

**Order Number 9417553**

**Provincialism, duplicity, and veneration: William Faulkner's  
Snopes family**

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**Middle Tennessee State University, 1993**

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Provincialism, Duplicity, and Veneration:  
William Faulkner's Snopes Family

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A dissertation presented to the  
Graduate Faculty of Middle Tennessee State University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Arts

December 1993

Provincialism, Duplicity, and Veneration:  
William Faulkner's Snopes Family

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Abstract

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by

Kenneth Mac Brown

Although since his death in 1962, William Faulkner has received an enormous amount of critical attention most of these studies deal with what critics call his major works. However, inadequate critical focus is given to the Snopeses and Faulkner's Snopes trilogy. This is unfortunate since the Snopes family represents a significant segment of the Yoknapatawpha society. The development of the Snopes family spans a major portion of Faulkner's literary career, and thus their depiction is certainly not, as many critics suggest, an example of Faulkner's failing literary powers. Since first publication of the Snopes material, critics have tended either to ignore the Snopeses, to take a harsh view of them, or to dismiss them as rehashed Southwest humor.

A close reading of the Snopes material, especially the trilogy, shows that the Snopeses fill a central place in Faulkner's literary universe. With his depictions of the Snopeses, Faulkner is writing up to his full ability, and his characterizations go far beyond old Southwest humor. As always, Faulkner is much too complex to write mere local color.

Chapter 1 of this study examines how most critics dismiss the Snopeses as Faulkner's revision of antebellum humor and how they see the trilogy as inferior novels about a family of grotesque buffoons. Chapter 2 explores the characteristics of antebellum humor through some of the better known examples and authors. Chapter 3 examines various members of the Snopes family and how Faulkner uses them. Chapters 4 and 5 examine how Faulkner complicates Flem Snopes by tracing Flem's rise to power and his subsequent quest for veneration. Through the chronicle, Faulkner gives Flem his multi-dimensionality. The concluding chapter explores the ways in which Faulkner allows the reader to view Flem as a man of his times and therefore to see him in a more compassionate light.

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## Chapter 1

### The Critical Heritage

Although Absalom, Absalom!, Light in August, and The Sound and the Fury assure William Faulkner's place as one of America's literary torchbearers, critics often dismiss Faulkner's Snopes trilogy as a mere rehashing of old antebellum local color writing. This dismissal is unfortunate. Too often, critics regard the Snopeses merely as backwoods, grotesque demons, or they even ignore the Snopes books as inferior works of an author with waning powers. Seeing the Snopeses as reconstituted nineteenth-century local color characters with a naturalistic or modernistic facade oversimplifies the psychological and sociological complications of the Snopes clan, especially of Flem. By ignoring Faulkner's Snopes material or by viewing it as reissued local color, critics overlook the fact that the Snopes trilogy provides one of the most sustained analytical explorations of a character and his family ever developed by a major author.

Three overlapping streams of Snopes criticism have developed. First, many critics dismiss the trilogy in favor of Faulkner's earlier works and suggest that the Snopes saga is merely a product of Faulkner's waning literary powers. This view is mistaken. Faulkner conceived of the Snopeses early in his career in some of his New Orleans sketches and the Father Abraham story. He continued working on the

Snopeses, often publishing short stories out of the early drafts of the Snopes material and turning the Snopes chronicle into at least a thirty-five-year project. This period represents Faulkner's most sustained writing effort, and therefore, the Snopeses constitute an essential part of what Faulkner calls his "apocryphal country."

A second group of critics tends to see the Snopes trilogy as the comic Faulkner working to achieve purely folksy, rustic humor, thus equating this material with the works of antebellum humorists. Thomas L. McHaney in "What Faulkner Learned from the Tall Tale" (1984) observes that Faulkner practices "the art of lying in that peculiarly Southwestern mode" (120). Certainly, either directly or indirectly, Faulkner is obliged to the tall tale tradition and to the likes of Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, George Washington Harris, and Johnson Jones Hooper. In this light, the Snopes family is, as a group, shiftless yokels --something subhuman and ready to infect and devour everything that they approach like a contagious disease. Flem becomes in this mode the arch-villain, a character who symbolizes all that is wrong with twentieth-century humanity.

The notion that the Snopes material is only a contemporary revision of the tall tales of the antebellum humorists is also only partially correct. As Mary Ann Wimsatt and Robert L. Phillips suggest in "Antebellum Humor"

from The History of Southern Literature, Faulkner, like Mark Twain, Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty, and Erskine Caldwell, is "in one way or another indebted to the rich imaginations of antebellum forebears" (156). The significant contributions of the antebellum humorists therefore require additional exploration. However, a close comparison of Faulkner's trilogy and the works of the antebellum humorists reveals that while Faulkner uses some of the same literary tools as his forebears, the Snopeses are more than mere stereotypes. Also, Faulkner's knowledge of the tall tale, as Robert Penn Warren suggests in "William Faulkner," may be as much the result of what he observed sitting on the porches of country stores as of what he read in any published work (109).

The third view, that of the Snopeses being evil monsters, coexists with that of the Snopeses being out of the tall tale tradition. The Snopeses are called "destructive," "literally inhuman," "grotesque buffoons," "insidious horrors," and "money hungry, greedy, manmade curses." The Snopeses compare unfavorably to the likes of the Sartorises and Snopes-watchers like Gavin Stevens and V. K. Ratliff. In these comparisons, the Snopeses, while being viewed as out of the tall tale tradition, are always considered the villains. Curiously, the Snopes-like characters that appear in antebellum humorous sketches as "screamers" and "ringed-tailed roarers" are the heroes.

This view suggests that the Snopeses, while traditionally being acknowledged as Faulkner's lowest life form, may require examination in a new light. Although Flem Snopes may not appear to be heroic in the traditional sense, it is possible to see him as a rustic hero in the tall tale tradition. Since critics acknowledge that the Snopeses are survivors like the antebellum heroes, it is worthwhile to see what skills and uncommon qualities they possess. In order to do this, it is necessary to examine the way in which antebellum humorists created these American archetypal figures.

Critics are quick to point out the resemblance of the Snopes stories to the works of the antebellum humorists since even a casual reading of the Snopes material reveals similarities between Faulkner's writings and that of nineteenth-century local colorists. The Snopes trilogy contains tall tales, confidence games, horse trades, earthy humor, and characters similar to those created by Hooper, Harris, Longstreet, and Thomas Chandler Haliburton. Unfortunately, critics often fail to get past Faulkner's veneer of rusticity and to scrutinize the more complex interplay between the Snopeses and those around them.

In one of the earliest reviews of the Snopeses, George Marion O'Donnell takes the often-expressed dim view of the Snopes family in an article titled "Faulkner's Mythology" (1939). O'Donnell regards the Snopes family as an important

component of Faulkner's mythological "spiritual geography" which consists of two worlds--the Sartoris world and the Snopes world (84). He adds that while the Sartorises act in a traditional manner and "represent vital morality," the Snopes clan functions in an antitraditional method, and therefore, the "Snopeses are immoral from the Sartoris point of view" (84). He sees the Snopes-Sartoris struggle as a clash between the naturalism of the Snopeses and the humanism of the Sartorises. O'Donnell's premise is straightforward, if overly simplistic. He neglects the fact that the Sartoris family does not always act with an "ethically responsible will" and is not without its amorality and indiscretions. Also, O'Donnell fails to point out that even the worst of the Snopeses are susceptible to momentary lapses of decency.

One of the earliest comprehensive looks at the Snopes novels is Warren Beck's Man in Motion: Faulkner's Trilogy (1961). Beck takes a dim view of the Snopes clan, seeing them as a "blunt and appalling cultural fact" (21) and as "so grotesque they ellipse the human" (139). He adds that they are like pirates, "a motley crew, ununiformed, each wearing his personal anarchism with a difference, all of them destructive but eccentrically so" (21). Although Beck is quick to point out the collective and individual shortcomings of the Snopes clan, he is charitable in his general praise of the trilogy. He calls the Snopes novels

"the crown of Faulkner's creativity" (5) and sees them as variations on the "theme of ubiquitous evil and its opposition" (3). According to Beck, the trilogy demonstrates both Faulkner's commitment to human verities and to realistic awareness, and he adds that the Faulknerian theme of recurrent conflict between "ruthless aggression" and partially successful "principled resistance" (8) is evident throughout the trilogy. Beck calls the novels "genuine realism," and even terms Faulkner's inconsistencies "ironic corrections of his own eccentricities" (186). Unfortunately, he spends much of his energy in following what has become the recurrent critical path of devaluing the Snopeses.

Cleanth Brooks in William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country (1963), a standard text of Faulkner criticism, provides a comprehensive assessment of the Snopeses. While Brooks provides a complete inventory of the Snopes family, his views are somewhat limited in that he fails to consider the multi-dimensionality of the functions of the Snopeses, especially Flem. For example, Brooks views Faulkner's shiftless poor white as stereotypical and derivative, comparing Faulkner's uses of Clarence Snopes and I. O. Snopes to the rustic buffoons found in Longstreet's Georgia Scenes. Fittingly, Brooks observes that The Hamlet is the story of the rise of Flem Snopes, but Brooks tends to dismiss Flem as "far from the most interesting of

characters" (174). However, he does admit that Flem achieves the "dimension of myth" when Ratliff imagines Flem's entrance into hell (171). Brooks suggests that The Town is a lesser work than The Hamlet, the former lacking the mythic and heroic qualities of the latter, and he concludes his assessment of The Town by suggesting that if one failed to read The Town and went directly from The Hamlet to The Mansion, "one would lose nothing very essential" (216). Thus to Brooks, The Town is a second-rate sequel rather than an essential part of the trilogy.

Brooks feels that The Mansion is a much stronger novel than The Town. To him, the world presented in The Mansion is far removed from the robust pastoral world of The Hamlet and the "coziness" of The Town. Further, he suggests that Faulkner creates a heroic world in The Mansion in which Mink Snopes becomes an unlikely hero similar to those in an Elizabethan revenge tragedy. While Brooks evaluates Mink Snopes as a hero in The Mansion, he rates Flem as the ultimate representative of what he calls "the insidious horror of Snopesism" (222). Brooks observes that Flem, unlike Mink, has no sense of honor and therefore is less vulnerable. Since he works inside the law, only someone outside the law can strike him down (222). To Brooks, "Flem is a kind of monster who has betrayed everyone, first in his lust for pure money power, and later in what Faulkner regards as a loathsome lust, a desire for respectability"

(228). Brooks adds that "Flem, except as he has been reflected and magnified against the clouds of the imaginations of people like Gavin and Ratliff, is finally a negative quality" and a "shadow cast by an interest rate or an animated mortgage" (230). Brooks's remarks about one of Faulkner's finest characters and Faulkner's most infamous family have long set the tone of Snopes criticism. Unfortunately, Brooks's views of Flem are rather shortsighted and do not account for the full dimensions of the character nor for those of the Snopes family.

Although many critics view the Snopeses as villains and monsters, Otis B. Wheeler in "Some Uses of Folk Humor" (1964) takes a much lighter look at the Snopes family. He sees Faulkner's Snopeses as descendants from two strains of antebellum humor--"Down East" and "Frontier." Wheeler characterizes the Yankee peddler or "Down East" type as a sharp trader or observer of humanity. The "Frontier" or old Southwest character such as Simon Suggs is a sharp trader but is usually less scrupulous. Also, folk humor is full of practical jokes and is often violent, brutal, bawdy and scatological. Wheeler correctly views the Snopes saga as Faulkner's chief repository of frontier humor (76). The Hamlet alone contains two horse swaps in addition to other types of trades and confidence games and the brutal and ribald actions which occur in Frenchmen's Bend. To Wheeler, Flem's trip to hell suggests the superhuman feats of a Mike

Fink or Davy Crockett. He maintains that although Flem in this section resembles the hero of a tall tale, he is still more demonic than benign (78).

Although Wheeler's view of the Snopeses, Flem in particular, is basically negative, he does make some allowances for them. Wheeler believes that Faulkner sees Snopesism as:

the force of greed and rapacity which destroys morality and decency whenever it comes in contact with them. In general, it is more a threat to the "haves" than the "have-nots" because the Snopeses are after the possessions and the status of the haves--but whatever its objects, Snopesism could not destroy if its antagonists were not decadent, weak or foolish. For weakness Faulkner has great compassion, but for decadence and foolishness he has the lash of humor! Often there is a certain justice in Flem's fleecing those sheep who stand waiting for it or in swindling those who have larceny in their hearts. (78)

Wheeler is one of the few critics who offer any type of sympathetic view of Flem or justification for Flem's activities. According to Wheeler, the complexity of Faulkner's folk humor is best illustrated in The Town where Faulkner employs three narrators to present a unified view of the Snopes invasion. V. K. Ratliff, reminiscent of the "Down East" folk humor, functions as a wise observer who

understands Flem's desires for respectability. Chick Mallison appears as a somewhat civilized version of Huckleberry Finn and views Snopesism with childlike wonder, and Gavin Stevens, who is unable to observe Snopesism without a sense of helplessness, sees it as a "horrid creeping fungus with which he is fated to fight, but doomed to lose" (81).

James Gray Watson in The Snopes Dilemma (1968) takes a dim view of the Snopeses, especially Flem. Watson believes that Faulkner's characterization of Flem Snopes is at odds with Faulkner's belief that good literature deals with "the human heart in conflict with itself" (Essays 1042). Watson views Flem as a "character so completely resistant to moral definition as to be literally inhuman" and as a character who serves "as the unchanged amoral archetype in contrast to which the range and opulent complexity of the moral world are revealed" (12). He sums up Flem by adding that "of all of Faulkner's characters, none is so completely out of tune with the rhythms of life as Flem Snopes" (225). Watson compares Flem to Thomas Sutpen in that both exhibit "singleness of purpose and rise from poverty by using others" (224).

Watson sees Flem's importance as a counterpoint by which the "depth and scope of the moral universe of Yoknapatawpha might be judged" (226). He views Flem as the villain's villain, part of what he calls "Faulkner's most

extended and comprehensive statement of the nature of man and the outcome of his struggle" (229). Yet, Watson finds nothing lofty, heroic, or even positive about Flem Snopes. To Watson, even Flem's murder is a moral act, and Flem is necessary only to create the thematic and structural tension between motion and stasis (229). Although Watson makes some valid points, his argument fails to realize Flem's complexity. He sees the trilogy as monochromatic with Flem and his clan representing complete amorality, and the Snopes watchers as being the guardians of morality and public good. Flem, however, is much too complex to be categorized in such a manner. Such a reading fails to account for Flem's economic rise and for his subsequent quest for veneration.

In Faulkner (1976), Warren Beck sees the theme of the trilogy as the "inexorable but gradual rise of Snopesism in all its pernicious mutations" (279). As in Man in Motion, Beck takes an entirely negative view of the Snopeses with the exception of Mink Snopes. To Beck, Mink is one of Faulkner's finest characterizations because of his sense of honor and his "living fluidity" (101). In contrast, he views Flem as an upstart and an insidious villain, the ultimate usurper of the mansion (639), and he sees many of the other Snopeses as varying types of grotesque buffoons (642). Although Beck sees the trilogy as a "triumph of realism" which draws on traditional modes, he fails to offer

any new insights into Faulkner's treatment of the Snopes family.

Although William Faulkner's name figures prominently in the respected critical source, The History of Southern Literature (1985), the importance of the Snopes clan in Faulkner's writing is neglected. Cleanth Brooks, in the Faulkner chapter, identifies Faulkner as having been fortunate to be born into the culturally remote hills of north Mississippi because it was rich in the materials he needed to create his unique fiction (333). He mentions how, as a youngster, Faulkner gained firsthand accounts of the antebellum South and the Civil War from elderly matriarchs and Confederate veterans and therefore was able to learn about a passing culture which would be inexorably altered in the first decades of the twentieth century.

Brooks correctly views Faulkner as an artist who is able to profit by using his local material to present "problems of modern man living in a world of drastic change" (342), but Brooks fails to mention anything about the Snopes family and their pivotal place in the Yoknapatawpha saga. This omission is significant since Brooks laid the foundation for the Snopeses' place in Faulkner's canon but unfortunately fails here to follow through on their importance. Instead, Brooks focuses on what he calls Faulkner's "romantic idealists." Certainly, these character types play an important role in the development of Faulkner's fiction.

However, the rise of Flem Snopes from a son of a white trash sharecropper to the president of a city bank, along with his accompanying quest for respectability, the antics of the peripheral Snopeses, and the symbolic implications of Snopesism, all constitute important variations on Faulkner's themes. While Brooks sees Faulkner's use of Yoknapatawpha as a "means of presenting the characteristic problems of modern man living in a world of drastic change" (341), he fails to cite the Snopes clan as examples. Faulkner's cadre of failed "romantic idealists" may appear more admirable than the Snopeses to Brooks and other critics. However, fictionally they are no more important, and they lack the one ability that the Snopeses seem to possess--the skill to survive and prosper in a changing world.

Although a major vein of Snopes criticism focuses on the grotesque nature of the rise of the Snopes family, Daniel Hoffman, in his Faulkner's Country Matters: Folklore and Fable in Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha (1989), places the nucleus of the trilogy, specifically The Hamlet, in the oral tradition and local color of Southern literature. Hoffman cites Harris, Longstreet, Hooper, Haliburton and Twain as Faulkner's literary predecessors and sees Faulkner's tall tale humor as most evident in the Snopes family. For example, Byron Snopes in Flags in the Dust with his anonymous pornographic letters and Montgomery Ward Snopes with his pornographic peep show in The Town exemplify what

Hoffman calls "the humor of lust" (77). He places the names of various Snopeses in the tall tale tradition of glorified ugliness and cites, as examples, the epithets of major Snopeses such as Mink and Flem. Hoffman also places the redneck politician Clarence Snopes and the ignorant Virgil Snopes in the same mold as characters in antebellum humor.

Although Hoffman mentions the peripheral Snopeses, he concentrates his efforts on Flem. To Hoffman, Flem is a descendant of several antebellum characters. Initially, he sees Flem sharing many of the characteristics of the Yankee peddler, but he asserts that Flem is the "most developed treatment of the Yankee peddler's ethos in our literature . . . "in whom the Yankee love of trading becomes a lust for moneymaking and a compulsion to dominate" (73). Hoffman, however, notes that Faulkner complicates the stock characterization of the Yankee peddler by making the merchant, Flem, the heartless villain instead of the itinerant peddler.

Hoffman observes that Faulkner read and "borrowed from the work of several Southern humorists" (8). He cites Longstreet's Georgia Scenes (1835), Harris's Sut Lovingood: Yarns Spun by a "Nat'ral Born Durn'd Fool" (1867), and Hooper's Adventures of Captain Simon Suggs (1845) as written sources for Flem and the other Snopeses. The characters of the tall tale portrayed an American as being "adaptable to circumstance, undaunted by adversity, at any moment ready to

change his calling" (19). This portrayal allowed an individual to achieve status by accomplishments rather than by inheritance. Thus, the hope of upward mobility, the deflection of one's beginnings, and the ability to disregard conscience gave rise to a figure who could express negativity and irresponsibility and yet emerge as a metamorphic hero. Hoffman insists that such is the case with Haliburtion's Yankee peddler Sam Slick and Hooper's Simon Suggs, and that these characters prefigure creations by Hawthorne, Melville, and Twain as well as Faulkner (19). This type of metamorphic hero displays many negative characterizations such as fraudulence and demonism.

Hoffman sees much of what he calls a "mythical and folk archetype" in a transformed or adapted manner in Faulkner's work. According to Hoffman, Faulkner, like many other Southern writers, views himself as something of a disinherited aristocrat and to an extent defends the notion of the old South as Garden of Eden. At the same time, however, he recognizes the upward social mobility of the metamorphic hero. Hoffman observes that this creates a tension in Faulkner's work which allows the presence of both the Snopeses and the Sartorises. While Hoffman sees Mississippi's two-generation aristocracy, represented by the Sartorises, the Compsons, and the McCaslins, as the basis for the metamorphic hero, he fails to recognize Flem and his

clan as earlier evolutions of the same metamorphic hero. Like the others, Flem is a self-made man who rises from poverty to become the most powerful man in his county. However, Hoffman argues that Flem's actions "lead to success, but not, in Faulkner's world, to heroism" (24). Flem's story is not a typical rags to riches story, nor is Flem a Horatio Alger. Flem is successful in his quests for money, power, and respectability, and if, as Hoffman suggests, success is a true attribute of a metamorphic hero, then Flem is more like the Compsons and the Sartorises than Hoffman proposes. Hoffman views characters such as Simon Suggs, Sut Lovingood, and Sam Slick as metamorphic heroes, but unfortunately likens them to Faulkner's Sartorises, Compsons, and McCaslins, failing to notice the similarities between the antebellum characters and Flem Snopes.

In Faulkner's Apocrypha (1989), another recent appraisal of the trilogy, Joseph Urgo observes that "critics who have analyzed the Snopes trilogy have worked hard to show that in Snopes, Faulkner was doing what he had always done in his fiction, with the qualification that he was not doing it as well" (146). He adds that another of many critics' shortcomings is that most "say more about Faulkner in general than about the trilogy in particular" and that many critics attempt to show how the "old Faulkner of the 1930s and 1940s is still alive and well in the Snopes trilogy as a whole" (147). However, Urgo argues that rather

than seeing Faulkner's later works such as the trilogy as products of an author's diminished powers, they should be viewed at the center of what he calls "Faulkner's apocrypha" (4). The apocrypha, according to Urgo, is the "political and ideological alternative of what Faulkner considered to be the totalitarianism of modern society" (4)

While most critics feel that Faulkner despised the Snopes clan, Urgo argues that Faulkner admired the Snopeses' constant refusal to allow anyone to treat them like the class from which they rose and their ability to turn class disadvantages and buffoonery into personal gain (149). Urgo even likens Faulkner to Flem Snopes, comparing Faulkner's view that a writer's whose responsibility is to his art to Flem's desire to get rich. While Flem belongs to money, Faulkner belongs to art. Urgo sees Flem's quest for respectability as similar to Faulkner's long road to critical and popular acknowledgment. According to Urgo, Flem craves respectability in his mansion just as Faulkner craves respectability in the university. He sees Flem and Faulkner as survivors because they can adapt to changing circumstances by listening and observing (156). Urgo summarizes the trilogy as a tale told by a mule breeder who learned "something profoundly important from his mules" (149).

While Urgo makes some valuable points, he concentrates his efforts on what he sees as the "intellectual and

spiritual dimensions of the apocryphal vision" (168). Urgo sees the trilogy as "a three-dimensional study of human rebellion against the death of the body, the intellect, and the soul" (168). He sees The Hamlet as a sensual work full of ghastly examples of human passion and The Town as an intellectual work focusing on the racial and political issues of the South. To Urgo, The Mansion as a restatement of Faulkner's spirituality which explores the tension between the outrage of the proletarian class and the emptiness of individualist success (169).

Although Urgo argues that he, unlike many other critics, does not view the trilogy as the product of Faulkner's waning powers, he appears to be apologizing by categorizing the trilogy as apocrypha or added text. He focuses on how Faulkner places his appraisal of current events within the body of the novel and on how the Snopeses are Faulkner's symbols of "tripartite existence with sensuality, political activism, and rebelliousness as being components of his apocryphal individual" (209). However, Urgo fails to notice that Faulkner demonstrates these same characteristics and an intense individualism, specifically in his characterizations of Mink and Flem.

Richard C. Moreland, in Faulkner and Modernism: Reading and Rewriting (1990), explores the sociological and psychological ramifications of the Snopeses and their place in the economically changing South. Moreland focuses mainly

on Faulkner's treatment of Ab and Flem Snopes, but he also offers insights into some of the minor Snopeses who infiltrate Frenchman's Bend. To Moreland, the Snopeses, whose stories are told and then retold in later works, represent "importantly critical, published revisions of Faulkner's thinking and writing" (4). Moreland suggests that repetitions of what he calls "primal scenes" allow Faulkner to deal with the same basic story on psychological, sociological, and economic levels. For example, in "Barn Burning," Ab and Sarty's treatment and Ab's subsequent handling of the situation are an exhibition of the old Southern social system with its resulting ramifications of a tenant-landowner post-Civil War feudal society. However, in the opening of The Hamlet, when Faulkner retells the story through Ratliff, he shows "both the potential humor and the potential for economic criticism and change in Ab's acute understanding of his own social and economic relationships with the planter" (19). Additionally, Sarty, who serves as a moral conscience, is replaced by Flem who functions as a representative of twentieth-century capitalism.

The Hamlet opens with the story of Ab Snopes, whom Moreland views as a victim of the old South. Ab's world is a stratified economy where class lines are drawn between landowner and tenant. In Ab's world, his only recourse is to make some violent signature like burning a barn or soiling an expensive rug. However, Ab is displaced by Flem

who symbolizes the emerging capitalistic economy, and the store replaces the plantation house as the seat of economic power. Rather than dealing in crop shares, Flem and his peers deal in foreclosed mortgages. Moreland makes a point of showing how Faulkner tempers the upheaval of the emerging twentieth-century New South economy with the humor typical of the nineteenth-century Old Southwest. He sees Faulkner's humor as twofold--to "understand and appreciate the Snopeses variously resourceful, perverse, funny ways of escaping the still widely mystified but changing structures of Old South power and privilege" and "to maintain a sense of the attendant risks of falling into the differently remystified, reterritorialized forms of power, privilege, and alienation in the liberalized capitalism of the twentieth-century New South" (142). For example, Flem's funny little black tie displaces Ab's clumping boot. Eck and I. O. Snopes represent comically what Moreland calls "two complementary polarized aspects of the economic system" (146). Eck is a moveable pawn and a "piece of clumsy, incompetent brawn" while I. O. is the "personification of the system itself," always speaking in a fanfare of aphorisms (146).

Moreland recognizes the complexity of the Snopeses, but he limits his discussion to The Hamlet. By not treating the entire trilogy, he fails to account for the expansion of the Snopes family's roles and for Flem's expanding agenda, especially his quest for respectability.

Although since his death in 1962, William Faulkner has received an enormous amount of critical attention, most of this criticism deals with what critics term his major works. An inadequate amount of critical focus is given to the Snopeses and Faulkner's trilogy as evidenced when even Brooks, in the respected text The History of Southern Literature, fails to mention the Snopeses. This is an unfortunate circumstance because the Snopes family represents a significant segment of the Yoknapatawpha society. Additionally, the development of the Snopeses spans a major portion Faulkner's literary career and thus their depiction is certainly not, as many critics suggest, an example of Faulkner's failing literary powers. Since publication of the first Snopes material, the critics either ignore the Snopes family or, as we have seen, take a harsh view of them and dismiss the saga as mere rehashed antebellum humor. In the following chapters, I hope to correct these errors.

## Chapter 2

### The Antebellum Humorists

Much has been made of Faulkner's connection with the antebellum humorists, and rightfully so. Many of his characters, especially the Snopeses, appear to be descendants of characters found in antebellum humor. Whether the linkage is direct as critics such as Otis B. Wheeler and Daniel Hoffman have suggested, or indirect, coming from rural America's common oral tradition, Faulkner shares literary ground with the antebellum humorists who realistically and humorously depicted life on the frontier and, as a result, gave America its first national literature.

The antebellum humorists with which the Snopeses are most often associated grew out of the oral tradition and are not contained within geographic boundaries. Furthermore, their sketches contrast sharply with the oral didacticism of the Puritans and the democratic and deistic essays of Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine. Out of this tall tale tradition began a literature that was created for enjoyment rather than for spiritual instruction or enlightenment. By the first half of the nineteenth century, America began to stretch its boundaries, both geographically and intellectually, and in the early 1830s some of the more learned Americans began to publish humorous and realistic sketches of frontier life in local papers and in national

journals such as The Spirit of the Times. The genesis of what became known as Southwest humor lay in the progression from tall tale to written literature and followed the familiar pattern of mixing humor with realism. In Native American Humor, Walter Blair observes that the Puritan-bred innate seriousness of the early American writers tended to be the biggest obstacle for the growth of an American humor and that, consequently, realism and humor developed together (4).

As Blair makes clear, telling and retelling a story adds an appearance of reality and, at the same time, enables the teller to put some distance between himself and the actual circumstances surrounding the story. Thus, the storyteller, along with the audience, is free to enjoy the intricacies of the story without having to be responsible for its outcome. The storyteller, therefore, can remain oblivious to the tale's moral consequences, or lack thereof. The early nineteenth-century storytellers such as George Washington Harris, Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, Johnson Jones Hooper, and Thomas Chandler Haliburton developed realistic amoral characterizations and plots that have become archetypal. For example, the horse swap or horse swindle appears throughout antebellum literature and on into literature of the twentieth-century. These repetitions demonstrate the power of the original.

This quiet revolution in American literature took place between 1830 and 1860 and gave the young democracy a distinctive voice and a unique American character. Several writers were helping carve out what David S. Reynolds calls in Beneath the American Renaissance, a "subversive American voice" and at the same time creating a rustic and American hero (449). However, only a handful of critics have paid serious attention to the people responsible for shaping the original American hero. Perhaps this oversight has occurred because these early writers were not professional journalists and novelists. They were lawyers, farmers, editors, tinkers, and wanderers. Also, most of their works first appeared as sketches in little known tabloids and in local and regional publications.

In the introduction to The Mirth of a Nation, Walter Blair observes that early humor has remained "unread by anyone but scholars for far too long" (ix). However, these early sketches were extremely popular during the time preceding the Civil War. These are stories of common people, written in the coarse language of the rough and illiterate backwoodsmen who settled much of the United States. Unfortunately, these early sketches are ignored except by a handful of critics such as Walter Blair, Franklin Meine, and M. Thomas Inge. However, as Franklin Meine observes in Tall Tales of the Old Southwest, antebellum humor is a significant facet of literary history

for two reasons: the frontier humorists were the first American realists, and these writers exerted a far-reaching influence on later American writers (27).

Originating in the early nineteenth-century and continuing until after the Civil War, antebellum humor comes from unknown authors like those who penned many of the Davy Crockett stories and from the likes of Longstreet, Harris, Thomas Bangs Thorpe, and Hooper. These writers' sketches first found a home in regional publications, and later the best of this antebellum humor was brought to a national audience in William T. Porter's New York weekly publication, The Spirit of the Times (1831-1861), which Porter billed as "a Chronicle of the Turf, Agriculture, Field Sports, Literature, and the Stage." Rather than following European and English romantic traditions like many of the early American authors, the old Southwest writers introduced a new style of literature and with it forged the prototypical rustic American hero through the creation of characters such as Sut Lovingood, Simon Suggs, Ned Brace, and Nimrod Wildfire and with the mythifying of real life characters such as Davy Crockett and Mike Fink. In later American literature, these character types became refined and reshaped and emerge as Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer in the late nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, a host of Faulkner characters, specifically various members of

the Snopes family, reestablish the tall tale personage as a prominent American character type.

The use of the vernacular, or what Walter Blair calls the "earthy language of the common folk" (ix), is one of the several facets of antebellum humor that make its study significant. Although the use of American vernacular can be traced back to William Byrd's eighteenth-century sketches of the wilderness, the antebellum humorists were the first to popularize what Longstreet calls the "coarse, inelegant and sometimes ungrammatical language" of frontier early America (viii). A. P. Hudson, quoted in the introduction to a reprint of Georgia scenes, observes that the early Southwest writers "had the wit to realize that something old in talk might look new in print" (viii). The use of the vernacular gives the impression that stories are being told rather than written and allows the author to escape from the stuffiness of form that characterized some of the more proper popular antebellum literature.

The vernacular voice of antebellum humor added greatly to its freshness, and the depictions of native characters brought to life within these sketches gave American literature what might be considered its first purely American heroes. Frontier heroes vary from the "ring-tailed roarer" or "screamer" to the "down East type" or confidence man. In Beneath the American Renaissance, David Reynolds describes the "screamer" as a loud rustic braggart who

gushes "streams of strange metaphors," and as a "comic demigod" whose antics center around drunkenness, cruelty, violence, and eroticism (449). Notable examples of the "screamer" include Mike Fink, Davy Crockett, Nimrod Wildfire, and Sut Lovingood. The confidence man, characterized by the likes of Longstreet's Peter Ketch, Haliburton's Sam Slick, and Hooper's Simon Suggs, relies on his wits to get the best of another. Meine goes so far as to suggest that the antebellum confidence man causes larceny to become respectable (22) and raises swindling to "the dignity of the fine arts" (85).

The Mike Fink tales constitute some of the earliest "screamer" stories. The actual Mike Fink first worked as a young Indian scout and acquired a reputation as the best shot in Pittsburgh. Later, he became a boatman on the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers and soon was reported to be "king of the keelboatmen" and "snag of the Mississippi." The fictional Mike Fink emerged in Morgan Neville's "The Last of the Boatmen" (1829), a work which contains a number of sketches such as "The Shooting of the Cup," "Mike Teaches Peg a Lesson," and "The Disgraced Scalp-Lock," republished in Thomas Bangs Thorpe's Sketches of the Southwest.

These sketches portray Fink as the typical backwoods "roarer"--a braggart, a miscreant, and a reckless scoundrel. In "The Shooting of the Cup" the narrator relates how Fink, who has the "handshake of a blacksmith's vise," wagers a

quart of whiskey that he can shoot a tin cup off his brother's head from a distance of thirty yards. Mike fires his rifle, and the cup flies from his brother's head "rendered unfit for future service" (32). In "Mike Teaches Peg a Lesson" Fink takes a woman who "passes for his wife" to shore at gun point, orders her to lie down among dried leaves and kindling, and sets fire all around in order to teach her "not to be winkin' at them fellers on t'other boat" (35). In "The Disgraced Scalp-Lock" Fink displays his shooting skill by shooting the scalp-lock off the head of a drunken renegade Cherokee named Proud Joe and later has to fight and kill the Indian.

Another early "ring-tailed roarer," Davy Crockett, like Mike Fink, is both man and myth, thanks to a wide assortment of publications bearing his name. Although the authorship of Crockett's sketches and early biographies are matters of debate, the material ascribed to Crockett makes him one of the earliest antebellum humorists and heroes. Naturally, the fictional Davy Crockett is far removed from the real David Crockett, the nearly illiterate frontier Tennessee politician and later hero of the Alamo.

In "Bear Hunting in Tennessee," Crockett appears as a braggart relating his superhuman skill as a bear hunter. During the fall and winter, Crockett, while taking time out from boat building, dodging hurricanes, and straddling earthquakes, walks hundreds of miles and kills fifty-eight

fat bears. The following spring, he claims to kill forty-seven more, which brings his total to 105 bears in less than a year (qtd. in Cohen, 25). Crockett is able to furnish all the other settlers with meat for the year with his hunting prowess. Underlying this attitude of bravado is the hero's fierce independence, his desire to be entirely self-sufficient and to prove himself.

B. A. Botkin, in A Treasury of American Folklore, observes that "if the prevailing rusticity of American folk heroes may be said to constitute one of their chief attractions, then none is more attractive than Davy Crockett" (5). To demonstrate Crockett's rusticity, Botkin uses stories such as "A Sensible Varmint," "Crockett's Morning Hunt," and "Speech of Crockett during the Canvass of 1829," among others. "A Sensible Varmint" shows Crockett's command of the animal world. "Crockett's Morning Hunt" demonstrates his skill in handling the cosmos, and "Speech of Crockett during the Canvass of 1829" reveals Crockett's sociopolitical savvy.

In "A Sensible Varmint," Crockett, who never wastes ammunition, is walking through the woods hunting when he sees a raccoon in a tree. As he raises his rifle to shoot, the animal asks, "Is your name Crockett?" When Davy replies in the affirmative, the raccoon says, "'You needn't take no further trouble, for I may as well cum down without another word;' and the cretur wauked rite down from the tree for he

considered himself shot" (25). Although "A Sensible Varmint" demonstrates details tinted more by fancy than realism, the antebellum humorist's concerns with hunting skills show the concerns for survival which underlie the sketch.

In "Crockett's Morning Hunt," Davy rises on a cold January morning to discover that the earth has frozen on its axis because the sun had ice lodged under its wheels. To amend the situation, Crockett walks twenty-five miles to Daybreak Hill. On his way, he kills a bear, and when he arrives at the hill he beats the animal carcass against the ice "till the hot ile began to walk out on him at all sides" (30). Crockett uses this oil to thaw out the sun, and then he kicks its cog wheel backwards until the sun rises. At that time, he lights his pipe by the beginning blaze of the sun (30). In this sketch, Crockett completely controls nature which, ironically, frontier man had little dominion over.

"Speech of Crockett during the Canvass of 1829" demonstrates Davy's skill at handling political accusations and at the same time takes a satirical blow at societal norms. He tells the crowd that although he has been accused of adultery, it is a lie because he "never ran away with any man's wife, that was not willing" and that although he has been accused of gambling, it's a lie because he "always planks down the cash" and that although he's been accused of

being a drunkard, Crockett replies "it's a d--d eternal lie,--for whiskey can't make me drunk" (27).

The numerous Crockett stories demonstrate the scope of the early tall tales and the limitless imaginations of their creators. Also, while the plots are often farfetched, an attentive reading of these sketches gives realistic insights into the frontier and into the ideal heroic types needed to tame it. The deification of men such as Crockett and Fink results from America's lack of a national mythology. B. A. Botkin observes that heroes arise from admiration of the great and near-great. In other civilizations religion or myth provided heroes, but America, "lacking a body of true myth and ritual," out of necessity conceived its own heroes such as Davy Crockett and Mike Fink and made them into demigods (2).

One of the earliest fictional "roarers," James Kirke Paulding's Nimrod Wildfire, first appears in an 1830 play called Lion of the West. According to Blair in Mirth of a Nation, Wildfire was rumored to be a fictional representation of the real Davy Crockett (37). Wildfire is noted for his spectacular boasts and his peculiar phrases. In a conversation with an English lady, he brags that he can "jump higher--squat lower--dive deeper--stay under longer and come out drier" (Paulding 40). When speaking of an opponent, Wildfire brags that "He'll come off as badly as a fellow I once hit a sledgehammer lick over the head--a real

sock dologer. He disappeared altogether; all they could ever find of him was a little grease spot in one corner" (41). He adds that his late girlfriend, Patty Snaggs, "can whip her weight in wildcats" (40). In addition, Paulding attempts to recreate the Southern vernacular by flavoring Wildfire's extraordinary swaggering with a medley of odd phrases such as "slantindicualr," "slaunchwise," and "tetotaciously exflunctified" (41). Like the fictional Crockett and Fink, Wildlife survives on his wits, stamina, and arrogance.

Following the success of these "ring-tailed roarers" such as Crockett, Fink, and Wildfire, other characters emerge with significant differences. While some characters brag of fearless exploits and superhuman feats, George Washington Harris's Sut Lovingood boasts of his fear and his foolish nature. Although the outrageous rhetoric and opprobrious actions of these characters make them appear as low-class, uneducated simpletons whose only literary merit is to provide a quick chuckle, there is more to some of them than a surface reading suggests. Franklin Mein calls Harris's Sut Lovingood "a unique and original character in American humor" (22). When William Faulkner, in an interview for The Paris Review, was asked by Jean Stein Vanden Heuvel about his favorite characters, he named a few characters such as Sarah Gamp from Dickens, Prince Hal and Falstaff, Don Quixote, Jim and Huck Finn and continued

I like Sut Lovingood from a book written by George Harris about 1840 or '50 in the Tennessee mountains. He had no illusions about himself, did the best he could; at certain times was a coward and knew it and wasn't ashamed; he never blamed his misfortunes on anyone and never cursed god for them. (251)

Sut Lovingood, a Tennessee mountaineer, claims his sole ambition in life is to raise "peticler" hell. However, Harris uses Sut to illustrate the East Tennessee society and to satirize both its populace and the infringement of civilization on this society.

In "Sicily Burns's Wedding," Sut shows his contempt for preachers, religion, government and society in general. Sut considers "Suckit riders" as he calls them, as disconcerting because "they preaches agin me, an' I hes no chance tu preach back at them" and adds that it is impossible to find a circuit rider's grave because they ride until they marry and "ef they marrys money, they turns intu store-keepers, swaps hosses, an' stays away ove colleckshun Sundays" or if they marry and "by sum orful mistake misses the money, jis' turns intu polertishuns, sells 'ile well stock, an' dies sorter in the human way" (376). At the end of the sketch, Sut admits that if he escapes the wrath of Sicily Burns's father, he may become human, and with his ornery nature end up as a "Squire," "school cummisiner," or "President of a Wild Cat Bank" (380).

In this sketch, Sicily Burns marries a young circuit-riding preacher named Clapshaw. Sut, with his dislike of "suckit" riders, comes to the wedding and decides to raise a little of his "peticler" hell. He places a basket over the head of a bull, and the animal, realizing that it cannot see, goes on a wild uproar, knocks over a bee hive, and lunges at the house. The annoyed bees chase the bull, who, in turn, breaks up the wedding party. The entire affair turns into a wild melee of scattering guests and rampaging horses with riding equipment spread out for miles in every direction. The father of the bride ends up astride the bull; the bride jumps into a spring and places a crock over her head to escape the rampaging bees, and the bridegroom jumps under a straw pile and "sot intu prayin--you cud a-hearn him a mile--sumthin 'bout the plagues ove Yegipt, an' the pains ove the secon death" (379). This episode of a domestic animal running wild and breaking up a gathering anticipates Faulkner's horse stampede in "Spotted Horses."

Sut also acts as a catalyst in "Mrs. Yardley's Quilting," when he releases a skittish horse at a quilting party, one of the main social gatherings in the old Southwest. Harris uses this social function to allow Sut to comment on society as he sees it. For example, Sut observes that women with glasses like Mrs. Yardley are "dang'rus in the extreme" and "Thar is jis' no knowin' what they ken du" because they notice everything (180). About quiltings, Sut

says that he approves of them provided they have the proper trimmings such as "'vittils, fiddils, an' sperriets in 'bundunce" and that a quilting is "wuf three old pray'r meetins on the poperlashun pint, purtickerly ef his hilt in the dark ove the moon, an' run intu the night a few hours" (182). In "Mrs. Yardley's Quilting," Sut satirizes respectable society which he sees as being made up of old religious bespectacled women, "suckit" riders, crooked "constibils," and "red-com'd dominecker fellers from town." Conversely, he praises good food, whiskey, and young women, especially widows, since he believes "what they don't know, haint worth larning" (184). Sut adds that "Widders am a speshul means, fur ripenin green men, killin off weak ones, an makin 'ternally happy the soun ones" (184).

This sketch is typical of Harris in that it shows how settlers live in and deal with a new country in which the codes governing older and more civilized society lack practical application. Donald Day observes that Harris, like other antebellum humorists, makes light of the inhabitants and hardships of a new country by "enveloping misfortunes in a mocking humor" and showing how Sut pits himself against "supposedly respectable and intelligent members of society who are in reality hypocrites and whose intelligence cannot save them from his devastating punishment" (124).

In another yarn, "Sut's New-Fangled Shirt," Harris illustrates the problems of imposing city standards on a rural world. Here, Sut's landlady talks him into wearing a starched shirt. The garment has been over-starched, and after Sut works and sleeps in the shirt, it becomes glued to his body. Sut has to cut and pry himself out of the shirt and, in the process, removes a substantial amount of his own flesh. As a result of nearly being skinned alive, Sut vows never to wear starched clothes again. Harris uses this comic episode as a metaphor for the restraints of freedom that are imposed by civilization.

By looking through the twin veneers of Sut's idioms and his rusticity, one can see a rural bumpkin intelligently critiquing customs and personalities of a new land. Obvious also is the fact that Sut is as ragged, as independent, and as rugged as the land in which he lives. As Cohen suggests, Sut sees himself for what he is and holds "no illusions regarding family, church, or state" (157). Milton Rickels observes that Sut as a knowing fool desires freedom foremost, and he sees organized society, represented by the church on one hand and the sheriff on the other, as threats to his freedom to follow his impulse (52). Significantly, Sut is quick to point out the failings and hypocrisy of authority figures, and they usually become his victims.

Although Sut has his partisans, Edmund Wilson sees Lovingood in a much harsher manner. He says that Harris's

book, Sut Lovingood: Yarns spun by a "Nat'ral Born Durn'd Fool" is the "most repellent book of any real literary merit in American literature: and that it contains the stories of a "peasant squatting in his own filth" (148). Wilson adds that "Sut Lovingood is unmistakably an ancestor of Faulkner's Snopeses, that frightening low-class family" (153). Although Wilson observes correctly that Sut is a literary antecedent to the Snopes family, by taking so autocratic a view of both Lovingood and the Snopeses, he underrates them.

Unlike Harris, Longstreet creates in Georgia Scenes humor more subtle and more genteel. At his best, Longstreet writes in the oral tradition, and at his worst, as Walter Blair observes in Native American Humor, Longstreet occasionally moralizes in the Spectator tradition (76). Although Georgia Scenes may have Addisonian echoes, Franklin Meine in Tall Tales of the Southwest calls it the "cornerstone of early humorous literature" (17). Longstreet's vignettes reveal realistically life on the frontier through the eyes of a genteel educated narrator, a technique that William Faulkner later uses in developing Gavin Stevens. Like other Southwest humorists, Longstreet's sketches in Georgia Scenes serve as literary predecessors to both William Faulkner and Mark Twain.

In "The Dance," the narrator, Abram Baldwin, is invited to a dance after finishing some business in a rural area.

After arriving, he discovers that the wife of his host is an old girlfriend, but after being reintroduced he realizes that she does not remember him. Although the plot of this sketch is lackluster, Longstreet realistically portrays a social gathering in what the narrator calls "one of the frontier counties," and contrasts with it what is expected in urban society. For example, the "frolic," as it is called, begins at nine in the morning rather than the evening and is held in a one-room house in which all the furniture has been removed. The musical accompaniment consists of a lone Negro fiddle player named Billy Porter. Although the narrator arrives an hour before time for the dance, the girls are already dressed in what the narrator describes as "neat but plain habiliments of their own manufacture" (5).

While the narrator makes obvious the fact that the women control the dance, he points out both the lack of fashion and the lack of formality. For example, the narrator observes that the country girls are completely unaware of "the refinements of the present day in female dress" since they use "no artificial means of spreading [sic] their frock tails to an interesting extent from their ankles" (6). The narrator observes that contrary to the manners of polite society no formal introductions or ceremonies take place, and the rules of house etiquette dictate that a lady needn't refuse to dance with a gentleman

"merely because she had not been made acquainted with him" (7). Throughout the story, the narrator tries to get Mrs. Gibson to remember him. Ironically, Mrs. Gibson is drawn away from the dance to chase away a dog that has stolen a large piece of meat just as Baldwin readies himself to show her his best dance steps . The narrator knows that the dog has escaped by Mrs. Gibson's shouts of "G-e-e-e-t you gone!" (12). The humorous device of anti-climax so popular with Twain and Faulkner surfaces in this antebellum tale.

In "The Song," Longstreet reveals much the same type of realism and cynicism toward female-dominated society. In this sketch, Longstreet describes "Mrs. B\_\_\_\_\_ 's" party at which several young women beg a lady to sing and play the piano. Longstreet carefully juxtaposes female gentility with primal voyeurism by having the narrator describe one young lady as beseeching the other to play by dropping to her knees "with such a melting sweetness of voice, such a bewitching leer at the gentleman, and such a theatric heave of the bosom, that it threw the young gentlemen into transports" (57). Finally the young lady, Miss Crump, agrees to perform, and her concert causes the narrator to resort to taking laudanum by evening's end. The narrator reports that Miss Crump has studied voice under "Madam Piggisqueaki" and piano under "Seignior Buzzifussi" and describes her keyboard skills as a "panic-struck" "fly-catching grab at half a dozen keys" and her singing as

"one of the most unearthly howls that ever issued from the throat of a human being" (58-60). As in "The Dance," Longstreet uses "The Song" to show how the frontier society lacks the refinement of urban society, but also that some foreign imports into urban society are not immune to criticism either.

Although Longstreet is adroit in describing frontier domestic comedy, he excels in portraying local rustic personages. In "The Character of a Native Georgian," Longstreet introduces Ned Brace, something of a genteel "roarer" who makes practical joking an affliction and who seems "to live only to amuse himself with his fellow beings" (22). In this sketch, the narrator, who accompanies Brace to Savannah, relates how Brace astonishes and repels the guests at a boarding house, how he flusters a Frenchman by pretending that he is an old acquaintance, how he nearly breaks up a church service with his "discordant" bellowing, and how he turns a funeral procession into a laughing matter.

While the rustic hero often is characterized as a "roarer," braggart, or buffoon, just as often he functions as a confidence man or flimflam artist. This type of character doesn't merely want to survive within or without polite society; he wants to flourish. Of all the attributes of the rustic hero, this ability to operate as a con artist is the most creative. Thus, one of the activities

popularized by antebellum humorists consists of what Eugene Current-Garcia calls the "'sport' of getting ahead--whether by trickery, deceit, or practical joking" (39). And despite the fact that many of the hero's actions are dishonest, the reader acquires a sympathy for the confidence man and often champions him.

Longstreet provides one of the best antebellum examples of the flimflam artist in his sketch called "The Horse Swap." This story opens with a brash young man riding wildly into a small Georgia town. As he approaches, he whoops and tells the quickly assembling crowd that his name is Yallow Blossom from Jasper and that he "can outswap any man that ever walked these hills, or ever straddled horseflesh since the days of old daddy Adam" (15). Blossom rides a spirited-looking horse named Bullet, and he lets the townspeople know that the animal is for trade. An old man named Peter Ketch comes forward and examines Bullet. The old man has a horse named Kit, and when Blossom notices the animal, Ketch warns him that Kit is mean and shaky. However, the horse's actions prove just the opposite. Blossom beats the horse's tail and shoots a gun between his ears, and the horse doesn't flinch. As Blossom continues to examine Kit, he tells Ketch that he doesn't like the horse's eyes (19).

After much bantering back and forth concerning who "gives boot" to whom, Blossom agrees to trade horses with Ketch and give him three dollars in boot. After the money

changes hands, Ketch removes the saddle blanket from Bullet, and the onlookers discover a saddle sore on the horse's back that seems "to have defied all medical skill" (20). When Ketch discovers the horse's injured back, the crowd pokes a deal of fun at the old man for getting taken by the young horse trader. Blossom laughs and tells the crowd that he has owned the horse for three months and never noticed the sore. Peter Ketch's little son, Neddy, who has been standing nearby, cannot tolerate the laughter at his father and finally tells Blossom that Kit is "both blind and deaf" (21). When the crowd learns that Kit is both blind and deaf, the joking begins to focus on Blossom. Then the old man tells his son not to make people discontented with their things because Kit has only some "little failings" that keep him from being "all sorts of a horse" (21). In the story's anticlimax, the old man tells his son to get moving because "the stranger seems to be getting snappish" (21).

Significantly, the character gains heroic status by proving his superiority as a con artist. Although Blossom's bragging initially does not make him appear heroic, the crowd rallies around him when they think he has gotten the best in a trade. When the onlookers discover that he has received the worse end of the deal, however, Blossom assumes the role of the fool, and old Peter Ketch is elevated to heroic status. Blossom, a professional horse trader by his own account, challenges any man to best him and loses to a

humble local. Like an early Flem Snopes, the old man makes no claims, and in fact says very little. However, as a confidence man, Ketch is superior because he allows Blossom basically to fleece himself with his banter, a technique that Flem Snopes will later use. Longstreet uses the hero's simple exterior as a facade and reveals Ketch as shrewd and shifty. This sketch anticipates Faulkner's horse trades in The Hamlet.

While Johnson Jones Hooper loads "The Captain Attends A Camp Meeting" with satire about religion, he also provides an excellent example of a rustic hero functioning as a flimflam artist. In this sketch Simon Suggs dupes a congregation of folks who believe they are saving him from eternal damnation. The tale begins with a poor and destitute Suggs attending a camp meeting to have a little fun. As he approaches, Suggs ties his horse some distance away and walks up to the fringe of the crowd. Quickly recognizing as a well-known sinner, the preacher begins to work on him to get him to the mourner's bench. Suddenly, Suggs shows signs of being stricken with religious zeal and proceeds to the center of the camp to confess his sins. The audience and preachers seem pleased at the prospect of Suggs's being saved, and seizing upon the emotions of the crowd, Suggs declares that he has been so inspired by the Holy Spirit that he plans to return to his village and build a church. However, he adds that he knows the church will

cost much money and tells the congregation that he lacks the resources. Immediately members of the crowd call for a collection in order to finance the building project.

Suggs works the crowd by shouting to the more affluent people: "Don't leave ef you ain't able to afford anything, just give us your blessin; and it'll be all the same (240). Those about to leave reseat themselves, and Suggs removes his hat and places into it his last five dollar bill. Then he passes the hat to those who seem most eager to escape and afterward draws out some of the notes from his hat and tells the audience "Brother Snook has drapta five wi me, and brother Snodgrass a ten! In course 'taine expected that you that ain't as well off as them will give as much; let every one given accordin' to their means" (240-1). With this theatrical display, Suggs sets the hook in the group. Each person is filled with what Hooper terms "the pride of the purse" (241). After a large amount of money is collected, the preacher in charge of the meeting, Reverend Mr. Bugg, tells Suggs to count the money and turn it over to him as he will be leaving soon. Suggs replies to Bugg that he cannot because it first has to "be prayed over" (241). Suggs tells the preacher that he has to be alone to pray over the money and that he intends to take the money down by the creek, spread it out, and pray over it until he feels "it's got the blessin" (241). Taken by Suggs's newfound piety, Reverend Bugg allows him to leave unescorted with the

money. Suggs then goes into the swamp where his horse is tied, mounts it, and as he rides away he comments to himself, "Ef them fellers ain't done to a cracklin . . . I'll never bet on a pair again" (241).

Through Suggs, Hooper illustrates a sting operation in which the hero not only cons the congregation, but the preacher as well. However, the flimflaming of Reverend Bugg makes Simon a con-artist hero since Bugg's intention is to take the collection for himself. Therefore, Suggs actually victimizes Bugg more so than he does the congregation since Reverend Bugg has already started the swindle by holding the camp meeting. Although Simon Suggs, like Sut Lovingood, may appear as a buffoon, he knows human nature so well that, as Cohen observes in Humor of the Old Southwest, he "profits by the selfishness, affectation and avarice of others" (204).

Thomas Chandler Haliburton offers a variation of the confidence man with his characterization of a Yankee clock peddler appropriately named Sam Slick. Walter Blair contends in Native American Humor that Slick exhibits both the qualities of a "foxy, soft spoken Yankee peddler" and those of a "forthright, tall-talking, ring-tailed roarer from Kaintuck" (56). While Blair sees this composition of characters as a weakness, it actually offers a variation of character that anticipates Faulkner's Flem Snopes. Like most confidence men, Slick uses the vaingloriousness of his

dupes to help him hawk his wares. In "The Clockmaker," Slick tells the narrator that the secret to his success at selling clocks is his knowledge of "soft sawder" and "human natur" and illustrates this knowledge by selling a clock to Deacon Flint. Slick, accompanied by the narrator, goes to the Deacon's house and immediately begins complimenting his farm. He then begins to flatter the old Deacon by telling him that he is worth "half a dozen of the young men we see, nowadays" (14). After Deacon Flint goes outside, Mrs. Flint enters and inquires if he has sold all of his clocks. Slick tells her that he has sold all except one, and that is being held for "Neighbor Steel's wife." Mrs. Flint then asks to look at the clock, and Slick gets it and places it on the mantle. When the Deacon returns, he tells Slick that he doesn't want to buy a clock, but Slick says that the clock is already sold to Mr. Steel. Slick then checks the time, tells the Deacon he is late, and asks Mrs. Flint to keep it on her mantle until he returns.

As Sam Slick and the narrator leave, Slick remarks that because of "human natur" he has just sold for forty dollars a clock that cost him six dollars and fifty cents. He explains that Mrs. Flint will never allow Mrs. Steel to have the clock because "having once indulged in the use of a superfluity, how difficult it is to give it up" (16). Slick adds that he has sold fifteen thousand clocks in the same manner. He uses "soft sawder" to get the clocks into the

house and "human natur" to make sure they never come out of it (16). According to Hoffman in Faulkner's Country Matters, Sam Slick, like Simon Suggs and Melville's Confidence Man, is a forebear to Flem Snopes (19).

Although the works of the antebellum humorists today gather dust on library shelves, these works constitute an important chapter in the history of American literature in general and Southern literature in particular. By listening to the stories of the land and writing them down in the vernacular voice, these writers gave America its first indigenous humor and a realistic view of the frontier. In addition, by establishing the tall tale tradition in American literature, they gave this country its own unique personage--the rustic American hero.

The rustic hero often appears as an uneducated, unsophisticated bumpkin, but this persona is a ruse. Simon Suggs's favorite aphorism, "It's good to be shifty in a new country" (qtd. in Hoole 51), serves as a motto, for the rustic hero relies on himself to survive on the frontier. Born out of a desire to maintain an intense individualism, the wisdom of the rustic hero manifests itself in his ability to see through the facades of social and religious institutions, to get the best of another in a trade, and to respect the forces of his environment. Unlike the denizens of a stable society who value the prestige of wealth and rank, the inhabitants of the frontier extol personal

courage, backwoods savvy, and extraordinary physical powers. These qualities, not wealth and station, enable the rustic hero to muster the forces necessary to survive and eventually prevail in a new land. As many have noted, these qualities help qualify Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn in Adventures of Huckleberry Finn as the universal symbol of the rustic hero. Just as these qualities enable rustic heroes like Davy Crockett, Simon Suggs, Sut Lovingood, and Huckleberry Finn to conquer the old Southwest, these same qualities empower Faulkner's Snopeses, led by Flem, to master the New South.

## Chapter 3

### The Peripheral Snopeses

The antebellum humorists created unique characters who were able to cope with life on the frontier, and William Faulkner, in the same manner, created characters who could deal with the New South. In Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha Comedy, Lyall H. Powers sees the "group or swarm or tribe of proliferating characters" known as the Snopeses as being "among the most fascinating of Faulkner's creations" (145). Powers observes that the Snopeses serve not only as Faulkner's conception of human evil but also as a convenient means to develop Faulkner's "fundamentally optimistic attitude of the human condition" (145). While the Snopeses appear negative, they, like their antebellum predecessors, learn to prevail in spite of their circumstances, an attribute Faulkner admires.

It might be assumed that when William Faulkner first decided to write about the people of his native soil, he would choose to deal with families modeled closely after his own, such as the Sartoris family, but this is not the case. While Faulkner's first published Yoknapatawpha novel, Sartoris (1929), focuses on the Sartoris family, the Snopes family is still mentioned. Preceding Sartoris and as early as late 1926, Faulkner had written "Father Abraham," the first story of the Snopeses which was not published separately until 1983. By 1927 Faulkner abandoned this

manuscript in favor of writing Flags in the Dust, published in a heavily edited version and titled Sartoris (Blotner 203-10). The idea for a novel about the Snopes clan implicit in "Father Abraham" stayed with Faulkner throughout the Thirties, and episodes developed for the novel were published as short stories and played large parts in novels such as As I Lay Dying and Absalom, Absalom!. The Snopes family remained in the periphery of Faulkner's published works in this way, but the first Snopes novel, The Hamlet, did not appear until 1940. Seventeen years later, in 1957, the second Snopes novel, The Town, appeared, followed by The Mansion in 1959. However, the Snopeses are not limited to the trilogy. All of the Yoknapatawpha novels contain Snopeses or Snopesian characters.

In his Snopes genealogy in William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country, Cleanth Brooks names twenty-five Snopeses and lists many others who are unnamed wives, husbands, and children (452). The first named Snopes, Ab, appears in The Unvanquished, The Hamlet, and "Barn Burning" and is mentioned in The Town and The Mansion, and Faulkner characterizes him quite differently in these various works. Ab's eldest son, Flem, functions as the central Snopes and the subject of the trilogy. Throughout the trilogy, the other Snopeses revolve around Flem in one way or another. Basically, they either act as dupes of Flem, function as contrasts to him, or fill both roles. Therefore, Flem will

be treated in two separate chapters of this dissertation. Faulkner gives the more than twenty peripheral Snopeses varying amounts of attention and casts them in diverse roles intended to convey disparate morals. Rather than using them as mere stock comic characters, Faulkner allows these Snopeses to serve as Flem's power base, reinforcing him, and filling the vacuum he leaves when he moves on. In The Town, V. K. Ratliff remarks that Flem is "farming Snopeses" (31), which implies that he is cultivating his clansmen for his own use. Several of Flem's relatives fall victim to his manipulations, and other Snopeses even serve as foils to Flem.

Ab's character ranges from an aspiring young confidence man to a bitter, vindictive, and improvised sharecropper. Throughout these characterizations, he serves as an unperfected role model for Flem, and his vindictiveness provides the catalyst for Flem's first step to power.

In The Unvanquished, Ab Snopes, a backwoodsman, surfaces as a young army deserter who claims to have been wounded while riding with Colonel Sartoris's cavalry. Even young Bayard observes that Ab, like a mule, bears watching (136). Supposedly Ab has been charged to look out for Granny while the Colonel fights in the war, but he becomes an accomplice in Granny's mule scam. Ab sells stolen mules for Granny Millard until the Yankee soldiers catch her and end Ab's only successful enterprise. In The Unvanquished,

Ab, at first, appears to be a rather benign and somewhat comic stock character; however, his greed and ineptitude lead to Granny's death.

Although Ab Snopes learns much about duplicity from the mule-selling enterprise, he later falls victim to the master of the confidence game, Pat Stamper. In The Hamlet, V. K. Ratliff describes to the whittle-and-spit crowd how Ab became "soured on life" as the result of being taken twice in a horse trade with Stamper. Ab trades a horse which he has made appear spirited and a mule to Stamper for what turns out to be a psychotic set of mules. The mules gallop uncontrollably into town, but when Ab starts to leave, he finds the mules lying in the traces appearing as though they had "done hung themselves in one of those suicide packs" (39). Like Yallow Blossom in Longstreet's "The Horse Swap," Ab is humiliated in front of the townspeople who realize that he traded with Stamper. Ab then takes the mules back to Stamper and trades them plus twenty-four dollars for his old mule and what he believes is a fat black horse. On the way home, rain dilutes the dye, and Ab discovers that he has bought back his own horse. According to Ratliff, Ab Snopes had fancied himself the Pat Stamper of his county. However, Ab's encounter with Stamper eliminates him from the horse trading business and causes him to become the dour barn burner who appears in "Barn Burning" and The Hamlet.

As Ab ages, he becomes more caustic. In "Barn Burning" and Ratliff's retelling of the barn burning story in The Hamlet, Ab Snopes appears as an embittered and outraged old man who settles supposed injustices with matches and kerosene. At the beginning of the story, the judge acquits Ab of a barn burning for lack of evidence and then tells him to get out of the county immediately. Ab then moves on to Major DeSpain's farm. Ab's pride and embitterment surface as he enters the front door and soils Mrs. DeSpain's French rug with a manure-laden boot. He then ruins the rug after being ordered to clean it and ultimately ends up in court where, as always, he feels unjustly treated. As a result, Ab reacts in the only way he knows--by burning the Major's barn.

Ab's proclivity to burn barns, like his soiling of DeSpain's rug, reveals that he is never able to accept his station in life, but Ab's reactions to society are violent and ultimately futile. In "Barn Burning," Faulkner characterizes Ab as seeing himself as a common man struggling for survival in a hostile environment in which he cannot win. Ab serves as a model for Flem in that he rejects caste, but unlike Flem, Ab battles with society rather than maneuvering it the way Flem will learn to do.

Although Ab Snopes figures prominently in "Barn Burning," he is not the only important Snopes in the story. Ab's youngest son, Sarty, functions as his moral opposite.

The mention of the name Snopes usually conjures up images of avarice, immorality, and lechery, but not all of the Snopes family are evil. Actually, several of the Snopeses are portrayed as decent characters who contrast with Flem's deviousness. One of these, Colonel Sartoris Snopes, appears only in "Barn Burning," first published in Harpers Magazine in 1939. Sarty, the son of Ab Snopes and the younger brother of Flem, is questioned by a justice of the peace about his father's role in a barn burning because, the justice says, "I reckon anybody named for Colonel Sartoris in this country can't help but tell the truth" (4). This comment demonstrates, that, unlike the Snopeses, the Sartoris family name is held in esteem. Later in the story, Sarty faces the same ethical dilemma between truth and fidelity after his father soils and then ruins Major DeSpain's expensive French rug.

Throughout the story, Sarty is torn between loyalty he feels for his father and his own keenly developed sense of justice. Faulkner opposes Ab's guileless acts of retribution with Sarty's "grief and despair" (4), "terror and grief" (17), and "grief and despair" (24). Sarty hopes that his father will stop burning barns and even suggests that they hide the corn to avoid paying the extra bushels to DeSpain. By the end of the story, Sarty lives up to his conception of his namesake and forsakes his family for a principle. Sarty defies Ab's prophetic warning that "You

got to learn to stick to your own blood or you aint going to have any blood to stick to you" (8). Unlike his brother Flem who gathers his clan around him, Sarty disappears and is not mentioned in subsequent published works. While Sarty's decency in "Barn Burning" might seem incongruous with the Snopes blood line, according to Joseph Blotner, "Ilium Falling," an early version of The Mansion, shows that Faulkner had thought of bringing Sarty back to be matched with a collateral Snopes so that the two could sire what would turn out to be the worst of the Snopes family and Flem's chosen heir to his entire estate (401). Faulkner did not follow through on this design. Thus, even though the mention of Snopeses usually invokes images of evil, detestable characters, not all the Snopeses turn out to be vile.

Eckrum (Eck) Snopes, one of the most decent members of the Snopes family, is a Snopes in name only. In The Town Ratliff explains that Eck is "indubitably and indefensibly not a Snopes" since his mother was pregnant "before she married whatever Snopes was Eck's titular Father" (31). In The Mansion, Montgomery Ward Snopes, the Paris pimp turned Jefferson pornographer, ironically says of Eck and his children: "they dont belong to us; they are only shame" (83).

Eck first appears in Father Abraham in the spotted horses section and plays the same role when the story is

told in the last section of The Hamlet. Buck Hipps gives Eck one of the wild horses for starting the bidding. Eck then buys another one but loses both when the herd breaks out of the corral and rampages through the village. One of the horses runs over Vernon Tull's wagon, and Eck offers to take responsibility for the damages. Conversely, Flem, who brings the horses to Frenchmen's Bend and profits from their sale, never admits to having any ownership in the horses at all and escapes any liability in the ensuing lawsuit.

Eck next appears in The Town at the beginning of the Snopes invasion in Jefferson. Eck, the former blacksmith in Frenchman's Bend, follows Flem into town and takes his place cooking hamburgers at Flem's back street cafe. However, Eck does not last long in Flem's employ. Flem fires him after several customers heard him say, "Aint we supposed to be selling beef in these here hamburgers? I dont know just what that is yet but it aint no beef" (33). According to Ratliff, Flem sees Eck as

a threat to his whole family's long tradition of slow and invincible rapacity because of that same incredible and innocent assumption that all people practise courage and honesty for the simple reason that if they didn't everybody would be frightened and confused. (33)

Unlike Flem, Eck Snopes demonstrates a basic honesty and morality without regard for personal gain. After Flem fires Eck from the cafe, Will Varner sends word to the

Jefferson Masons to find him what he calls a good "broke neck job," and they secure him a position as a night watchman at the oil depot (33). Eck, however, is killed while looking for a lost child. He places a lantern down into an empty tanker and the fumes ignite and explode. The only part of Eck retrieved is his back brace, Therefore, the Masons who are in charge of the funeral place the brace in a coffin and bury it. Ratliff describes Eck as a good man and remembers him giving out raw peanuts to local boys (110). Faulkner creates Eck as one possessing some of the old verities such as courage and compassion while at the same time lacking somewhat in common sense.

Eck Snopes is survived by his wife, two sons, Wallstreet Panic (Wall) and Admiral Dewey, and two unnamed children. Wall is mentioned briefly in The Hamlet and The Town as the boy who helps Eck try to catch their wild horses. In Father Abraham and "Spotted Horses," that job belongs to Admiral Dewey. Wall reappears as a twelve-year-old boy in Jefferson, hears about school, and enters kindergarten, taking his little brother with him. By Christmas, Wall progresses to the second grade where he is befriended by his teacher, Miss Vaiden Wyott. She helps him pass through the third grade and even encourages him to shorten his name to Wall. While he attends school, Wall takes a job at the grocery store and also takes on several

paper routes. Eventually, he hires his brother and another boy to help him.

After Eck's death, Wall's mother receives \$1,000 from the oil company, and she uses the money to buy her sixteen-year-old son half interest in the grocery store. Faulkner shows that Wallsteet is ambitious, but unlike many of the other Snopeses, he functions within accepted moral, ethical, and legal bounds. After he establishes himself in the store, Wall marries a girl with what Ratliff describes as "an ambition equal to his" (Town 146). Wall's wife's devotion and industry serve as an antithesis to Flem's wife's indifference and apathy.

Wall and his wife work diligently to make the grocery a success and steadfastly reject any attempts by Flem to gain any foothold in their business. However, Flem influences a salesman to coerce Wall to buy an overstock of goods. This forces Wall to seek a loan from the local banks, but Flem uses his influence to undermine Wall's loan requests so that Wall will have to come to him for the money. Wall's wife, whose favorite expression is "them goddamn Snopeses," refuses to take money from Flem and, instead, takes the money from Ratliff and makes him a silent partner. After this encounter with Flem, Wall learns from his mistakes and goes on to enlarge his store into Jefferson's first supermarket. Eventually, Wall opens his own wholesale

grocery business and moves to Memphis where he is immune to Flem's meddling.

Wall is the Snopes that Flem can't control. Since Wallstreet operates in an ethical and honest manner, he simultaneously becomes wealthy and respectable--something that Flem has to do one step at a time. Wall, who was not named until he was ten years old, received his name from I.O. Snopes in hope that he might become wealthy like those who "ran the Wallstreet Panic." Apparently the name works, as he becomes the most financially successful Snopes other than Flem. Both Eck and Wallstreet Snopes differ from Flem in that they are decent by conventional standards.

Issac (Ike) Snopes is another decent Snopes--although in a non-conventional manner. Ike represents the lowest end of the Snopes evolutionary ladder, Out of all, Ike is the most grotesque, the most passionate, and the least intelligent. Since Ike is mentally retarded, he is the legal ward of Flem Snopes; however, Mrs. Littlejohn takes care of him. Flem's only contact with Ike is to swindle him out of his ten-dollar inheritance. In "The Long Summer" section of The Hamlet, Ike falls in love with Jack Houston's cow. Houston chases Ike and the cow around the countryside until he decides to take the cow to Ike at Mrs. Littlejohn's. Before Ike receives the cow, Ratliff retrieves the inheritance money from Flem through a goat deal and gives the money to Mrs. Littlejohn for Ike. With

that money, she purchases the cow from Houston. Shortly afterward, Ratliff discovers a new, but already well-worn, path to the barn and learns that Lancelot (Lump) Snopes has been gathering a paid audience to watch Ike's passionate interludes with the cow. Ratliff temporarily restrains Lump's peep show and goes to I.O. Snopes, the schoolmaster, to appeal to him to save the honor of the family. I.O. agrees that "The Snopes name has done held its head up too long in this country to have no such reproaches against it like stock diddling" (201) and then cons Eck into buying a major portion of the cow to get it away from Ike. Eck buys the cow and, also, a wooden toy cow to replace Ike's lost love. Ike's passionate love of the cow serves as a sharp contrast to the marriage of Flem and Eula which Victor Urgo describes as a "a grotesque denial of human passion" (171).

Ike's love affair with the cow provides one of the more humorous sections of the novel. It is akin to the rustic humor of the antebellum humorists, and even Faulkner's vernacular reads like that of a Harris or Longstreet. However, Faulkner uses Ike for more than just crude rustic humor. Ike's love of the cow is filled with poetry and passion and contrasts sharply with the other love stories in The Hamlet. Labove and McCarron's love of Eula is mere animal lust. The Eula-Flem marriage is purely socioeconomic; it is cold and without love or honor. Even Faulkner's diction is mechanical when he writes about their

mismarriage, and it contrasts to the poetic descriptions of Ike's pastoral romps with his beloved bovine in the Mississippi Arcadia. Of the love stories in The Hamlet, Ike's love for the cow is the most chivalrous. Brooks observes that the idiot conducts himself toward the cow with all the "gallantry with which a knight might conduct his lady" (180). Ike saves the cow from a fire, steals food for her, and even eats the same food. Faulkner uses his finest poetic diction to describe Ike's relationship with the cow which results in the section reading like a pastoral romance. Like some of the other Snopeses, Ike serves as an antithesis to Flem; however, Faulkner uses several other Snopeses as dupes and imperfect copies of Flem.

One of the more enterprising Snopeses, whom Brooks calls "the intellectual and artistic member of the family" (221), Montgomery Ward, figures prominently in The Town and relates part of The Mansion. The oldest son of I. O. Snopes, Montgomery escapes the World War I draft by feigning a disability and goes to France to work with Gavin Stevens at the Y.M.C.A. After being appointed to manage a canteen, Montgomery quickly turns it into a brothel so that, according to Ratliff, "any time a soldier got tired of jest buying socks or eating chocolate bars, he could buy a ticket from Montgomery Ward and go around through the back door and get his-self entertained" (Town 114). When Gavin discovers the back-room enterprise, he closes the operation but does

not turn Montgomery over to the authorities. Montgomery then simply moves his operation to Paris and opens an even larger version of his bordello which he runs for two years after the war.

When Montgomery Ward returns to Jefferson, he brings what Ratliff describes as an "acceptable version of his Paris canteen back home with him" (116), which he runs according to the same basic economic principle as the brothel. Ratliff observes that unlike selling socks, candy bars, and soda pop where the merchandise is consumed and thereby has to be replenished, "in strict entertainment, there aint no destructive consumption" (115). Montgomery opens what Ratliff calls a "dry whorehouse" or magic lantern show in which he projects slides of bawdy French postcards obtained overseas.

On the surface, when Montgomery Ward paints "Atelier Monty" on the door of his rented building, holds an open house, and places photographs in the store window, he appears to be opening a regular photographic studio. However, two years pass and the photographs in the window do not change. Also, Ratliff observes that Montgomery's business seems to be frequented at night by men who don't "need to have their picture struck" (124). When the authorities finally discover Montgomery Ward's porno operation, they do not have adequate state laws for his

business and instead have to arrest him on an antiquated law of operating an automobile in the city limits.

After Montgomery is arrested, Faulkner makes it clear in both The Town and The Mansion that the "Atelier Monty" episode is not merely a comic effect. As do most of the Snopeses, Montgomery becomes an implement of Flem. Early in The Town Ratliff comments that there was not enough money in the atelier for Flem to take or he would have already beaten Montgomery Ward out of it. However, Flem visits Stevens to find out about the legalities involved in Montgomery's case and then substitutes moonshine for developer in Montgomery's studio in order to get him sent to the state penitentiary at Parchman. In The Town, Ratliff and Stevens speculate that Flem goes to the trouble of framing Montgomery to improve the Snopes name, but Flem says he is just "interested in Jefferson" (176).

It is significant to note Montgomery's attitude about getting caught in what he calls the "nekkid-picture business." He does not feel badly toward Flem or the law. In fact, he seems surprised that his business lasted as long as it did. In The Mansion, he feels flattered that Flem went to so much trouble to force him out of business. Furthermore, Montgomery feels that since Flem is a banker, he has some responsibility to look out for the family name, or as he says, "to deal not just in simple usury but in respectability too" (53). It is not until later that

Montgomery understands Flem's purpose in sending him to Parchman. Flem pays Montgomery Ward Snopes to coerce Mink Snopes into attempting a poorly designed escape, as he purposely wants Mink to attempt an escape, and fail, in order for Mink to have time added to his prison term. After Mink is captured, he realizes that Montgomery is a tool of Flem's and holds no animosity toward Montgomery, who quietly finishes his prison term and leaves Mississippi for California, where he secures a lucrative job in the motion picture industry. Although Montgomery Ward Snopes is like Flem in his desire to get the most money for the least effort, he lacks Flem's mendacity, and rather than becoming an equal of Flem, he merely becomes one of his pawns. Significantly, Flem allows Montgomery to operate his "dry whorehouse" as long as Flem has no better use for him. However, when Flem decides that Mink Snopes might be released from prison in the future and thereby pose a threat, he uses Montgomery to keep Mink in prison.

I.O. Snopes is one of the most versatile of the Snopes clan. Presumably, he is just another of Flem's cousins who filter into Frenchman's Bend. He first takes up Eck Snopes's old job as blacksmith. Later when Labove retreats from his teaching job, I.O. becomes the new schoolmaster. Next, I.O. moves to Jefferson and takes over Eck's job in the cafe. I.O.'s last occupation in Jefferson is that of mule trader where he joins forces with Lonzo Hait and

creates a scheme in which they buy mules and lead them onto the railroad track in front of approaching trains. The mules are slaughtered, and the two swindlers charge the railroad for damages. The scheme works well until Hait fails to get off the track in time and is struck and killed by an oncoming train. Afterward, I.O. and Mrs. Hait run afoul of each other when one of I.O.'s mules kicks a bucket of coals over and sets Mrs. Hait's house afire. Mrs. Hait blames I.O. for the incident and keeps his mule as collateral. Flem gets involved to settle the dispute and in the process ultimately rids Jefferson of I.O. Snopes.

Although I.O. finds temporary success as a confidence man, he ultimately fails after being duped by both Mrs. Hait and Flem. While I.O. serves as an implement of Flem, he also functions as a contradiction to him. I.O.'s constant chatter contrasts to Flem's silence, and I.O.'s cliches and mixed metaphors comprise what Watson calls a "masterpiece of absurdity" (27). For example, when I.O. begins his work as a blacksmith, he tells the men in the Bend:

Well, gentlemen, off with the old and on with the new. Competition is the trade of life, and though a chain aint no stronger than its weakest link, I don't think you'll find the boy yonder no weak reed to have to lean on once he catches onto it. It's the old shop, the old stand; its just a new broom in it and maybe you cant

teach a old dog new tricks but you can teach a new young willing one anything. (65)

I.O. talks more in one conversation than Flem does in several chapters.

I.O. is also responsible for increasing the number of Snopeses. In The Hamlet, he marries a relative of Mrs. Vernon Tull and has three children, Clarence and the twins, Bilbo and Vardaman. Later his first wife appears with another son, Montgomery Ward. This original wife eventually runs the Snopes Hotel in Jefferson. Like his half-brother, Montgomery Ward, Clarence Snopes functions as a verbose antithesis to Flem.

Obviously, Clarence Snopes inherited his father's rhetorical skills since he becomes the Snopes politician. While the reader might question Clarence's political skills, Faulkner does provide ample evidence that he is an excellent guide to the Memphis whorehouses. Clarence first appears in Sanctuary where he helps Horace Benbow locate Temple Drake. Also, he is involved with Judge Drake in keeping Temple's Memphis lodging from becoming public, he shows Virgil Snopes and Fonzo Winbush the brothels of Memphis. Like Flem, Clarence is a protege of Will Varner. Clarence starts his career as a Varner-appointed constable and soon becomes supervisor of the Beat. Varner eventually gets Clarence elected to the state senate. Clarence then runs for United States Congress, and his political career comes to a sudden

halt. His success, like Flem's, is based on the exploitation of others, and Clarence's political downfall serves as a comic contrast to Flem's murder. Ratliff, as an old man in The Mansion, takes it upon himself to get rid of Clarence, much as Mink vows to kill Flem. In The Snopes Dilemma, James Gray Watson observes that both Mink and Ratliff face similar obstacles such as old age and lack of energy, yet each accomplishes his goal (203).

At the annual Varner July picnic, Clarence, now Senator C. Egglestone Snopes, is taken out of politics by Ratliff's clever moves. Ratliff has two young boys gather branches from a dog thicket and drag them across the back of Clarence's pants legs. Subsequently, every dog nearby comes and urinates on Clarence. Afterward, Uncle Billy Varner quickly withdraws his support from Clarence saying, "I aint going to have Beat Two and Frenchman's Bend represented nowhere by nobody that ere a son-a-bitching dog that happens by cant tell from a fence post" (319). Like the other Snopeses who aspire to Flem's success, Clarence ultimately falls short of his goal. While Ratliff spends his adult life trying to best Flem Snopes or at least to keep up with him, he makes only mediocre progress, but Ratliff ends Clarence's political reign with the help of children.

A variety of other Snopeses populate the trilogy as well as being mentioned in other novels. These cameo appearances usually describe humorous episodes and are

reminiscent of characterizations by tall tale humorists such as Longstreet and Harris. However, these Snopeses all revolve around Flem in that they serve as tools of Flem or contrast to him.

One character Flem uses in The Town is Doris Snopes, a younger brother to Clarence. When Flem receives Byron Snopes's four half-breed Mexican children, he farms them out to Doris. Although Doris attempts to tame these children, he barely escapes with his life as the children tie him to a tree and set fire to him. Doris assumes many of the common standards of behavior and therefore becomes a victim of his own family.

Another character imported to Jefferson by Flem, Orestes (Res) Snopes, appears in The Mansion, when he moves to Jefferson to manage what is left of the old Compson place. He is much like Flem in his scheming, and as Warren Beck observes, serves as an agent of Flem's acquisitiveness (95). He attempts to con an old man named Meadowfill out of a valuable piece of property by putting a hog lot next to it. Res then allows the pig to trespass repeatedly to anger old Meadowfill. However, Gavin Stevens thwarts Res's plans to gain the property, thereby halting one of Flem's schemes. Significantly, Gavin Stevens never defeats Flem in any type of head-on contest, but like V. K. Ratliff who disposes of Clarence Snopes, Stevens manages to defeat one of Flem's

agents. Like many of the Snopeses, Res attempts to pattern himself after Flem, but Res fails to duplicate Flem.

Among the lesser known Snopeses, several comic characters serve as contrasts to Flem. Unlike the impotent Flem, two Snopeses display extraordinary sexual prowess. In fact, Virgil Snopes gains a reputation for his sexual athleticism in the Memphis brothels. Virgil, along with Fonzo Winbush, appears in Sanctuary where the two move to Memphis to attend barber college. Although the bumpkins take up residence in Miss Reba's brothel, they think they are living with a fine Christian woman and her daughters. Soon, they begin to frequent Memphis whorehouses where Virgil discovers his real talent, "a capacity to take care of two girls in succession to their satisfaction or at least until they hollered quit" (Mansion 73). Shortly afterward, Clarence Snopes discovers Virgil's sexual prowess and starts an enterprise in which he takes bets on Virgil's endurance. Clarence comments that Virgil has a promising future as long as "the supply of two dollar whores just holds out" (Mansion 74). Virgil evidently inherits some of his libido from his father, Wesley.

Wesley is the Snopes who takes I. O.'s place as the school teacher, but according to Ratliff, Wesley's true vocation combines leading singing at revivals and baptizings and seducing young women "until one day a posse of enraged fathers caught him and a fourteen-year-old girl in an empty

cotton house tarred and feathered him out of the country" (Town 41). Although Virgil and Wesley take advantage of women, they use them purely for sexual gratification. Flem also uses women, as evidenced by his treatment of Eula and Linda, but he uses women for financial gain and always in a detached and passionless manner.

Wesley's other son, Bryon, comes back from business college and takes a job as teller in the Sartoris Bank, embezzles money from the bank, and disappears into Mexico. He functions as a contrast to Flem Snopes in The Town because, according to Ratliff, Flem has too much respect for both money and intellect just to rob a bank like Byron (138). Flem sees banking as a method of "steady and decorous embezzlement" which is part of fixed operating expenses. Therefore, Byron's unimaginative theft is beneath Flem.

Out of all of the Snopes clan, Mink Snopes serves as the sharpest contrast to Flem. Mink is innocent in his inability to deal with society and consequently is the most pathetic of the Snopeses. However, Mink possesses a highly developed code of honor and is motivated by beliefs about honor rather than by greed. Cleanth Brooks in The Yoknapatawpha Country sees Mink as the most heroic of all the Snopeses (220). Yet, according to V. K. Ratliff in The Hamlet, Mink is a "different kind of Snopes like a cotton-mouth is a different kind of snake" (91), and in The

Town Ratliff sees him as the "only out-and-out mean Snopes we ever experienced" (79). Other than Flem, Mink is Faulkner's most developed Snopes character. Mink first appears in The Hamlet where he kills Jack Houston over a boarding fee for a cow and is sent to prison. Faulkner mentions Mink in The Town, and he later plays a pivotal role as Flem's killer in The Mansion. In the trilogy, Faulkner traces Mink through most of his adult life and presents a portrait of a man whose personal and societal relations all end in failure. However, through years of hardship and imprisonment, Mink retains his honor, and out of a primal sense of justice and retribution, he ultimately avenges his betrayal by a kinsman. Mink, with his simplistic values, repeatedly becomes a victim.

Faulkner introduces Mink in The Hamlet when Ratliff sells Mink a sewing machine and takes as partial payment a ten-dollar bearer note that has been passed from Flem to Mink. Mink tells Ratliff to take the note to Flem and tell him it is from the cousin "that's still scratching dirt to keep alive to another cousin that's risen from scratching dirt and owning a herd of cattle and a hay barn. To owning cattle and a hay barn" (76). Mink repeats the part about the barn and tells Ratliff to repeat it to himself over and over so that he won't forget what Mink said. The implication clearly serves two purposes. It reminds the reader and Flem that his roots are from poor

earth-scratching farmers, and considering Ab Snopes's propensity for burning barns, it is a veiled threat toward Flem. While this scene gives light to Mink's feelings toward Flem, it also demonstrates significant vocal interplay between Mink and his wife. While she looks at Ratliff and the machine, Mink tells her three times to get back into the house. She then screams to Mink that Flem would "let you die and rot right here and [be] glad of it" (74).

At the beginning of "The Long Summer" section of The Hamlet and again in The Mansion, Faulkner relates how Jack Houston sues Mink Snopes for pasturing a cow which Mink had allowed to stay at Houston's during the winter. At the trial, Will Varner orders Mink to pay \$18.75 to Houston for pasture rent. Unable to pay cash, Mink works off the debt by digging post holes at fifty cents a day in half-day increments. After three days, Houston offers to buy the animal, but Mink refuses. Later, Varner tries to advance Mink payment for the cow and even threatens him because he has not started his own crop, but Mink stoically finishes working off the debt, declaring to Varner that a "law-abiding feller always listens to a court judgment (Mansion 20). When Mink finally works out the judgment, he goes to pick up the cow. However, Houston refuses to give it to him, saying that Mink owes an additional dollar and seventy-five cents for boarding the cow since the time of

the judgment. Mink again goes to Varner to ask if it is legal for Houston to charge the additional money. Varner attempts to give Mink the money to pay the fine, but Mink declines and tells Varner that "Me and Houston don't deal in money, we deal in post holes" (Mansion 29). For a second time, Mink seeks the help of the law, represented by Will Varner, and comes away defeated. After Mink retrieves the cow, he decides to kill Houston. Since he doesn't think he has any shells that will fire, Mink takes the family's last five dollars and goes to Jefferson to buy shotgun shells.

Mink's journey to Jefferson and his futile attempt to buy shells further demonstrates his inability to function in society. He loses his money and blames the mail carrier with whom he hitches a ride into town. Ike McCaslin at the hardware store refuses to sell him buckshot, and Mink leaves and passes by the other stores that are closed to him due to his lack of money. Mink passes up eating at the backstreet cafe and rejects seeing a ten-cent movie, even though he has never seen one. He only hopes to see an automobile or a few trains before he catches the mail carrier back to Frenchman's Bend. Without money or even knowledge of what the city is like, Mink is completely out of place there. Unlike Flem, who uses society, Mink is merely a pawn in society.

Although Mink stoically accepts his lot in life, he retains his pride, and this pride motivates him to ambush

Jack Houston in The Mansion. When he takes the first shot at Houston, the shell fails to explode. As he fires the second barrel, he thinks "And even now. They still ain't satisfied yet" (39). His mention of "They," which represents society in general, shows that Mink is keenly aware of his alienation from society. He knows that he can never work within the system and that he must rely on his naturalistic codes to satisfy his sense of justice.

Later while Mink sits in jail waiting for Flem to return and help him, he theorizes: "They Themselves would have prevented Flem from getting back in time" and that he "must face, accept this last ultimate useless and reasonless risk and jeopardy too just to show how much he could stand before They would let his cousin come back and save him" (37). Mink feels that Flem will somehow intervene on his behalf until he asks finally at the end of the trial, "Is Flem Snopes in this room?" Realizing that Flem is not coming, Mink then yells, "Tell that son of a bitch---" (Hamlet 333). At this point, Mink's alienation from society is complete. Ratliff shrewdly observes that Mink's sentencing to Parchman places him with all of the others who are "failures at killing and stealing and lying" (Mansion 89). The emphasis here should be on "failure" since the supposition is that Flem Snopes, like others who are successful, engages in the same activities but without getting punished.

Faulkner never attempts to sanctify or gloss over Mink Snopes. Mink marries a woman of questionable background, treats her and their children poorly, and ultimately drives them away. Mink constantly reveals his racial prejudices, as exemplified by his contacts with Houston's servant and his questioning in jail as to whether they "feed them niggers before they do a white man" (Hamlet 258). Yet Mink's heroism lies the fact that he possesses integrity--a quality which appears to be completely lacking in Flem and most of the other Snopeses. Mink's literal notions of integrity are such that his court-appointed lawyer believes Mink to be insane. Because of Mink's complete discord with society, the lawyer tries to get him placed in an insane asylum. However, Mink refuses the suggestion because he wants to take responsibility for his actions. Faulkner paints Mink's actions as somewhat heroic in that he allows Mink to take it on himself to right a wrong that civil law could not correct.

One of Mink's intrinsic values is his belief in the virtue of the clan. Flem's refusal to help Mink at his trial creates, in Mink's mind, another wrong which Mink concludes must be corrected. Mink's view of life revolves around the notion of inescapable retribution; if "he's Got to do something, cant nothing stop him" (49). Even when Montgomery Ward Snopes enters prison and, acting on Flem's behalf, persuades Mink to attempt to escape by walking out

in women's clothing, Mink does not alter his original goal. Although twenty-one years are added to his sentence, Mink holds no malice toward Montgomery Ward because he realizes that Montgomery is Flem's puppet. Mink merely instructs Montgomery Ward to "Tell him [Flem] he hadn't ought to used that dress. But it don't matter. If I had made it out then, maybe I would a changed. But I reckon I wont now. I reckon I'll jest wait" (86). Mink's unshakable belief in his own sense of right and wrong is enough to sustain him through his added sentence. According to Watson, Mink's forgiving Montgomery "demonstrates that the principles which motivate his revenge transcend momentary individual animosities and local prison customs" (165).

In The Mansion, when Mink is finally released from prison, Faulkner recounts his journey to Memphis and back to Jefferson in a folk-epic-like manner. In this section, Mink journeys to Memphis to buy a gun and then back to Jefferson to shoot Flem. In his quest, Mink enters what to him is a fantastic new world where he travels paved highways with "iron numbers along the roads" and realizes that "he had forgotten distance" (403). Mink stops at a store and is amazed to learn that a tin of sardines costs twenty-six cents instead of a nickel and is tempted by his desire for a Coca-Cola. When Mink sees the cold bottles in the soft drink cases, he gives into his temptation and "something terrible happened inside his mouth and throat--a leap, a

spring of thin liquid like fire or the myriad sting of ants all the way down to his stomach" (260). After Mink leaves the store, he discovers that the storekeeper shortchanged him ten cents, which marks the first time Mink is robbed on his way to Memphis.

Later, Mink's journey is interrupted by the time he spends with Reverend Goodhay, where he is robbed of his ten dollars. After Mink loses his money, Goodhay promises to make it up to him if he will stay until Sunday. Although Mink thinks about stealing Goodhay's pistol, he rejects the idea out of his sense of dignity and honor. He reminds himself that he has never stolen anything and declares to himself "I wont never" (274). Naturally, this is a sharp contrast to Flem who has no sense of honor and therefore has no qualms about stealing as long as it is done within the law.

Unlike Flem who seems to go undeterred from one goal to the next, Mink has to overcome several more obstacles before he kills Flem. Mink finally gets to Memphis, and after finding his way through the city, he buys a dirty old pistol and three shells at a pawn shop. He then hitches a ride back toward Jefferson. Along the way, he tests the weapon and accidentally expends two of his shells. When Mink finally reaches Jefferson, he has to get past the guard that Gavin Stevens hired. Finally, Mink reaches Flem and fires his rusty gun at him. In much the same manner as when he killed

Jack Houston, the gun fails to fire. He fires a second time, and the shell explodes and kills Flem.

By the end of The Mansion, Faulkner endows Mink with the qualities of a classical dragon slayer. He describes Mink as being

equal to any, brave as any, being inextricable from, anonymous with all of them: the beautiful, the splendid, the proud and the brave, right on up to the very top itself among the shining phantoms and dreams which are the milestones of the long human recording--.

(435-36)

Faulkner formulates the Mink-Flem antithesis much as Shakespeare does with Duncan and Macbeth in Macbeth. Just as woman-born man could destroy Macbeth, it appears that no man without simplistic, literal and pure integrity can kill Flem.

Another aspect of Mink that separates him from the other Snopeses is his sense of religion. Early in The Mansion, Mink declares that he doesn't believe in the "Old Moster" and that church was only a place where a man could call himself a preacher in order to seduce other men's wives (5). However, as the years pass in the penitentiary, he comes to some definite beliefs about God's sense of justice. Mink comes to believe that the "Old Moster just punishes; He dont play jokes" (398). According to Brooks, Mink is one of Faulkner's Calvinists because he does not believe in a God

of love and mercy but instead believes that there is a final justice (232). Mink faithfully clings to the notion that, although he must endure hardships and setbacks, the "Old Moster" will help him attain his retribution. Even after Mink shoots the gun at Flem's head and the gun misfires, Mink tells himself, "Hit'll go this time: Old Moster dont play jokes" (416). According to John B. Cullen, Faulkner's sympathetic treatment of Mink proves he "understands and in many ways admires what some people call poor white" (126).

Another way in which Mink sharply contrasts with Flem is in his sexual prowess. Lyall Powers observes that "we are meant to feel that his love and love-making are strong and intense and rather exceptional--that his amorous qualities have the strength of virtue" (159). Mink's virtue lies in the fact that he is intensely monogamous. Yettie, Mink's wife, describes Mink's love-making as unlike anything in her previous experience. She tells Mink that "I've had a hundred men, but I never had a wasp before. The stuff comes out you is rank poison. It's too hot. It burns itself and my seed up" (238). Unlike the impotent Flem, Mink's fecundity is superhuman.

Collectively, the Snopeses comprise what appears to be one of American literature's most repulsive families. However, the Snopeses vary considerably. Some like Eck and Wall approach decency, and many have at least some good qualities. Faulkner's purpose in creating the Snopeses is

not merely to display a group of horrible and often comic monsters. Although they frequently resemble products of antebellum humor, the Snopeses are much more than rehashed nineteenth-century bumpkins. Nor are they merely examples of twentieth-century white trash. Instead, Faulkner uses the Snopeses to represent the antithesis of the South's Old Guard, and to epitomize the unlikely inheritors of the New South. More importantly, they are either pawns of Flem, filling the vacuum he creates when he moves upward, or they serve as contrasts to Flem. Flem is the arch-Snopes, and all the Snopeses, in one way or another, revolve around him.

## Chapter 4

### The Rise of Flem Snopes

Flem Snopes, the impotent son of an itinerant sharecropper who usurps his way to the presidency of a county seat bank, is traditionally viewed as a sly, deceptive, immoral, white trash flimflammer who will do anything for material gain. On the surface, as critics often argue, Flem shares many qualities with the protagonists of the antebellum humorists. Flem's schemes remind the reader of a Sut Lovingood or a Simon Suggs, and his methods recall the flimflaming abilities of Longstreet's Peter Ketch or Haliburton's Sam Slick. Flem Snopes proves to be more than merely a backwoods confidence man, however. In Flem, Faulkner creates a character who appears to be out of the tall tale tradition of the Old Southwest but who lacks any morality and moves with the cunning and precision of a Machiavellian villain.

Faulkner views the rise of Flem Snopes as symbolic of the emergence of the New Order of the post-reconstruction South. Faulkner resists making Flem like the many fictional representations of Southerners who are inexorably buried by the burden of the past. Instead, Faulkner endows Flem with the realization that the past is past and those who will prevail in the present and future are those individuals with the ability to adapt to what Faulkner sees as the New Order. Accompanying the rise of the New Order, as represented by

the Snopeses, is the decline of the genteel aristocracy whose unyielding ties to the past bind them to the lost days of the plantation society. However, Faulkner complicates Flem's ascent. Unlike Ab Snopes, whose repudiation of the Old Order is overt and violent, Flem's actions are subtle. Faulkner develops Flem as a character whose every advance is calculated for his own self-serving purposes, and Faulkner filters Flem's maneuvers through narrators V. K. Ratliff, Gavin Stevens, and Chick Mallison. As a result, even Flem's most horrendous actions are both outwardly deplored and inwardly admired by Faulkner's narrators and readers alike. Ab Snopes, whose footsteps are characterized in "Barn Burning" as heavy boot steps with a "clocklike finality," walks with a "machinelike deliberation" (11). However, Flem, according to Ratliff in The Hamlet, makes his first marks in Frenchman's Bend wearing rubber-soled tennis shoes (54). Additionally, instead of fixating on the past, Flem has no past worth remembering and adopts what Warren Beck calls in Man in Motion, a policy of "expedient acquisitiveness" (80). Through the Snopes trilogy, Faulkner evolves Flem Snopes into his humorous and horrific version of the modern hero who not only endures but prevails.

Just as Faulkner sees the right time for the creation of a Flem Snopes, he also gives him the proper lineage, and Ab provides the impetus for Flem's transition from a member of the subjugated poor white class of the South to a

prominent force in the New Order. This is not to say that Flem and Ab are alike. Although Faulkner provides varying characterizations of Ab Snopes during and after the Civil War, no role of Ab's is analogous to Flem. Ab, like Flem, never fully accepts his station in life, but unlike Flem, his reactions to society are violent and ultimately futile. Ab sees himself as a common man struggling for survival in a hostile environment in which he cannot win. Significantly, Flem uses Ab's hostile nature as a means to gain the favor needed to obtain his first foothold in Frenchman's Bend.

At the beginning of The Hamlet, Faulkner uses Ab and Flem as representatives of the Old and New Order. As evidenced in "Barn Burning" and in Ratliff's humorous retelling of the barn burning story at the beginning of The Hamlet, Ab meets societal repression with acts of violence. Early on in the novel, Flem parlays Ab's threat of violence into a clerk's job at Will Varner's store. This occurs after Ab rents a farm from Jody Varner. Jody Varner hears about Ab's proclivity to burn barns and decides to attempt to placate the older Snopes. Jody attempts to enlist Flem's help in keeping the Varner barns fire-free by offering Flem a chance for more credit and more farm land, but Flem tells Jody, "Aint no benefit in farming. I figure on getting out of it as soon as I can" (23). Although Flem says very little, his words have far-reaching implications, and he hints at what he wants by mentioning to Jody that "You run a

store" (23). Shortly thereafter, Jody takes Flem's hint and gives him a clerk's job in the Varner store. This marks the first instance that Flem uses a family member to better himself, and ironically it is not Ab's influence but rather his bad reputation that propels Flem into Varner's store.

Once Flem is settled into his clerking job at the store, he gains the friendship and trust of the Varner family, especially Jody's father, Will Varner. When the time comes to open the cotton gin, much to the amused bewilderment of Ratliff and the other locals, Flem rather than Jody opens the gin and takes on the job of weighing the cotton as it is hauled into the gin. Jody is left to tend the store. Soon, Flem assists Will in going through the credit ledgers and making the yearly settlements with Varner's numerous tenant farmers. Ratliff observes that Will never even allowed Jody to take part in yearly settlements (60).

As evidenced from the beginning of The Hamlet, much of Flem's complexity lies in the way he uses his family members. Lawrence Bowling observes that the Snopeses "will suffer almost any insult or ignominy to achieve material gain" (114). Therefore, Flem exploits his family for his own financial gain, and he also uses them to establish a pipeline or network when it is expedient for him to do so. Consequently, as Flem gains power, Snopeses take jobs in

Frenchman's Bend, and each time Flem moves on, other Snopeses fill the vacuum he leaves.

Flem first hires other Snopeses after he is given a degree of freedom in handling Varner's business holdings. Flem removes Trumbull, the regular blacksmith, from the Varner-owned blacksmith shop and hires his inexperienced and profoundly inept cousins I.O. and Eck Snopes in his place. Although it might appear that this is an act of pure nepotism on Flem's behalf, the villagers soon discover that Flem uses I.O.'s maladroitness to make a profit. Flem accomplishes this by building a new blacksmith shop and buying new tools to equip it. Most importantly, he then hires Trumbull's former apprentice to run the shop, claiming that he is starting the business so "people could get decent work done again" (66). After a month, Flem's new shop procures all the local trade, and within three months, Flem sells the contents of the shop with its smith, tools, and clientele to Varner. He takes the old equipment in trade and sells it to a junk metal dealer. Finally, Flem sells the new building to a farmer to use as a cowshed, after which Ratliff declares that even he could not keep up with the amount of Flem's profit (67). Although Faulkner reveals Flem's actions as dubious and unethical through this episode, the tone in which the story is related by Ratliff is light and amusing and much like the manner in which Hooper relates a Simon Suggs adventure.

In a few years, Flem becomes a fixture in the community, and the residents of Frenchman's Bend continue to notice Flem's almost limitless chicanery. Not only does Flem deal in land and cattle, he also resorts to petty usury. For example, Ratliff learns that Flem works "at the top and the bottom at the same time" (71) when Bookwright tells him about overhearing two Negroes at Quick's sawmill. Flem had loaned a Negro \$5.00 more than two years ago. The Negro tells his friend that Flem allows him to pay only a dime each Saturday and has yet to say anything about the original five dollars (70).

Although Faulkner establishes Flem as a first rate confidence man, he doesn't allow Flem to become invincible. Ratliff, when referring to the Snopeses, tells Will Varner that "there aint but two men I know can risk fooling with them folks. And just one of them is named Varner and his front name aint Jody" (28) When Varner asks Ratliff to name the other one, he replies, "That aint been proved yet" (28). However, later Ratliff sells a sewing machine to Mink Snopes and is conned into taking a ten-dollar bearer note with Flem's signature as partial payment. The note also contains the idiot Ike Snopes's signature because Flem had made the note to cheat Ike out of his inheritance. However, Ratliff devises a plan to dupe Flem Snopes. Ratliff lets it be known that he has a contract to obtain fifty goats and even allows Flem to find out where to buy them. When Ratliff

returns to Frenchman's Bend, he learns that Flem has bought the fifty goats. Flem asks Ratliff for double the price he originally paid for the goats, and Ratliff agrees and gives him the note he had obtained from Mink as payment. When Ratliff discovers that Flem is Ike's legal guardian, he burns the note so Flem cannot use it again and gives the money with interest to Mrs. Littlejohn for Ike's care.

Flem continues to work at the store and is somewhat befriended by the Varner clan. He takes his meals at the Verners, sleeps in Will's office, and spends his Sunday afternoons listening to old man Will talk as they chew tobacco under the shade in the Varner's lawn. Ultimately, Flem seizes an opportunity to get closer to the Varner wealth. Eula Varner, Will's sixteen-year-old daughter who is courted by every eligible young man in the area with the exception of Flem, turns up pregnant, and none of her former suitors is to be found. According to Ratliff, Flem agrees to marry Eula for a \$300 check and a deed to the old Frenchman's place. Flem's marriage to Eula offers him a tie to Varner's money and also affords Flem a claim to the respectability of the Varner family.

Flem's return to Frenchman's Bend, as told in The Hamlet and also in "Spotted Horses," is one of the highlights of Snopes watching. Flem arrives with Eula, the most mature three-month-old baby anyone has ever seen, a Texan, and two dozen wild Texas ponies tied together with

barbed wire. Buck Hipps, the Texan, announces that the ponies will be auctioned the next day, and Flem refuses to acknowledge any interest in the horses.

Faulkner obscures Flem's role as a partner in this deal to heighten his ability as a confidence man, but the townspeople speculate that he is a silent partner with Buck Hipps. However, Hipps leaves town, and Flem never admits to having anything to do with the auction. When Mrs. Armstid comes to get her money back from Flem, he tells her that the Texas man took it with him. The only thing she receives from Flem is a nickel bag of candy as "a little sweetening for the chaps" (317). However, the locals don't seem to hold Flem responsible for the fiasco. Instead, they seem to admire him for it. I.O. Snopes tells the loafers that "you boys might as well quit trying. You can't get ahead of Flem. You can't touch him" (317). Naturally, Flem never shows a trace of remorse or responsibility for the damage the horses cause.

By the end of The Hamlet, the passionless, silent, abstract Flem Snopes is invincible as a confidence man. If anyone would be able to match Flem, it would have to be V.K. Ratliff, a foremost trader and Snopes watcher. In a final section, V. K. discovers that Flem has been spending his nights digging at the old Frenchman's place. Local lore had it that the old Frenchman had buried a fortune there during the Civil War and died before he could retrieve it. After

learning that Flem was digging, V.K. figures that Flem has some notion about where the treasure is buried. Therefore, Ratliff, along with Henry Armstid and Bookwright, gets an old man to witch the property with a divining rod. They dig where the old man tells them and recover three bags containing silver dollars. The trio then decides to buy the farm, and V.K. negotiates a deal with Flem in which he gives Flem his interest in a backstreet Jefferson cafe. After buying the farm, the fortune hunters dig several nights before they realize that Flem had baited the holes and had gone out there every night to dig, hoping that someone would see him. Ratliff and his partners fall for one of the oldest and simplest cons in existence--the salted mine. As a result of this con, Flem takes over Ratliff's interest in a Jefferson restaurant, and this provides Flem the opportunity to move from Frenchman's Bend to Jefferson where, as revealed in The Town, he takes over the city in much the same way as he dominated Frenchman's Bend.

Gary Lindberg in The Confidence Man in American Literature describes the confidence man as an American cultural hero who functions to clarify the uneasy relations between our stated ethics and our tolerated practices (210). This tension exists in Twain, Longstreet, and Hooper, but the stakes are higher and more sustained in Faulkner's confidence games than they appear in the works of his literary forebears. However, the elements of the confidence

game remain the same. Faulkner makes Flem's confidence games a spectator sport and uses V. K. Ratliff's telling, retelling, and speculation as a means of involving the reader in the duplicity. According to Lindburg, "trade is a pleasure in Frenchman's Bend because it is a game "to conceal motive and feelings" (210). Throughout the trilogy, Faulkner uses the narrator Ratliff to elevate Snopes-watching to a rustic Super Bowl. Much of the spectator's pleasure rests on trying to decide what new game is being played. Faulkner, who is as much concerned with this collusion as with duplicity, allows his readers to share the villagers' curiosity, apprehension, and amusement. This collusion allows the confidence game spectators to shift their values. Instead of adhering to the concept of loving the sinner and hating the sin, the spectators both love and hate the sinner on the basis of the skill with which the sin is accomplished. Whether motivated by greed, pride, honor, or the thrill of the challenge, the confidence man emerges as a covert cultural hero. Through his abilities as a confidence man, Flem is able to usurp the established order in Frenchman's Bend, and having conquered the small village, Flem is ready to move to another level and take on the Old Order.

During the course of events in The Hamlet, Faulkner establishes Flem Snopes as a contender who is able to surpass the best of the tricksters and traders in

Frenchman's Bend. Although Flem comes from the lowest of pedigrees and family circumstances, through the use of his wits, he is able, in some ways, to rise above his lowly origins. Eventually Flem establishes himself as one of the most influential and powerful men in Frenchman's Bend, second only to Will Varner. Additionally, each step Flem takes is followed by another Snopes who in turn occupies Flem's former position. By the end of The Hamlet, Flem has risen as far as he can go in Frenchman's Bend, and his half ownership of Ratliff's old cafe provides the impetus to relocate his wife and her daughter in Jefferson.

The beginning of the Flem Snopes saga as told in The Hamlet has much in common with the oral tradition and the tall tales of Harris, Longstreet, Hooper, and even Twain. The various peripheral Snopeses who move throughout the trilogy appear like characters out of antebellum humor, and Flem Snopes certainly is akin to a Simon Suggs, a Sam Slick, or even a Jim Smiley. Faulkner uses the tall tale tradition, as Michael Millgate observes in The Achievement of William Faulkner, "with precisely calculated literary objectives in view: he uses it with the full knowledge of its antecedents and with a sophisticated awareness of its contribution to the elaborate interplay of traditional and experimental features which constitutes the complex presentation in his novels" (291). While Faulkner allows Flem to resemble the tall tale characters, he gives Flem a

much more sustained treatment than is accorded to antebellum characters. Also unlike these characters, Flem Snopes is ethically a blank page. As Faulkner develops the trilogy, he shows Flem Snopes as a character whose innermost workings are submerged deep within his psyche and are only partially revealed by the conjectures of Ratliff and others. Since what is known about Flem is based on piecemeal information and the conjecture of others, Flem evolves into a shadowy and therefore sinister character. However, Flem is multi-dimensional as Faulkner demonstrates throughout the trilogy.

Although a surface reading of the Snopes trilogy might suggest Flem to be inspired purely by unscrupulous acquisitiveness, as is suggested in Flem's dealings in The Hamlet, Faulkner endows Flem with other motives. When considering the trilogy as a whole, it is possible to see Flem as an early twentieth-century American Adam. Many Europeans came to America and marched westward in search of a better way of life and ultimately in quest of respectability regardless of lineage. With the passing of generations, the successful settlers achieved a prominence unattainable in Europe. As Faulkner reveals in other novels, this is true of Yoknapatawpha aristocracy like the Sartorises and the Compsons. Likewise, Flem Snopes lifts himself out of his ancestral poverty and moves from his father's sharecropper's shack to Will Varner's store, then to Jefferson, and finally to the banker's mansion.

Flem's motivation and depth are also made evident through a comparison of the Snopeses and the Sartorises. Readers and critics alike often see these families as a contrast between the rustic white trash hill folk and the well-bred aristocrat of the Southern plantation. This type of reading is correct only when one looks at limited instances. When one scrutinizes the entire body of Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha saga, however, these two families appear on different rungs of the same evolutionary and economic ladder. During the Civil War and Reconstruction, the Sartoris family is at its height while the Snopes fortunes, as exemplified by the mule stealing backwoods barn-burner Ab Snopes, are at their lowest. As time progresses, the twentieth-century Sartorises tend to decline in wealth and prominence while the Snopeses, led by Flem, leave the hills, infiltrate, and eventually take over Jefferson. Faulkner demonstrates this role reversal in The Town by allowing Flem to use his wife's suicide to take over the presidency of the bank that was once the sole domain of the Sartoris family. Although the reader may be unsympathetic with Flem's rise because of his underhanded methods, Faulkner reminds the reader in Flags in the Dust that John Sartoris gained much of his station in life with skillful use of a derringer (6).

The second novel of the trilogy, The Town, details Flem's rise in Jefferson. As in The Hamlet, the reader

gathers information about Flem's exploits from second- and third-hand sources. In this novel, the story is told by three narrators--V. K. Ratliff, Gavin Stevens, and Chick Mallison, with Mallison providing narration for over half the novel. Naturally, much of Mallison's story is derived from what he hears from Ratliff and Stevens since Mallison is a young child when most of the events of the novel occur. By using this framework device of having educated narrators like Stevens and Mallison narrate the events surrounding a low-brow character, Faulkner is employing a narrative technique used by the old Southwest humorists such as Longstreet. This framework gives the story an air of respectability, a characteristic that Flem is yet to gain.

The environment of The Hamlet gives Flem the opportunity to perfect and ultimately become master of the confidence game. Flem's ultimate test and greatest victory occur when he defeats Ratliff in a trade. Once Ratliff is subdued, Flem leaves Frenchman's Bend to take on the city. However, Faulkner's decision to remove Flem from the hamlet raises the question of motivation. If Faulkner intended for Flem merely to get the best of another, the unsophisticated world of Frenchman's Bend would always provide easy pickings. Besting another simply for the sake of boast or financial gain is not Flem's goal, as is evidenced in The Town. Although Flem's motives revolve around money, he learns that money alone is not enough. Like his character

Thomas Sutpen in Absalom, Absalom!, Faulkner endows Flem with a sense of a grand design. Unlike Sutpen, Flem's ambition grows as he moves upward. Flem comes to realize that he wants things that he did not even know existed before he left Frenchman's Bend. Flem's strategy requires taking small steps at first and then progressing to larger steps with each move.

Like Flem's first appearance in The Hamlet, his arrival in The Town is unadorned. In what Gavin Stevens calls "the first summer of Snopeses" (4), Flem drives a wagon into Jefferson and the next day appears behind the counter of Ratliff's former cafe. To the lawyer Stevens, Flem is unimpressive--"a squat uncommunicative man with a neat minute bow tie and opaque eyes and a sudden little hooked nose like the beak of a small hawk" (4). However, Ratliff advises Stevens that Flem bears watching and predicts that Flem's first move will be to remove Grover Winbush, the partner in Flem's cafe, from the business. Within six months, Flem eliminates Grover Winbush from the cafe, and in addition replaces himself with another Snopes. Since Flem knows that he can manipulate his relatives, another Snopes takes his place in what Ratliff describes as an unbroken chain.

Flem quits working at the cafe, moves into a small rented house, and obtains the position of superintendent of the Jefferson power plant. According to Chick Mallison, the

townspeople are not so much astonished that Flem became the superintendent of the power plant as they are that there existed or was a need for such a position (9). However, Flem's new job comes about through the town's new Mayor, Manfred DeSpain. At this time, Jefferson society views DeSpain as the area's most eligible bachelor, making DeSpain a credulous pawn in Flem's master plan. Mallison describes DeSpain's first sight of Eula Varner Snopes as fate "to which both she and Major DeSpain were victims" (14).

DeSpain and Eula begin an affair which lasts eighteen years, and according to Chick Mallison, everyone in Jefferson knew about it and even supported it. However, Flem never seems to find out about the affair. When Gavin Stevens asks Ratliff why Flem has not caught on to Eula and DeSpain, Ratliff explains that "He dont need to yet" (15). Then when it is announced that Flem Snopes has become power plant superintendent to a town that didn't know it needed one, it becomes obvious to the Snopes watchers that Flem is able to turn DeSpain's affair with Eula into a job for himself.

Flem's political appointment comes to a halt when a routine audit reveals that brass fittings and other materials are missing from the plant. Flem has taken the brass, but the scam backfires when the two Negro workers learn that Flem has duped both of them, and they then hide the brass in the water tank where Flem will be unable to get

at it. In this instance, Flem is duped by an unsuspecting source. As a result, Flem makes up the shortage from his own pocket and resigns from his post.

Faulkner opens The Town by giving the reader a hint that Flem Snopes will not be content with small scale confidence games. Chick Mallison observes:

At first we thought that the water tank was only Flem Snopes' monument. We didn't know any better then. It wasn't until afterward that we realized that that object low on the sky above Jefferson, Mississippi, wasn't a monument at all. It was only a footprint. (3)

Ratliff and Stevens, as well as the other townspeople, assume Flem will be undone by his theft of the brass fittings at the water plant, but as they later learn, the Snopes watchers have underestimated Flem. After Flem leaves the power plant, he spends most of his time sitting on his front porch looking at the water tank as if it is his monument. But, as Mallison observes, "A monument only says At least I got this far while a footprint says This is were I was when I moved again" (29). Faulkner makes it clear that Flem's inability to pilfer the power plant wasn't a lost battle; it was merely an inconvenience. Also, the failure is part of Flem's educational process. According to Brooks in The Yoknapatawpha Country, "In his first years in Jefferson, Flem learns painfully by trial and error, to distinguish between what you can steal profitably and what

you cannot" (212). Additionally, even the narrators do not know to what degree Flem failed, as Ratliff tells Gavin that Flem may have stolen more than what the audit showed (30).

Early in the novel, V. K. Ratliff, always the most astute Snopes watcher, observes that Snopes still has some ideas about turning Eula's affair with DeSpain into profit. According to Ratliff, "not catching his wife with Manfred DeSpain yet is like that twenty-dollar gold piece pinned to your undershirt on your first maiden trip to a Memphis whorehouse. He don't need it yet" (29). Although Gavin Stevens, V. K. Ratliff, and the "we" that constitute the Jefferson townspeople cannot determine exactly what Flem is planning, the death of old Bayard Sartoris, the president of the Merchants and Farmers Bank, affords Flem the opportunity to replace simple larceny with finance-capitalism. This is a reasonable occurrence, since the novel takes place during the first half of the twentieth century.

In the Twenties, the South was finally beginning to enter into American industrialism and the world of finance-capitalism. Faulkner uses Flem Snopes as the example of the new guard. As a result, Flem appears as distasteful since, as W. J. Cash points out in The Mind of the South, the Southern philosophical stance revolves around holding on to "the old way" and reasserting "the legend of the Old South" (391). However, in The Literature of the South, Thomas Daniel Young observes that Southern renaissance writers such

as Faulkner believe in the mortality of a society as well as that of an individual. Thus, the Southerner seems to be caught between the desire to hold on to the ideals of the past and a sense that he is no longer able to hold on to these beliefs (602). As Richard Moreland observes, Flem becomes the "white-collar breed of servant at the New South planter-businessman's door" and represents "the mysteriously unlocalizable unknown" in this changing economy (144-5). In this respect, the trilogy recounting the rise and usurpation of Flem Snopes can be viewed as the chronicle of an age.

When Sartoris dies, it is learned that Flem has been buying small lots of stock in the bank (117). With the major owners being the Sartoris family, Manfred DeSpain, and Will Varner, various families in the county also own minor portions of stock. While the narrators believe Flem is still reeling from the water tank fiasco, he quietly buys these odd lots of stock. Since the Sartoris family has no strong contenders for the office of bank president, the board of directors elect Manfred DeSpain, the current vice-president, to succeed Bayard. Also after the death of Sartoris, the closing audit of the bank shows that a large sum of money is missing. That fact, coupled with the disappearance of Bryon Snopes, the bookkeeper, leads the directors to the conclusion that Byron had embezzled the money, and after another board of directors' meeting, it is announced that the new president has made up the amount

stolen. The subsequent disclosure that Flem Snopes is to be the new vice-president of the bank at first goes unnoticed. Even before the news is absorbed, Ratliff observes that "at least we know jest now much Miz Flem Snopes is worth" (119). Just as Flem parlayed his wife's affair into a job as power plant superintendent when DeSpain was mayor, he is now able to exploit his wife's affection for DeSpain into the vice-presidency of the bank.

Flem's attitude toward his wife reveals another perspective Faulkner shared with the antebellum humorists. Faulkner, like his literary forerunners, allows his male characters to demean women for their own advantages. For example, Davy Crockett, when accused of adultery, denies the charge because he never associated with any man's wife who wasn't willing. George Washington Harris in stories such as "Sicily Burns's Wedding" and "Mrs. Yardley's Quilting" shows Sut Lovingood's ambivalence toward women and his ability to use them as vehicles for his own amusement. Likewise, Hooper in "The Captain Attends A Camp Meeting" uses his character, Simon Suggs, to observe that the preachers seem all too ready to minister to the young and pretty girls while neglecting the older women. However, Faulkner extends this diminution by using Flem's insensibility toward women to advance his own current capitalistic goals.

Also, Flem's rise to bank vice-president marks a change in the types of citizens who become bank officials.

Although Flem attains the position through the usual maneuvering of proxies, he is, according to Gavin Stevens, "the first actual vice president of a bank we had seen to notice" (137). The appointment of Flem Snopes displaces the old method of being born into the position. Flem does not gain the appointment by being someone called "mayor" or "colonel." Instead, Flem is part of the New South. As the fortunes of the old aristocracy diminish, a new breed ascends into their places. Although Faulkner often seems to detest the likes of Flem and the other ill-bred Snopeses, he certainly acknowledges their power.

As Flem becomes part of the bank, the Snopes watchers speculate that Flem is planning how to rob the bank, but Ratliff disagrees. Ratliff comments that Flem is

just trying to find out how anybody could think so light of money as to let a feller no brighter than Byron Snopes steal some of it. You boys got Flem Snopes wrong. He's got too much respect and reverence not just for money, but for sharpness, too, to outrage and debase one of them by just crude robbing and stealing the other one. (138).

Through Ratliff, Faulkner makes clear that although the stakes are higher, Flem Snopes, like his old Southwest forebears, is still a confidence man and not a simple thief.

Ratliff's notion that ordinary theft constitutes an outrage and a debasement holds well with the philosophy of a confidence man. Theft is a crime, while the confidence game merely takes legality to its limits. Also, the confidence man thinks ahead as to how one advancement can lead to another, and a one-time robbery would limit all future possibilities, a fact Flem learned from his debacle at the power plant.

While no one is sure whether or not Flem actually lost money in the brass at the power plant, the fact that he did pay money out of his own pocket shows Flem is not invincible. Faulkner keeps this fact in mind in Flem's dealing with Wallstreet Panic Snopes. Much of the town's fascination with Flem centers around trying to determine what his next move will be. When Flem abruptly leaves his job at the bank, withdraws all his money, and deposits it in the town's other bank, Gavin Stevens speculates that Flem is attempting to start a run on his bank in order to abolish it and thereby extract revenge on Manfred DeSpain. Ratliff, however, dismisses that argument by telling Stevens that Flem has more respect for money than "to insult and degrade money by mishandling it" (142). Instead, one of Flem's motives centers on his attempt to break Wallstreet's grocery business by locking out any chance for credit in Jefferson. Since Flem is a major stockholder in one bank and a major depositor in the other, he is able to keep Wallstreet from

obtaining a loan at either bank, thereby hoping to force Wallstreet to come to him for a loan. However, with the aid of a loan from Ratliff, Wallstreet bypasses Flem and continues to grow in the grocery business.

After Flem fails to gain control of Wallstreet's grocery business, Ratliff explains to Gavin Stevens that Flem will plan a scheme that doesn't involve his relatives because the Snopeses are not worth Flem's trouble financially. According to Ratliff, Flem would have already taken Montgomery Ward and I. O. Snopes if they were worth the effort. Ratliff is only partially correct. Flem eventually cons both of them when he has the need. Ratliff adds that the only thing left in Jefferson that would be worth Flem's time is the presidency of the bank and the only way to get it would be to use what Ratliff calls "that-ere twenty-dollar gold piece" (151). But Gavin Stevens explains Eula Varner Snopes would not help Flem wrest the presidency of the bank away from DeSpain.

The other reason Flem had for moving his money from the old Sartoris bank revolves around his attitude toward banks in general. Like the heroes of the old Southwest humorists, Flem is skeptical of organized institutions. To Flem, "the natural and normal thieving of its officers and employees was the sole reason for a bank" (267). Flem presumes that since the Bank of Jefferson is older, it has adjusted itself to routine embezzlement. He also supposes that any bank

that would allow Byron Snopes to get away with stealing from it and would also make Flem vice-president is suspect. Since to Flem "the normal condition of a bank was a steady and decorous embezzlement" (265), Flem picks the lesser of two evils in which to store his money. Additionally, he sees the old Sartoris bank as an institution ripe for steady and decent looting (265). Flem is sure that Colonel Sartoris did this during his tenure as president and is equally sure that Manfred DeSpain is currently doing the same. Therefore, Flem wants to be privy to the substantial larceny afforded to bankers.

Although by using his wits, Flem has raised himself from a poor sharecropper's son to a clerk, a cafe owner, and finally a wealthy bank vice-president, his priority is still making footprints instead of building a monument. Flem never stops thinking like a confidence man, and the only way for him to gain complete control of Jefferson is to remove DeSpain from the bank and become president of it himself. Displacing DeSpain would not only clear the way for Flem to take over the bank, it would also serve as retribution toward the man who has cuckolded him for eighteen years. Stevens describes DeSpain as

a creature who was a living mockery of virtue and morality because he was a paradox: lately mayor of the town and now president of one of its banks and a

warden of the Episcopal church, who was not content to be a normal natural Saturday-night whoremonger. (270) By implying that Flem is justified in undoing DeSpain, Faulkner allows the reader to feel a degree of sympathy with Flem on a moral level as well as permitting the reader to champion the man who is able to outdo another. This act of retribution and duplicity which will constitute Flem's greatest move can only be accomplished through Flem's manipulation of his wife and her daughter, and only through the help of Flem's father-in-law, Will Varner. In addition, Flem realizes that timing is important because if Linda Snopes escapes his control, either through going away to school or by marrying, Eula will leave him, and Flem will lose his clout with Varner.

Stevens and Ratliff understand Flem's desire to gain the presidency but fail to grasp Flem's subtle manipulation of his family and in-laws. The success of the confidence game lies with the flim-flam artist's being able to outmaneuver the opponent. Flem is certainly capable of this, and he continually mystifies his spectators, especially Gavin Stevens. Ratliff observes that Stevens can't understand Snopes' confidence game because he is a lawyer, and in Stevens' mind "if it aint complicated it dont matter whether it works or not because if it aint complicated enough it aint right" (296). Ratliff tells Stevens he knows that Flem went to Mrs. Varner because he

drove Flem there. When Stevens discovers that Will Varner journeyed to Flem's house in Jefferson at four o'clock in the morning, they know that Flem has somehow used his family to get Will Varner to give him the presidency of the bank. Nothing short of blackmail would cause the Varners to help Flem since both Will Varner and his wife loathe him, but even Ratliff fails to understand completely Flem's moves. Throughout the novel, Flem makes his gains by keeping his adversaries and spectators alike off balance.

Not until Eula tells Stevens about Flem's takeover of the bank does Stevens gain a fair understanding of Flem. Eula explains that it was a will drawn up by Linda which would give Flem whatever she inherited from her mother that causes Will Varner to throw DeSpain out of the bank. According to Stevens, Varner had been "seething for eighteen years over the way that Flem had tricked him out of the old Frenchman's plantation and then made a profit on it," and this same son-in-law now came to "disarm him of the one remaining weapon that he held over his enemy"--his estate (328). When Varner reads the will, he immediately goes to town ready to throw Manfred out of the state for being Eula's lover for eighteen years and ready to do likewise to Flem for waiting that long to do anything about it (329). However, Flem has the best of Varner, and both Flem and Varner know it. Therefore, Varner signs over his bank stock to Flem in order to make Flem president of the bank. In

exchange for Varner's temporary relinquishment of his bank stock, Flem agrees to destroy Linda's will. Thus, without respect to those whom he harms or outrages, Flem makes his deepest footprint. Eula decides to leave for Texas with DeSpain. For her, the only loose end is Linda, and she persuades Stevens to promise to watch over and even marry Linda if conditions "become such that something will have to be done" (332).

The events in the final chapter of The Town further illustrate Flem's ability to shape an unexpected and tragic event in his own favor. Instead of leaving with DeSpain, Eula commits suicide, and Flem takes control of the situation. For example, Manfred DeSpain announces that for health reasons he is selling his bank stock and moving West. So, Flem discreetly buys DeSpain's large house. Also, since Flem doesn't need her anymore, he allows Linda to take Gavin Stevens' suggestion and move to Greenwich Village.

At the beginning of Chapter twenty-three, V. K. Ratliff describes Snopes as becoming such an accomplished confidence man that there is no longer any competition. Instead, Ratliff observes that Flem must resort to playing the game by himself and only for amusement:

He had everything now that he had come to Jefferson to get. He had more. He had things he didn't even know he was going to want until he reached Jefferson because he didn't even know what they was until then. He had

his bank and his money in it and his-self to be president of it so he could not only watch his money from ever being stole by another twenty-two calibre rogue like his cousin Byron, but nobody could ever steal from him the respectability that being president of one of the two Yoknapatawpha County banks toted along with it. And he was going to have one of the biggest residences in the county or maybe Mississippi too when his carpenter got through with Manfred DeSpain's old home. (347)

Ratliff's assessment is only partially correct. Flem's motives may originally have been to become wealthy, and along the way to best every opponent. However, as Flem elevates his financial situation, he discovers a desire for respectability. In creating Flem, Faulkner appears to believe that "if it aint complicated enough it aint right" (296). Thus, Faulkner continues to complicate Flem throughout the trilogy. At times, Flem appears to be merely a twentieth-century version of an antebellum confidence man, but he is far more complex. Flem's quest is for more than just power and money. Ultimately, Flem learns to strive for respectability and veneration, qualities which are treated in the following chapter.

## Chapter 5

### The Search to Veneration

While The Hamlet reads like a folk tale with its humorous and outrageous sketches about the inception of Snopesism, and the coming to power of Flem Snopes, The Town is more sharply focused. Only in the final section of The Town does Faulkner revert to rustic antics with the story of the tyranny of Byron Snopes's wild, poodle-eating, half-breed children. Obviously Faulkner learned much from the frontier humorists and the storytellers around Oxford, but he extends his work into a complex and unified image of his central character.

That money serves as motivation for Flem Snopes is made clear from his earliest confidence games in The Hamlet and is further revealed in The Town and The Mansion. However, Flem's story is about more than the rise of a redneck entrepreneur. Flem learns that money is not an end in itself; instead, it becomes a vehicle to his ends. Faulkner makes clear that Flem is concerned about appearances, and this concern motivates Flem to seek the outward trappings of respect. As Flem gains wealth by degrees, he seeks the regard that he feels wealth should bring.

Early in The Hamlet, Faulkner reveals Flem's concern for appearances. For example, when Flem first takes the clerk's job at Will Varner's store, he appears dressed in a new homemade white shirt, a grey cloth cap, and a new pair

of rubber-soled tennis shoes. After Flem moves into the village, he starts to attend church. In addition, Flem begins to wear a tiny machine-made black bow tie, the only person to own one in Frenchman's Bend. Eventually, he carries forward his desire for refinement and discards his tennis shoes.

Flem's interest in appearances is also evidenced in The Hamlet by his refusal to keep Mink Snopes from being convicted of Jack Houston's murder. Mink's pleas for help go unacknowledged by Flem, and Mink Snopes receives a long prison sentence. By allowing Mink to go to prison, Flem not only extracts revenge on Mink, he also rids Frenchman's Bend of what is perceived to be the most criminal of the Snopes clan. Throughout the trilogy, Faulkner suggests that character is not as important as surface appearance to Flem. Flem never worries about Mink's activities until he feels that Mink's actions might hinder his own status, a philosophy Flem continues in dealing with other Snopeses.

The progression of Snopeses following Flem's footsteps to Jefferson is determined by outward conformity rather than by aptitude. This attitude becomes clear early in The Town when Flem fires Eck from the cafe. Eck loses his position not because of his ability, but because he conveys to customers his suspicion that there is no "beef in these here hamburgers" (33). Similarly, Flem banishes Montgomery Ward

and I. O. when they, too, prove to be embarrassments in light of Flem's new-found desire for respectability.

As illustrated by the rise of Flem Snopes, Faulkner demonstrates that the quest for wealth and respectability is not always a respectable process. In The Sound and Fury, and to a lesser extent Flags in the Dust, Faulkner illustrates the demise of once proud and honorable families. However, in the trilogy, especially The Town, Faulkner focuses on a reversal of that theme. While the stock of families like the Compsons and Sartoris has fallen, the outward regard for Flem Snopes rises in proportion to his increase in wealth and power.

As Flem's wealth and power increase, so does his desire for respectability, evidenced by an ever increasing interest in outward appearances. For example, when Flem becomes vice president of the bank and goes to work behind the teller's cage, his checked cap is replaced by a broad black felt hat which Ratliff says is the type that preachers and politicians wear (140). In addition, Flem becomes more involved in the church and eventually gets himself elected as a Baptist deacon.

Just as Faulkner illustrates Flem's talents as a confidence man to gain wealth, he also allows Flem to use these talents to improve appearances. For example, Faulkner demonstrates Flem's concern for appearances when the sheriff catches Montgomery Ward Snopes operating a pornographic

"magic lantern" slide show in the darkroom of his downtown photographic studio. When Montgomery is confronted, he tells the sheriff and Stevens that he has broken no county law and even tries to bribe them. After the sheriff arrests Montgomery on a minor charge, Flem replaces the developer in the darkroom with whiskey so that Montgomery will be sure to be sent to Parchman prison. This planted evidence gives Stevens the opportunity to send Montgomery to prison without ever having to reveal the existence of Montgomery's suitcase full of pornographic photographs.

The Mansion reveals that Flem sends Montgomery to prison to set up Mink's escape attempt and thereby get his prison sentence lengthened, Flem tells Stevens that in wanting to send Montgomery Ward to prison, he is "thinking of Jefferson" (168). However, by ridding Jefferson of Montgomery Ward and at the same time reducing the possibility of Mink's returning to the county, Flem reveals his concern with appearances as well his own safety. In explaining Flem's blossoming "civic virtue" Ratliff tells Stevens:

When you jest want money, all you need to do to satisfy yourself is count it and put it where cant nobody get it, and forget about it. But this-here new thing he has done found out it's nice to have, is different. It's like keeping warm in winter or cool in summer, or peace or being free or contentment. You cant jest

count it and lock it up somewhere safe and forget about it until you feel like looking at it again. You got to work at it steady, never to forget about it. It's got to be out in the open, where folks can see it, or there aint no such thing. (175)

While Flem was interested only in obtaining money, he was quick to use his relations for financial gain and to allow them to roam free and work their own schemes. However, after Flem discovers that appearances are important, he is just as quick to dispose of those relatives.

In a series of events reminiscent of the spotted horses episode in The Hamlet, Faulkner allows Flem to oust I.O. Snopes from Jefferson. After Lonzo Hait is killed in a mule scam with him, I.O. claims that the widow owes him money out of her settlement with the railroad. Flem, who also has an interest in the money Mrs. Hait collected, gets involved in the settlement by buying all of I. O.'s mules with the stipulation that I. O. leave Jefferson and never return. While Flem spends a significant amount of money, Ratliff explains to Stevens that this becomes an investment in respectability in that he is able to rid the town of another undesirable Snopes.

Of all of Faulkner's narrators, Ratliff best understands Flem. He recognizes Flem's motives for "helping" Mrs. Hait and explains to Chick Mallison that Gavin Stevens has miscalculated Flem again. By this time,

Ratliff understands that Flem is a man who at first "thought he discovered that money would buy anything he could or would ever want, and shaped all the rest of his life and actions on that" (258). However, as Flem progresses up the financial ladder, he discovers that money alone cannot buy the respectability he seeks. According to Ratliff, this makes Flem more unpredictable:

When it's jest money and power a man wants, there is usually some place where he will stop: there's always one thing at least that ever--every man wont do for jest money. But when it's respectability he finds out he wants and has got to have, there aint nothing he wont do to get it and keep it. (259)

Flem's crusade for respectability motivates him as his quest for money did in The Hamlet. When Flem becomes secure financially, he comes to realize his own ignorance and becomes fearful that "those with the education . . . would despoil him of it in their turn" (264). As a result, Flem attempts to cloak himself in a veneer of respectability and is willing to go to any extreme to reinforce that facade.

Once Flem gains the vice-presidency of the bank and buys the house he has been renting, he changes the furnishings to create, according to Gavin Stevens, a place unlike anything seen in Jefferson. Eula explains that Flem is responsible for the decor, even going to Memphis to "find somebody who could tell him what he had to have" (221).

Flem's rejection of what the salesman describes as "expensive," "successful," and "antique" is filled with Snopesian logic: "Only a fool would try to fool smart people and anybody that needs to fool fools is already one" (222). Instead, Flem buys furnishings which look as if they are from a Town and Country magazine ad labeled American Interior. Stevens even notices that the tea service was not silver but something that is "simply newer" (220). Although Flem lacks the taste and refinement to know what is socially acceptable, he has enough intelligence about him to know that he is ignorant in such matters. Flem's shopping for furniture symbolizes his search for respectability. As Eula explains to Stevens: "He knew exactly what he wanted. No, that's wrong. He didn't know yet. He only knew what he wanted, had to have" (221). Flem's rejection of antique decor and of a silver tea service for more contemporary furnishings and appointments also epitomizes his renunciation of the past.

By the end of the novel, it would appear that Flem's ability to parlay Eula's eighteen-year affair with Manfred DeSpain into the presidency of the bank should be enough to satisfy Flem's desire for wealth and respectability. However, Flem once again proves that he always has another angle. After Eula commits suicide, DeSpain announces that he is leaving Jefferson, and Flem allows Linda to move to Greenwich Village. As a condition of her move, Flem makes

Stevens responsible for importing a large marble monument from Italy to be placed on Eula's grave. Linda is allowed to leave only after the monument arrives. When it is unveiled, Ratliff describes how the white marble with the medallion face of Eula stands out against the bright fall colors and notes its ironic inscription from Proverbs which reads:

EULA VARNER SNOPEs

1889

1927

A Virtuous Wife Is a Crown to Her Husband

Her Children rise and Call Her Blessed (355)

By choosing the inscription, Flem places a mark of respectability on Eula, and therefore on himself. Flem concludes that the words carved in marble will always carry more credibility than the talk about Eula's eighteen-year affair, and as memories dim, the inscription will become fact merely out of a lack of evidence to the contrary.

Although Faulkner might have allowed Eula's marble tombstone to be Flem's monument if The Town had been the last Snopes novel, Faulkner continues to make new footprints for Flem throughout The Mansion. Flem's first footprints in Frenchman's Bend and in Jefferson were motivated purely by acquisitiveness, but as he gains wealth and station, his footprints change direction as he starts walking toward respectability.

From the beginning of The Hamlet, the old Frenchman's Place stands as a symbol of the opulent past. Throughout his works, Faulkner makes clear that the grand designs of the landed aristocracy, whether it be Louis Grenier, Thomas Sutpen, or the Compsons, are out of place in the New South. When Faulkner describes Will Varner as sitting on the lawn of the old Frenchman's Place "trying to find out what it felt like to be the fool that would need all this... just to eat and sleep in" (Hamlet 6), he likens Varner to the new generation of yeoman farmers and businessmen. Will has no desire to build mansions. He simply sees the run-down farm and the old plantation house as the only property he ever bought that he "couldn't sell to nobody" (6). By finally unloading the property on Flem Snopes as part of the deal to marry Eula, he provides Flem the impetus to move to Jefferson where Flem shapes his own mansion.

When Flem leaves Frenchman's Bend, he, like Will Varner, sees no need for a plantation home. As he moves from small town confidence man to bank president, his aspirations grow, and petty greed is replaced by a desire for veneration. Each step Flem takes is followed by a change in dwelling, and after Eula's death, he buys Manfred DeSpain's house, the same house to which Ab Snopes came as a tenant farmer many years ago. However, Flem knows he has to go beyond DeSpain and therefore is not content merely to move into the house. Instead, he hires his cousin, Wat, to

reshape the house into a mansion, similar to the old Frenchman's, which would be dominated by large colonial columns:

entry big ones so even a feller that never seen colyums before wouldn't have not dout a-tall what they was, like in the photographs where the Confedrit sweetheart in a hoop skirt and a magnolia is saying good-bye to her Confedrit beau jest before he rides of to finish tending to General Grant. (Town 352)

At this point, Flem, who rejects the past, ironically succumbs to the extravagance associated with the old landed aristocracy. However, Flem's actions are always selfishly motivated. Transforming DeSpain's house into a mansion is another way of showing that Flem is a man deserving of respect.

Later in The Mansion, Faulkner shows a degree of sympathy for Flem when Ratliff explains that unlike a DeSpain or a Sartoris, Flem was not born into respectability and money. Instead, he "had to earn both of them, snatch and tear and scrabble both of them outen the hard enduring resisting rock" (153). As a result, his dwelling "would have to be the physical symbol of all them generations of respectability and aristocracy that not only would a been too proud to mishandle other folks' money, but couldn't possibly ever needed to" (153). In "Faulkner's Aristocratic Families: The Grand Design and the Plantation House," Mark

Allister observes that while in Faulkner's early novels the plantation house serves merely to illustrate wealth, in his later novels, "Faulkner equates the tremendous house with the grand design, and the sudden rise and subsequent collapse of the aristocracy parallels the building and destruction of their houses" (92). While Allister has Sutpen, the Compsons, and the Sartorises in mind, his concept also applies to Flem Snopes. Also, like Sutpen's, Flem's mansion becomes a dark house. There are no grand balls or extravagant parties; no one enters except Snopes and his hired help.

Faulkner uses the same rationale with Flem Snopes as he did earlier with Thomas Sutpen. In Absalom, Absalom!, after being rejected at the front door of the plantation, young Thomas Sutpen decides that "you have got to have what they have that made them do what the man did. You got to have land and niggers and a fine house to combat them with" (238). Faulkner repeats the same scene in "Barn Burning" with Flem's father, Ab. Ab counters the rebuke, however, by dragging his dirty boot across the white carpet. Reminiscent of Sutpen, Ab even comments about the house: "Pretty and white, aint it?. . . That's sweat. Nigger sweat. Maybe it ain't white enough yet to suit him" (12). Later, Flem, like Sutpen, knows that only wits, not violence, can conquer the established order. Flem even exceeds Sutpen. Neither Sutpen's father nor Ab ever owned

land; instead, they were owned by the land. While Sutpen manages to "tear out" a plantation from the wilderness, Flem manipulates people and eventually owns a number of farms, businesses, and has most of the people in the county indebted to him in one way or another.

Although Frederick R. Karl, in William Faulkner: American Writer, sees Mink's murder of Flem as overlying "the entire conception of Faulkner's Snopes material" (1002), this is not the case. Flem's murder is anticlimactic. At the beginning of The Town, Charles Mallison comments that although the townspeople thought that the water tank would be Flem's monument, they were wrong: "It was only a footprint" (3). Throughout The Town and The Mansion, Faulkner allows Flem to continue to make footprints until he is the most powerful and wealthy man in the county. Flem successively bests Will Varner, Ratliff, and Gavin Stevens. In The Mansion, he even cons Jason Compson.

In a section which reveals both Flem's ability to make profit and his desire to make permanent reminders of his family, Faulkner reintroduces Jason Compson, who figures prominently in The Sound and the Fury. Jason thinks he has conned Flem into taking the old golf course property in exchange for the note on his house after Jason has let it be known that the government plans to build an airfield on the property. Jason believes he is appealing to Flem's desire for respectability by suggesting that the field be named

after the owner. According to Jason, Flem might "spend some more money to have an airfield named for him" because only the Italian marble industry had managed to ever sell Flem anything "as amorphous as prestige" (325). After Flem takes the property, Jason even jokes about the deal, calling the property "Snopes Field" and "Snopes's Demolitional Jump-off" (332). However, he soon discovers that Flem has plans to develop the property other than as an airfield.

Therefore, Jason attempts to find some flaw in the deed but is unable to do so. Eventually, Flem turns the property into a subdivision of small cheaply-built houses for returning World War II soldiers and names it Eula Acres, thereby giving his family another place in Jefferson history "not to be ashamed of" (333). Faulkner never reveals whether or not Flem picks the name, but he allows Chick Mallison to suggest that Wat Snopes named it because he wanted to believe "that there are some things, at least one thing, that even Flem Snopes wouldn't do" (333). However, Flem sanctions the name, and one can easily assume he does so for the same reasons that he erects the marble monument at Eula's grave site.

Although Flem is quick to use his abilities to make money and to earn respect, he is just as astute when he needs to protect himself from assaults on his position, even if it means blackmailing the woman he raised as a child. After Linda Snopes Kohl's husband is killed and she is made

deaf in a bomb explosion, Linda returns to Jefferson and lives with Flem. She immediately becomes a civil rights crusader pushing the black school, the school board, and the board of supervisors for immediate improvements in the black school and the training of its teachers. Her actions do not go unnoticed by some of the town's more conservative elements, and phrases such as "nigger lover" (226) and "Jew Communist Kohl" (228) appear on the sidewalk in front of Flem's mansion. Faulkner uses the episode to complicate the reader's response. Chick Mallison observes that instead of being like most people in this situation and thinking, "This is my cross; I will bear it," Flem is actually thinking, "All I got to do now is keep folks thinking this is a cross and not a gambit" (229). In this situation, Flem determines he can gain respect by turning a potential social embarrassment into a ploy for the town's united sympathy.

Not until an F.B.I. man named Gihon visits Stevens to inquire about Linda's communist party membership does Linda tell Gavin that her desk drawer had been ransacked and her communist party membership card stolen. Stevens then speculates that in order to curtail Linda's social activism, Flem has found Linda's card and reported her to the F.B.I. Flem may even be responsible for scrawling "Jew Communist Kohl" on the sidewalk. The ploy works in any case, as Stevens convinces Linda to leave Jefferson and go to work at

the shipyard in Pascagoula, leaving Flem the sole inhabitant of his mansion.

Doreen Fowler in Faulkner's Changing Vision: From Outrage to Affirmation observes that in The Hamlet the "effort to disconnect oneself from one's fellow man is epitomized" in Flem Snopes (69). This is certainly true in The Mansion as well, for Flem appears to equate respect with distance. Flem enters his house at four each afternoon and doesn't come out until eight the next morning, his only human contacts at that time being with his cook and his yard boy/driver. Even at the bank, Faulkner pictures Flem alone in his office, thinking about a foreclosure, with his back to the door, his feet propped on the hearth and his heels deepening the same scratches begun by Colonel Sartoris's boots years ago. Rather than socializing like a DeSpain or a Sartoris, Flem simply spends his time sitting in a swivel chair in his bedroom with his feet propped on his mantle. Flem had Wat Snopes nail a small unpainted board at the exact height to use as a foot prop on what Faulkner carefully describes as a white painted colonial style "hand-carved hand-painted Mt. Vernon" mantelpiece. According to Ratliff, the board was "not a defiance, not a simple reminder of where he had come from but rather . . . a reaffirmation of his-self and maybe a warning to his-self too" (156).

Although Faulkner goes to great lengths to define Flem's footprints, he never delineates Flem's monument. While one might reasonably assume that the mansion with its huge columns would be the monument, it turns out to be another footprint. Many of Flem's footprints are made for profit, others to gain respect, and still others for both. In all the accounts Faulkner's narrators give of Flem, the only thing Flem ever does that is not motivated by greed, avarice, or the desire for respect is to have Wat Snopes nail the plain wooden board to his fancy colonial mantle. Only behind the locked doors of the mansion and in the privacy of his bedroom, does Faulkner allow Flem to show any vestige of humanity. Faulkner chooses as Flem's monument what Ratliff describes as:

that-ere little raw wood step like out of a scrap pile, nailed by a country carpenter onto that what you might call respectability's virgin Matter-horn for the Alpine climber to cling to panting, gathering his-self for that last do-or-die upsurge to deface the ultimate crowning pinnacle and peak with his own victorious initials. But not this one; and here was that humility again: not in public where it would be a insult to any and all that held Merchants and Farmers Bank Alpine climbing in veneration, but in private like a secret chapel or a shrine: not to cling panting to it,

desperate and indomitable, but to prop his feet on it while setting at his ease. (159)

When Mink Snopes comes to kill him, Flem is sitting there by himself with his feet propped on the board surveying his monument. Even after Mink's first shell fails to explode, Flem doesn't attempt to move. Only after the force of the bullet propels him backward does Flem fall from his altar. According to Chick Mallison, "A monument says At least I got this far" (Town 29), and Faulkner could have no better monument for Flem than the prop nailed to the mantelpiece. In addition to being Flem's literal stopping place, the prop is Flem's refuge. In this way, Faulkner reveals that Flem possesses humanity.

Faulkner's often quoted lines from his Nobel Prize award speech, "I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail" (1042), appear to conflict with the trilogy, but this is not the case. With Flem, Faulkner evokes a message that man must recreate himself in order to prevail through changing times and codes. Just as the antebellum humorists created characters who broke conventional modes, so did Faulkner. While Flem is not in the mainstream of ethically accepted behavior, he nevertheless meets the challenge of the New South. Although the "moonlight and magnolia" types appear more admirable, it is Flem who prevails and the Snopeses who push progress to its limits. Also, Faulkner knows that history is revisionist in nature.

Those from the past who appear most admirable may well have been, like Flem, loathed by their contemporaries. While Flem's contemporary narrators for the most part view him negatively, even they exhibit a grudging respect for his sharpness. Furthermore, Faulkner allows Flem to maneuver in such a way as to increase his respectability in the present and virtually to guarantee his veneration by future generations. Even his death by a murderous ex-convict relative adds to the illusion. In this regard, Flem Snopes prevails even in death.

## Chapter 6

### Conclusion

Although the works of William Faulkner receive much critical attention, the critical community has tended to ignore the Snopes trilogy in favor of earlier novels. Cleanth Brooks in The Yoknapatawpha Country sees Flem as "far from the most interesting of characters" (174) and like Brooks many critics dismiss the Snopes material as work of an author with declining powers. Others see it as mere local color in the vein of old Southwest humor. As a result, Faulkner's Snopes trilogy has received proportionately less critical attention than his other Yoknapatawpha novels.

These critics overlook the fact that the Snopes material represents Faulkner's most sustained writing effort. Although the first Snopes novel was published in 1940, Faulkner began writing about the Snopeses as early as 1926. Also, while the Snopeses share qualities with the creations of the antebellum humorists, the Snopeses are different in many ways. The Snopeses are often complex. Like their literary forebears, the Snopeses, especially Flem, are representative of their times. They do what they have to do to flourish in their world. Out of necessity, the Snopeses are ragged, rugged, undeterred, and individualistic.

A close reading of the Snopes material, especially the trilogy, shows that the Snopeses fill a central place in

A close reading of the Snopes material, especially the trilogy, shows that the Snopeses fill a central place in Faulkner's literary universe. Faulkner's depictions of the Snopeses show Faulkner writing up to his full ability, and his characterizations, especially that of Flem, go far beyond old Southwest humor. As always, Faulkner is much too complex to write mere local color.

While Flem is viewed as a mere, scheming country flimflammer who conquers everyone who gets in his way, there is much more to Flem than this. As many critics suggest, Flem appears like a Simon Suggs or a Sam Slick, but this is only partially not simply so. Unlike his literary predecessors, Faulkner allows Flem several dimensions. In order to complicate Flem's characterization, Faulkner surrounds Flem with various Snopeses who become his implements, imitate him, or do both. In *Flem*, Faulkner creates a character who rises from the lowest of circumstances to become the wealthiest and most powerful man in his domain. Initially, Flem is motivated purely by greed. Then, Flem's greed leads him to desire things he did not even know he wanted when he first arrived in Jefferson. As Flem's wealth grows, he realizes that wealth is not enough, and he begins to crave respectability. Consequently, his actions become more unpredictable. Finally, after Flem achieves wealth and a facade of respectability, Faulkner bestows on Flem a spark of

humanity. This multi-dimensionality makes Flem one of Faulkner's most complicated characters.

Faulkner's depiction of Flem is one of American literature's most sustained treatments, and through Faulkner's genius, Flem becomes a most dominant symbol of greed and hypocrisy--a malevolent aberration that informs the worst of society. Even so, Flem's character transcends symbolism. Although at times, Flem is vehemently evil, he is not merely so. Flem is unsophisticated, yet intelligent beyond his genes, and able to rise above his circumstances. In fact, Flem Snopes accomplishes what few people, either real or literary, are capable of achieving; he realizes the American dream. Coming from the lowest circumstances, Flem obtains a menial clerk's job in Varner's store as a type of fire insurance policy and parlays it into the presidency of a county seat bank in Jefferson. He learns how to make money by besting others, and along the way, he learns to crave respect to go with his wealth. In every way, Flem has to best the best of the old aristocracy.

Faulkner allows Flem to symbolize the bad in the world and the inherent evil in all of us. Although Flem gains his station through nefarious methods, those whom he cheats are usually themselves dishonest. Therefore, we grudgingly admire Flem. Furthermore, we either see a little of ourselves in Flem, or we wish we were more like him. Faulkner seeks this compassion for Flem with the image of

him with his feet propped on the unpainted wooden board nailed to his colonial mantle. This scene provides one of the few instances of Flem's humanity. Flem almost becomes Faulkner's Everyman.

Shortly before his death, Faulkner said that "the first thing that a writer has is compassion for all his characters. . . . He himself does not feel that he has the power to judge" (Fant 82). Faulkner does not judge Flem. Instead, Faulkner affirms the old verities of courage and honor through examples of corruption and perversion, and his complex characterization of Flem is at the heart of this moral exercise. In The Town, Ratliff observes to Gavin Stevens that "if it aint complicated enough it aint right" (298). With Flem, Faulkner got it right.

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