

"FAULKNER'S SNOPE'S FAMILY"

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Faulkner Editions and Abbreviations used in the text:

1. The Town (New York: Random House, 1957) (T)
2. The Hamlet (New York: Random House, 1964) (H)
3. The Mansion (New York: Random House, 1959) (M)
4. Sartoris (New York: Random House, 1956) (S)
5. The Sound and the Fury (New York: Modern Library, 1956) (SF)
6. Light in August (New York: Modern Library, 1959)
7. Go Down, Moses (New York: Modern Library, 1942)
8. Absalom, Absalom! (New York: Modern Library, 1964)
9. 'Knight's Gambit' (New York: Random House, 1949) (KG)

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis is to redirect the point of emphasis which critics have chosen to take in their examinations of Faulkner's Snopes trilogy. The first problem is to direct that emphasis to its only legitimate subject, the Snopes family, and the second is to define what the Snopes represent in terms of their participation in the novels, rather than on the basis of some external judgements about them.

One source of confusion has been the defensiveness of some critics about the episodic nature of the individual novels and the effect of this upon the unity of the trilogy as a whole. At the outset, defenders of Faulkner had been confronted with the charge that the novels, The Town particularly, were merely collections of largely unrelated short stories strung together by the thematically unifying gimmick of the sage-narrators Ratliff and Stevens. Their reaction, or overreaction, has been to defend that unifying element, to radiate effusive, and I suggest, largely undeserved praise on the philosophizing observations of the narrators. Warren Beck has gone so far as to assert that the moral searching, the microcosm of man struggling with the forces of evil which he sees reflected in the Ratliff-Stevens sections of the novels, represents Faulkner at his

best.¹

Some parts of the trilogy do represent Faulkner at his best. The descriptions of Ike and his cow in The Hamlet, the "Spotted Horses" section of The Town, the "Mink" narrative in The Mansion, are all powerful and moving examples of Faulkner's best writing. Yet these sections, and I suggest virtually all of the best writing in the trilogy, have nothing to do with Ratliff or Stevens. These sections are about Snopes activities. They tell their story. They tell it best directly, as anecdotes, without the intervention of a moral commentator or an observer drawing analogues of the universal human condition.

It is true that these sections as episodes are virtually self-contained and without the unifying presence of the narrators would serve to present a less unified novel. Recognizing this, many critics have seemed wary of stressing the superiority of the parts to the whole, of the precedence the episodes have over their unifying framework lest they serve the cause of detractors of the novels.

The alternative to recognizing the genuinely episodic nature of the novels has been to overstate the felicitousness of the moral viewpoints at the expense of the Snopes sections. Its invalidity aside, this attempt

¹Warren Beck, Man in Motion: Faulkner's Trilogy (Madison, 1961), pp. 95-137.

to hold a largely untenable view appears superfluous. This thesis attempts to demonstrate that an admission of fragmentation or apparent disunity is of itself no automatic critical evaluation, that this is in fact characteristic of much of Faulkner's best writing. It is interesting in this connection that Charles Moorman used Faulkner's Snopes trilogy as a modern structural parallel of Mallory's Morte D Arthur,² suggesting that both represent unified structures composed of diverse and even contradictory parts.

Another fear of the critics has been the nature of the subject which remains without the moral force of the narrators, that is the Snopes themselves. Too often the critics have accepted unquestioningly the scorn heaped upon the Snopes family by their observers. Too often the Ratliff-Stevens visions of a horde, terrifying and faceless, which can and must destroy their more genteel society is accepted as a final judgement, ignoring the closer examinations of the Snopes which give a more moderate view of Snopes behaviour and the individual motivations for it which largely dismisses the "horde" view of them.

Such gullibleness also does a complete disservice to Faulkner, the artist, since it ignores a basic device of his art, his use of the alternating points of view, which are attached either to Ratliff or Stevens for the most part.

²Charles Moorman, The Book of King Arthur; The Unity of Mallory's Morte D Arthur (U. of Kentucky, 1965), p. 106.

The lack of an authorial voice to direct the reader to some final absolute explanation of the incidents which arise requires the reader to seek the truth in the situations for himself, based upon what he knows about the narrators who are observing the Snopes. To accept whole the views of the narrators oversimplifies the personal conflicts within the novels, giving a completely one-dimensional view of the Snopes, and in the process doing them, as representative characters a disservice, but surely committing a greater disservice to Faulkner.

Generally critics who have accepted the Ratliff-Stevens points of view as final have lumped this terror under the label "Snopesism". What they mean by this is not clear. When it has been specified it has very often been presented with qualities and characteristics alien from those of the people who bear the name Snopes in the Faulkner novels. Frequently, critics who have sensed in modern society a deterioration in the quality of life, and attribute this deterioration to the "invasion" of that society by some vague force, have equated this evil power they sense with "Snopesism". The invasion they sense may very possibly exist, and it is also possible that the characteristics of the Snopes family could legitimately be labelled "Snopesism", but there is no justification at all for assuming the two are synonymous. The definition of "Snopesism" must rely on qualities actually possessed by the people who bear that

name or the label, as applied to Faulkner's trilogy, is quite meaningless.

This thesis will attempt to demonstrate whether such an "ism" can validly be posited on the basis of the texts, and what such an "ism" specifically means. It will also attempt to evaluate what the Snopes as a group offer in terms of their individuality and vitality to a social fabric largely in decay. The thesis will probe the indictment against the Snopes to discover what, if any, positive contributions they are capable of making to their society. It would be rather surprising if Faulkner's trilogy, which is perhaps the last, and very likely the best of a chain of novels about life in the American small town stretching back to E. W. Howe's The Story of a Country Town, Harold Frederic's The Damnation of Theron Ware and Lewis' Main Street should present them as totally reprehensible. The traditional theme of novels in the genre was the moral deterioration or stagnation of the small town, and the efforts, usually futile and doomed, of the protagonists to either revive the town or to escape it. Ned Westlock, Theron Ware and Carol Kennicott struggled to bring a new vitality to their communities and each in his way was defeated by the overwhelming complacency, the hostility to the change they represented.

Faulkner has taken this theme and presented it from the points of view of two of the entrenched members of the

community, with the new, more vital force of individualism presented, by the narrators, as the antagonists. It is interesting that in the years since their publication, reader sympathy for the Theron Wares and Carol Kennicotts has generally turned to criticism of their self-righteousness, with concomittantly increased sympathy for the town. I suggest that much the same kind of reaction of this reversed situation in the Snopes trilogy might be expected in the future.

The faults and positive qualities of both forces in the town will concern this thesis. The nature of the "Snopes threat", the extent to which a threat can genuinely be said to exist, the nature of the Snopes, why they act as they do, how all of this relates to "Snopesism" or any other "ism" will also be examined.

This, then, is the ambition of the thesis, to analyze as fully as possible the people who are genuinely the subject of the trilogy, the Snopes who give it its name. Henry James said in "The Art of Fiction" that, "The only obligation to which in advance we may hold a novel, is that it be interesting".³ This precept carried further might apply as well to the population of a novel, its characters. Surely the one quality no one can deny the Snopes clan is

³Henry James, The Future of the Novel (New York, 1956), p. 9.

that they are interesting. The trilogy is about them, not about Gavin Stevens. It is about their history, what they have done, not about some Mississippi microcosm of the moral condition of the universe. I will attempt to shed some light upon who and what composed the strange clan that suddenly appeared in Frenchman's Bend from somewhere further west, the Snopes family.

CHAPTER I

JUST SNOPESES

The title of this chapter comprises two words from Gavin Stevens' indictment of the Snopes family in chapter two of The Town. In the words which follow he capitalizes his verdict. They were "like colonies of rats or termites are just rats or termites".(T40) Implicit in this definition of the Snopes are the two traits generally attributed to them by their observers, Gavin Stevens, Charles Mallison, V. K. Ratliff, and even Faulkner himself in his public statements. The image of clusters of vermin or rodents connotes a voracious ferocity both terrifying and anonymous.

Critics seem almost universally inclined to accept per se this view of the Snopes both as some kind of implicit social threat and as a faceless anonymous horde. It is a viewpoint which suffers from over-relying on Faulkner's assertions about what the Snopes represent. Assertions which quite naturally were tempered by what Faulkner had wanted to say or genuinely thought he had said. It is a viewpoint which I hope this thesis will demonstrate has relied too little on what the texts themselves have to say about the Snopes. Gavin Stevens' statement, like many of those Faulkner himself made, is more accurate in the part than the whole. They were, I propose, just Snopeses.

I do not by any means imply here that the Snopes are somehow a force for good. It would be utterly fallacious to assert that they are not in many ways eccentric, or rapacious, or cruel. It seems to me equally misguided to suggest that there are not valid reasons for their eccentricity, that generations of deprived and exploited hill farmers might quite naturally appear ludicrous indeed grotesque to the townspeople whom they confront. It seems shortsighted however to suggest that the plight of Flem or Mink or Montgomery Ward, struggling to grapple with an environment they can neither understand nor appreciate even if like Flem they do dominate it, is not tragic. They had as Gavin Stevens says, "the need for the money before (he) had the opportunity to acquire the means to get it".(T264)

Faulkner's declaration that the Snopes were "a tribe of people which would come into an otherwise peaceful little Southern town like ants or like mold on cheese"¹ is effectively transferred to the trilogy most consistently through the impact of the Snopes names. Much has been written by critics about the connotational significance of the names of such Faulkner characters as Popeye and Gail Hightower. It is also a virtual commonplace of criticism of the Snopes Trilogy to point to the special nature of the names Faulkner

¹F. L. Gwyn and J. L. Blotmer eds., Faulkner in the University (Charlottesville, 1959), p. 193.

endows the Snopes family with. "The sound of Snopes communicates a quality ugly and snarling and fearsome (sneak, snoop, snake, sneer etc.); for it is almost impossible to associate the "sn" sound at the beginning of a word with anything pleasant".²

Faulkner also tentatively establishes implicit qualities of character in the various given names. Hoffman points out the immediate contempt or disgust induced by Flem (phlegm),³ and Olga Vickery demonstrates how Mink's name ties in with what she describes as the trilogy's conflicting themes of love and commercialism, since Mink has an obsession antithetical to pure commercialism, the preservation of his sense of dignity.⁴

Individually the Snopes are described in terms of animals, most consistently rodents. Flem is variously like a hawk (H51), a spider (H58), a parrot (H61), a frog (H147), and a rabbit (T143). I.O. is like a weasel (H63), Lump is like a squirrel or chipmunk (H144), Mink is like a wasp (H238), St. Elmo is like a goat (H319), and Doris and

²F. J. Hoffman, William Faulkner (New York, 1966), p. 87.

³Ibid.

⁴Olga Vickery, The Novels of William Faulkner; A Critical Interpretation (L.S.U., 1964), p. 178.

Clarence are like wolverines (T368). Collectively they are described as "an invasion of snakes or wildcats" (T106) and in Gavin's previously mentioned parallel as "rats and termites" (T40).

The Snopes are therefore, in name at least, and hence by implication in character, as anonymous as individual vermin or snakes within a particular cluster. Like the rodents or termites they are associated with their very names arouse terror. Those whom they come in contact with are "irrevocably smirched and contaminated".(T43) This terrifying evil is more powerful than some localized contagion, however. It is insidious by virtue of its creeping universality. The Jefferson water tower, the center of Flem's first money-making scheme in town is described first by the narrator as a monument. He then corrects himself. "Except that it was not a monument: it was a footprint. A monument only says At least I got this far while a footprint says This is where I was when I moved again".(T29).

What then is this anonymous force, this insidious power for evil? How is it composed? Are the components totally anonymous, and if so do they really comprise a force that legitimately ~~may~~ be called Snopesism? If so, is Snopesism the product of family ambition or something more abstract, perhaps an aesthetic? If Snopesism is distinct from a force we can call Flemism what are the significant differences? If the "ism" which is discovered to be the

best expression of what the Snopes represent should be Flemism is it significantly different from what is generally called "the American Dream"?

Questions like these must inevitably arise if connotational names and social implications within the Snopes trilogy are to be taken seriously. This thesis is directed towards answering these questions and anticipating others about the nature of Snopes and Snopesism. Before we can define Snopesism or Flemism, however, we must first approach their antecedents, a family called Snopes and a man called Flem.

In late April of 1902 Flem, Ab, Ab's two daughters, his wife and his wife's widowed sister arrive in Frenchman's Bend. When Jody Varner questions where they have come from Ab will only tell him that they have been farming further west. More about the family's background, especially Ab's is revealed when V. K. Ratliff reminisces about Ab as he knew him when he was a boy in the second chapter of The Town. Ratliff reveals the history of Ab's first marriage to Vynie, which produced no children, and its dissolution subsequent to a series of failures, especially in horse swapping which "soured" him on life.

Ab, the nominal patriarch of the Snopes clan which clusters around Frenchman's Bend, and later Jefferson, is seen as a typically impoverished Mississippi dirt farmer

whose penchant for swapping and gambling pursued more and more with a vengeance keeps him even more destitute than the worn unremitting tenant farms of north Mississippi might warrant. He is, for all that, when we meet him in chapter two of The Hamlet as energetic and intent as any of the farmers about him, and except for being "a fool about a horse" and hence susceptible to all the disasters concomitant with that particular foolishness, he is on the whole not significantly different from his neighbours. His wry sense of humour in his struggle with his worn out farm and rented hovel, with his increasingly intractable wife Vynie, and through all his doomed misadventures with the horse trader Pat Stamper makes him generally likeable. He is, at least, affable and friendly enough to warrant the companionship of the boy, V. K. Ratliff.

Eventually, as setback follows setback, even his wife's father gives up on him to a serious enough degree to reclaim his daughter, albeit he claims the furniture as well. In the process, as Ratliff put it, Ab sours. As a pattern of response to his environment this is a boding of things to come for younger Snopeses, who also are broken by years of unremitting toil. Some, like Mink, continue their struggle with the worn-out farms, living in the rented shacks, continuing to absorb each new setback until like him they can bear it no longer and strike out. Some, like Flem and

Montgomery Ward will use any means to escape, from usury to peddling pornography. The others get out any way they can, a fair number by just hanging on to Flem's coattails.

Of the Snopes who settle in Frenchman's Bend and Jefferson Ab is the first, and in that sense, and probably only in that sense, the leader. With him are his second wife; Lennie; Lennie's widowed sister who remains anonymous; two daughters, "big, identical, like two young tremendous cows" (H47); and Flem. Missing is a boy younger than Flem who it is later revealed has run away. Although he remains anonymous in the trilogy his name is given in "Barn Burning" as Colonel Sartoris Snopes or Sarty. Thus, though the issue of Ab's paternity is vaguely exposed to doubt in The Town, it seems apparent that this is a family unit; husband, wife, son, daughters, and sister-in-law. This implied doubt will be examined later as it relates to Snopes family relationships in general.

The second group of Snopes to arrive in Frenchman's Bend are I.O. and Eck Snopes. Both men consistently refer to each other as cousins. While the extent to which the term "cousin" is intended to be taken literally will be discussed later and while it seems there is some justification for not always accepting it literally, there seems to be no apparent reason to question it in this case. There is at the same time no apparent justification for Harry Runyan's

assertion in A Faulkner Glossary that Eck is I.O.'s nephew.⁵ Quite the opposite is actually implied in Montgomery Ward's reference to Mink (presumably a cousin of Eck) as his great-uncle (M82). If this were accepted as conclusive it would make I.O. the nephew of Eck rather than Runyan's reverse of the situation. More convincing is the reference which Eck and I.O. make to one another as cousins. Eck consistently refers to I.O. as "my cousin" and except for his introduction of Eck to Jack Houston as "my young cousin" (H63), I.O. generally refers to him in the same way. V. K. Ratliff also refers to Eck as "being Flem's cousin" (H66).

Two cousins of Flem who seem to be confirmable blood relations stemming back to a common grandmother who is referred to only once, and then only as Grandma Snopes (H76) are Mink, and Isaac, a twenty-one year old idiot when he first appears in The Hamlet. Appearing with Mink are his wife, whose name, Yettie, is not revealed until she reappears in The Mansion, and two anonymous daughters, one of whom also reappears by reference in The Mansion as the madam of a Memphis whore house Mink passes.

Another Snopes referred to as cousin, this time a cousin of Mink's, appears suddenly one morning as clerk of Varner's store when Flem moves on to bigger things in Jefferson. Launcelot, named by a wistful school teacher

⁵Harry Runyan, A Faulkner Glossary (New York, 1964), p. 150.

mother who loved books, who was so embarrassed according to V. K. Ratliff by the anomalous appellation for a Snopes, preferred and indeed cultivated the substitute of Lump. In addition to being referred to (H224) as Mink's cousin, Lump is also designated as Wallstreet Panic Snopes' uncle (H227), which, if taken literally, would make him Eck's (Wallstreet's father) brother, though admittedly, no apparent fraternal relationship exists between them.

The remaining Snopes interrelationships are even more tenuous. Wesley who is referred to, though not by name, as "the actual Snopes schoolmaster" (T40), is finally named in The Mansion. He is referred to vaguely as a cousin of I.O. though even this is qualified in parentheses. His two sons Virgil and Byron both appear by name in The Town. His only other link with the rest of the family is provided by Montgomery Ward who refers to him as Uncle Wesley (M71).

Other Snopes, even less traceable than these, are the imported carpenter, Watkins Products Snopes (Wat) and the overseer Flem hires for the development of Eula Acres, Orestes (Res) Snopes. Any relationship they may have with other Snopes in the trilogy is certainly not emphasized although Res does refer once to his "Cousin Flem" (M348) though by that time Flem was such an important man that all the Snopes were emphasizing their relationship to Mr. Snopes, the banker, and it is quite within the realm of possibility that anyone with the Snopes surname might suddenly acquire a

blood relationship with him upon arrival in Jefferson where none in fact really existed.

On the basis of family interrelationships established in the texts it is possible to develop a reasonably accurate genealogy of the Snopes family. The Snopes in the trilogy appear to fall into three groups.

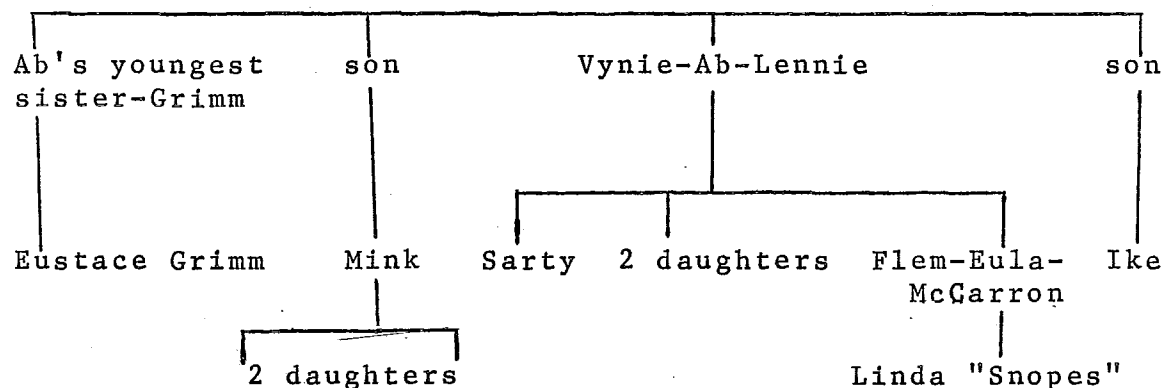
The first group involves the concretely direct relations of Flem. In The Hamlet Mink asserts that Grandma Snopes left ten dollars to three grandsons, himself, Flem, and their cousin Isaac Snopes (H76). It is puzzling why only these three are bequeathed an inheritance, if as Cleanth Brooks suggests,⁶ Wesley, I.O., Lump, and Eck are also first cousins or as Volpe⁷ has it Virgil and Byron are also first cousins and Lump is not. They were certainly not singled out because they were the three most promising grandchildren; Ike, the idiot's inclusion obviates that possibility. Distance, either geographic or social, might be an explanation. A more concrete possibility seems related to the rough indications the books contain about their various ages. Eck appears to be older than Ike or Mink (H265-6) (H76) (M283) and it is a safe assumption that

⁶Cleanth Brooks, William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country (New Haven, 1963), p. 452.

⁷Edmund L. Volpe, A Reader's Guide to William Faulkner (New York, 1965), p. 307.

Eck is younger than I.O. who calls him "my young cousin". It is probable, although Flem's age is always left in doubt, that Ike, Flem, and Mink are the youngest of the known grandchildren of grandma Snopes. This would give added weight to Mink's assertion that his and Flem's "grandpaw had two sets of chillen" (M102). If this statement is taken at its literal face value it would appear to indicate that Flem, Ike, and Mink, the younger Snopes grandchildren, stem from a second grandma Snopes. Since they never refer to one another as anything else but cousins it is fair to assume that they stem from three different fathers. The only other member of this group is a sister of Ab's, his youngest mentioned when her son Eustace aids Flem in the swindle of Ratliff and the others by "salting" the old Frenchman's place.

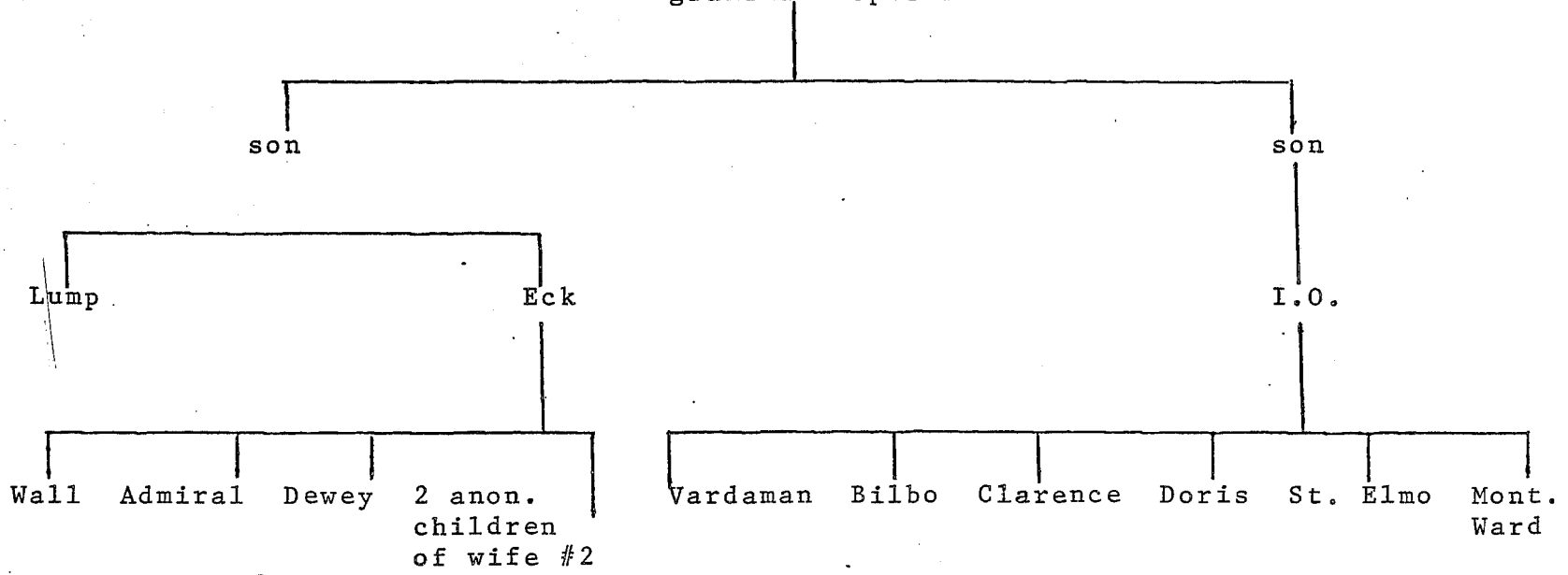
"grandma Snopes" #2



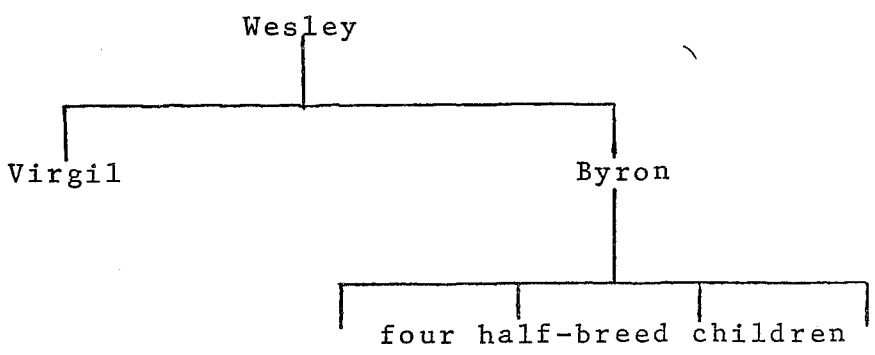
The second Snopes group, one stemming from a common grandfather with the first, but offspring of a different grandmother incorporates the families of Lump, Eck, and I.O.. The problem of attributing direct relationships stems from Faulkner's rather free use of the term cousin. It may often merely be recognition of their common surname, or a lumping together of people sharing the name by the townspeople who see them all as very much the same anyway, but when such cousinship is compounded by other factors such as the companionship of Eck and I.O. and their consistent reference to one another as cousin, or the reference of Eck's son Wallstreet Panic to his "uncle Lump" (H227) it should be taken more literally than the casual reference by Res of his "Cousin Flem" to influence people. It is interesting in this connection that Volpe refuses to accept this reference to Lump as concrete establishment of his uncle-ship because he says the term "uncle" is loosely used by the Snopes clan.⁸ This seems rather strange since his genealogy does accept the reliability of the term "cousin" which the clan flings about with considerably greater abandon.

⁸ Ibid.

"grandma Snopes #1



Other Snopes



Orestes
Watkins Products

Unlike Brooks, Mr. Volpe does not make Wesley a first cousin, he designates him Ab's brother and hence the uncle of his erstwhile cousins. I have chosen to remove him from the group of direct Snopes relations since I think any relationship attributed to him would be largely arbitrary. If he must be included, however, Mr. Volpe's placing appears wholly without foundation since on the basis of the texts he can only substantively be I.O.'s cousin and Montgomery Ward's uncle (T40, M71). Although Wat is once referred to as Mink's kinsman (M411) and Orestes once refers to his "Cousin Flem" (M348) their real blood relationship is not convincingly demonstrable.

Perhaps the most significant point to be demonstrated in any attempted Snopes genealogy, aside from the great difficulty in sorting out the individual from the mass, is that in the end it is possible. Faulkner had, without doubt, aimed initially at a level of anonymity equivalent to that of ants or the mould on cheese, as he put it, but in writing the story of the Snopes, he had to look more closely than he had chosen to before. Compelled by the new realism Swiggart refers to,⁹ Faulkner now wrote of the Snopes as he actually conceived them close up, and not as they conformed to some pre-established role of mass villainy. Such a simplistic definition of the Snopes clan was possible in

⁹Peter Swiggart, The Art of Faulkner's Novels (Austin, 1963), p. 196.

Sartoris which contained only brief reference to them, but over the course of three novels about them led to considerable re-evaluation, sometimes the reversal of earlier views, and resulted in much of the critical confusion about the three books. The trilogy itself stands as refutation of the anonymity of the individual Snopeses. In the making of a Snopes history it was inevitable that the various ambitions and anxieties and motivations would be examined, even emphasized, and the originally planned homogeneous Snopes terror would disappear like the proverbial forest into the trees. This contradiction between the anonymous and the specific runs through the whole of the trilogy. In the last two volumes Faulkner is forced to make explicit gestures at re-establishing the "pack" view of the Snopeses.

A comparison of the introduction of I.O. and Eck Snopes in The Hamlet with their first appearance in The Town reveals one significant addition. Eck, in explaining his presence to Jack Houston in The Town, says, "It was my cousin hired me". Houston asks, "Who is your cousin?", and I.O. who arrives at this point addresses Eck as "my young cousin" (H62-63). These affirmations of relationship seem straightforward and matter-of-fact. The men are cousins.

In The Town, however, when Faulkner came to re-introduce the characters (after a writing lapse of seventeen years) he has Gavin Stevens parenthesize these matter-of-fact statements of their relationship. In referring to who

really was the village blacksmith he asserts it was not I.O. but "Eck, his cousin (whatever the relationship was. . .) (T36). The context is the same. It is a retelling of the first appearance of Eck and I.O. in Frenchman's Bend. The validity or importance of the cousinship is one of the few significant changes in the Town version.

Once again, in the introduction of Wesley Snopes, Gavin Stevens parenthesizes his distinction between Wesley and I.O. as talkers. Wesley's talking was "not the verbal diarrhea of his cousin (whatever kin I.O. was; they none of them seemed to bear any specific kinship to one another; they were just Snopeses. . .) (T40). It is significant that the same words which are used to blur what is in any event a questionable relationship are used to obscure what is in all likelihood a legitimate cousinship.

Charles Mallison throws the same kind of confusion upon the relationship of Ab to Flem. Although their family ties are firmly and convincingly established in The Hamlet, the narrator says of Ab, "Some folks said he was Mr. Flem's father but some said he was just his uncle. . ."(T129). Significantly these folks did not cast their dubiety upon their relationship in The Hamlet. Actually quite the opposite is the case, since Ratliff who grew up near Snopeses, who is the affirmed authority on the Snopeses, establishes quite explicitly Ab's fatherhood (H26).

The same technique of blurring or at least establishing grounds for doubt is applied to the cousinship of Flem and Mink. In this instance as well, their first-cousinship was established quite conclusively when Mink related the circumstances of his relationship with Flem and Ike to Ratliff (H76) in The Hamlet, and Flem by his actions affirmed what Mink had said. In The Town Charles Mallison is again responsible for the blurring of their relationship. Referring to Mink's plight in jail he says, "the last person on earth he would hope for help from would be his uncle or cousin Flem" (T166). This blurring is repeated in The Mansion. In the section entitled "Flem" a narrator describes Stevens waiting for Ratliff's return from Memphis where he would "reveal Mink to the Memphis police and save Mink's cousin, kinsman, whatever Flem was. . ." (M382). This instance lends significance to the technique of obscuring since it is not one of the involved characters who might be implying the invalidity of Snopes family life, but it is a narrator or intelligence.

It is Gavin Stevens who first confronts the question. He asks Flem himself, "somebody will have to save your cousin, nephew--which is he, anyway?" Flem ignores the question. Montgomery Ward is also directly confronted, this time by V. K. Ratliff. Ratliff taunts him about joining his "native-born Mississippi cousin or uncle. . .Mink Snopes,

your cousin or uncle", and at last when his prurience can no longer be contained he asks, "Which was he, your uncle or your cousin?" Montgomery Ward ignores the question (M64).

The relationship of Montgomery Ward and Flem is questioned early in The Mansion (53) when not yet understanding why Flem wanted Montgomery Ward sent to Parchman Prison the narrator ponders, "Why, in fact, Montgomery Ward had to go anywhere, if all his uncle or cousin wanted was just to take his business away from him". Montgomery Ward himself is led to question his relationship with Mink. "What the hell, ain't we cousins or something?" (M67). Mink ignores the question.

Faulkner's theme of the anonymity of Snopeses, their disregard for or unawareness of family is felt principally in the last two books of the trilogy. Another device for showing Snopes disregard for family is the vision Faulkner eventually has of Snopeses destroying each other. This occurs throughout the trilogy but is most pronounced in The Mansion. It is in the final book that Mink's obsession with revenge on his cousin Flem for not coming to his aid is fully explored, and hence the issue, Flem's failure to aid his beleaguered kinsman, takes on greater significance. Proceeding from this event is Flem's use of his relative Montgomery Ward to increase Mink's sentence by tricking him into trying to escape, committing Montgomery Ward not only

to a prison sentence of his own, but to an act which we learn in The Mansion that even Montgomery Ward finds disgusting. Other examples of Snopes family cannibalism are I.O.'s cheating of Eck into paying the bulk of the cost of Jack Houston's cow, and Lump's acting as announcer or barker each time Ike makes love to his cow. The latter two instances occur in The Town and are sharper and clearer instances of selfishness and indifference to any claims kinship might make for special consideration. They are presented as instances of individual greed and are thematically or narratively effective.

The issue of responsibility to family is developed much more extensively in The Mansion. Implicitly the whole section on Mink is devoted to it. Mink must kill Flem because he failed to aid his kinsman. This is generally taken as an indictment of Snopes lack of family sense, that like some breed of vermin they would not risk themselves to save each other. Surely the opposite is demonstrated by this section. If there were no family sense, no primitive sense of responsibility, Mink could never have been motivated to act as he did. There would be no need to avenge this treason to family if no sense of family existed. It is Flem, not "the Snopes" who disregard blood loyalty. It is Flem who denies his family, not the family which denies

itself, and certainly not the family which denies Flem, their wealthy kinsman.

Indeed many of the Snopes go out of their way to point out their relationship, real or fanciful, to Flem. Some of the Snopes clearly publicize their relationship to Flem for all the influence or pressure they hope it will bring. Certainly this is Orestes intention when in his dealings with Gavin Stevens over the Meadowfill property he announces that he will have to discuss things with his "Cousin Flem" (M348).

This kind of family solidarity for profit is undeniably present, but there is a more legitimate, a more honest kind of family pride, exhibited most often by Mink, but also at various times and with differing focal points by Eck and Montgomery Ward. The pride of someone like Lump is abundantly apparent. He is more than willing to vocalize it. Mink's pride on the other hand, although centered around the achievements of Flem differs in its essential quality. Mink is proud that a Snopes could rise as Flem has, could have "broken free" (M35) of the tenant farmer's feudal existence, to be clever enough to be clerk in a store, let alone president of a bank and owner of a mansion. The first time we meet Mink he threatens his wife over this very issue. When Ratliff implies that Flem Snopes may have had a new sewing machine sent to them, Mink's wife launches into a tirade against Flem. Mink warns her to shut up. She

continues, "Your own kin you're so proud of because he works in a store and wears a necktie all day" (H75). Mink then threatens her back into the house. He would have been proud to say of Flem's mansion to a stranger, "My cousin lives there. He owns it." (M411) Lump can only vicariously enjoy Flem's manipulations. It is Flem's success which attracts Lump, Flem's talent for cheating people, not the fact that he is a Snopes.

Montgomery Ward's pride in the Snopes clan closely parallels a view expressed by Faulkner during his talks at the University of Virginia. Montgomery Ward says of Mink's ill-fated, futile attempted escape from Parchman, "I was proud, not just to be kin to him but of belonging to what Reba called all of us poor sons of a bitches" (M85). From his pride in Mink he goes on to a wider pride or pity in what it is to be a Snopes, to have had a promissory note for doom signed in your name when you were born, to have fought back, to have attempted to be "THE son of a bitch's son of a bitch" (M87).

Faulkner said when speaking of the Snopeses, "people don't have enough verve and zest any more, which is not the fault of man so much as the pressure against being an individualist, and a good first-rate scoundrel is an individualist".¹⁰ It is a grudging acknowledgement that the

¹⁰ Faulkner in the University, p. 133.

Snopeses are, if nothing else, interesting, and it touches on a point made in The Sound and the Fury, that to have something, regardless of how corrupt or immoral, to indulge in the neurotic, fanciful world of the Compsons, or the grotesque Snopes society, is better than just surviving, better than sitting and watching, better than inhabiting one's dull little bungalow and experiencing life vicariously through the screen of a television set. The whole question of the Snopes vitality and eccentricity will be examined in the second chapter of this thesis. The point here is that a Snopes like Montgomery Ward is not to be intimidated by what Jefferson or Frenchman's Bend thinks of him or his family, who rejects the advice of the self-righteous Gavin Stevens while with him in Europe and disregards his pretentious moral crusade against "Snopesism". He accepts instead the philosophy of the Memphis prostitute, Reba, that Mink is, like everyone else, "Every one of us. The poor son of a bitches" (M82). With an awareness of life that transcends the rules and conventions Ratliff and Stevens rigidly cling to, the breaking of which especially by a Snopes sends both of them into fits of terror, Montgomery Ward knows that Flem, who has had to learn the rules of gentlemanly exploitation of others from the reluctant, respectable citizens of Jefferson, will not be outdone by people like Stevens. "Montgomery Ward had more simple sense and judgement, let alone family pride and loyalty, than to

actively believe that ten thousand Lawyer Stevenses and Hub Hamptons, let alone just one of each of them, could a diddled Flem Snopes" (M59).

Again, a certain moderation must be urged, however. While the instances of Snopes family awareness, even pride, are valid I have no intention of implying that the Snopes unanimously expressed boundless pride in just being Snopes or hastened heedlessly to each other's aid at any threat to a member of the family. Obviously some cared more than others. In the same incident, when Eck was agreeing to buy Houston's cow to cure Ike of his affection for it by making him eat some of it, his cousin I.O. was taking advantage of his trustfulness to make him pay the bulk of the price. Certainly Wallstreet Panic did all he could to get away from his Snopes relations. Some Snopes were conscious of family ties and responsibilities and some were not. Some even had a sense of pride in being Snopes, and most took special pride in Flem's achievements, sometimes for purely selfish reasons. Some Snopes, Wallstreet particularly, went out of their way to disown their family ties.

Flem, if the moral of The Mansion is accepted as a final statement, failed his family by refusing to aid his cousin, Mink, and was killed for it. It is significant, however, that it was Flem who led the Snopes who escaped the tenant farming cycle. It was Flem who distributed the patronage that brought Eck and I.O. to Frenchman's Bend, who

must have installed Lump as his successor at Varner's store. It was a Snopes carpenter, Watkins Products, who rebuilt his mansion, and another Snopes, Orestes, who supervised Eula Acres. There are obvious advantages in nepotism, and knowing Flem's character it is wise to be dubious about his magnanimity, yet when Flem's disposal of I.O. and Montgomery Ward, and his indifference to the plight of Mink are used as conclusive examples of his indifference to family, it is wise to temper such judgements with these events. In all, the Snopes do not exhibit a particular closeness as a family unit, yet, they do manage to express a sense of being a family, of sharing a common burden, or common history often enough to deny the categorization as a herd or a cheese mold. They are a family.

This is Faulkner's principal means of establishing Snopes homogeneity. Mrs. Vickery's statement that "the spaced arrival and similarity in appearance of the Snopeses suggest a burlesque on the progress of economic man through the pages of history",¹¹ gives a striking image, and may in many ways conform to Faulkner's own original plans for a Snopes horde, but for all its impressiveness it is just not

¹¹The Novels of William Faulkner, p. 172.

consistent with the text of The Hamlet, The Town and The Mansion. Flem, for example, is "a thick squat soft man" with "a broad still face" and with "eyes the color of stagnant water" (H51). Eck, who appears next, is "a young, well-made, muscle-bound man" with "an open equable face" (H62). I.O. is "a frail man" with "talkative weasel's face" and "little bright eyes darting" (H63). Mink is "slightly less than medium height also but thin, with a single line of heavy eyebrow" (H73). I suggest that similarities in appearance are less pronounced than differences.

Ratliff and Gavin Stevens, and even Faulkner talk about Snopeses as if they all looked alike. When this general impression or bias is exposed to actual description, however, it just does not hold up. Mrs. Vickery's problem is that experienced by many critics of the Snopes Trilogy, that is they accept a final theory or abstract definition of the Snopes which may be valid enough about the "Snopes" people she is talking about, but they are not the Snopes in the Faulkner novels. There may be a social threat; there may be a social group which conforms to the definition she propounds, but they are not the people who bear the name Snopes in Faulkner's novels. The difference between the "Snopesism" people like Vickery talk about and the Snopesism of the people who bear that name will be discussed in chapter two. This kind of confusion of the actual characteristics appears to stem in the work of some critics from their haste

to pass from three novels which are not considered in the first rank of the Faulkner canon to more significant work. Such haste would seem to be evidenced by Mrs. Vickery's erroneous reference to Mrs. Hait's feud with I.O. over a trespassing cow¹² (it was one of his mules) (T232 ff.) and her mention of Mink's three dollar pound fee to Houston¹³ (it was one dollar) (M26). The errors are, in the context of the whole study, rather trivial, but the issue of one rather than three dollars does, after all, lend emphasis to the significance of the smallness of the amount Mink could further sustain without breaking. The errors are substantively minor, but the danger they point to, of relying on general recollections of the content of a work nearly 1200 pages long, is significant.

Writing about a mass invasion of faceless, uniformly voracious grasping men was controllable on the level of Sartoris, but such bland anonymity would in itself obviate the need for a 1200 page history of such a family. By its very nature such "Snopesism" would neither require nor submit to closer examination. When however, one considers that the Snopes do indeed have a history (see chapter two), that they are individually interesting and that their

¹²The Novels of William Faulkner, p. 197.

¹³Ibid., p. 171.

struggle to climb up the economic ladder is more than simply a threat to or invasion of those who occupy that position immediately above them, then such absolute definitions of a whole family, even a social group are not only meaningless but are irrelevant to the overall artistic unity of the trilogy. Herein lies much of the difficulty in understanding the Snopes. Many critics, and Faulkner himself, feared that without the continuity of a battle of absolutes, between a representative of civilization (Gavin Stevens) and unlicensed insatiable greed (the Snopes invasion) the trilogy would fail. Hence Faulkner apologists like Vickery, and Warren Beck insist on maintaining their view of "Snopesism" as some mysterious abstract force for evil. In fact some Snopes are quite the opposite, and some aspects of this so-called "Snopesism" are preferable, in terms of their vitality and intense emotional commitment, to the dusty philosophizing and almost lifeless prurience of the protagonists, Gavin and V. K. Ratliff. If the Snopes Trilogy is to be defended, if it requires defence, at all, it should be defended on its real merits, not the invented abstract qualities proposed by these critics. The trilogy's best sections are those about the Snopes, about their eccentricity, their rapacity, their total ignorance of "civilized" society and their sustained attempts to cope with and dominate that society. The trilogy is unified because it is, by intent at least, about the Snopes clan. Its weakest moments are those dedicated to the repetitive

philosophizings of Stevens and Ratliff. Here is the real and interesting subject of the trilogy, not the imposed abstractions of moral warfare. It is the Snopes family.

What then, as a group have they been shown to be? They are albeit with some difficulty and complications, a family. Their interrelationships are indeed obscured, but are to a point provable, and it is probably only to a point that their geneology is significant in any event. They are not homogeneous and anonymous, as some critics have claimed. They are in fact quite easily distinguishable from one another. They share a common past of deprivation, of hardship, of exploitation, which they are in varying degrees aware of and motivated by. Although no Snopes was a general in the Civil War, or a governor of Mississippi, they have, to the extent expressed, a history. What that history means in terms of individual actions and goals, or an aesthetic, to what extent it constitutes a threat to society under a label like Snopesism or Flemism and to what extent the fears of the established society are genuine will be discussed in the following chapters. Otherwise, as a group, as a family, although they are by no means ordinary as either one, some are good and some are bad, but few are the same; few are identical representatives of some "ism". They shared, most of all, a common surname. Mostly, they were just Snopeses.

CHAPTER II
THE GHOST OF THE PAST

There is no question that the most enduring parts of the Snopes trilogy are those anecdotes devoted to the adventures and schemes of the Snopes family. Peter Swiggart has stated, "As in other recent Faulkner novels, the scenes involving Gavin Stevens are sources of structural weakness".¹ Of the last novel of the trilogy he says, "At best the passages of The Mansion involving Mink Snopes act to redeem the novel's weaknesses".² Michael Millgate says somewhat more generously,

The characterisation of Mink and the evocation of his slow but inevitable movement across the land are so powerful and disturbing that Mink's story, though suspended for the whole of the long central section, casts a peculiar excitement over the whole book.³

Warren Beck argues expansively against this point of view. The third chapter of Man in Motion in fact, is dedicated to demonstrating the effectiveness, the validity

¹The Art of Faulkner's Novels, p. 201.

²Ibid.

³Michael Millgate, The Achievement of William Faulkner (New York, 1966), p. 245.

of Ratliff's and Gavin's musings about life. He stresses the importance of the trilogy's moral view. Indeed, by devoting the bulk of his book to discussing the universal truths exposed in Gavin's various tiltings he gives those sections of the novel precedence. He argues,

The Gaving Stevens of Charles Mallinson's judicious-affectionate view and of Gavin's own musings, confessional as well as inquiring, is a many-dimensioned, restless-minded, variously moody, and impulsively active fellow, and an adequate reading should grasp him entire and credit him in his sustained role. Otherwise the Snopes trilogy cannot be seen as an organic work, in which Gavin comes to the aid of that good man Ratliff and largely takes over, and indeed The Town would be rejected almost altogether. . . and only the Mink Snopes episodes of The Mansion could be fully valued.⁴

If this view of the significance of Stevens and Ratliff to the artistic merits of the Snopes novels is accepted whole, the rest of Beck's argument holds up, but surely he has misplaced the stress. Giving the Snopes sections of the novels their proper critical due, their legitimate recognition as the most interesting, the most important parts of the novels is inevitable if we follow Mr. Beck's patronizing advice and give the novels an "adequate reading". Recognizing this obviates the need for his argument that without Gavin's ramblings the novels fail.

This trilogy about a large and varied family is bound to be less unified than a novel like Light in August

⁴Man in Motion, p. 56.

which is structured in the form of what Richard Chase calls the classic American novel.⁵ By its nature it is diverse, but because it deals essentially with the history of a single family, whose surname gives the three books their title, as a unit the trilogy creates its own unity. The novels after all are about the Snopes, not about Gavin Stevens. When they adhere to their real subject they are largely alive and vital; when they wander off with Gavin's abstractions they fall flat.

Alternatives to the Snopes as alive, active characters are considerably more numerous in The Hamlet than in the last two Snopes books. They must vie for interest with the violent Jack Houston, the obsessed school teacher-football player Labove, the lecherous Will Varner, the amazing Eula Varner and the bold young Hoake McCarron who fights off Eula's other suitors and eventually takes her virginity. Even with these rivals in interest the Snopes still dominate The Hamlet. Increasingly in the last two novels, the Snopes alone are seen as active forces, the other major figures in the novels merely watch, and then participate vicariously by recounting the incidents, and then theorizing about them.

Volpe's estimation of the study of Mink and its importance to the novel seems to give the most convincing rebuttal to Beck's view, and in so doing reveals the kind of

⁵Richard Chase, The American Novel and Its Tradition (New York, 1957), p. 201.

thematic unity which does exist in any understanding examination of the Snopes.

The outrage and indignation at the human condition in Faulkner's early works and the writer's steadfast admiration of man's ability to endure these impossible conditions suffuse the portrait of Mink and give to the whole novel the emotional unity The Town lacks.⁶

What does unify The Town is its presentation of the Snopes activities, though admittedly diffused by their variety to a greater extent than in The Mansion. Such unity from diversity marks The Hamlet as well.

Commenting on the abstract moral observations which are largely used to fill gaps between episodes in The Mansion Volpe concluded,

When (Faulkner) deals with the theme of moral complexity, he is the master artist. When he diffuses his vision and attempts to incorporate in his novels his views on social issues. . . he sacrifices the role of artist to the role of sage. Certainly he ties these issues to his plot, but the connections are contrived and the issues essentially extraneous.⁷

The fear among Faulkner critics like Beck that to admit to the general artistic ineffectiveness of the Gavin Stevens-V. K. Ratliff sections is to deny the novels their raison d'être seems wholly unfounded. Some of Faulkner's best writing concerns the adventures of the Snopes. The first section of The Hamlet recounting how Ab Snopes had

⁶ A Reader's Guide to William Faulkner, p. 337.

⁷ Ibid., p. 343.

soured and his adventures as a horse trader, the description of Ike and his cow in the rain, the recounting of Mink's murder of Houston, the havoc raised by Byron Snopes' half-breed children, Mink's revenge upon his cousin Flem, all can rank with Faulkner's best fiction. These sections are episodic, and to an extent unconnected, but are all, to the extent that they help reveal the Snopes story, related.

It is never specified why an admission of the truly episodic nature of the novels in the trilogy should be such a blow to their standing. Almost all of Faulkner's best pieces are either short, or a connected group of short pieces. This is obvious in Go Down Moses. It is apparent as well in The Sound and the Fury, and as Malcolm Cowley has pointed out, even Absalom, Absalom!, structurally the soundest of Faulkner's novels breaks down thematically between Sutpen's ambition and the secondary themes of incest and miscegenation.⁸ This is certainly true of the trilogy. The original critical rejection of the Snopes novels held that they were merely collections of stories strung together.⁹ While it is apparent to most discerning critics today that the novels are more than just a fusion of unrelated stories; the novels of the trilogy are episodic, and the best episodes are clearly those about

⁸Malcolm Cowley ed., The Portable Faulkner (New York, 1963), p. 19.

⁹A Reader's Guide to William Faulkner, p. 307.

the Snopeses. It is clear further, that this is neither a quality exclusive in the Faulkner canon to the Snopes trilogy, nor automatically grounds for any particular critical evaluation in itself.

Michael Millgate gives a thorough study of the history of the writing of the Snopes novels which demonstrates most convincingly that the novels are episodic by design rather than accident and were certainly not an opportunistic stringing together of stories Faulkner happened to have at hand which he padded to book length. Millgate relates the history of the original conception of the Snopes trilogy to the "Father Abraham" manuscript upon which Faulkner appears to have been working as early as 1926. He traces how Faulkner removed sections from the planned Snopes novel which could with minor alterations function as independent short stories. The stories were then published, with considerably greater financial benefit to Faulkner than his novels generated at the time. When Faulkner returned to the task of writing the Snopes novels he used his original version in the "Father Abraham" text rather than the Scribners short story version. This, according to Millgate, was evidently the case with other isolated sections such as "The Hound", "Lizards in Jamshyd's Courtyard", and "Centaur in Brass".¹⁰

¹⁰The Achievement of William Faulkner, pp. 180-186.

What is it then, that makes these Snopes people interesting? What characteristics of theirs warrant a twelve hundred page history by one of America's greatest writers? Essentially, I suggest, they are doers, not thinkers or watchers. They possess vitality.

When Faulkner said at the University of Virginia, "people don't have enough verve and zest any more" he went on to lament that it is "not the fault of man so much as the fault of the time we live in",¹¹ he touches the source of his grudging admiration for the Snopeses. They are individualists. He said that he could admire a scoundrel, a first rate scoundrel, because "a scoundrel to be a good one, must be an individualist". He even admits a grudging admiration for Flem, until he, according to Faulkner, was bitten by the bug of respectability.

It is the times, the pressure against the individual to conform, the total bombardment which weighs daily on all of us; the ethos of business advertising which requires all readers to think alike so they can be trained to want the same things, so that they must be respectable enough to keep the jobs which produce the cars so they can buy the cars and so on, in a complete and incombattable circle.

¹¹ Faulkner in the University, p. 33.

Faulkner feared¹² that Snopes desire for respectability is representative of this homogenization, and as such is especially dangerous. Surely this is shortsighted, for the Snopes receive their standard of respectability from the Jefferson society around them. If this learned social attitude is complete conformity to some absolute of behaviour this can hardly be blamed on the Snopes, and can hardly prove that the Snopes are an enemy of individuality. Such an argument is completely fallacious in light of the content of the Snopes trilogy.

This question of a choice between respectable normalcy and what might be described as a depraved individuality runs through much of Faulkner's writing. Such a parallel was drawn in Light in August between the criminal Joe Christmas and the fascist town leader Percy Grimm. The line was drawn again between the good townspeople and Sutpen in Absalom, Absalom!. Such a distinction or choice was presented in The Sound and the Fury.

The Compsons are surely not an admirable family. They do not consistently perform acts of goodness. Quite the opposite is the case. They are not a force combatting evil. They are obsessed solely with themselves, haunted by their vision of their family's past glories which they

¹²Faulkner in the University, p. 34.

have not only failed to sustain, but in selling off the last of the family lands, they have betrayed. All that remains are a few trimmings of that past and the courtly gestures that accompany them. None of them is motivated by any considerations outside himself. Mr. Compson ignores the reality of their present condition, content to calmly permit their decline to complete itself. His wife demands constant attention through her hypocondria. Caddy is preoccupied with her sexual pursuits. Jason busily steals the money she sends home to her bastard child. Quentin accepts the sacrifice of the last family lands to send him to Harvard and promptly commits suicide at the end of his term, and Benjy exemplifies the whole family, requiring, in his idiot state, constant supervision.

Yet for all this, for all their cruelty to one another, their total selfishness, their preoccupation with their warped reading of the past (their family general was a total incompetent and was quickly displaced, and their governor of the state was invested via a backroom deal and was governor for only one day) they are more real, more alive, even in a way more desirable than the people who are replacing them today, the occupants of "row after row of small crowded jerrybuilt individually owned demiurban bungalows".(SF411) A society of people content to be repeatedly,

drawing neatly in and neatly parking before the repetitive Dixie Cafes or Mac's or Lorraine's to eat, solitary, neatly and without haste the meat a little too stringy to chew properly and too overcooked to taste at all, the stereotyped fried potatoes and the bread you didn't chew but mumbled, like one of the paper napkins, the machine-chopped prefrozen lettuce and tomatoes like (except for the tense inviolate color) something exhumed by paleontologists from tundras, the machine-made prefrozen pie and what they would call coffee--the food perfectly pure and tasteless except for the dousing of machine-made tomato ketchup.(M382)

The Compsons are terrifying, they show no real sense of family in terms of compassion for each other, yet they are very much a family. Above all else they are Compsons.

In this way they parallel the Snopes family; a family which is described as terrifying. They too are accused of not showing a sense of family, yet in a sense what they are as a family dominates all that they do. Faulkner was fascinated by these individualists, and by implication feared not only that they were dying out, but that the conditions in modern society would not permit their intense and violent approach to life to reappear, that people would be so intimidated by the need for sameness that they would lack the courage or fierce egotism of the Compsons that enabled them to insist by continuing to live as they did, that they were right, and the rest of society was wrong. Of the vast differences between these novels, perhaps the most significant is that Faulkner presented the Compsons through Compson narrators (Dilsey included) but presented the Snopes

through narrators and points of view identifiable with the townsfolk they confronted. It is interesting to speculate how much more terrifying or grotesquely ridiculous the Compsons might have appeared had they been described by their fellow Jeffersonians.

The point specifically, however, is that the Compsons, the Sutpens, the Snopeses are all different from the all-encroaching sameness of the society around them. They are unique in some very disturbing ways, but they are unique. What Faulkner said of Joe Christmas would apply to this whole group of characters,

He tries to do the best he can with his rights. Now with Christmas, for instance, he didn't know what he was. He knew that he would never know what he was, and his only salvation in order to live with himself was to repudiate mankind, to live outside the human race. And he tried to do that but nobody would let him, the human race itself would not let him.¹³

The human race instinctively is alarmed by such individuality, such rejection of sameness. The forms which these characters' uniqueness take are often disturbing, but they retain by their actions the individuality which Faulkner so admired.

It is not, interestingly enough, the old Southern gentry which rises to fend off the Snopes. Gavin and V. K. Ratliff are pretty markedly of the newer middle class.

¹³ Faulkner in the University, p. 118..

Ironically, it is Manfred De Spain who makes Flem vice-president of the bank, and it was old Bayard Sartoris who sent Byron Snopes to business school in Memphis.

Charles Mallison asserts in The Town that "Snopeses had to be watched constantly. . .and that Uncle Gavin and Ratliff were doing it or trying to because nobody else in Jefferson seemed to recognize the danger".(T106) From this statement it is apparent that neither the presence nor the exact character of the "Snopes threat" is universally agreed upon. Quite the opposite is apparently the case. Only Stevens and Ratliff, and later Chick Mallison seem to recognize the danger at all. This could mean that either no "Snopes threat" exists in reality, that it is the result of excessive prurience or mild paranoia on the parts of Ratliff and Stevens, or its nature is so nebulous or inconspicuous that it cannot be defined.

First, examine the men who are aware of the threat. Neither man, until Gavin weds at the end of The Mansion, has a wife or children to preoccupy him. Neither man, with the exception of Gavin's timid attentions to Eula, courts a woman. Neither man golfs, or collects stamps, or grows petunias and with the exception of Gavin's occasional game of chess, and Ratliff's occasional drink their only social activity, their only interest is talking.

Ratliff, the independant business man can work or not work as it suits him. He can, whenever he wishes, stop

to gossip on the porch at Varner's store or visit Gavin's office. Even when working, however, he is acknowledged as the local newspaper. He is a talker like Stevens, but is as much a listener, "doing the talking apparently though actually doing a good deal more listening than anybody believed until afterward".(H13)

Gavin, although employed as city and county attorney, has complete freedom to come and go as he wishes. Perhaps the most concise capitalization of his character is that given by his nephew in "Knight's Gambit".

What surprised him was his uncle: that glib talkative man who talked so much and so glibly, particularly about things which had absolutely no concern with him, that his was indeed a split personality; the one, the lawyer, the county attorney who walked and breathed and displaced air; the other, the garrulous facile voice so garrulous and facile that it seemed to have no connection with reality at all and presently hearing it was like listening not even to fiction but to literature.(KG141)

These then, are the two men who first recognize the "Snopes menace"; two aging bachelors whose interest is other people's lives, other people's actions and a thorough discussion and analysis of them. Both men not only disseminate their news, they interpret it. The more profound they can make their philosophizing about it, the more they enjoy it.

The two men are essentially products of the middle class. Gavin's family has been in Jefferson for several

generations, but they are not shown to have been one of the first families or former members of the Southern aristocracy like the Compsons or the Sartoris. No mention is made of his ancestors' participation in the Civil War or of their possessing any of the other absolutes of the antebellum Southern upper classes. The Stevens appear to have been comfortably well off middle class citizens. Ratliff, except for his background is left hazy, but from what we know of him as a successful middle class merchant we can assume that his forebears were of much the same ilk.

To the extent that they are representative of the comfortably established middle class of which they are a part, their attitudes towards the Snopes probably reflect the views of their whole social class. They exhibit, first of all, the predilection of the bourgeoisie to apply its own set of rules of conduct or morals to all others, even those who may not be aware of them. This moral absolutism is used as a yardstick against which anyone who confronts it can be measured, and this is certainly true of the Snopeses. If they, or anyone else, did not conform to the entrenched dogmatism, they would inevitably be the subject of scorn, of denunciation, of contempt, and of ridicule.

These observations are offered, not as some blanket defence or condonation of Snopes actions. They are presented to help set the stage or establish some objectification of

what the conditions really are before attempting to grapple with Faulkner's constantly shifting points of view in the novels, points of view which most often are either that of one of the characters actually involved in the defense of Jefferson from the Snopes, or a point of view sympathetic to their cause. As Volpe says,

The motives that each narrator attributes to Flem or Eula are motives which reflect more about the narrator's personality and background than about the personality of Flem or Eula. Without an authorial voice to depend upon, the reader also becomes involved in this process of seeking truth. And all he can do is add his own speculations, which reflect his own personality and background.¹⁴

It bears reaffirming, therefore, that the characters and biases of the two main narrators of the Snopes history must be taken into account in any appraisal of the real nature of the "Snopes invasion" or the abstraction call "Snopesism" which is often used to label it. Both men are gossiping, prurient, aging bachelors whose favourite past-time is observing and evaluating other people's lives. Both men are deeply entrenched in middle class morality and are sensitive to the interests and security of that class and any threat which might arise to their "people". (H321) Like the society they wish to protect, they fear what they cannot

¹⁴ A Reader's Guide to William Faulkner, p. 319.

understand and that includes practically anything which varies from their rigid code of behaviour.

For two men with these inclinations, with increasing amounts of time on their hands, battling Snopeses can be a complete preoccupation, even a new raison d'être. Such a cause can be a real opportunity for melodrama. Near the end of The Hamlet Ratliff indulges himself.

He had been arguing with Bookright about the probability of Flem returning to help Mink, who by this time was in the Jefferson jail. In the middle of the argument his tone suddenly changes.

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

'I could have,' he said. 'But I didn't. I might have if I could just been sho he would buy something this time that would sho enough kill him, like Mrs. Littlejohn said. 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 even if it could, just 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! (H321)

Ratliff, the would-be saviour of his people could do more, but they are ungrateful. They have turned with curiosity to the golden calf of "Snopesism". He could do more, but he won't. He won't! Bookright, apparently taken aback, perhaps embarassed, manages only to repeat, "all right".

The rest of the townsfolk just refused to heed the advice of their philosopher-prophets, the town's garrulous bachelor gossips. When they did heed the "Snopes threat" it was when, like Bookright or Armstid, they had been beaten by Flem Snopes in a deal. Then the townspeople were alarmed to the dangers of "Snopesism". Then they heeded their ignored prophets.

This, I suggest, is the real "Snopes threat". It is the vision of the established group, the prosperous middle class business men or the wealthy feudal landholders like Will Varner that this "down" group, this indigent, impoverished tenant farmer class or family will somehow, has somehow, gained the upper hand economically. This would represent not only the loss of a docile and unorganized source of cheap labour, but the threat of actual displacement by the former hired help.

This is certainly the attitude of Varners. When the Snopes arrive in Frenchman's Bend, Jody Varner's first instinct is to cheat Ab out of the crop he will grow on his rented farm by blackmailing him about his past as a barn burner. The Snopes are no threat to the Varners when they arrive. Ab only asks to be allowed to rent a farm and to be left alone. They are told that if they don't like the shack that they are allotted, they don't have to rent the farm.

It is when they turn the tables, when they use the

threat or implied threat that Ab's barn burning activities could be revived since the original barn burning episode resulted from Ab's belief that he had been pushed too far, then the Snopes are seen as a source of terror. When Jody, in his new state of fear grants such magnanimous concessions as offering to make repairs to the rickety Snopes hovel, when out of this new sense of fear he gives Flem the job he wants as clerk in the Varner store, then the Snopes threat becomes current. When the Varners are in the position of having to make concessions to one of their exploited tenants, then a sense of alarm is felt throughout Yoknapatawpha County.

Ratliff recounts the barn burning incident, describing how Ab burned DeSpain's barn as retaliation for what Ab considered the humiliation of having to clean DeSpain's hundred dollar French rug upon which he had purposely tracked manure as a gesture of defiance to the man who lived in luxury while allotting his tenants accommodations not "fitten for hawgs".(H13) Ratliff spreads the word of this dangerous family, a family volatile and unpredictable, not at all the qualities desired of good tenant farmers. They could, as Jack Houston discovered too late, react with alarming violence when they felt they had been pushed too far. Ratliff begins and perpetuates his vision of the "Snopes terror".

The Snopes are unpredictable. They are determined to alter their economic status. Flem informs Jody Varner

at the beginning of The Hamlet that there is no future for him in farming. He asserts, in fact, that it is just not good enough, that he intends to find something better.

Varner, without Flem once hinting at his father's penchant for barn burning, is driven by his fear of Ab to give Flem the somewhat redundant position as clerk in the Varner store, a store at which people have helped themselves to what they needed on the honour system for as long as anyone could remember.

As Ratliff realizes early, Flem's ambition will not stop at the clerkship in a country store. His quest for wealth will be unceasing as its forms will be unpredictable. Of this man and his curious family he harbours greater fear than he would of any ordinary rival in commerce, even one far more sophisticated. He knows that Flem will be relentless, that he will spare nothing or no one, including himself, to achieve his wealth. He will not subscribe to any rules of business fair play, as he discovers when he tests Flem's honesty by muttering about his chance to make a great profit by acquiring a herd of goats loud enough for Flem to overhear. When he arrives to purchase the goats, only to discover that Flem has preceded him, he feels that his vision has been demonstrated correct. He realizes that Flem does not conform to the rules of "civilized" business ethics, even if he is aware that such codes exist.

Ratliff, the merchant, is afraid first of all of a new rival in business, but this special fear broadens to a fear of a whole family and social class which he cannot understand. His failure to grasp some overall design, some end toward which his actions eventually lead makes it impossible for him to anticipate any of Flem's moves.

The Snopes, a new commodity in Yoknapatawpha are equally unintelligible to the other citizens of Jefferson. To them they are a distasteful, unlettered, uncouth, assortment of greedy alien people. Much of their behaviour discussed by the townspeople is a source of local humour. Snopes activities recounted are generally grotesque (Eck's demise in the explosion or Mink's disposal of Houston's body), often marked by a bizarre unreality bordering on surrealism (Ike's affair with the cow or the adventures of Byron's half-breed children). The anecdotes about them read curiously like the tall tales of the early American frontier both in their exaggeration and in the subject of that exaggeration, usually strangers or foreigners.

This essentially is how the Snopes are viewed by the townspeople they confront. They are readily defined by the sequence of detestable animal metaphors used to describe them. They are the local buffoons. Even buffoons can be dangerous, however, as Gavin Stevens warns Ratliff.

"You used to laugh at them too," he (Ratliff) said.

"Why not?" I (Gavin) said. "What else are we going to do about them? Of course you've got the best joke: you don't have to fry hamburgers any more. But given them time; maybe they have got one taking a correspondence-school law course. Then I won't have to be acting city attorney any more either. (T44)

These new people, these invaders, are insidious. They are relentless in their pervasiveness. No one of the established people is safe any more, for soon every job will be threatened, be challenged for by a Snopes. The immigrant population is displacing the established, or native element.

Not only is the immigrant group ludicrous and grotesque, not only are they a threat to the jobs of native Jeffersonians, they are prolific as well. Asides about the unending stream of Snopes run through the novels. V. K. Ratliff even quizzes Eck about his family, inquiring why he felt the need to have so many children.

Another source of jokes about Snopes is their parsimony. Most of the jokes about Snopes niggardliness center on Flem. The most commonly cited incident in this indictment was the story of Flem forcing his bride and her daughter to live with him in a tent behind the restaurant he ran when he first moved to Jefferson. It was behaviour the Jeffersonians would have found unthinkable, and was in its retelling the source of much humour.

In Jefferson's view of the Snopes they were strange

in appearance. They were niggardly, prolific, and on the whole quite ridiculous. They are, in fact, the stereotype of the immigrant group. The reaction of the townspeople to them, the innate hostility and revulsion, the withdrawal from contact with them is typical of an established society's rejection of any immigrant group, a rejection based upon a deep-seated fear of a new threat to their jobs, their property, their security. As Volpe has observed, the reaction

by the tolerant Ratliff makes little sense until it is recognized as the reaction of a member of the in-group to the invasion of the out-group. In many ways, this anti-Snopesism reflects a feeling that is identical with the feeling every new immigrant group in the United States has engendered in the entrenched social group. Before individuals have emerged, the new group is collectively considered immoral, unsanitary, excessively prolific, socially obnoxious, and economically unscrupulous and pushing--in short, a menace to the community. These are the very characteristics of Snopesism.¹⁵

The Snopes who enter the lives and myths of the established townsfolk are described by their Jefferson observers as a distasteful, inexplicable mob; grotesque and dangerous. Initially the Snopes are dismissed because they are different from their new neighbours, because they differ in what the townspeople believe are genuinely

¹⁵A Reader's Guide to William Faulkner, p. 309.

contemptible ways. They are dismissed once the initial shock is past not only because they are a threat to the economic security of the entrenched groups, but because they lack the traditions and social niceties of that society. They lack the requisite history.

This would seem to be the point Gavin Stevens is making in The Town when he recounts his conversation with Eula in which she described Flem's furniture buying trip to Memphis. It is, in one way pitiful; in an anomalous way profound, and on Flem's part, though perhaps unwittingly, profoundly simple or honest. The anecdote is also, as Gavin Stevens intends, quite amusing.

Flem, who has risen to the vice-presidency of the Sartoris bank, needs new furniture for his rented house. He senses innately that as a bank vice-president he must have different furniture than he has had in the past. His problem is that while he is convinced of the need he has absolutely no conception of what kind of furniture it is that he does need. He knows that he is at the mercy of the furniture store owner, because he can cheat him on the price and Flem won't even know that he has been cheated. It is a risk he is willing to take. His one stipulation about the furniture is that it should not be so expensive that it will attract attention to itself and appear pretentious. It must be just right. The store manager cannot quite grasp the point. At one stage he suggests

antiques.

'I can take this piece here for instance and make it look still older.' And Flem said, 'Why?' and the man said, 'For background. Your grandfather.' And Flem said, 'I had a grandfather because everybody had. I don't 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 don't aim to fool anybody. Only a fool would try to fool smart people, and anybody that needs to fool fools is already one.' (T222)

The episode concludes with the manager's wife offering to completely furnish the house, as she thinks a bank vice-president ex-country store clerk's home ought to be decorated. The job apparently satisfies Flem since he refuses to have even the ash trays moved after four years.

The most obvious reaction to the incident is amusement. Flem's total unawareness, his total lack of understanding of social embellishments is titillating. It is typical buffoon humour. The anomaly of a yokel wandering among antique furniture to which he is immune is amusing.

The incident is much more, however. It is indicative of Flem's whole condition. It reflects his attempt to dominate a society which he not only does not understand while he is struggling to control it, but one which if he should dominate he could not apprehend. It is in that sense pitiful. It also, however, comments upon the society which has adopted these particular posturings, a society grown so affected that its attitude toward the unsophisticated, toward those who cannot appreciate a particular refinement

is ridicule. The ignorant are the butts of that society's jokes.

In its final statement the quotation attests to Flem's shrewdness. He, more than Gavin Stevens, knows how uninformed he is. He admits to his complete social ineptitude. He is, at least, honest. Once he is vice-president of the bank he does not invent an impressive pedigree or court social connections. He refuses to be ludicrous enough to buy "genuine family heirlooms". He recognizes what he is, what his past, his family, his history have been. He makes no attempt to deny them.

One basis of the contempt for the Snopeses is that they, a historyless barbaric pack are displacing the civilized members of society who do have a history. What, in fact, they do displace is a social fabric already in deterioration. The great families of the past in Yoknapatawpha, the Compsons, the Sartorises are generally stultified in their glorification of the past. They are either unwilling to cope with a present they despise or are so indifferent to it that they ignore it altogether.

A more active member of the social elite, Manfred de Spain, is mayor of Jefferson and eventually president of the town bank. Mr. de Spain is not above using town funds to create a post for Flem as superintendent of the Jefferson power plant as reward for Flem's docility in de Spain's affair with Mrs. Snopes. Eventually he goes even further,

making Flem vice-president of the Sartoris bank. Manfred de Spain, however is a gentleman. His dishonesty, his flagrant adultery, the hypocrisy of his misuse of town funds to avail himself of the services of Eula is quite acceptable. He is of a noble, historied family. Town society senses no danger in his actions. There is no terror about a "de Spain threat".

Also quite acceptable to the citizens of Jefferson are the activities of "Uncle" Will Varner. He is tyrannical, ruling Frenchman's Bend as an enlightened despot. His sexual liaisons with the wives of his tenants are a local legend. The farmers accept whatever price "Uncle" Will decrees for their produce when it is weighed at his mill, and must pay whatever price he sets for supplies at his store. He makes no improvements in the houses in which his tenants must live, perfectly content to squeeze out of them whatever he possibly can for their labours. It is his son Jody who first meets the Snopes, and his initial instinct when he hears the rumour about Ab having been involved in barn burning is to exploit him. He plans to allow Ab to work his rented farm, to plant, cultivate, harvest the crop, then threaten to expose him unless he removes himself and his family from Frenchman's Bend. The Varners would then acquire the whole crop, rather than just what was due them in rent. Where Ab and his family would go, what they would eat while trying to find work is of no

concern to them. There is no "Varner threat", however. They are known to everyone in the area. They are accepted as feudal landlords, and they arouse no sense of terror in native Jeffersonians.

The point of delineation between those who succeed and are a threat, and those who succeed and are not, appears to center on the question of their history. Faulkner ~~expressed~~ expressed the need for involvement with the traditions of history as well as the danger of allowing the past to preoccupy or dominate the present. This is a key theme in almost all of the Yoknapatawpha novels. It is an important problem in the Snopes trilogy. Gavin's recounting of Flem's experience in the Memphis furniture store capitalizes the whole issue. Flem is unaware of his grandfather, unaware of his past, unaware of his history. On the level of history as romance this is certainly so. If history is merely the record of generals and governors of Mississippi this is true. I suggest that it is only such a superficial view of history which enables one to suppose that this obviates Flem's awareness of his family's history.

What he says after denying any knowledge of his grandfather is significant. Although he has no idea who he was, Flem does know that whoever he was "he never owned enough furniture for a room, let alone a house".(T222) He knows nothing at all about his grandfather or his own history except this. This, at least, was inevitable. This was

absolute. This about his history he knows for certain, that whoever, whatever his antecedents were specifically, they were above all else poor.

He shares this sense of the past with Mink and with most of the other Snopes relations. Other things about the past are apparent to them as well. They know that for generations they have spent their impoverished lives struggling with the land. The sense of this futile battle stretching back through all their ancestors is burned in them. Mink recalls the endless struggle with

the ground, the dirt which any and every tenant farmer and sharecropper knew to be his sworn foe and mortal enemy--the hard implacable land which wore out his youth and his tools and then his body itself. And not just his body but that soft mysterious one he had touched that first time with amazement and reverence and incredulous excitement the night of his marriage, now worn too to such leather-toughness that half the time, it seemed to him most of the time, he would be too spent with physical exhaustion to remember it was even female. And not just their two, but those of their children, the two girls to watch growing up and be able to see what was ahead of that tender and elfin innocence; until was it any wonder that a man would look at that inimical irreconcilable square of dirt to which he was bound and chained for the rest of his life, and say to it: You got me, you'll wear me out because you are stronger than me since I'm jest bone and flesh. I cant leave you because I cant afford to, and you know it. Me and what used to be the passion and excitement of my youth until you wore out the youth and I forgot the passion, will be here next year with the children of our passion for you to wear that much nearer the grave, and you know it; and the year after that, and you know that too. And not just me, but all my tenant and cropper kind that have immolated youth and hope on thirty and forty or fifty acres of dirt that wouldn't nobody but

our kind work because you're all our kind
have. (M90)

The long history of the impoverished dirt farmer and his endless futile struggle with his worn farms impinges on the consciousness of Flem, of Mink, of Montgomery Ward, and most of the Snopes who have left farming. Ab had shifted from tenant shack to tenant shack before arriving in Frenchman's Bend. Flem knew first hand the history of his family because for generations it had not appreciably changed. There were no Confederate swords in attic trunks to ponder sentimentally as old Bayard Sartoris does, or even yellowing books signed in an ancestor's hand to trip the mind back to the past as they do for Chick Mallison. There was for Flem, for Mink, for Montgomery Ward, a constant reminder of the past all about them. The past was for someone like Mink his present and once caught in its cycle he knew it could only be his future as well.

This was the Snopes history, though not a history much apprehended by the population of Jefferson, but a history all the same. Flem knew it well, and he knew its lessons. He was determined not to be trapped in the tenant farmer's inescapable cycle. There were no portraits in oils of his grandfather, yet he would have known almost exactly what his life must have been without ever having had the curiosity to enquire. Flem and his fellow Snopes are completely aware of their history, more aware probably than

their genteel neighbours, and are almost universally actuated by an understanding of what that history has been. They are prime exhibitors of what Warren Beck calls the "experimental sense".¹⁶ For them "the past as exile" had indeed "come home again" to haunt them. They flee it in greater terror than they would the ghost Beck identifies it with.

This, in effect, is what alarms the Jefferson prophets, Ratliff and Stevens, who are aware of the Snopes. This is what frightens any of the established citizens who ponder the Snopes economic gains. They are socially intolerable, but more, they are socially and historically motivated. The Snopes are aware of the past. They flee in terror from its ghost. Their flight is not tempered by any "civilized" social or business conventions, or ethics or morals. They have been down too long for that. They represent, as such, a threat to established social and business patterns because they are wholly unpredictable, and the established interests they confront are in such disarray, are so weary and so vulnerable that they cannot hope to stop them. Their progress is terrifying to the easy-going Ratliff, for the consequences of their advance are uncertain. Mink said proudly of Flem that he had

¹⁶ Man in Motion, p. 7.

"broken free". Sharing a common past of an endless cycle of deprivation in their hopeless battle with worn-out farms, the other Snopes sought to imitate his example. On their own, or clutching to Flem's coat tails they too were breaking free.

CHAPTER III

SNOPE SISM

The Snopes history is focalized by and in Flem Snopes. He is both representative of the past and indicative of the direction for the Snopes in the future. He, more than any of his family is propelled by his awareness and rejection of the past, by his efforts to break out of the family's traditional pattern of dirt farming. He is the first to assert that the cycle of endless body-breaking toil is just not good enough. It is he with his endless patience and iron will, and ruthlessness as well, who is the first Snopes to escape the futile tenant farming existence they have always known.

Mink is the only Snopes in the trilogy who still struggles with the traditional Snopes tenant farmer existence, until he too cannot tolerate its indignities any longer and lashes out, savagely murdering his wealthy neighbour Jack Houston. His observations of the kind of life he and his family are forced to live moderates the objections to the alternative, the Snopes' desperate, grotesque flight from that existence.

It was dusk. He emerged from the bottom and looked up the slope of his meagre and sorry corn and saw it--the paintless two-room cabin with an open hallway between and a lean-to kitchen, which was not his, on which he paid rent but not taxes,

paying almost as much in rent in one year as the house had cost to build; not old, yet the roof of which already leaked and the weather-stripping had already begun to rot away from the wall planks and which was just like the one he had been born in which had not belonged to his father either, and just like the one he would die in if he died indoors--which he probably would even if his clothes, repudiated without warning at some instant between bed and table or perhaps the door itself, by his unflagging heart-muscles--and it was just like the more than six others he had lived in since his marriage and like the twice that many more he knew he would live in before he did die. . . . He stopped looking at the house; he had only glanced at it as it was, and mounted through the yellow and stunted stand of his corn, yellow and stunted because he had had no money to buy fertilizer to put beneath it and owned neither the stock nor the tools to work it properly with and had had no one to help him with what he did own in order to gamble his physical strength and endurance against his body's livelihood. . . . (H219-220)

Mink was trapped. He knew only how to farm. Lacking his fellow Snopes' imagination or bluff or ruthlessness or whatever it was that each of the others manipulated in order to break free, he found no alternative to tenant farming.

Flem's fourth statement in the trilogy is his reply to Jody Varner's offer of a good farm to work. He asserts bluntly, "Aint no benefit in farming. I figure on getting out of it as soon as I can". (H23) In less than a week by virtue of Jody's fear of Ab's alleged penchant for burning barns, Flem is free of farming. His next consideration or perhaps obsession is never to have to return to it.

In this ambition he succeeds. He is unquestionably ruthless. He sacrifices everything humane within himself to

this task. He will endure the contempt of the population of Jefferson and remain in his tent behind the restaurant to save money. He will endure their ridicule and exploit Manfred de Spain's affair with his wife and cuckolding of him. He ignores the plight of his cousin Mink in the Jefferson jail and cruelly bleeds what little money the impoverished citizens of Frenchman's Bend have from them by auctioning his wild Texas ponies. He ignores the plight of Mrs. Armstid who pleads for the return of her five dollars to buy shoes for her children, and he exploits and manipulates anyone, including members of his own family, to attain more wealth. His whole condition, his entire life is capitalized by his sexual impotence. Wed to an extraordinarily beautiful woman, her beauty is completely isolated from his touch, immune to his appreciation.

It is apparent that Flem is aware of his loss, though by no means preoccupied with it. Behind the impenetrable masks he wears there is still a vulnerability. Eula says of his impotence,

You've got to be careful or you'll have to pity him. You'll have to. He couldn't bear that, and it's no use to hurt people if you don't get anything for it. Because he couldn't bear being pitied. . . But you mustn't ever have the chance to, the right to, the choice to. Like he can live with his impotence, but you mustn't have the chance to help him with pity. (T331)

Flem's sexual impotence has often been paralleled with his social or cultural impotence and it seems apparent that

Faulkner designated Flem as impotent with something like this in mind. Whether or not the two conditions perfectly complement each other, it does not seem unreasonable to apply one of the few remarks made about Flem as a person beyond the specific reference.

If this is possible it can be assumed on the basis of Eula's statement about his impotence that Flem is conscious of what he is doing, both external to himself and in terms of the sacrifice of his own spirit or humanity. Gavin Stevens suggests that he is aware that,

that money which had cost him so dear had in fact cost him everything, since he had sacrificed his whole life to gain it. (T264)

sacrificed all his life for, sacrificed all the other rights and passions and hopes which make up the sum of a man and his life. (T263)

Impelled, however, by a fierce determination to break free of his family's traditional pattern of life, he willingly accepted the sacrifice. One consideration alone mattered, to achieve and retain commercial success.

Because he made this choice Flem has been indicted by Volpe and other critics for what he calls "the worst crime in the Faulkner canon, a lack of humanity".¹ Critical examinations of Flem inevitably dwell upon this point of his guilt as an evil force. It is curiously anomalous therefore

¹A Reader's Guide to William Faulkner, p. 309.

that in the single lengthy treatment of Flem as an individual with a personality, chapter seventeen of The Town, narrated by Gavin Stevens, "innocence" should be a word consistently applied to Flem, some eight times in the course of the chapter.

This seeming contradiction raises an interesting and valid point on Flem's behalf. Of his schemes to get rich Stevens says,

he realised that he himself had nothing and would never 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. (T263)

How Flem would acquire that money was yet another problem, for in his escape from tenant farming he brought no saleable skills, he had,

nothing save the will and the need and the ruthlessness and the industry and what talent he had been born with, to serve them; who never in his life had been given anything by any man yet and expected no more as long as life should last. . . . (T264)

And once Flem did break free, did acquire his wealth, there could still be no rest "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". (T263)

Flem, as has been demonstrated earlier, had the industry and the ruthlessness, had the ghosts of the past impelling him away from the drudgery of tenant farm existence.

He had to somehow get out, yet like so many of his family and neighbours who shared that ambition, there appeared no opportunity. Flem

not only had not the education with which to cope with those who did have education, whom he must outguess and outfigure and despoil, but (that) he never would have that education now. (T263-264)

Gavin says of Flem's plight, "his was the fate to have first the need for the money, before he had opportunity to acquire the means to get it". (T264) This is really an essential point in any discussion of what might be called Flem's moral guilt. His ignorance of business methods is total, yet by the end of his life his business manipulations have amassed a fortune for him.

For Flem there is only one way of learning how to exploit the commercial system, by watching. Chapter eight of The Town records his period of observing the mechanics of banking. By simple observation he had also seen Manfred de Spain

using his position as mayor of the town to offer the base coinage of its power-plant superintendency and its implied privileges of petty larceny, not only to pay for the gratification of his appetite but to cover his reputation, trying to buy at the same time the right to the wife's bed and the security of his good name of the husband who owned them both--this for the privilege of misappropriating a handful of brass. . . . (T273)

Flem's ignorance fed upon his fellow townsmen for enlightenment. He watched to see what the good people of Jefferson would do in response to de Spain's fraud. He saw

that Gavin Stevens, "the city official sworn and--so he thought until that moment--dedicated too, until he too proved to be vulernable (not competent: merely vulnerable) to that same passion". Gavin Stevens too could bend his civic virtue to conform to his personal convenience, could withdraw a suit against a prominent Jeffersonian whom he knows has misappropriated funds, because Eula requested it.

It is apparent then that Flem determined to escape tenant farming, determined to break free. He knew he was unequipped to compete with his better trained, more aware competitors, so his would have to be a relentless and ruthless pursuit. What he had not learned from observing the Varners in operation, first as a clerk in their store and then as Will's right-hand man, he was prepared to learn by watching the de Spains and Sartorises in operation, for he genuinely did not know how to go about acquiring wealth or what rules were involved, if any. He had tasted "the humility of not knowing, of never having had any chance to learn the rules and methods of the deadly game in which he had gauged his life. . ." (T266)

Impelled by "the innocence, ignorance, if you like" (T275) Flem studied the methods and rules of the leading citizens of Jefferson. He learned the system, not from their mouthings about moral rectitude and business ethics, but by watching how the respected business men of Jefferson acted,

just as he had learned from "Uncle" Will Varner with whom de Spain forged an alliance to promote himself to the presidency of the Sartoris bank.

Flem's guilt or immorality cannot be exclusive therefore, if it is a pattern of behaviour learned from the society around him. In stressing Flem's innocence or ignorance, Gavin Stevens accentuates this point. As Olga Vickery has stated, it is society which holds the values which make acquisition an acceptable motive, and if society over-emphasizes gain, it must share Flem's burden of guilt, for it is from society that Flem learns.² If Flem is ugly or terrifying, perhaps the real source of terror is the value system of the society from which he springs, values and attitudes which he imitates in the extreme, to an extent that borders on parody.

Richard Chase placed the discussion of the Snopes on more reasoned grounds when he rejected what he called the "traditionalist view" of Faulkner, "that kind of conservative criticism that divides Faulkner's characters into Sartorises (good) and Snopeses (bad)".³ Unfortunately Mr. Chase's

²The Novels of William Faulkner, p. 168.

³The American Novel and its Tradition, p. 231.

arguments were directed more towards a realistic appraisal of Jason Compson than a complete dismissal of simplistic moral judgements applied to Faulkner characters. Thus, his argument, as it develops seeks only to demonstrate that Jason has a sense of humour and outrage.

Chase's arguments are convincing enough, but they seem to beg the real question. If Jason cannot be labelled a Snopes or a representative of Snopesism, then who can? Of Jason Chase says, "thus Jason appears at first to be a Snopes in all but name. He is mean-spirited, obscene, rapacious, anti-Semitic".⁴ Implicitly therefore, those who are named Snopes uniformly exhibit similar characteristics. As has been demonstrated earlier in this thesis, there are no character traits shared by all the Snopes, so that relating their name to a series of characteristics is quite meaningless. Further, Snopesism, if it were a viable term hardly countenances the four traits Chase implies that Jason shares with them. It might reasonably be asserted that Jason and Flem are similar in their rapaciousness, but Flem is too aloof from the grief he causes to be considered mean-spirited, and is never demonstrably obscene or anti-Semitic. If Jason is not a Snopes, does not exhibit Snopesism, it is not because he has good qualities which the Snopes uniformly lack, qualities which moderate his evil characteristics. It is

⁴The American Novel and its Tradition.

simply because he exhibits strong characteristics, mostly reprehensible, which are not shared by the Snopes, with the possible exception of Lump, but certainly not shared by a majority of them.

Jason certainly does not represent Snopesism. If he must represent an "ism", presumably it would be Jasonism or Compsonism. It should be apparent at the same time from the examination of individual Snopes in the first chapter of this thesis that there is no collective series of characteristics common to a majority of the family which reflects a pattern of behaviour consistent enough to label Snopesism.

Chase felt the need to redeem Jason from the label of Snopesism. Warren Beck also expended considerable effort in distinguishing not only Jason, but that other Faulkner tyrant, Thomas Sutpen, from association with Flem.

If Chase did not go far enough, Beck has gone too far. Sutpen according to Beck is redeemed because he has a great design,⁵ a design which even Faulkner himself insisted transcended mere commercial ambition.⁶ Sutpen's design apparently vitiates the treatment of slaves as pit animals for his amusement the whole brutal pattern of his life. It is suggested that the sheer ruthless intensity

⁵Man in Motion, pp. 86-87.

⁶Faulkner in the University, p. 35.

of that ambition, regardless of the means used to achieve it, will expiate his personal guilt or responsibility.

Flem, on the other hand "lacks the delinquent's jealous sense of inferiority, the beatnik's hypnotic self-consciousness, the revolutionist's galvanizing incantation of ideology. There is no indication that, beyond knowing only what he needs to know he possesses a sense of identity or of personal conduct".⁷

Little reference need be made to the first part of Mr. Beck's statement since its irrelevancy is self-negating. The fact that Flem evidences neither the characteristics of a delinquent nor a beatnik nor a revolutionist is quite superfluous. In addition Eula's injunction to Gavin Stevens not to pity Flem because of his impotency would seem to seriously impute the blank assertion that Flem does not feel. Flem certainly makes a considerable effort to convince people that he is immune to what they say, but what he may in fact feel is not so obvious. As Charles Mallison says of him, "Mr. Snopes probably missed what folks didn't say to him behind his back, but he never missed what folks didn't say to him to his face. Anyway, irony and sarcasm was not one of them". (T166)

The second part of Beck's statement touches upon a major point of this chapter and the thesis as a whole. Flem does possess a sense of identity. He is totally aware of

⁷Man in Motion, p. 89.

what he is, and what his family, his past, his history is. Nothing impels him more than his sense of identity, because he consciously flees it. It is the whole process of his flight, his escape from that identity or role, which actuates the three novels. As for a sense of conduct, Flem's activities are confined within a scope of immorality much less contemptible than Sutpen's or Jason's.

It is an easy matter to continue questioning whether Jason and Sutpen are as redeemable as critics like Beck insist, or that Flem is quite so reprehensible, but the point here is that while the three are, of course, different, they are united by a rapaciousness, a compulsive need for wealth and its power, and are ruthless in their drives to achieve it. That Sutpen knew specifically how he would employ that wealth or that Jason had a sense of humour seems little justification for their voracity and no demonstration of an evil force less terrifying than that represented by Flem Snopes.

As Volpe has expressed it, what makes Flem terrifying is not his commercialism, for his relative Wall Street is equally dedicated to commercial success yet receives the approbation of the Jefferson community.⁸ Vickery has also

⁸ A Reader's Guide to William Faulkner, p. 309.

noted that although his fellow citizens loathed Flem as a person, they still admired his shrewdness in business.⁹

What Flem is really indictable for is his complete obliviousness to the feelings of other people. This would seem to be what is meant by Snopesism; not voraciousness, not simple greed or the mere coveting and lusting for wealth. Such commercial ambitions conform to the dominant profit motive in North American society. Although Flem's desire to escape his family's tenant farming past is representative of an ambition shared by virtually all of the Snopes, the desire for self-improvement is also shared by millions of people who have never heard the name. It seems that neither this nor any other single characteristic or group of characteristics can meaningfully be called Snopesism.

Once Faulkner had expanded his treatment of the Snopes beyond the few limited references in Sartoris it proved increasingly less possible to present a vision of a sustained and anonymous force for evil. Without becoming entangled in the dispute between Melvin Backman (Faulkner: The Major Years) and George Marion O'Donnell ("Faulkner's Mythology") over whether Sartoris is essentially concerned with the social and moral clash between the Sartorises and the Snopes, the novel does characterise and define the Snopes better than the later Faulkner works on the subject, by virtue of the infrequency of their appearance.

⁹The Novels of William Faulkner, p. 174.

Unlike treatments of them in the Snopes trilogy the Sartoris descriptions of them can be simplistic and absolute, because no detailed picture of them is drawn. Thus,

Snopes was a young man, member of a seemingly inexhaustible family which for the last ten years had been moving to town in dribbles from a small settlement known as Frenchman's Bend. Flem, the first Snopes, had appeared unheralded one day behind the counter of a small restaurant on a side street, patronized by country folk. With this foothold and like Abraham of old, he brought his blood and legal kin household by household, individual by individual, into town, and established them where they could gain money. Flem himself was presently manager of the city light and water plant, and for the following few years he was a sort of handy man to the municipal government; and three years ago, to old Bayard's profane astonishment and unconcealed annoyance, he became vice-president of the Sartoris bank, where already a relation of his was bookkeeper. (S172)

When Faulkner came to detail the Snopes history, however, when he viewed the Snopes close up, their differences more than their similarities became most apparent. Such a one-dimensional view of moral or social warfare between the good established classes and the bad immigrant class must break down as the reader is forced to countenance some understanding of the motivations of the Snopes family.

Faulkner may well have intended to write of the Snopes as an "ism", as an abstract force of evil. There is indeed, much evidence to substantiate this view.¹⁰ Except

¹⁰The Achievement of William Faulkner, pp. 181-187.

for the limited success of this approach in Sartoris, however, his intention must serve only as additional critical background, not as a basis for Snopes criticism. Snopesism just does not exist as a uniform attitude or pattern of behaviour.

What does exist as a mode, as a pattern of commercial success, is the career of Flem Snopes. More legitimate as a label, as a definition of a particular attitude of life is the term Flemism. Very often what critics refer to as Snopesism would be more appropriate and meaningful beneath that label. Such a term justifiably may represent that kind of emotionless, feelingless commercialism which Flem exemplifies, and to the extent that Flem is a danger to society, a force for evil, Flemism^{*} could identify such behaviour in others. As with all labels, Flemism invites the danger of misapplication, of being used to represent all manner of evil. If Flem is passionless, it is a conscious passionlessness. Flemism, therefore, must represent a willful denial of feeling for others and for oneself, solely to satisfy a commercial ambition. The pursuit of gain would know no boundaries, would recognize no ethic or morality. Its rapaciousness would be as indiscriminating as it was all-pervading.

The efforts of Beck and Vickery, and Faulkner himself at the University of Virginia, to establish a qualitative distinction between Flem and Sutpen and Jason Compson are

* Flemism is a term used by Volpe in A Reader's Guide but has not generally been adopted by other Faulkner critics.

successful only on the level of social position. That is to say, all three men sought the same thing, wealth. Flem, however sought it as the only means of escaping an existence he could no longer tolerate, while Sutpen sought it with one step further in mind, the establishment of himself as a local aristocrat. Sutpen sought the graceful mansion opulently furnished which the wealth would bring, and the dynasty he might establish through a suitably respectable spouse. Flem married Eula, already pregnant, for money. His only ambition was more wealth. By this standard Beck¹¹ and Faulkner¹² insist that Flem is more reprehensible. They further stipulate that Flem is less vindicated than Jason Compson whom Beck insists still deals in values, and even though the values are inverted, Jason is of "larger dimensions" than Flem.

All of this seems to miss the real point. As Volpe has stated, Flem's crime is not greed, for if it were it would obviate the role of Wall Street Snopes in the trilogy. His compulsive commercialism is even to an extent admired in Jefferson. Both Volpe and Olga Vickery argue that Flem's greatest crime is committed against himself. He devoids himself of all feeling.

¹¹Man in Motion, p. 88.

¹²Faulkner in the University, p. 34.

Surely the standard by which all three men must be judged is not the quality or cultural acceptability of their particular dreams or ambitions. They should not be judged more or less reprehensible because of the dimensions of that ambition or how grandiose or magnificent the design. The standard must be how much they are willing to sacrifice to satisfy that ambition, what they are willing to do to themselves, to their societies, to their own families. On this basis a distinction between the three is far more difficult.

John Lewis Longley has summarized Sutpen,

Sutpen's failure springs from a defect of human feeling, the simple inability to feel and understand the feelings of others. Faulkner commentary has often rightly shown that Sutpen's racial attitudes are a part of his culture and that these same attitudes destroy the culture as well. What has not been shown is that Sutpen's dream of magnificence is typical of the United States as a whole, is indeed an example of the greatest American myth of all and thus is symptomatic of one national cultural failure.¹³

Herein lies a key to the character of Thomas Sutpen. It is further, a key to the characters of Jason Compson and Flem Snopes. Earlier in this chapter Flem's role as an observer of business, as a learner, was pointed out. While it is certainly not reasonable to suggest that he is an

¹³ John Lewis Longley Jr., The Tragic Mask: A Study of Faulkner's Heroes (Chapel Hill, 1963), p. 210.

accurate reflection of our whole culture, he is at least one perspective of our society's commercial motivation carried to an extreme. As I have repeated throughout, this thesis is not an attempt to establish Flem as desirable, as a good man. The point here is, however, that the dominant motive in Flem's life, the covetousness and greed which he embodies are prime motives in North American culture. The emphasis upon lavish physical possessions, the profit motive, conspicuous wastage, which ~~are~~ continually impressed upon members of this society is a danger not exclusive to any individual or group within that society. That an uneducated hill farmer, struggling to escape a way of life he hates should adopt that single aspect of the culture and pursue it exclusively at the expense of all else demonstrates a pervasive social danger. The danger, the evil is not Flem Snopes. It is that motive in our society, ever more dominant, which has become an obsession, the relentless and often ruthless competition for gain. Flem is a part of a system. He is, in terms of what he sacrifices for his commercial success, as much the victim as those he comes to exploit.

In the end, alone in his newly acquired mansion, friendless as always, Flem observes the approach of his cousin Mink with a revolver. He just sat "immobile and even detached too" as the gun misfired and Mink rolled the cylinder back in order to fire again. The second shot did not fail.

Linda, his nominal daughter, who had arranged for Mink's release from Parchman Prison, showed his cousin, the murderer of a man she had known as her father, the quickest route of escape. It was a death lamented by no one, possibly not even Flem. Except for the mechanics of overseeing his acquired wealth, watching its increase, death could not be much different for him from his life, propped on the back legs of his chair, his feet against the mantle, his jaw moving faintly and steadily as if chewing, alone in the only room of the mansion that he bothered to use. (M412-416)

Here, focalized in the death of Flem in a mansion he owned but never really used, Faulkner demonstrates what Flem's life has amounted to. Flem makes no effort to resist Mink and the violent death he threatens. The system which he had observed, learned, and ultimately mastered offered nothing beyond acquisition. Flem did not even know he could not appreciate his mansion; probably was unaware that he was supposed to. So he sat aimlessly every evening, his jaws moving "as if chewing". (M413) Now that Flem had the money to chew all of the tobacco he chose to, he had lost the desire to.

Focalized in his death, as it had been in the suicide of Eula is the sterility of what Flem is, of what he has learned to be, of what he represents. Rather than have Linda know her mother was a whore, Eula chose suicide. In her decision she rejected ultimately, as she had throughout her

life, any attraction to commercialism. She was immune to it, perhaps unaware of it, in her total commitment to intense feeling or passion. Just as she had rejected any real communion with Flem's creed of acquisition, she found nothing in it to distract her from her final decision.

Flem's death seems to witness a similar resignation on his part, though certainly less conscious than Eula's. Rather than struggling or crying for help Flem is resigned to death, to the loss of all he had struggled to attain. His condition is capitalized by his rejection of chewing tobacco because gum was cheaper, then the rejection of the gum in its turn because he could chew just air for nothing at all. He discovered that like his jaws perpetually moving, simulating chewing at the air, there was no pleasure in the accumulations compiled from his denials, no pleasure in a life which was just movement without flavour or substance.

Reba Rivers, the Memphis prostitute friend of Montgomery Ward had summarized the human condition as defined by Mink's murder of Jack Houston, a murder he had no particular desire to commit, but one which he felt he was forced to, to expiate somehow the total, overwhelming, unbearable injustice which he sensed. "All to us. Every one of us. The poor sons of a bitches." (M82)

Ratliff and Gavin Stevens, those benevolent guardians of Jefferson civic virtue utter the same words of despair after Mink's murder of Flem.

"Yes," Ratliff said. "So this is what all come down to. All the ramshacking and fore-closing and grabbling and snatching, doing it by gentle underhand when he could but by honest hard trompling when he had to, with a few of us trying to trip him and still dodge outen the way when we could but getting overtrompled too when we couldn't. And now all that's left of it is a bedrode old lady and her retired old-maid school teacher daughter that would a lived happily ever after in sunny California. . . .So maybe there's even a moral in it somewhere, if you jest knowed where to look."

"There aren't any morals," Stevens said.

"People just do the best they can."

"The pore ~~sons~~ of bitches," Ratliff said.

"The pore sons of bitches," Stevens said. (M428-429)

So here united for the first and only time by virtue of their common philosophy, their folksy ethical relativism, are the prostitute Reba Rivers, the petty criminal Montgomery Ward who repeats her words, the respected aging town philosophers and the subjects of their collected sympathy, the murdered Jack Houston and Flem Snopes, and the murderer Mink Snopes. Here in their summation, and for Ratliff and Stevens their fullest illumination, they discern that no sophistry can ultimately distinguish different categories of men, for there is no room, there is no validity to absolutes of good and evil, for no man has a monopoly on either, or a means of defining them free from self-interest. For we all share the same common curse or burden or perhaps blessing of being just men, just poor sons of a bitches.

CONCLUSION

Death and suffering have a way of uniting mankind. In the universal realities they impose upon the mind, false distinctions, the mists of our own propaganda, dissolve. Surely this is the lesson of the Snopes, that of course people are different, that people who have shared a history distinct in many ways from the social norm are neither necessarily inferior by virtue of their difference nor guilty thereby of some nefarious social evil. Those who venture into the main stream of the North American socio-economic system from some alien point will inevitably try harder to master the apparent mode of life. Inevitably externals will pre-occupy those whose background and education deny them access to an understanding of causes and purposes. H. P. Fairchild in his study of American immigrant groups warned that, "The danger in this change is that he may become hard and bright and external and committed to a vulgar doctrine of success. That, I think is what (the Irish) dread about America. America seems to them all outside, all formidable background with nothing within or behind."¹

Faulkner feared that in our society there was little

¹H. P. Fairchild, Immigrant Backgrounds (London, 1927) p. 90.

room for uniqueness, for individuality, that in this mass communication culture dominated by the advertising executives of Madison Avenue men must sacrifice whatever uniqueness they have to conform to some standard of social acceptability in order to win the baubles which the advertisers dangle before them. Their need, their compulsion to possess, Faulkner anticipated, would create a terrible cycle in which men would not dare to be different lest they lose the jobs through which they earn the money to buy the material goods which the advertisers insist they must want, and the age of the automaton would be close at hand.

His statements at the University of Virginia indicate that Faulkner's fear was not really of the Snopes' grasping or cheating or grotesque behaviour, but of their compulsion to mimic the external forms of social behaviour. Such a danger does indeed exist, yet surely if new "immigrant" groups mimic accepted social behaviour, and what is seen in distorted form is ugly and terrifying, our reaction should not be to denounce those who act out a parody of our society's values. The real fear, the needed evaluation, should be of those social values which when mirrored are so frightening.

Our society stresses acquisition. The prime mover in our economic and social system is covetousness, the response increasingly conditioned into us to be aroused by the latest consumer product flashed before us which incites us to strive to possess it. As an economic system no one can

question its success. We can be considerably less enthusiastic about its effects upon our culture, upon basic human intercourse in a society founded, indeed dependant upon, competition.

This is really what the Snopes represent. They are not some vague uniform abstraction. They are an alien, perhaps less civilized family which moves suddenly from a primitive dirt farming existence into the midst of twentieth century capitalism. How they adjust to the system after observing it in operation can give us a perspective of ourselves we are incapable of, a view of ourselves, our preoccupations, our ambitions, magnified in the imitations of these outsiders.

The Snopes do pose a threat to Jefferson society, because they, in varying degrees, have sacrificed their humanity to their program of acquisition. They pose for all of us a challenge and a question, for we must decide at what point to withdraw from the struggle, the competition for gain, for newer cars, newer house. How much that is unique within us, that seeks expression, are we prepared to deny, to ignore? At what stage of emptying ourselves are we prepared to draw the line, or must we like Flem be compelled to go on acquiring that which long since has eluded our appreciation?

Surely one day the conscience will demand a reckoning to determine whether the goods received balance with the

price of their acquisition. Perhaps we may discern too late that it was the induced wanting which we satisfied, the desire stimulated within us to own which was satiated momentarily, that the particular bauble was quite irrelevant, and that the price we, like Flem, were willing to pay, was terrifyingly exorbitant.

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