he was once deeply in love, to plead with her to help Linda. In the end his involvement is victorious. His interference forces Flem to bring on the climax in having Eula sign over to him her share of the will and her subsequent suicide, and Linda is free of Snopesism at last. This is a violent form of solution, but the evil of the situation will admit of no other.

In his article, "An Uneven Addition to a Magnificent Whole," Michael Harrington claims that he has discovered "good-humoredness" in The Town. He goes on to say that:

It is as if he (Faulkner) had almost made his peace with the inexorable rise of the Snopeses, that he has given in to them and perhaps even found in them his own most important value, endurance.¹³

¹³Michael Harrington, "An Uneven Addition to a Magnificent Whole," Commonweal, LXVI (21 June, 1957), pp. 306-307.

He even goes so far as to suggest that perhaps Faulkner will find in the Snopeses a new beginning and will accept the end of the old world. In view of all the evidence, such conclusions seem dumbfounding. Faulkner could not spell out more clearly his contempt for all that the Snopeses stand for and his alarm for the apathy with which their rise is accepted.

The resolution in The Town does not assume a "happy ending." Gavin realizes that there is suffering ahead for Linda:

"That's her fate. She is doomed to anguish and to bear it, doomed to one passion and one anguish and all the rest of her life to bear it, as some people are doomed from birth to be robbed or betrayed or murdered."¹⁴

Life is a battlefield in which the victors are those who, like Dilsey, "endure." The Bundrens' pilgrimage to Jefferson with their dead mother is a saga of endurance. None of them becomes president of the bank but their heroism is an end in itself. That they are defeated is not a defence of nihilism, but an acknowledgement of the presence of evil in the world. Darl Bundren and Quentin Compson go mad trying to discover the answer behind the seeming irrationality of the universe. Faulkner seems to say: seek not--accept and endure. But endurance does not imply passivity. We must accept the fact that we are atoning for the past and all we

¹⁴The Town, p. 351.

can do is live with courage and be willing to become involved with other human beings.

Many critics have protested that Faulkner is overly-preoccupied with sex, and sex in its most repulsive forms like rape, incest, and perversion. But Faulkner is not setting up these abnormalities as a standard, but as a protest against what genuine love has degenerated into in this generation. Montgomery Ward Snopes's peep-show is symbolic of the vicarious back-alley sex that has replaced real feeling between men and women. Eula's and Flem's marriage represents "waste" for it is doomed to be barren. To balance it, Faulkner reveals the genuine affection between Chick's mother and father. It is of particular significance that Maggie is willing to aid Gavin in his fight against the Snopeses.

The particular evil that the modern world is faced with is the Snopeses. Ratliff says: ". . . we got them now; they're ourn now."¹⁵ In Southern terms it is the price the South is paying for the crime of slavery. Slavery made the Civil War inevitable and the despair and poverty of the defeat spawned the Snopeses. In broader terms, Snopesism represents the non-spiritual, mechanistic forces

¹⁵Ibid., p. 102.

in life which reflect what Rosa in Absalom, Absalom describes as, "that sickness somewhere at the prime foundation of this factual scheme."¹⁶

Faulkner's novels have impact because he describes a milieu he knows intimately. But Yoknapatawpha County is only a spatial background against which his characters move. By making Flem Snopes a larger-than-life figure, Faulkner universalizes his meaning. He invests the victims of Snopesism with an atmosphere of tragedy. The forces pitted against them are almost invincible, and the easy course, rather than to face this "maelstrom of unbearable reality,"¹⁷ is to take to drink or day-dreams like Hightower or to become a Snopes like Jason.

Faulkner's sympathetic treatment of the type of personality suggested by Hightower and by the speculative Gavin indicates that perhaps there is much of these men in Faulkner himself. In the Thirties, leftist critics accused him of political irresponsibility. Indeed, Maxwell Geismar went so far as to suggest that he might even be planting the seeds of Fascism:

¹⁶William Faulkner, Absalom, Absalom (New York: The Modern Library, 1936), p. 143.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 150.

For it is in the larger tradition of reversionary, neo-pagan, and neurotic discontent (from which Fascism stems) that much of Faulkner's writing must be placed--the anti-civilized revolt arising out of modern social evils, nourished by ignorance of their true nature, and which succumbs to malice as their solution.¹⁸

Such charges are absurd. Like Hightower and Gavin, by inclination Faulkner loves to brood lovingly over the grandeurs of the past. By conscience he is driven to speak out against the evil and injustice of modern life. This may account for his long stubborn withdrawal from the hurly-burly of life which was broken recently by a series of courageous statements against segregation.

Actually Flem Snopes as a character does not really triumph, even in a limited sense. He is impotent and a hollow man. He will never have the love of wife, child, or friend. Acting out of self-interest, he cuts himself off from other human beings. In setting up a code of his own, he makes himself a pariah. His pursuit of respectability will never leave him contented for he finds that it is something that he will have to work for day and night. He personifies the disorders which T.S. Eliot decries in After Strange Gods:

¹⁸Maxwell Geismar, Writers in Crisis (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin Co., 1942), p. 182.

. when morals cease to be a matter of tradition and orthodoxy . . . and when each man is to elaborate his own, then personality becomes a thing of alarming importance.¹⁹

Faulkner believes that man is capable of much good. In a speech to his daughter's graduating class at Pine Manor Junior College, Wellesley, Massachusetts, in June, 1953, he said:

It is not men in the mass who can and will save Man. It is Man himself, created in the image of God so that he shall have the power and the will to choose right from wrong, and so be able to save himself because he is worth saving--Man, the individual, men and women, who will refuse always to be tricked or frightened or bribed into surrendering, not just the right but the duty too, to choose between justice and injustice, courage and cowardice, sacrifice and greed, pity and self; who will believe always not only in the right of man to be free of injustice and rapacity and deception, but the duty and responsibility of man to see that justice and pity and compassion are done. So, never be afraid. Never be afraid to raise your voice for honesty and truth and compassion, against injustice and lying and greed.²⁰

It is even possible for a Snopes to triumph over being a Snopes. Wallstreet Panic Snopes, with the help of his teacher and his wife, succeeds in business through simple honesty and industry. Gavin Stevens wonders why his

¹⁹T.S. Eliot, After Strange Gods (London, Faber and Faber, 1934), p. 54.

²⁰Quoted by William Van O'Connor, The Tangled Fire of William Faulkner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1954), p. 157.

wife has not persuaded him to change his name. Ratliff tells him:

"She dont want to change it. She jest wants to live it down. She aint trying to drag by the hair out of Snopes, to escape from Snopes. She's got to purify Snopes itself. She's got to beat Snopes from the inside."²¹

And the fierce little wife screams civilization's protest against the Snopeses:

"Them damn Snopeses! God damn them! God damn them!"²²

²¹The Town, p. 149.

²²Ibid., p. 148.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis has sought to examine Snopesism, in all its significant aspects, in the novels of William Faulkner. Snopesism has been defined as the unprincipled pursuit of self-aggrandizement, and is personified by Faulkner in his delineation of the Snopes family. The thesis has concentrated mainly on the figure of Flem Snopes because he is the quintessential Snopes.

Chapter I is an examination of the Southern background, largely from an historical and economic point of view. The purpose of this survey is to trace the rise of the "rednecks", poor tenant-farmers, to positions of prominence in the Southern States. The Snopeses are typical "rednecks". Faulkner regards the Snopeses as the punishment incurred by the South for the original sin of slavery. He believes that slavery made the Civil War inevitable. The ancestors of the Snopeses were the "bushwhackers", those who sat on the fence during the War and exploited both sides for their own advantage. After the War, they were able to acquire land from the impoverished aristocracy and gradually gained economic power in the region. Although this sequence of events is not spelled out in the novels dealing with the Snopes family, it is implicit in the account of their rise. A study of the earlier novels is necessary in order to understand this development fully. One must also understand

that members of the old order such as the Compsons and the Sartoris have become so spiritually impoverished that the energetic and unprincipled Snopeses have no difficulty in defeating them.

Chapter II is a study of the rootlessness of the Snopeses. This characteristic is contrasted with the affection for their land felt by the members of the old order. Although the Snopeses are born in the South, they feel no attachment to their native region; this is borne out by the fact that their only part in the Civil War was to use it for their own advantage. Nor do they feel attachment to or responsibility for other people, even their own kin. Most important of all, they do not share common ethical standards with their neighbours since they are governed only by self-interest. This alienation from other human beings and from their environment determines every other aspect of the Snopeses.

Chapter III illustrates the various facets of the most characteristic feature of the Snopeses, their rapacity. Their ruling passion is a predatory lust for money and power and, in this pursuit, any means is justified. They are dishonest and will cheat anyone with a cold impersonality. They are cunning and use guile to trick their neighbours. And they are utterly ruthless in getting what they want.

Chapter IV is a discussion of a more sophisticated element of Snopesism, the quest for respectability. This is the dominant theme of The Town. Once Flem Snopes has acquired the money he wants, he turns with the same intensity to the pursuit of respectability. This is to be attained by the acquisition of what seem to be the appurtenances of status: certain clothing; a certain type of home and furnishings; a certain marriage. It also includes a name to which no scandal is attached, a difficult task when the name happens to be Snopes.

In Chapter V the mechanical aspect of the Snopeses is studied. Faulkner emphasizes their non-human qualities by references to their animal-like appearance and by metallic imagery. Their lack of emotional life is brought out in a comparison of them with the warm-blooded people among whom they live. Their alienation from nature is also stressed.

In Chapter VI, entitled "The Observers," a further attempt is made to understand Snopesism by examining the people who watch them or are victimized by them. In The Hamlet, the principle observer is Ratliff, the itinerant sewing-machine salesman. He is warm and human, the anti-thesis of Flem Snopes. In The Town, Faulkner introduces two more observers, the lawyer, Gavin Stevens, and his nephew, Charles Mallison. It is shown that Faulkner makes

the point that Snopesism is able to flourish as long as these people remain simply observers, as long as they do not fight actively against the Snopeses.

The Conclusion seeks to show that the implications of Snopesism reach far beyond the borders of Yoknapatawpha County. For Faulkner, the Snopeses represent the unprincipled materialism of modern life. Many critics have regarded Faulkner as a nihilist in that the world he portrays seems to offer nothing but destruction and annihilation of traditional values. But the novels dominated by the Snopeses are shown to be attempts to express the condition man degenerates into when he lives only for self-gratification. Snopesism symbolizes the non-spiritual features of life which can be defeated only if man is willing to live with courage and integrity. Those critics who have accused Faulkner of nihilism are refuted by his insistence on the good of which man is capable.

APPENDIX

The Mansion, the final novel¹ in the saga of the Snopes family, was published just before the completion of this thesis. Fortunately, Faulkner has changed or added nothing to invalidate the conclusions of the thesis.

In this book, Faulkner has tied together many of the loose ends and unfinished plots of previous works. Characters other than the Snopeses, who were central to some of the novels but who have played little or no part in those dealing exclusively with the Snopeses, are introduced in order to stress the homogeneity of Yoknapatawpha.

Faulkner seems to have lost interest in Flem Snopes. "The sound and the fury" which were aroused in him in his depiction of Flem in The Hamlet and The Town, seem to have evaporated. He has promised a trilogy about the Snopeses and he has fulfilled his promise--but it is a disappointing final chapter.

Flem has reached the utmost level of success through his ruthless ambition. He is president of the bank and owner of the largest house in town. His rootlessness is still characteristic of him for he inhabits the shell of the mansion but will never be a part of it.

¹Cf. Introduction, p. v supra.

There is only one item within its walls to stamp it with his enigmatic personality. This is a small wooden projection built on the mantelpiece of the dining room. Here he props his feet night after night, chewing steadily, the wide-brimmed black hat always on his head. What he thinks about remains a mystery for there seem to be no more worlds to conquer.

The rapacity that led him from a poor tenant-farm to the pinnacle of respectability is curiously absent in this novel. There is simply no more reason to trick or cheat. Even Gavin Stevens and Ratliff are no longer interested in him for he has ceased to be a threat to the community. One almost feels a little pity for Flem because there is nothing left in life for him.

He is still the mechanical man, undefined, devisualized, inhuman. But this negative quality is one that can be exploited by the novelist only to a limited degree. Flem's relations with other people remain as cold and impersonal as in the previous novels. His step-daughter, Linda, returns from New York to live with him but they never address a word to each other. But even this relationship has little significant value because Flem has so little connection with the main thread of the story told in The Mansion.

All that seems left for Flem is death, and without emotion he awaits his nemesis. It comes in the form of Mink Snopes, whom Flem could have rescued from imprisonment thirty-eight years before. Actually The Mansion is more the story of Mink Snopes than that of Flem, who dominated the two earlier novels.

As was pointed out in the chapter entitled The Mechanical Man, Mink is not a typical Snopes for he is capable of passion.² His passion for revenge is so dominant that he waits out his long prison term obsessed by one aim--to kill Flem as soon as he is free. A large part of the novel is devoted to an account of the attempts by the other characters to circumvent this crime. Gavin Stevens even goes to Flem to warn him of his danger. Flem's typical laconic reply is, "Much obliged,"³ almost the only words he utters in the entire course of the novel. Perhaps Flem himself has impassively accepted such a fate as inevitable. In the second before his death he watches his murderer "immobile and even detached too."⁴

At Flem's funeral the Snopeses are assembled for the last time. Gavin Stevens recognizes them:

²Cf. p. 72 supra.

³William Faulkner, The Mansion (New York: Random House, 1959), p. 380.

⁴Ibid., p. 415.

They were Snopeses; he had never seen them before but they were incontrovertible: not alien at all: simply identical, not so much in expression as in position, attitude; he thought rapidly, in something like that second of simple panic when you are violently wakened They're like wolves come to look at the trap where another bigger wolf, the boss wolf, the head wolf, what Ratliff would call the bull wolf, died; if maybe there was not a shred or scrap of hide still snared in it.⁵

And then they are gone. They disappear from Yoknapatawpha as silently and as mysteriously as they first appeared.

The final impression of The Mansion is that Faulkner has forced his great talent to write a novel which lacks the passion of his greatest work. But why? Surely the qualities associated with the Snopeses are as much a part of life as they ever were. Has Faulkner tired of this family precisely because they represent the spirit of negation? One wonders whether his imaginative vision will now turn to the more positive and creative aspects of life.

⁵Ibid., p. 421.

