

FAULKNER'S WORLD AS REFLECTED IN *THE HAMLET*

by
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Among Faulkner's major works of Yoknapatawpha County, *The Hamlet* (1940) is a late product.¹ "More than any other novel of Faulkner's," however, as Cleanth Brooks wrote, "*The Hamlet* introduces us to a strange and special world."² Geographically speaking, Yoknapatawpha County is situated in the northwest Mississippi. Its county seat is Jefferson, some seventy-five miles southeast of Memphis and forty miles from Oxford, the site of the state university. As Robert Penn Warren pointed out, "Jefferson, the county seat of Yoknapatawpha County, is already the most famous county seat in the nation, and is as solidly recognizable as anybody's home town."³ The scene of *The Hamlet* is Frenchman's Bend, that crossroad settlement twenty miles southeast of Jefferson. According to Elizabeth Kerr, Frenchman's Bend is a composite of several places. "Since Faulkner included only one 'hamlet' in his country, he combined details from several hamlets to make a typical community in which characters could not be easily identified with real people."⁴

In *The Hamlet*, few details are given about the farms near Frenchman's Bend; but Faulkner deals with Frenchman's Bend, the rural settlement, in detail. The inhabitants of Frenchman's Bend were all white farmers who never owned slaves. Most of

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¹ All other major works, such as *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *As I Lay Dying* (1930), *Light in August* (1932), *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), were published before *The Hamlet*.

² Brooks, *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha County* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1963), p. 167.

³ Robert Penn Warren, "William Faulkner," in *William Faulkner: Four Decades of Criticism*, ed., Linda Wagner (East Lansing, Mich.: Michigan State University, 1973), p. 94.

the farmers lived in the unpainted one- or two-room cabins; they planted cotton in the bottom land and corn at the foot of the hills, living almost as meagerly as sharecroppers. In the background, as *The Hamlet* opens, one sees the gutted shell of what once had been a plantation house now had reverted to the cane and the cypress jungle from which their master had hewed. This might seem to invite a contrast between the planter aristocracy and the “rednecks,” like Will Varner, who now owns the Old Frenchman place. But the story does not seem to present such poles; it does not set a glorious ante-bellum world against a degenerate modern world which has lost the traditional virtues. As William Van O'Connor has correctly pointed out, “It is a serious distortion of the fictional world to set up the Past, identifying it as the planter aristocracy, and oppose this to the Present, identified with a modernism of self-interest and the pursuit of sensation.”⁵

The opening pages of *The Hamlet* clearly identify the citizens of Frenchman's Bend as the descendants of the non-slaveholding class. These people—with home-made whiskey stills and Protestant psalm books—had come originally from the northeast, through the Tennessee mountains. Most of them had Scottish, English and Welsh names. To quote from *The Hamlet*:

They brought no slaves and Phyfe and Chippendale highboys; indeed, what they did bring most of them could (and did) carry in their hands. They took up land and built one- and two-room cabins and did not paint them either, but that was all. Their descendants still planted cotton in the bottom land and corn along the edge of the hills and in the secret coves in the hills made whiskey of the corn and sold what they did not drink. Some garment which the missing man had worn might be seen—a felt hat, a broadcloth coat, a pair of city shoes or even his pistol on a child, or an old man or a woman. County officers did not bother them at all save in the heel of election years. They supported their own churches and schools, they married and committed infrequent adulteries and more frequent homicides among themselves and were their own

4 Elizabeth M. Kerr, *Yoknapatawpha: Faulkner's 'Little Postage Stamp of Native Soil'* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1969), p. 66.

5 William Van O'Connor, *The Tangled Fire of William Faulkner* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1954), p. 111.

courts, judges and executioners. They were Protestants and Democrats and prolific; there were not one Negro landowner in the entire section. Strange Negroes would absolutely refuse to pass through it after dark (H, pp. 4-5).⁶

As we can see, the society to which those citizens in Frenchman's Bend belonged was a society—for all its essential Puritanism—did not frown on certain faults. Whiskey-making and bootlegging would go on, crimes of passion and violence would be committed. The Varners was the only leading family of Frenchman's Bend. They were people of some wealth, but without breeding or gentility. Old Mr. Varner was a power in his part of the country, owning the only two-story house, the store, the cotton gin, and the combined grist mill and blacksmith shop. His store was the gathering place for the men in Frenchman's Bend. "In *The Hamlet*, the narrow world of Frenchman's Bend, centered in Varner's store, is seen in the perspective provided by Ratliff's travels."⁷ It is usually considered that *The Hamlet* begins with "the story of demoralizing infiltration of the Snopes clan into Frenchman's Bend...."⁸ And many critics agree that this is the subject matter of this book.⁹

⁶ William Faulkner, *The Hamlet* (New York: A Vintage Book, 1940, 1959). Hereafter all my references are to this edition and will be cited in the text.

⁷ Elizabeth Kerr, "Snopes," *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, 1 (Winter, 1960), 68.

⁸ Gordon E. Bigelow, "Faulkner's Snopes Saga," *The English Journal*, XLIX (December, 1960), 595.

⁹ See first of all George Marion O'Donnell's monumental writing, "Faulkner's Mythology," *The Kenyon Review* (Summer, 1939), 258-99, reprinted in *William Faulkner: Four Decades of Criticism*, pp. 83-93. O'Donnell wrote, "Being anti-traditional, the Snopeses are immoral from the Sartoris point of view. But the Snopeses . . . acting only for self-interest. . . acknowledge no ethical duty." By following his dominant theme, Stephen Vincent Benet wrote, "Flem Snopes and His Kin," *Saturday Review*, XXII (April 6, 1940), 7; Louis Krenenberger responded in his "The World of William Faulkner," *The Nation*, CL (April 13, 1940), 481-82. Even such well-known critics as Malcolm Cowley could write, "Very soon he [Flem Snopes] has peopled Frenchman's Bend with a whole swarm of his relatives, little men gnawing at money like rats at cheese." "Faulkner by Daylight," *New Republic*, CII (April 15, 1940), 510. Robert Penn Warren could also advise the reader by saying "A good starting point for any discussion of the frame of ideas in Faulkner's work is provided by . . . George Marion O'Donnell." "The Snopes World," *Kenyon Review*, III (Spring, 1941), 254-257.

The basic intention of this paper is to try to prove that *The Hamlet* is not just about the rise of the Snopes clan, but also about the whole community of Frenchman's Bend—the common experiences of love, hate, and fear of its members. Although those experiences may appear provincial, they serve as an excellent mirror of the perennial triumphs and defeats of the human spirit in general. So what Faulkner is basically concerned about is the people and the world in which they live. He himself once expressed, "The story can come from an anecdote, it can come from a character. With me it never comes from an idea because I . . . ain't really interested in ideas. I'm interested in people."¹⁰ And another point this study intends to justify is that many of the evils attributed to the Snopeses happen to be evils which have been to a large extent practised so long by so many of these other characters in Frenchman's Bend. If the term of Snopesism is all avarice, no such considerations as love, sympathy, kinship and friendship, among the Snopeses, only Flem himself can be said to possess all qualities. All other Snopeses possessing individual qualities of their own should not be lumped together as "the Snopes clan."

(1)

As has been discussed, Faulkner's description of Frenchman's Bend in the first chapter of *The Hamlet* was rendered in such a way as to make it vulnerable to the kinds of amoralities which the Snopeses might count on using to gain an economic and social foothold. When Faulkner described Will Varner, the leading citizen of Frenchman's Bend, as "a farmer, a usurer, a veterinarian," Will was actually "shrewd secret and merry, of a Rabelaisian turn of mind and very probably still sexually lusty" (H, p. 5), though he was then sixty years old. He was indeed a usurer, a man who reaped where he had not sown. Even when he was seen "sitting in a home-made chair on the jungle-choked lawn of the Old Frenchman's homestead," "people all believed that he sat there planning his next mortgage foreclosure in private" (H, p. 6). His son, Jody, planned to allow Ab

¹⁰ *Faulkner in the University*, eds. Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner (Charlottesville: The University of Virginia Press, 1959), p. 19.

Snopes and his family to sharecrop on the Varner's land only because he thought that he could outsmart the Snopes family and run them off to get their part of the crop by letting them know that he was aware of Ab's past experience of burning a barn. So, the Varners became involved with the Snopeses, only because they tried to get the better of them. At this point, Faulkner made it very plain that the Varners were coarse of mind and coarse of moral character. They "represent plain people of vigor and force, somewhat coarse of fiber and with no aspirations toward 'society.' They have managed by shrewdness and some chicanery to amass money with which to live comfortably."¹¹

In this sense, without realizing it, Frenchman's Bend and the Varners had practised Snopesism long before the first Snopes arrived. The Varners were not "good" men being exploited by "bad" men. As a matter of fact, after Ab Snopes and his family got settled on the Varners's land, his son, Flem, skinned the local citizens only by following certain established patterns. At first, Flem patterned himself and his behavior on that of Jody and Will Varner to the smallest detail. Like Jody's succession of identical suits worn until they disintegrated, Flem's shirts were cut from one bolt of cloth and displayed the same sun-browned streaks on each fold. His black tie was a copy of Will's, the only other man in Frenchman's Bend to possess so extravagant useless a piece of apparel. Together the white shirt and black tie gave him "Jody Varner's look of ceremonial heterodoxy raised to its tenth power" (H, p. 58). Having closely resembled the Varners in dress, Flem next took over the Varner gestures and mannerisms. He entered the store "jerking his head at the men the gallery exactly as Will Varner himself would do" (H, p. 90), and his secretiveness imitated even as it parodied Will's bland inscrutability. At the same time, this kind of deliberate repetition of mannerisms and details of dress contributed greatly to the comedy of *The Hamlet*.

The differences between Flem and the Varners are that

¹¹ Brooks, p. 27.

Flem would never make the mistakes that both Will and Jody had made. Will once bought a worthless piece of property, the Old Frenchman place, and could not make any profit from it. He said, "But after all, I reckon I'll just keep what there is left of it, just to remind me of my one mistake. This is the only thing I ever bought in my life I couldn't sell to nobody." (H, p. 6) However, Flem was able to sell it because he was more capable than Will, not because Will did not want to resort to trickery. The mistakes that Jody had always made in the store disappeared when Flem took over. It was Jody who miscalculated accounts, usually in his favor. Yet, Flem "never made mistakes in any matter pertaining to money" (H, p. 57). Though Flem might have exploited Varner's customers, at no point had he cheated them. He had his own ethics even though they were exclusively concerned with a ledger rather than with people. His uncompromising integrity with respect to his books left the villagers, accustomed to Jody's good-humored dishonesty, vaguely uneasy. Not even Will could corrupt him. Flem resisted all bribes, claiming that "he don't want no more and no less that his legal interest according to what the banking and the civil laws states in black and white is his" (H, pp. 151-152).

It is certainly true that the Snopes theme pulls together many of the episodes in *The Hamlet*: the horse swap, the barn burning, the sale of the spotted horses, and the treasure hunt. It begins with the coming of Flem Snopes and his family to Frenchman's Bend as unwelcome sharecroppers and ends with his triumphant departure as the economical power of the region. However, we must be aware that Flem plays little or no part in the stories of Labove's perverted passion for Eula Varner, Eula's love with Hoake McCarron, the romance of the idiot and the cow, the feud between Jack Houston and Lucy Pate, or Mink's murder of Houston. These stories, which constitute Book Two and Three, occupy literally the center of the novel; they, generally uninfluenced by the Snopes theme, are different from the humor and seriousness that prevail in the tales of barter. They take on another kind of tone—intense,

tortured, and strange. Juxtaposed with the tales of barter, these stories fuse distress with laughter, pathos with violence, and despair with hilarity. The result is a unique presentation of the community of Frenchman's Bend and its people.

Therefore, *The Hamlet* is not only the story of the Snopeses but the story of the whole community of Frenchman's Bend as well. It is their story—the story of their passions, rancors, greed, and violence; the story of their shrewdness and wry humor. The chief commentator on their antics and foibles is Ratliff. It is his ironic humor that provides the novel with its perspective and tone. Even from the “barn burning” episode of Book One, we can see how Ratliff manipulates the whole situation and makes it humorous. As already noted, Jody heard that Ab might once have burned a barn. It is possible that Ab could burn the Varner's barn if he ever became dissatisfied with anything. By relying on his shrewdness, Jody decided to turn this frightening possibility to his own advantage: at just the right time, he would remind Ab that he had the reputation of being a barn burner, and Ab would have to quit the country. However, after Ratliff emphasized how quickly Ab took offense and still more quickly he burned barns, Jody the conniver became Jody the victim. “The trick turned against Jody, not because Jody became obsessed by the thought of fire.”¹² To keep Ab and Flem placated, Jody made one concession after another, even though the Snopeses had asked for nothing. The comedy rests both on Jody's change and on “the contrast between the storyteller Ratliff's blandness and the listener's apoplectic horror.”¹³ Jody's “hell fire” interrupts the story like a comic refrain. And when Jody's horror has changed to desperate talkativeness, the comedy mounts in a laughable crescendo.

In the third chapter of Book One, Faulkner shifts his emphasis from Ab to Flem, from comic anecdotes to a serio-

¹² Richard Boyd Hauck, *A Cheerful Nihilism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), p. 181.

¹³ Melvin Backman, *Faulkner: The Major Years* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), p. 143.

comic theme: the rise of Flem Snopes. Partly by following the established patterns of the community and partly due to his singleminded acquisitiveness, Flem advanced in Frenchman's Bend at top speed. Within two years he had taken over the keeping of the Varner accounts and had wrested from Jody the management of the store. Within five years he had come to own cattle and property, and was known throughout the countryside as a moneylender and an unscrupulous wheeler-dealer in various and prosperous enterprises. Flem's acquisitiveness is different from Ratliff's desire for gain, since the sewing machine agent's pleasure is shrewd deals "transcended mere gross profit" (H, p. 72). Flem's desire for money and power is more ruthless. Hence his rise to power would become a matter of concern for the community; and Ratliff, its self-appointed champion, would eventually have to do battle with him. Yet, despite the fact that Flem had become a threat to the community, the story of his success is still partly comic. As Richard B. Hauck has said, "Flem's story is consistently comic and grotesque."¹⁴

The comic and grotesque quality is evident in the very description of Flem:

a thick squat soft man of establishable age between twenty and thirty, with a broad still face containing a tight seam of mouth stained slightly at the corners with tobacco, and eyes the color of stagnant water, and projecting from among the other features in startling and sudden paradox, a tiny predatory nose like the beak of a small hawk. It was as though the original nose had been left off by the original designer or craftsman and the unfinished job taken over by someone of a radically different school or perhaps by some viciously maniacal humorist or perhaps by one who had had only time to clap into the center of the face a frantic and desperate warning. (H, p. 52)

Stylistically, Faulkner might have employed these comic and grotesque similes and metaphors to abuse Flem, to suggest that his humanness is tainted and incomplete. The same comic quality is evident, too, in the account of his early doings: his imitation of Jody in his wearing of white shirts and of Will in

¹⁴ Hauck, p. 180.

his wearing of small black bowties, his challenging of Will Varner to pay five cents for the tobacco he took, and his refusal to give credit to a customer who had been in and out of the store's debt for the last fifteen years.

Fear, on the part of the Varners, gave the Snopeses their first entree of the Varner's house—fear, compounded by the futile attempts of Jody and his father to outsmart and out-cheat the family they feared. Matters became more serious, however, when Flem implanted his relatives about the entire community of Frenchman's Bend. For example, Flem got rid of Trumbull, the old blacksmith, and brought in Eck and I. O. Snopes to run the business. Eck married into a local family and fathered a son named Admiral Dewey Snopes, and then surprised his wife with an additional son, born of a previous marriage, whose name was Wall-street Panic Snopes. I. O. Snopes was later found to be a bigamist with sons by one marriage named Montgomery Ward Snopes and St. Elmo Snopes, and by another marriage a burly son named Clarence. Other kin, who moved to Frenchman's Bend, were Flem's cousins, Mink Snopes and Ike Snopes. By this time, Jody, Ratliff imagined, would be hysterically imploring Flem: "I want to make one pure and simple demand of you and I want a pure and simple Yes and No for an answer: How many more is there? How much longer is this going on? Just what is it going to cost me to protect one gaddamn barn full of hay" (H, p. 68)?

Nevertheless, not one of the six other male members of the Snopes family who play a major role in *The Hamlet* is able to emulate the unadulterated Snopesism of Flem. Ike, the idiot, is totally unaware of the economy of existence. He seems so unlike Flem as to justify Joseph Gold's characterization of him as "the antithesis of Snopesism."¹⁵ Eck, a man "whose intentions were good and who was accommodating and unfailingly pleasant and even generous" (H, p. 67), is certainly kin to Flem in name only. On several occasions—his paying for the

¹⁵ Joseph Gold, "The 'Normality' of Snopesism: Universal Themes in Faulkner's *The Hamlet*," *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, III (Winter, 1962), 25-34.

cow and his honest attempt to pay damages at court—in *The Hamlet* he manifests a most un-Snopesian generosity. In *The Town* Eck broke his neck saving the life, not only of another man but of a Negro. He finally lost life needlessly looking for a little boy thought to be lost. As for Ab, he was “soured” by a horse-trade which he undertook “not for profit but for honor” (H, p. 36) and in which he was defeated by his own inability to cope with the Snopesism of the horse-trade, Jim Stamper, and his subsequent violent acts (barn burning, carpet ruining, etc.) were motivated not by profit but by simple meanness and pride. In much the same way Mink was victimized by rapacious tenant-farm system and tied by his own un-Snopes and by a lust to a woman who had borne him two children. And his failure to take Houston’s money after he had murdered him demonstrates clearly, as Elizabeth Kerr has noted, “his motives are not mercenary, despite his abject poverty, but are based upon a code of revenge.”¹⁶

Therefore, only two characters, Lump and I. O. Snopes, may be said to approximate the “genuine” Snopesism of Flem. Of these two, Lump, with his “amoral eyes” (H, p. 146) and “incorrigible dishonesty long since become pure reflex” (H, p. 250), appears to be the more nearly perfect copy; however, though Flem and Lump have, in Ratliff’s view, “both been cut with the same die” (H, p. 162), it is quite clear that the edges of the die have “dulled and spread a little” (H, p. 162) after turning out the original. In his conversation with Ratliff, for example, as well as in his dealings with Mink, Lump betrays both uneasiness and anger, however slight, of the Snopesism he owns. The representation of I.O., with “the quiet empty open face which seemed to have been a mere afterthought to the thatching of the skull” (H, p. 66), would appear, at first glance, to parallel even more closely the picture of his cousin Flem. In addition to his obvious tendency toward avarice, I. O. resembles Flem quite closely in certain outward signs. His paper dickey and lenseless glasses are clearly meant to echo

¹⁶ Kerr, “Snopes,” 76.

Flem's machine-made tie, and his meaningless chatter appears to function in much the same way as Flem's reticence. Despite all of these outward similarities, however, I. O. manifests various non-Snopesian deviations. His unfortunate fondness for women and his general lack of firmness are but two of his many human weaknesses which place him well below both Flem and Lump in any scale of Snopesism.

When Ratliff learned, on his return from Memphis hospital, of the arrival of still more Snopeses and Flem's increasing activities, he knew it was time to act. Ratliff is the first man in Frenchman's Bend who discovered the Snopeses and "invented Snopes-watching as a full-time occupation."¹⁷ What makes Ratliff a suitable opponent for Flem is that he too is adept at "the science and pastime of skull-duggery" (H, p. 83) which passes for honest shrewdness in trading. But though he does not deny the material world and its values, he does keep them firmly subordinated to his other more purely human interests. "Barter for him at once a source of profit, an exciting game, and a way of extending cementing personal relationships."¹⁸ Indeed, his first encounter with Mink Snopes is simply part of a complicated and carefully thought out plan by which he hopes to get the better of Flem.¹⁹

When Ratliff went out to Mink's tricky house in the country, his scheme was to see whether by selling a sewing machine to Mink, he could force Flem to pay the bill. The plan also involves the buying and selling of some goats, a transaction in which Ratliff meant to concede Flem a pawn in order to win a piece. Ratliff's plan succeeded and he got the better of Flem, but it is significant that he actually realized no profit. Having discovered Ike Snopes, the idiot, who was completely in the power of someone like Flem, he burned Flem's promissory note to Ike, but gave its value and the profit he

¹⁷ John Lewis Longley, Jr., *The Tragic Mask: A Study of Faulkner's Heroes* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1963), p. 63.

¹⁸ Olga W. Vickery, *The Novels of William Faulkner: A Critical Interpretation* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1964), p. 175.

¹⁹ See Brooks's Notes, p. 402.

had made on the goat transaction to Mrs. Littlejohn to be held for Ike. He was deeply stirred by the pathos of the idiot's helplessness.

(2)

Book Two, "Eula," of *The Hamlet* turns from barter to love, from Flem Snopes to Eula Varner. These two characters—they are more symbols than persons—represent two different principles of life: one the acquisitive, the other the sexual power. Eula Varner is also a source of comic joy in this novel. Strangely enough, the sensuous and desirable Eula has little drive of her own. She, like Flem in this respect, leads a mechanical life, not because of the rule of reason, emotion or convention, but because of a lack of any of these things, especially emotion. In the first place, the feminine quality of motionlessness is so exaggerated in her that Faulkner's description of it tends to be ridiculous. As a child, she refused to walk; she sat in her perambulator until she had grown too large for it. Then she was moved about from chair to chair or carried by a manservant until she was five years old. The comic image of the over-grown immovable child was reinforced by the description of the adolescent Eula riding to school on horseback behind Jody, mindless of the power of attraction of her half-revealed things. In school, she ate her baked sweet potato "like one of the unchaste and perhaps even anonymously pregnant immortals eating bread of Paradise on a sunwise slope of Olympus" (H, p. 124).

When Eula began to mature, her sexual power became apparent. The sexuality that Faulkner incarnates in Eula is both sacred and bestial. "Fecund and foul, unchaste and inviolable," she was the "unawares bitch" and the eternal goddess. Faulkner pays tribute to her as "some symbology out of the old Dionysic times-honey in sunlight and bursting grapes, the written bleeding of the crushed fecundated vine beneath the hard rapacious trampling goat-hoof" (H, p. 95); but he described her too in village style: "'she just like a dog! Soon as she passes anything in long pants she begins to give off something. You can smell it! You smell it ten feet away'" (H,

p. 99)! Yet, however powerful Eula's sexuality might have been made to appear at times, she was just object and not actor. What actions and motions she went through were the result of someone else's initiative. Throughout *The Hamlet* she remains directionless and without motivating power, as incapable of action on her own as an automobile, and as mechanical an object to be used and admired as that same mis-named object, the automobile. And what to be admired in Eula at this stage is of course her sexual power. This power was first intensely felt by her school teacher Labove.

Labove is a fantastic character. Faulkner describes him as "a man who was not thin so much as actually gaunt, with straight black hair coarse as a horse tail and high Indian cheekbones and quiet pale hard eyes and the long nose of thought but with the slightly curved nostrils of pride and the thin lips of secret and ruthless ambition" (H, pp. 105-106). He has a "contemptuous intensity" of pride and dedication that one associates with a genius or a madman. This is the man who fell in love with the eleven-year-old school girl Eula Varner. His passion was actually not love, it was a special kind of lust, "a lust in the head as well as in the glands, and it is perverse and obsessive."²⁰ He was unable to continue toward the career he had planned because of his domination by lust and passion. His life was involuntary because of his feelings for Eula Varner. For four years Labove seemed emotionless and cold as he played a game he did not like, gained glories and publicity that he was not concerned with, read material that was "dead verbiage to him," taught school forty miles from the University: all for a degree. He took no interest in anything except his single goal: a degree. But his singleminded purposiveness was transferred. When the time came for him to graduate and move on, he could not do it:

He must return, drawn back into the radius and impact of an eleven-year-old girl who, even while sitting with veiled eyes against the sun like a cat on the schoolhouse steps at recess and eating a cold potato,

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

postulated that ungirdled quality of the very goddesses in his Homer and Thucydides; of being at once corrupt and immediate, at once virgins and mothers of warriors and of grown men. (H, pp. 113-114)

The thought of Eula Varner had taken possession of his whole being and he could do nothing else except be where she was.

Labove lived as a hermit monk, according to Faulkner, as he just existed with the goal of uniting with Eula sexually. Having no intention of marrying her, and without romantic interest, Labove was consumed with an interest which was purely sexual:

In the first place, he did not want a wife at all, certainly not yet and probably not ever. And he did not want her as a wife, he just wanted her one time as a man with a gangrened hand or foot thirsts after the axe-stroke which will leave him comparatively whole again. (H, p. 119)

Faulkner's imagery in this passage shows the sickness of Labove and the unhealthy nature of his fixation. For Labove the sex act is perverted into rape, hatred, and physical struggle. Finally Labove was driven to attack Eula as she returned unexpectedly to the classroom and found him with his face against the bench where she sat in class. He struggled to subdue her as she resisted, not with fear or hysteria, but with disgust and irritation. Labove then looked for the inevitable encounter with her brother Jody, and was determined to face him. When they met in the classroom in brilliant anti-climax, Labove found that Eula had not even thought enough of the encounter to tell Jody. Labove left depressed. The Labove episode can obviously be read as one example of the perverted love of a kind in the village of Frenchman's Bend.

Likewise, Eula in her sixteenth year had also unintentionally aroused the marriageable young men of the village into a restrained frenzy. As with Labove, "they were not thinking of marriage" (H, p. 130). But they were all competitors for the ecstatic moment of a single physical union with her—"a leashed turmoil of lust like so many lowering dogs after a scarce-fledged and apparently unawares bitch" (H, p. 131.) Then warfare developed when an outlander named Hoake

McCarron, who lived twelve miles away from the village began to court Eula with considerable success, even though he had to fight off the combined force of his jealous competitors. Her loss of virginity is treated comically, for it is an insignificant and inevitable event in terms of her nature.

With Jody as the instigator in this part of the comedy, the squabble over her impregnation raged furiously in the house. While Jody fought with his father for pistol, Mrs. Varner, out of breath from running downstairs, gasped forth: " 'Hold him till I get a stick of stove wood. . . I'll fix him. I'll fix both of them. Turning up pregnant and yelling and cursing here in the house when I'm trying to take a nap" (H, p. 144). Then Will wrenched the pistol from his son and dispatched him to the barn to cool his heels. It was the old man who "cheerfully and robustly and undeviatingly declined to accept any such theory as female chastity other than as a myth to hoodwink young husbands" (H, pp. 141-142). Will tried to calm his son Jody by explaining the facts of life: "Hell and damnation, all this hullabaloo and uproar because one confounded running bitch finally foxed herself. What did you expect—that she would spend the rest of her life just running water through it" (H, p. 145)? To Will Varner, the situation merely called for a practical move which he immediately began to make. Bribed with money, and with a deed to the seemingly worthless Old Frenchman place, Flem found ample profit in assuming the responsibilities of husband and father. He married Eula and took her off to Texas, for a honeymoon which lasted until after the baby was born.

To Ratliff, Eula symbolizes a primitive and natural beauty gone corrupt and stagnant. A woman capable of great powers of reproduction, she was given to an important man (this was made known in *The Town*) who did not even want her. It was a total waste. Ratliff said, "Of course there was the waste, not wasted on Snopes but on all of them, himself included. . ." (H, pp. 150-151). Eula's doom is inseparable from that of her geography. In the waste of Eula, Ratliff saw "the waste of a world in which creative activity has degenerated into absurd circling."²¹

(3)

“The Long Summer,” Part III of the book, presents another variation on the theme of love—an idiot’s love for an animal. Paradoxically, this story of rural sodomy is told in the most elevated lyric prose. So richly poetic and allusive is the language that one might suspect a parody, except the author seems genuinely moved by certain qualities in the romance of Ike and his cow. It is not so much a story as a lyric poem that springs out of elemental love and a poetic joy in nature. The idiot, T. Y. Greet has remarked, is like a lover in a medieval romance who rescues his love from fire and dragon.²² But it is the devotion rather than the heroism that makes Ike Snopes the truest lover in the novel. For Labove and McCarron love was lust, for Flem, a commodity to be bartered. Only in an idiot’s passion has Faulkner found an uncorrupted love, as if the idiot represented a state of nature. The pinehills where Ike and the cow took refuge from the world suggests, too, nature unravished by man. The “shaggy crests” of the pinehills made “a constant murmuring sound in the high serene air,” as if the trunk and massy foliage were the “harps and strings of afternoon.” For the few days they lived in their Eden, the sun was their guide. Dawn came like a slow burst of “jonguil thunder,” and the lovers advanced with the rising sun.

They have the same destination: sunset. They pursue it as the sun itself does and within the compass of one single immutable horizon. They pace the ardent and the unheeding sun, themselves unheeding and without ardor among the shadows of the soaring trunks which are the sun geared ratchet-spokes which wheel the axled earth, powerful and without haste, up out of the caverns of the darkness, through dawn and morning and midmorning, and on toward and last into the slowing neap of noon, the flood, the slack of peak and crown of light garlanding all within one single coronet the fallen and unregenerate seraphim. (H, p. 186)

Even a sudden lancing shower of rain did not extinguish Ike’s joy. Still the lovers “walk in splendor, joined by the golden

²¹ Hauck, p. 185.

²² T. Y. Greet, “The Theme and Structure of Faulkner’s *The Hamlet*,” in *William Faulkner: Four Decades of Criticism*, p. 310.

skein of the wet grass rope, they move in single file toward the ineffable the earth wheeled darkly under the evening star.

She is there, solid amid the abstract earth. He walks lightly upon it, returning, treading lightly that frail inextricable canopy of the subterrene slumber—Helen and the bishops, the kings and the graceless seraphim. When he reaches her, she has already begun to lie down—first the forequarters, then the hinder ones, lowering herself in two distinct stages into the spent ebb of evening, nestling back into the nest-form of sleep, the mammalian attar. They lie down together. (H, p. 189)

Ike as a lover is absurd, but there is no absurdity in his love. The poetry of the language evokes another world where reality has been suspended. Thus a baryard joke is transformed into a poetic idyll in which Ike and the cow lose their particular identity and become simply lover and beloved wandering through an enchanted land far removed from Frenchman's Bend and Yoknapatawpha County. As Olga Vickery has observed, "The seemingly unlimited world discovered by Ike in pursuit of his beloved is in sharp contrast to the circumscribed existence of Flem."²³

However, the idiot's idyll was a fragile doomed dream the world would shatter. The old farmer from whom Ike stole feed, Houston from whom he stole the cow, and Ratliff whose morality he affronted, represent the property rights and puritanism of Frenchman's Bend that separate Ike from his cow. Specially when Ratliff saw that Ike's passion had been debased into a sideshow to titilate the village males, he was strongly opposed to Ike's possession of the cow. Although Ratliff's sense of descency prevails over the pathos of the idiot's loss, Faulkner seems to suggest that the idiot is in one sense superior to the community. There seems to be a nostalgic sense of loss that reaches back to the innocent stage of life when man had not yet acquired "lust and greed and bloodthirst and a moral conscience to keep him awake at night" (H, p. 195).

Still it is the "lust and greed and bloodthirst and a moral conscience" that provide the novel with its dramatic material, particularly in the Houston-Mink Snopes episode. It is a story

²³ Vickery, p. 177.

of murder and retribution. It is also concerned with the theme of love or rather with the struggle between the sexes which is passion. Dominated by the masculine need for freedom, the young Jack Houston hated the female passion for the married state. Even as a boy, Houston sensed that underlying Lucy Pate's "constancy and devotion" and "proffered slavery" was that "single constant despotic undeviating will of the enslaved not only for possession, complete assimilation, but to coerce and reshape the slaver into the seamliness of his victimization" (H, p. 210). To escape the "unflagging will . . . for the married state" (H, p. 211), and the "immemorial trap," Houston fled to the West, from Lucy Pate to Galveston where as if he could escape "from one woman by violating the skirts of another" (H, p. 215). He stayed away for thirteen years. But Lucy Pate was the love and the trap he could not escape. "Bitten now" and "drawn to the trap," he came back to marry her.

Shortly after their marriage she was killed by the stallion which Houston had bought as if for a wedding present to her. The stallion is associated with himself: "Or if that blood and bone and muscles represented that polygamous and bitless masculinity which he had relinquished, he never said that" (H, p. 218). Although Lucy was warned to keep away from the horse, "she was not afraid. It was as if she had recognized that transubstantiation, that duality, and thought even if she did not say it: Nonsense. I've married him now" (H, p. 219). The depth of Houston's feeling for her is indicated in the fact that he grieved bitterly and savagely for four years after her death. Houston's stallion, which is a substitute for the destructive maleness he could not totally give up, is responsible for her death, and this suggests that there is something forced and unnatural in their relationship.

Mink Snopes and Jack Houston are in many respects strangely alike although they later become the murderer and the murdered. Proud and tough, both had run away from home in their youth: one to flee the trap of marriage, the other to repudiate the sharecropping existence into which he

had been born. Neither had found freedom, and both had returned to the land and married state which seems their fate. As in Houston's case, Mink was chosen by his wife—out of all the other men at the road camp, and when he married her he took on quite a task. Although his cruelty toward her is necessary for their marriage, it evidently serves her needs, and helps to characterize him as a masterful, dominant person, their relationship must forever remain one lacking in tenderness and sensitivity because of its very nature. Mink threw away the money she had earned in prostituting herself after Houston's murder and he seemed not to feel any great regret at the breaking of family ties when he was sent to prison. Certainly the marriage is not without passion and feeling, but it is certainly less than ideal and is characterized by bitterness and regret.

In the relationship between Hoake and Eula, it is, as already indicated, evident that there is great passion in his feeling for her, yet he did leave when she became pregnant, which shows his lack of concern for her. Labove's desire for Eula, as also noted, is quite cruel and self-centered. Eula's suitors likewise are pictured as motivated by passion alone. Thus in viewing all these relationships we must remember that passion is something different from love. In spite of these relationships which involve passion, it is still the lack of love which stands out in the novel. In the pure sense of the word "love," as one of Faulkner's verities, it is only Ike who possesses it. However, lacking real love as these relationships do, Faulkner does reveal that all of them in the name of love are the ways and means men and women interact in Frenchman's Bend. And we do have a vivid picture of them all.

(4)

Book Four comes back to the subject and mood of Book One, turning from the variations of love stories of individuals to the folk comedy of the community, from intense oppressive feelings to the relaxed humorous atmosphere of the gatherings of men on the galleries of Varner's store or Littlejohn's hotel. The arrival of the spotted horses provides a circus excitement

for the hamlet. In this episode, Ratliff again serves as the ironic commentator to reinforce the comic mood. Almost as soon as the horses appeared, Ratliff tried to joke the impoverished farmers into not throwing away their money on animals that not only were worthless but might kill them. "You folks aint going to buy them things sho enough, are you? . . . give Flem Snopes and that Texas man your money . . ." (H, pp. 281-282). None of the men, even those who were Ratliff's friends, would say that they would not buy, yet all of them were on hand for the auction the next day. "All right. You folks can buy them critters if you want to. Buy me, I'd just as soon buy a tiger or a rattlesnake. And if Flem Snopes offered me either one of them, I would be afraid to touch it for fear it would turn out to be a painted dog or a piece of garden hose when I went up to take possession of it" (H, p. 283).

In one sense, the horses seem to represent an untamed masculine violence or freedom (associated with the "bitless masculinity" of Houston's stallion) that appealed to the farmers by its exciting difference from the simple routine of their lives. They are inclined to buy at the auction also because they hope to buy something at less than its value to satisfy their acquisitive instinct. It is irresistible. The half-crazy Henry Armstid arrived just in time to see the first horse given to Eck Snopes and demanded his right to bid also. He took from his wife the last five dollars they had in the world and bid with it, offering to fight anyone who outbid him. Ratliff saw that he could not turn any of them away from this folly and did not attend the auction. All day long the bidding continued; at dusk, the men attempted to catch the horses they had paid for. When someone left the gate open, the horses stamped wildly, leaving confusion and destruction behind them. The only serious injury was sustained by Henry Armstid, who not only could not now make his crop for the year but would have to have his room and board paid for.

The whole scene has the qualities of both a painting and a motion picture: in the foreground the horses rushed with purposeless fury back and forth across the lot while the Texas

spoke blusteringly to the idle men; in the background Mrs. Littlejohn went about her chores, commenting by her work and presence on all masculine stupidity. Ratliff mocked the farmer's being easily duped. As Richard B. Hauck has remarked, "The games of Snopeses versus Frenchman's Bend and Frenchman's Bend versus Snopeses usually elicit delightful laughter. . . they are complementary forces, and they deserve each other."²⁴ But the humor turns darker if the real damage occurs. Henry Armstid is a pitiful case and the picture of his wife pleading Flem for the return of her last five dollars is rather pathetic than comic. The story of the spotted horses, then serves to clarify two aspects of the theme of the novel: the destructive nature of the purely acquisitive instinct, and the susceptibility of acquisitive man to the rational manipulation. That Flem is becoming powerful and successful because he uses his knowledge of man and society is illustrated again through the story of Flem's buried treasure in the last portion of *The Hamlet*.

From the beginning, Ratliff is most disturbed by the Snopes's threat and heads the opposition to Flem. As stated earlier in this study, Ratliff is shrewd and clever; he intensely enjoys the experience of swapping and trading, but he never uses his cleverness to cheat or defraud the people of the countryside. In his first battle with Flem over the contract for the goats and the signed notes he accepted from Mink, he emerged with a clear victory. He is thus presented as a worthy opponent of Flem. His refusal to attend the horse auction is a positive anti-Snopes act. But gradually Ratliff loses his detached attitude as he becomes more and more involved with the Snopeses. In the final section of the book, a major crisis takes place: the climactic encounter between Ratliff and Flem. Its outcome left no ambiguity: Ratliff is seduced by the forces of evil and soundly defeated.

It is Armstid who first discovered that Flem Snopes was secretly digging in the garden of the Old Frenchman place at night. We are not told how Ratliff has become involved; but

²⁴ Hauck, p. 185.

we are allowed to see how through his shrewdness and logical rationalization he is sure that the treasure is there. Both Will and Flem had retained the ruined plantation for a long time. He also believed that Flem would not otherwise spend his nights digging. Bookwright was convinced, too, when he saw Flem actually on the scene. If Snopes could dig until midnight, then they three could dig through the rest of the night. Ratliff asked the help of an old man who was a magician with a diviner's rod, and during one exciting secret exploration, the old man helped them locate three small bags of money in the garden. That is all the evidence needed by these prospectors. At the end of that same day, Ratliff approached Flem and found him willing to sell the Old Frenchman's place:

A little after six that evening, in the empty and locked store, Ratliff gave a quit-claim deed to his half of the side-street lunch-room in Jefferson. Armstid gave a mortgage on his farm . . . Bookwright paid his third in cash. (H, p. 361)

Thereafter, they were free to dig in earnest. Fearing that someone would interrupt them, they dug only at night, and for three nights they wore themselves out and found nothing. Armstid was so enraged at finding no treasure that he refused to accept the fact. He stayed in field frantically searching for gold. As Flem with his family left the village for the town, he rode past the field where Armstid, days later, was still digging for non-existent pirate treasure. Flem watched him chase away some teasing boys, then:

He came straight back to the trench, hurrying back to it with that painful and laboring slowness, the gaunt unshaven face which was now completely that of a madman. He got back into the ditch and began to dig.

Snopes turned his head and spat over the wagon wheel. He jerked the reins slightly. "Come up," he said. (H, p. 373)

Thus ends the story and the Snopeses move to the county seat, Jefferson.

By then, Ratliff already knew that Flem had fooled three of them with the old trick of "salting" and empty mine, for he had examined the dates on the coins, and they all bore recent

dates. For Ratliff's defeat, Michael Millgate gives us three reasons: "partly because of the impetuosity which overcomes him in his eagerness to act, partly because of disabling unfamiliarity with the nature and magnitude of the operation on which he embarks, and partly, it seems, because he too has been self-betrayed by some measure of that greed and overconfidence which had earlier brought defeat to Jody Varner and to so many others who thought themselves smarter than Flem."²⁵ These three reasons are all clear enough to explain Ratliff's defeat; perhaps "greed" is the only reason for bringing his downfall and making him appear Snopesian. Greed, which springs out of man's self-interest, is a universal disease which has infected the whole village of Frenchman's Bend. In the end, then, each of Flem's important triumphs in Frenchman's Bend is a victory of Snopesism over Snopesism, of his more perfect, inhuman Snopesism over the less perfect, human Snopesism of the Varners, Ratliff, Armstid, and the villagers who bought his horses.

As we can see, Snopesism is a term which should not be applied to the Snopeses only. Judging from the milieu and circumstances in which they live and struggle, the term ought to be applied to most people in Frenchman's Bend. In *The Hamlet*, Faulkner has vividly presented a typical Southern community at a period of transition (1902-1905), rapidly transforming the old, agricultural society into a society of modern economy and industry. In the process of this kind of social transformation, the younger generation, such as Flem Snopes, has obviously adopted an even more profitable method than that of the generation of Ratliff and Will Varner in business deals and human communications. However, what Faulkner has tried to stress in the world of *The Hamlet* is the moral and social coherence of human experience. People in Frenchman's Bend are not dichotomously divided into "the Snopes clan" on the hand, and the non-Snopesian villagers on

²⁵ Michael Millgate, *The Achievement of William Faulkner* (New York: A Vintage Book, 1966), p. 199.

the other. But, in one sense, they all are Snopesian. Faulkner objectively examines the menace of any force which places self-gratification and material satisfaction above human decency and understanding.

福克納荒村中所反映的世界

(摘要)

田 維 新

本文試圖以荒村爲例，說明福克納對一般人性的刻劃及對美國南方村鎮的寫實描繪。從十九世紀的末期到廿世紀的初期，美國整個的社會開始從農業步入了工業。美國南方雖以農爲重，仍避免不了社會的變遷。尤其在內戰之後，從都市到鄉村，整個南方在重建的過程中，都受到機械文明的影響。可是在小說荒村中，福克納並無意說明這些，他只不過想藉人物的刻劃，反映時代的改變及人類原有的弱點。

不少研究福克納的學者（像George Marion O'Donnell等）在研究荒村時，都認爲福克納在這本小說中創造了兩類對比的人物：一類是像 Sartoris 那樣的人物；另一類則是 Snopes 家族之類的人物。前者爲守舊的貴族，重視人品及舊有價值觀念，後者純是工業社會裏的產品，沒人性，爲貪取錢財，不擇手段。由於這類人物的滲進荒村，敗壞了社會風氣，舊有的道德觀念也隨之喪失。

作者在仔細研讀本作品及參看其他有關資料之後，對這種二分法的評論提出了質疑。所以本文即在依據故事的發展及人物的描述，說明在 Snopes 這家族人來到荒村之前，該村並非人人皆重視人品，不貪圖非份之財。而在 Flem Snopes 和他的家族到了荒村之後，全村也沒因此風氣敗壞，道德淪喪。只是 Flem 個人比 Varner 和 Ratliff 等人，棋高一著，更懂生財之道而已。

由此可知，福克納是在藉荒村，再一次探討人性的複雜及其

弱點，並刻劃出村人們生活的全貌。他客觀地分析了人類常常爲了求得自身的滿足，而置人品、道德於不顧。這是自古而然，並非機械文明所導致的結果。