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FAULKNER

Three Studies

Dorsch Greer Dirksen

Part II

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*William Faulkner's Snopes
Family: The Hamlet, The
Town, and The Mansion*



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Robert L. Dorsch

*An Interpretation of the Central Themes
in the Work of William Faulkner*

Dorothy D. Greer

*Dilsey and Lucas: Faulkner's Use of the
Negro as a Gauge of Moral Character*

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FOREWORD

The attraction of the work of William Faulkner has increased since his death, July 6, 1962, as the world laments the passing of one of its most honored authors. These studies originated as master's theses in the Department of English at Kansas State Teachers College, Emporia, and have been edited for this publication with two ideas in mind: their relevancy to the whole scope of Faulknerian scholarship, and their illumination of a particular problem or complex passage in his work. Mr. Dorsch's study proposes a unity in Faulkner's work beyond the familial and geographical boundaries of Yoknapatawpha; Mrs. Greer investigates one facet of Faulkner's complex handling of race; Mrs. Dirksen offers a sort of thematic guidebook through Faulkner's comic epic, the Snopes trilogy. The Dorsch and Greer studies are published as Volume XI, Number 1, the Dirksen study as Volume XI, Number 2 of *The Emporia State Research Studies*.

Emporia, Kansas
October 25, 1962

G.D.W.

The cover portrait of William Faulkner is by Constance Denniston.

The First of the Snopeses

by

Sherland N. Dirksen*

When William Faulkner in the late fall of 1959 allowed Mink Snopes to kill cousin Flem in *The Mansion*, he brought to a close a chronicle of the Snopes family which had been nearly thirty-four years in the making.¹ This saga, which is imbedded as a major component in the larger Yoknapatawpha saga, came to the public first in episodes from Faulkner's early novels or from his various short stories, but it is chiefly contained in three novels: *The Hamlet*, *The Town*, and *The Mansion*. This trilogy, dealing with the conquest of Yoknapatawpha County by the peculiar and innumerable tribe of Snopeses, is also the story of the rise of Flem Snopes from poor-white tenant farmer to clerk in a country store to president of the Sartoris bank.

Critics have already made a substantial contribution toward the meaning of the Snopes saga. The interpretations cited here are not definitive but are those of the major critics of Faulkner. George O'Donnell in 1939 took the initial steps when he claimed that in Faulkner's mythology there are only two kinds of characters:

They are Sartorises or Snopeses, whatever the family names may be. And in the spiritual geography of Mr. Faulkner's work there are two worlds: the Sartoris world and the Snopes world. In all of his successful books, he is exploring the two worlds in detail, dramatizing the inevitable conflict between them.

It is a universal conflict. The Sartorises act traditionally; that is to say, they always act with an ethically responsible will. They represent vital morality, humanism. Being anti-traditional the Snopeses are immoral from the Sartoris point of view. But the Snopeses do not recognize this point of view; acting only for self-interest, they acknowledge no ethical duty. Really, then, they are amoral; they represent naturalism or animalism.²

Malcolm Cowley, some years later, accepted O'Donnell's thesis but broadened it so that it became less a simple antagonism between the good and the bad; he noted that the Sartorises themselves are stained with evil before the Snopeses appeared on the scene. His concise summary of the

* Mrs. Dirksen is an English instructor in the Tucson, Arizona, Public Schools. This study originated as a Master's thesis at Kansas State Teachers College.

1. Faulkner, in the preface to *The Mansion*, gives 1925 as the year in which the Snopes saga was conceived and begun.

2. George O'Donnell, "Faulkner's Mythology," *Kenyon Review*, I (Summer, 1939), p. 286.

Yoknapatawpha theme indicates the place of the Snopeses in the larger saga:

The deep South was settled partly by aristocrats like the Sartoris clan and partly by new men like Colonel Sutpen. Both types of planters were determined to establish a lasting social order on the land they had seized from the Indians (that is, to leave sons behind them). They had the virtue of living single-mindedly by a fixed code; but there was also an inherent guilt in their "design," their way of life; it was slavery that put a curse on the land and brought about the Civil War. After the War was lost . . . they tried to restore "the design." But they no longer had the strength to achieve more than a partial success. As time passed . . . the men of the old order found that they had to fight against a new exploiting class descended from the landless whites of slavery days. In this struggle between the clan of Sartoris and the unscrupulous tribe of Snopes, the Sartorises were defeated in advance by a traditional code that kept them from using the weapons of the enemy. As a price of victory, however, the Snopeses had to serve the mechanized civilization of the North, which was morally impotent in itself, but which, with the aid of its Southern retainers, ended by corrupting the Southern nation.³

Cowley, like O'Donnell, saw no reason to extend the meaning of Snopes beyond the South, but Robert Penn Warren pushed the Snopes perimeter much farther out, insisting that Faulkner's legend was a commentary, not on the South only, but on the whole modern world, "a legend of our general plight and problem." He also made clear that Snopes does not equate poor-white, that there are "good" poor-whites like V. K. Ratliff, the sewing machine salesman, who is one of Faulkner's chief spokesmen in the saga, and that some Sartorises like Jason Compson adopt Snopesism to become as mean as Flem.⁴

In 1959 prior to the completion of *The Mansion*, Hyatt Howe Waggoner encompassed this previous interpretation in his analysis when he referred to Snopesism as

. . . avarice married to pure animality. Flem is moved only by greed When he marries Eula, he is reinforcing that side of him which is merely animal; in his human attribute he neither wants nor needs any reinforcement and will tolerate no rivals. He defrauds other Snopeses as placidly as he defrauds the rest of Frenchman's Bend. He will find Eula a useful adjunct.

Flem Snopes is a Horatio Alger hero, rising by shrewd attention to business from rags to riches. He parodies the American dream, caricatures the American success myth. He has ambition, go-ahead, gumption, a head for figures: everything deemed necessary for success in Ben Franklin-Dale Carnegie popular philosophy. He is rewarded by riches, as Franklin's Poor Richard had prophesied. He keeps his eye on the main chance and looks for number one.⁵

Waggoner stated that the analysis of Snopesism is Faulkner's most effective attack on modern popular culture. But he realized that, until "the

3. Malcolm Cowley, "Introduction to *The Portable Faulkner*," p. 14.

4. Robert Penn Warren, "The Snopes World," *Kenyon Review*, III (Spring, 1941), pp. 253-7.

5. Hyatt Howe Waggoner, *William Faulkner: From Jefferson to the World*, pp. 184-5.

third part of Snopeses" was available, there could be no complete analysis.⁶

With this basic interpretation, one can hardly disagree. But since it was formulated before *The Mansion* or Faulkner's 1954 *Holiday* article on Mississippi, it is necessarily incomplete. With the appearance of *The Mansion*, which Faulkner says is the last chapter of the chronicle,⁷ the evidence, it can be assumed, is complete; and it is possible now to add considerably to the earlier critical estimates. Faulkner's own statements in the *Holiday* article confirm the validity of this consensus. He gives approximately the same historical explanation for the origin of the Snopeses, adding one class of men anterior to the Sartorises, the "tall men," who came down from the Appalachian highland, penetrating the wilderness, leaving little mark upon it, opening the way for the aristocratic planters who subdued the land and ruled it before the war. He makes it clear that the Sartorises, because of their own moral taint, bear an important share of responsibility for the rise of Snopesism, which like the Civil War, the defeat, the agony of Reconstruction, is part of the expiation for slavery.⁸

This thesis will attempt to show that the rise of the Snopes family is not only a destruction of the Compsons, the Sartorises, and the De Spains, who are, on the Southern scene, the protagonists of the traditional order, with its antique virtues and weaknesses of honor and courage and pride and nostalgia, but an allegory of power—a power which is dangerous to society, not only from without, but from within. The Snopeses are the rapacious, inhumanly opportunistic, careerist hustlers of peasant origin who, from their corner of Yoknapatawpha County at Frenchman's Bend, have crawled into the main orbit of life (Jefferson, the county seat) and, by sharp dealings, have taken over. They are the rootless bushwhackers whose natures are untouched by any of the graces or arts of a humane culture and whose adeptness at converting into a dollar every exploitable opportunity is their defining quality. The members of this tribe represent, as it is said of Popeye, the gangster hero of *Sanctuary*, "that vicious depthless quality of stamped tin"⁹ which emblemizes for Faulkner all those mechanical, dehumanizing forces of the modern world by which a traditional society has been destroyed. It is these people who figure in the trilogy as its terrifying protagonists and who appear to be twentieth century Machiavellians.

The word "Snopes" carries an unpleasant connotation. As Harry Campbell and Ruel Foster have pointed out, about fifty per cent of the words beginning with "sn" in the dictionary, such as *snake*, *snob*, *sneer*, *sneak*, produce unpleasant reactions. And the name, Flem Snopes, evokes

6. *Loc. cit.*

7. William Faulkner, Preface to *The Mansion*.

8. William Faulkner, "Mississippi," *Holiday*, XV (April, 1954), pp. 35-36.

9. Cowley, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

a doubly revolting connotation.¹⁰ Faulkner undoubtedly was aware of the suggestiveness of Snopes as the name for this clan, most of the members of which are essentially ruthless and amoral or deviate in other ways from the established norm. Many of the Snopeses are oversimplified and overly caricatured. On this point, Faulkner says:

They were simply an invention of mine to tell a story of man in his struggle. That I was not trying to say, this is the sort of folks we raise in my part of Mississippi at all. That they were simply over-emphasized, burlesqued if you like, which Mr. Dickens spent a lot of his time doing, for a valid to him and to me reason, which was to tell a story in an amusing, dramatic, tragic, or comical way.¹¹

From the family name is derived the word "Snopesism," as used by other Faulkner characters and critics. The word refers to the amoral, unscrupulous methods of advancement employed by Flem and his family-followers to gain materialistic power and suggests the resultant threat to other people.

The last two novels in the saga add considerably to one's knowledge of the Snopes family, showing who they are and what they are like. Faulkner in presenting them is like Homer, who in the *Iliad* conveys the sense of a large battle involving hundreds of men by describing in concrete detail a series of individual combats. Faulkner usually focuses upon one Snopes at a time, but simultaneously gives the reader a sense of being invaded or surrounded by a silent, insinuating horde of which this one Snopes is only one representative. While most of the clan are sharply individualized, they are, at the same time, treated en masse, blurred into a species which has only generic characteristic. People have trouble remembering the kinship of one Snopes to another. "They were just Snopeses, like colonies of rats or termites are just rats and termites."¹²

The ruthlessness, the predatory aggressiveness of the clan is underlined by Ratliff's comment that

. . . apparently all Snopeses are male . . . as if Snopes were some profound and incontrovertible hermaphroditic principle for the furtherance of a race, a species, the principle always vested physically in the male, any anonymous conceptive or gestative organ drawn into that radius to conceive and spawn, repeating that male principle and then vanishing.¹³

Irving Howe, another of Faulkner's major critics, suggests that the Snopeses closely resemble the *muzhiks*, the new peasant leaders of Russia, ". . . uncouth and ignorant yet vigorous and ambitious," who took the place of the old landlords after the 1917 revolution.¹⁴ The Snopeses burrow under the surface of society, and they use bourgeois commercialism as

10. Harry M. Campbell and Ruel E. Foster, *William Faulkner: A Critical Appraisal*, p. 104.

11. Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner, ed., *Faulkner in the University*, p. 282.

12. William Faulkner, *The Town*, p. 40.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 136.

14. Irving Howe, *William Faulkner: A Critical Study*, pp. 60-61.

their chief weapon in their attack on the existing power structure of the state.

The leader of the pack, "the bull wolf," as Ratliff calls him, is Flem, who is pure Snopes—a radiant center of Snopesism, shedding his dark light in all directions upon his lesser kin, whom he manipulates in one way or another as his minions. During most of his life, Flem's sole compelling motive is to make money, and at terrible cost he amasses considerable wealth. But he

. . . sacrificed all his life for money, sacrificed all the other rights and passions and hopes which make up the sum of a man and his life Too hard for it, all his life for it, knowing at the same time that as long as life lasted he could never for one second relax his vigilance, not just to add to it but simply to keep, hang on to, what he already had, had so far accumulated. Amassing it by terrible and picayune nickel by nickel, having learned soon, almost simultaneously probably, that he would never have any other method of gaining it save by simple, ruthless antlike industry¹⁵

The sum of the qualities of Snopesism is exemplified by the amoral, devious, unprincipled Flem himself, dedicated only to the acquisition of money and power.

If Faulkner has made one man the symbol of these characteristics, he is careful to suggest their universal application. Snopesism, it is clear, represents a danger to society. Flem Snopes achieves his greatest successes at the expense of people who usually act in accordance with an ethical code, but who yield to the temptation to adopt Snopes's morality at some moment that allows Flem to get the best of them. Flem Snopes got his start in both Frenchman's Bend and in Jefferson when someone tried to cheat him but was, instead, taken in. He married his wife Eula for a price, paid by her father, old Will Varner, the ruling hand of Frenchman's Bend. He permitted the continuance of the affair between his wife and Manfred de Spain, the mayor of Jefferson, since it offered him a way of ultimately destroying both of them. Therefore, through the years, this back-country funambulist of guile and duplicity and sharp practice went on, from the extreme poverty of share cropping until he became the effective master of the Jefferson scene. This account of Flem's activities explains what has happened to that vanished world of the Sartorises and the Compsons and the McCaslins in which men, however imperfect, yet acknowledged their accountability to codes of honor and virtue: the old order had been beset by the Snopeses.

The Snopes family appear as early as the Civil War and as late as 1929, so that the narrative of Flem Snopes's ascendancy in *The Hamlet* has ramifications extending both backward and forward into the cycle. In *Sartoris*, published in the year 1929 and which relates the recklessness of Bayard Sartoris and his determination to get rid of himself, a Snopes

15. *The Town*, p. 263.

(Byron?), who is a teller in the Sartoris Bank, writes obscene letters to Narcissa Benbow, a frequent visitor to the Sartoris family. With a brooding atmosphere of obscene and bestial decadence overhanging it, *Sanctuary*, with its Mississippi hills setting and its poor-white moonshiners, half-wits, and prostitutes, was published in 1931. Senator Clarence Snopes figures prominently in its Memphis brothel scenes, and Virgil and Fonzo Snopes stay at a house of prostitution without knowing it as such, while they attend barber college. This naivete is one of the weaknesses of Snopesism, for it hinders the advance to materialistic power. But it is also a malicious innocence that becomes a strength to allow the Snopeses to enter places in which others would fear to go. In 1938, *The Unvanquished* was completed, depicting the life of the unvanquished Sartoris family on their Mississippi plantation during the latter days of the Civil War and period of Reconstruction. In this collection of short stories, previously published in magazines, Ab Snopes, a Civil War bushwhacker and horse thief and father of Flem, collaborates with Rosa Millard, Colonel Sartoris's mother-in-law, in duping the Yankee Army at mule-trading. Rosa's conning with Ab represents the beginning of the new, and the end of the old order.

Colonel Sartoris Snopes, Flem's younger brother, appears in the short story, "Barn Burning," but not in *The Hamlet*; Ratliff simply mentions that ". . . there was another too, a little one."¹⁶ Colonel Sartoris Snopes—Sarty—is forced by his father to adhere to the kinship code which, in this case, includes arson and perjury. Ab senses that the boy did not want to perjure himself at a trial and tells him, "You got to learn to stick to your own blood. . . . Dont you know all they wanted was a chance to get at me because I had them beat?"¹⁷ Later, Ab instructs his wife to hold Sarty while he burns another barn, but the boy breaks loose and warns the owner. Unable to change his father's warped views of truth and justice, Sarty can only attempt to prevent further injustice and, then, leave his family for a life of his own. He is one Snopes with a sense of moral value.

Not all the Snopeses, of course, illustrate the nature of Snopesism. Many do not succeed at all. They lack initiative, drive, intelligence, or self-control. Eck, the blacksmith, is stupid; he is used by Flem, and it is he, along with Sarty and Wallstreet Panic, who are the only Snopeses ever to express pity for anyone, even for another Snopes: he gives Ike, the idiot Snopes, a toy cow, simply stating as his reason, "I felt sorry for him."¹⁸ I. O. is ineffectual, scattered, and without concentration: he does not rise in the world. Ike, the idiot who is in love with a cow, is the only Snopes capable of love, so far as is known: he will not be successful, either. Mink is a murderer, stupid enough, as his cousin tells him, to get caught. The Snopeses are a varied clan, united chiefly by their admiration

16. William Faulkner, *The Hamlet*, p. 14.

17. Cowley, *op. cit.*, p. 503.

18. *The Hamlet*, p. 272.

for and dependence upon Flem. He is the successful one, the one who made good.

Faulkner's trilogy makes it possible to see clearly the whole pattern of Snopesism. The entire design receives its inception in *The Hamlet*, is continued in *The Town*, and is completed in *The Mansion*. *The Hamlet* deals with the beginning of this process—the invasion of Frenchman's Bend spearheaded by Flem—around the turn of the century. To escape the poverty of his father's kind of life as a sharecropper, Flem becomes a store clerk. By shrewdness, by ruthlessness, by permitting his relatives to infest the village, Flem prospered in Frenchman's Bend until he had dominated it and had sucked it dry. *The Hamlet* ends when he sets out for Jefferson, a new world to conquer.

In *The Town*, Faulkner chronicles the history of Snopesism in Jefferson from Flem's arrival around 1908 as part-owner of a little side-street restaurant, until he becomes bank president in 1927. In Jefferson, however, his progress differs from his success in Frenchman's Bend. His cold-blooded, unprincipled ambition remains the same, but the differences between the two communities and the two times are reflected in the changes he makes in his methods. Flem soon discovers that, to achieve power, he must have respectability. He had brought along his numerous tribe of cousins to Jefferson as he had to Frenchman's Bend, but he ruthlessly sacrifices his kinsmen when their activities threaten his precarious respectability.

The Mansion concludes the trilogy in the aftermath of World War II. Herein, Flem Snopes meets his end at the hands of his own cousin, Mink.

Because the trilogy encompasses the whole design of the Snopes family, one should attempt to analyze the rise of the clan in Yoknapatawpha County in *The Hamlet*, *The Town*, and *The Mansion* to show that Snopesism is Faulkner's allegory of economic and materialistic power. Since Flem embodies the total characteristics of Snopesism and since his rise forms the basic framework for the Snopes trilogy, one may concentrate upon his life as the main substance of this study.

The Hamlet

Twenty miles or so southeast of Jefferson in the rich river-bottom country, Frenchman's Bend has been the original site of a vast pre-Civil War plantation and represents the farming countryside. The place is now merely the focus of country life. There is no longer any personal code to justify the brutal uses of power, for, by this time, the aristocracy was subordinated and dead, and its forms were empty. It no longer has any effective social influence. Money now rules; not money as the counter for the exchange of man's labor, but money itself, the sterile and bare sign of material force. Or, rather, *The Hamlet* shows the beginning of an advance towards the state where money rules, where materialism usurps the sovereignty, first of God, and then of the civil state.

When Flem came to Frenchman's Bend in *The Hamlet*, Snopesism had already preceded him in the person of Will Varner, ". . . thin as a fence rail and almost as long, with reddish-gray hair and mustaches and little hard bright innocently blue eyes . . . shrewd secret and merry, of a Rabelaisian turn of mind."¹⁹ He owns or holds mortgage on almost all the good land in the county, owns all the business in Frenchman's Bend, and is farmer, usurer, veterinarian, and political boss.

Varner may be compared with the robber barons of the past. He is shrewd and capable enough to have built and maintained his baronetcy, but he has human failings. Laziness prompts him to place responsibility in the hands of his less competent son; he observes a double standard of morals—one for himself and one for other people. In action, he moves rapidly and purposefully, but he is too inclined to "wash his hands" of matters which others can handle. His money and power provide him economic independence which the descendants of aristocratic families have lost, but he evidences no interest in class distinctions, morals, or aesthetics. His supremacy is based solely on money and the power and ease which it brings, and he maintains this position through the comfortable knowledge that most people are neither so shrewd nor so ambitious as he. However, when confronted by a man who possesses comparable ability in addition to singleness of purpose and no human failings, he loses at his own game.

Varner lost to Flem Snopes, the leading exponent of Snopesism. To the rest of the Snopeses, Flem is

". . . the one Snopes of them all who had risen, broken free, had either been born with or had learned, taught himself, the knack or the luck to cope with, hold his own, handle the They or Them"²⁰

To others he represents the personification of unscrupulous greed. Faulkner describes him as frog-like,

19. William Faulkner, *The Hamlet*, p. 5.

20. William Faulkner, *The Town*, p. 9.

a thick squat soft man . . . 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 someone of a radically different school or perhaps by one who had only time to clap into the center of the face a frantic and desperate warning.²¹

His appearance is exceptional only in that his nose seems to serve as a warning of his character and in that he sees everything without seeming to look at anything.

Flem's outstanding characteristic is a singleness of purpose, that of attaining wealth and power. Nothing stops his rise. His impenetrable blandness, shrewdness, sense of good timing, and genius for manipulation, added to his singleness of purpose, produce a perfect business man. These qualities combined with his immorality and lack of any basic humanity produce an inhuman and dangerous monster. In Frenchman's Bend, Flem attaches himself to the wealthiest people and learns their business secrets; he even dresses after them (Jody's white shirts and Will's black bow tie).

Flem's father, Ab, is the first Snopes to appear in the trilogy. He is a smaller-than-average man with ". . . a pair of eyes of a cold opaque gray between shaggy graying irascible brows," with a voice ". . . not deliberately harsh so much as rusty from infrequent use," a man who has a reputation for barn burning.²² Ratliff says that Ab "aint naturally mean. He's just soured." Then, Ratliff recounts events which reveal Ab to be the same Snopes who had not fought in the Civil War but had been a booty hunter, who had betrayed Rosa Millard and, as a consequence, had been caught and beaten by Rosa's grandson and forced to hide from John Sartoris when the latter returned from the war. Ratliff glosses the story and also adds a tall tale of Ab as a horse trader in his younger days, showing him to be an extremely unlucky man. However, the Ab of *The Unvanquished*, if not "naturally mean," was at least naturally self-justifying, evasive, and none too honest. He sought to profit from the war rather than to fight with his neighbors in a common cause. In the later story, "Barn Burning," and in *The Hamlet*, Ab still thinks of himself and family as opposed to everyone else, but, by this time, he bitterly asserts himself in attempts to retain his pride, the only thing he has left. His arson is a protest against the socio-economic group who, he feels, looks down upon him and continually persecutes him. His and his family's lives are a progression of moves from one over-farmed rent place to another, where they work not for themselves but for someone who owns them "body and soul." Ab, extremely sensitive to personal slight and presumed injustice, reacts against either one in the only manner which he can command by committing arson, and is forced to "move on" regularly.

21. *The Hamlet*, p. 52.

22. *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8

Even more than other tenant farmers, he has no place in society, no hopes for success, no friends, and no happiness. He cannot make the best of what he has because “. . . his ferocious conviction in the rightness of his own actions.”²³ causes him to have a perverse, antagonistic attitude. Nor can he even accept a gift from Ratliff, once a friend, without asking, “You brought it to me? . . . What for?”²⁴ In Ab’s lifelong frustration, one can see the basis for the determination of the later Snopeses to succeed.

When Ab Snopes’s family moves to Frenchman’s Bend and becomes Will Varner’s tenants, Flem uses his father’s arsonist tendencies to blackmail Jody Varner, into hiring him to work in the village store. Jody, in contrast with his father, is “prime, bulging, and slightly thyrodic,”²⁵ an invincible bachelor who already promises a large belly but who now manages to “. . . postulate something of the trig and unattached cavalier.”²⁶ He sets himself apart from other men by wearing a “. . . glazed collarless white shirt fastened at the neck with a heavy gold collar button beneath a suit of good black broadcloth.”²⁷

Jody Varner learns about Ab Snopes’s part in the burning of the Harris barn after he has promised to rent his land to Ab. At first, Jody plans to take advantage of this information to force Ab to leave the farm once the corn has been grown. When he learns from Ratliff that Ab has been involved in a second barn burning episode, he is so terror-stricken that he readily agrees to Flem’s proposition. He rationalizes Flem’s salary by considering it fire insurance. Through this initial toehold, Flem gains control of the village and of most of the Varner interests.

From his vantage point, Flem upsets the feudal order and disregards the traditions and expectations of the country folk by replacing Varner’s casual, unsystematized brigandage with a calculated “cost accounting” control. When he worked in the store, Jody often made mistakes, usually in his own favor, but because he gave the farmers long-term credit when they needed it, they expected him to. Flem never gives credit, and he never makes mistakes.

“You mean ain’t no body ever caught him once even?” Ratliff asked.

“No,” Bookwright said. “And folks don’t like it. Otherwise, how can you tell?”

“Sho,” Ratliff said. “How can you?”²⁸

He gains control of all the other Varner industries and interests in the village, including the cotton gin, the blacksmith shop, the store, and many of the surrounding farms, installing in each of these enterprises one of his kinsmen as manager, worker, or tenant farmer. Ratliff, perceiving the

23. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 50.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

27. *Loc. cit.*

28. *Ibid.*, p. 65.

irony of the appearance of the many Snopeses, imagines Jody saying to Flem, when Snopeses start turning up all over the place:

"I want to make one pure and simple demand of you and I want a pure and simple Yes and No for a answer: How many more is there? How much longer is this going on? Just what is it going to cost me to protect one barn full of hay?"²⁹

After Flem has forced Jody to hire him as store clerk, Ratliff observes to Will Varner that there are only two men who can risk fooling with Snopeses, ". . . and just one of them is named Varner and his front name ain't Jody."³⁰ This estimate proves to be accurate as far as Jody is concerned. Flem usurps Jody's position as Uncle Will's second-in-command, and Jody not only does not know how to combat the threat, he does not realize what is occurring until it is too late. When Jody tends the store and Flem replaces him at the cotton gin, the other men notice something in Jody's eyes not previously there. It is a ". . . shadow, something between annoyance and speculation and purest foreknowledge which was not quite bafflement yet but was certainly sober."³¹ These men refer to the episode, later, as the time Flem passed Jody, but Ratliff amends it: "You mean, that was when Jody began to find it out."³²

The best adjective for Jody is *ineffectual*, in contrast with his father and in his contest with Flem Snopes, in his loud and violent concern with his sister's sexual behavior and, consequently, the family name. He attempts to copy aristocratic mannerisms in his dress and in his insistence that his sister be a lady, school-tutored and chaste, but there is no evidence that he understands even what these things indicate. Will Varner advanced because he understood people; Jody, who concerns himself with superficialities, understands little of people or how to deal with them, and his failure is evident.

Flem's rise from a store clerk to the throne of a feudal domain is completed. This achievement is signified by his being seen sitting in Will Varner's flour barrel chair on the jungle-choked lawn of the Old Frenchman's Place. The undeviating line of Flem's rise is now fixed, but it is not until Eula Varner enters his life that the full significance of his victory is made clear.

A little summary of Eula's comatose career is necessary. She first appears as a ". . . soft ample girl with definite breasts even at thirteen and eyes like cloudy hothouse grapes and a full damp mouth always slightly open."³³ She is one who has grown from infancy to the age of eight moving only from her bed to chairs and to the table in order to eat or to avoid being in the way when house work was being done. She seems even in infancy to perceive that there is nowhere she wants to go, nothing new for

29. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 68.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 61.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 95.

her to do; instead, she exists as if waiting for one important event. When she reaches the age of eight, Jody insists that she go to school, and she does not contest the decision but simply refuses to move until he transports her to and from school on horseback. After five years of this moving about, Jody envisions himself “. . . transporting not only across the village’s horizon but across the embracing proscenium of the entire inhabited world like the sun itself, a kaleidoscopic convolution of mammalian ellipses.”³⁴

Still later, she emanates “that outrageous quality of being, existing, actually on the outside of the garments she wears and not only being unable to help it but not even caring.”³⁵ The school teacher sees her sitting on the steps at recess, eating a cold sweet potato like “. . . one of the unchaste and perhaps even anonymously pregnant immortals eating bread of Paradise on a sunwise slope of Olympus.”³⁶

In her late teens, after having been sought after by all the young men in the county and some outside the county, she meets the swashbuckling Hoake McCarron, and soon she is pregnant. After this incident, which reveals the Varners’ total unawareness of the true nature of their tragedy, Flem’s triumph follows Hoake’s actions, who, fearful of convention, has fled; the Varners, bound by this triumph, must find a husband; and Will chooses the sterile Flem, even to deeding him the Old Frenchman’s Place and purchasing the wedding license. Even in this instance, Will attempts to profit by giving Flem the place as Eula’s dowry. He has earlier described it as “my one mistake. The one thing I ever bought in my life I couldn’t sell to nobody.”³⁷ Therefore, Flem has appropriated the splendid female animal, who has aroused wild hopes, dreams, and passions in every male in the village from thirteen to ninety, as part of a lucrative business deal.

After the marriage and a honeymoon in Texas, where the baby is born, Ratliff sees Eula not as tragic, but as damned, for the earth goddess has been sacrificed to the pagan, and from this point Eula’s face is not only beautiful but “damned”—damned by the rational blindness which, in the words of Ike McCaslin, does not perceive that the land is no man’s to bequeath to another, that as soon as anyone discovered “. . . he could sell it for money, on that instant it ceased ever to have been his . . . and the man who bought it bought nothing.”³⁸

Ratliff, rankled by the sacrifice of Eula, seizes at once on I. O. Snopes’s idiom for the most scathing comment he has yet made:

“Snopes can come and Snopes can go, but Will Varner looks like he is going to snopes forever. Or Varner will Snopes forever—take your pick. What is it the fellow says? off with the old and on with the new;

34. *Ibid.*, p. 100.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 122.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 124.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

38. William Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses*, p. 257.

the old job at the old stand, maybe a new fellow doing the jobbing but it's the same old stand."³⁹

But although Flem has official title to Eula, to her he is nothing. She called him "the man" or ". . . sometimes she said Mr. Snopes, saying it exactly as she would have said Mr. Dog."⁴⁰

Flem's victory is now complete, and he disappears from the scene for a year. The King is gone and life in Frenchman's Bend seeks to renew itself, but the passions which arise during the summer of his absence are perverse, virulent, and destructive. The vague threat to sanity posed by the conflict between Mink Snopes and Jack Houston earlier in the novel now breaks into violence. Mink's loss of a suit for the recovery of his cow that has wandered into Houston's field causes the eruption.

Mink Snopes has all the characteristics of a Snopes, but is perhaps more like Ab than any of the rest of the clan. Virile and proud, defeated in his one attempt to escape a life of drudgery on tenant farms, he follows Flem to Frenchman's Bend but resents any act which he considers unjust and will not be completely guided by Flem. Ratliff's observation about him, ". . . this here seems to be a different kind of Snopes like a cottonmouth is a different kind of snake. So that wasn't the last time this one is going to make his cousin trouble,"⁴¹ prove to be only too true.

Mink murders a wealthy neighbor, Jack Houston, after what he considers to be just provocation, but assures himself that Flem will intervene in the trial and help him. When Flem fails to help, he decides that his remaining life's purpose is to repay Flem.

Mink's murder of Houston and his subsequent attempt to escape are also related to the theme of intra-Snopes depredation and, finally, to Flem Snopes. He kills Houston ostensibly, not only because he impounded his cow, but to maintain his sense of integrity in the face of poverty and defeat just as Ab burned barns. Lump, Flem's successor at the store, not only refuses to help Mink, but actually hinders his escape because of the money in Houston's pocket. Lump cannot forgive Mink for failing to pick his pockets before disposing of the body. "Do you mean to tell me you never even looked? never even looked?"⁴² When Mink is to be sent to the penitentiary for life, Flem violates the most fundamental obligation of the blood relationship by doing nothing although he could have acted to ameliorate the sentence. Flem's absence, in this case, is more significant than his presence could possibly be, for it is Ratliff, who looks after Mink's wife and children while Mink awaits trial in the Jefferson jail.

Never does Mink consider himself responsible for his own actions before trial, or that according to the law he is liable to punishment. He recognizes only that Flem, ". . . the only member of the clan with the

39. *The Hamlet*, p. 164.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 167.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 92.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 238.

power to and the reason to, or what could at least be expected to, extricate him,"⁴³ from the consequences of his act, has failed him. Mink's determination and endurance approach heroic qualities in his achievement of an evil end. Mink, like Flem, combines a singleness of purpose, determination, and amorality, but he lacks detachment. Instead, he is proud, vengeful, and antagonistic.

Unlike Mink, but much less successful than Flem, are I. O. Snopes and Lump Snopes. I. O. is one of the first of Flem's relatives who comes to Frenchman's Bend to work for Flem. He is a thin, undersized man who ". . . talks constantly in a steady stream of worn saws and proverbs usually having no connection with one another nor application to anything else."⁴⁴ He first superintends his cousin Eck in his new role as blacksmith (he is unable to do the work himself); thereafter, he is Mink's legal advisor (he loses the case), a schoolteacher (he leaves town when his first wife arrives), and a mule trader (he is forced by Flem to quit the business). The fact that few of the things he attempts turn out to be completely successful does not deter him from trying any work or scheme which might bring money. Lump succeeds Flem as clerk in Varner's store when Flem and Eula leave for their honeymoon and keeps the position on Flem's return. The villagers first view Lump when Flem enters the store ". . . heeled as by a dog by a man a little smaller than himself but shaped exactly like him."⁴⁵ Ratliff calls him that "Snopes encore," and tells how he was so ashamed and horrified by his given name "Launcelot" that he gladly accepted "Lump" in its place.⁴⁶ Lump does anything for money and helps Flem by obviously perjuring himself at the trial of Armstid versus Snopes. Neither I. O. nor Lump is equal to Flem in business maneuvers. Their biggest fault is short sightedness; all they can attain is easy money within short reach. Also, neither can remain completely detached from other people. I. O. is a bigamist and is caught; Lump succumbs to the temptation of bragging to the men about Flem's ability to trick them into buying the wild Texas ponies. However, both are like him in that they acknowledge kinship whenever it is advantageous, but take advantage of relatives as quickly as of strangers, whenever possible.

Another type of Snopes is Ike, Flem's idiot ward. Unable to understand any implication of Snopesism, even he is slightly affected by it. Although he is not conscious of the explicit value of money, he does realize that it has some value. Ike, too, has a singleness of purpose. Faulkner devotes one section of *The Hamlet* to Ike's love affair with Houston's cow. Olga Vickery says: ". . . Ike is the perfect lover just as Flem is the perfect economic man . . . Ike as a lover is absurd, but there is no absurdity in his love."⁴⁷ It is true that Ike loves completely without demanding any-

43. *Ibid.*, p. 265.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 64.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 145.

46. *Ibid.*, pp. 200-201.

47. Olga W. Vickery, *The Novels of William Faulkner*, p. 178.

thing in return. His single purpose lies in his love, and Faulkner's description of this love is idyllic and poetic. The contrast between Ike's love affair and those of Flem, Mink, and Houston is obvious. Flem is impotent; Mink must always be tormented by the memory of his wife's past lovers. Houston, on the other hand, fights against his marriage. The comic contrast in Faulkner's description of the cow and Eula is also clear. He describes the cow as the "flowing immemorial female," "maidenly shy," and "graceful." Jody says of Eula, "She just like a dog! Soon as she passes anything in long pants she begins to give off something."⁴⁸ At times, the humor is definitely crude. Even while reading the highly idyllic passages, one is occasionally jolted into the realization that idyllic passages, one is occasionally jolted into the realization that ing lies in the fact that "absurd" as Ike is as a lover, he is more human than Flem, who is completely removed from any human feelings. Ike identifies himself with love, the most universal of human qualities, and nothing distracts him until the object of his love is forcibly removed. He actually harms no one in pursuit of his object, but he offends society's sense of respectability and morality. Whereas Flem is amoral but capable of recognizing morals, Ike lacks the intelligence to recognize, let alone understand, moral law. He can only do what he feels without reasoning whether it is right or wrong. The greatest irony is that, while Ike is an object of callous curiosity and has his cow taken from him, Flem is grudgingly admired by his society and continues on his infamous career.

The aftermath of the Ike-episode also serves Faulkner in measuring the extent to which the Snopeses have demoralized the community. Houston, Mrs. Littlejohn, and Ratliff are sensitive to the idiot's shame and grief, and each acts to alleviate his pain. Houston, filled with ". . . that furious exasperation which was not rage but savage contempt and pity for all blind flesh capable of hope and grief,"⁴⁹ gives Ike the cow. Mrs. Littlejohn, realizing that the cow is the only thing Ike has ever desired, wants him to have it, despite the abnormal relationship implied. Ratliff acts to have the cow taken away from the boy because his sense of "conscience" forces him to do so. He is not, perhaps, as outraged by the act itself as sickened by the men, of whom he is one, who have succumbed to the corruption of Snopesism or who have remained passive to it. Ike's act becomes perversion only when he is put on exhibition by Lump, because Ike is not entirely a human being capable of making moral judgments, whereas the men of the community are. Ratliff shuts up the hole in the fence and has the cow taken away because he feels he must take a stand against evil, for Faulkner makes clear that one of the conditions of humanity is conscience as well as passion, greed, and bloodthirstiness.

V. K. Ratliff is the only character in the novel who acts to defeat Snopesism, though he, too, is tricked and corrupted by avarice because,

48. *The Hamlet*, p. 98.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 215.

unlike Flem, he is thoroughly human and, hence, fallible. The shrewd, humorous sewing machine agent and living newspaper of Yoknapatawpha County is the Faulkner "witness" serving an interpretative function similar to that of the Reporter in *Pylon* or the neighbors in *As I Lay Dying*. At times, he is merely an observant spectator, sometimes a participant, one who is lost completely in the long sections dealing with Eula Varner's courtship, the idiot's love affair, and Mink's quarrel with and murder of Houston. But before each of these incidents is terminated, Ratliff has become involved in the action, usually with opposition to Flem Snopes. Ratliff is certainly the chief spokesman and defendant of an ethical, humane tradition against the invasion of the Snopeses' amoral materialism.

He is shrewd, humorous, humane, and skeptical. His running commentary on the villagers and their actions characterizes both them and himself, and a large part of this characterization is drawn from actions and reactions in connection with Snopeses. In an allegorical fantasy, Ratliff imagines Flem's arrival in Hell, straw suitcase in hand, to discuss a contract with Satan. The attendant devils tell Satan they cannot find his soul:

"Sire," they says . . . "We cant do nothing with him."

"What?" the Prince hollers.

"He says a bargain is a bargain. That he swapped in good faith and honor, and now he has come to redeem it, like the law says. And we cant find it," they says. "We done looked everywhere. It wasn't no big one to begin with nohow, and we was specially careful in handling it. We sealed it up in a asbestos matchbox and put the box in a separate compartment to itself. But when we opened the compartment, it was gone. The matchbox was there and the seal wasn't broke. But there wasn't nothing in the matchbox but a little kind of dried-up smear under one edge. And now he has come to redeem it. But how can we redeem him into eternal torment without his soul?"⁵⁰

When Satan fails to fulfill his contract, Flem impassively forecloses and takes Satan's place on the throne of Hell, just as earlier, though less sensationally, Varner had to submit to him his earthly sovereignty.

That Ratliff is shrewd is evident. He makes his living by selling and trading among people who have little money to spend and who take pride in their ability to trade for profit. He manages to outwit Snopeses several times, which no one else in Frenchman's Bend does. Also, his ability to understand people enables him to observe and synthesize. Examples of this ability are his recognition of the similarity between Will Varner and Flem Snopes, his realization of Flem's final goal, long before anyone else. However, with these traits, Ratliff is not immune to human failings. After the Snopes-Houston trial, he ironically mocks I. O. Snopes's continual misquoting of adages. After the Armstid-Snopes trial, he explodes into a savage outburst when Bookwright asks if he returned to Mrs. Armstid her five dollars. Finally, he is duped by Flem in the gold salting of the Old Frenchman's Place. In the later two books he continues to "watch Snopeses" and to foil them whenever possible.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 151.