

THE BACKGROUND OF
SNOPEISM IN MISSISSIPPI
POLITICS

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My intention is not to draw, as John Cullen delightfully does in Old Times in the Faulkner Country, any parallels between real people and Faulkner's characters. Nor do I intend to derive a picture of Mississippi at the turn of the century from clues in The Hamlet. Rather I wish to confront the historical record of the period with Faulkner's portrayal in the novel of human beings dramatizing their values through their actions. This confrontation shows, I believe, how "Snopesism"--however it may also reflect universal patterns of behavior--arose from conditions that existed in a particular place at a particular time.

To support the validity of this effort, I call upon Faulkner himself, who said during his visit to Japan, "In my country, an artist is nothing. Nobody pays attention to him. . . . In my country, instead of asking the artist what makes children commit suicide, they go to the Chairman of General Motors and ask him. That is true. If you make a million dollars, you know all the answers."¹ But this cynical outburst can only mean that Faulkner did not believe that we might do better to ask the artist. He also said during these talks at Nagano that he loved his country enough "to want to cure its faults" by shaming and criticizing it. He felt that the writer "should not be just a 'recorder' of man--he should give man some reason to believe that man can be better than he is."² The novelist goes behind, beyond the "facts," but he need not ignore them.

The Hamlet has often been brilliantly discussed as a dramatization of archetypal patterns of behavior, but to treat the novel exclusively as a kind of universal myth is to miss some of its living qualities. Cleanth Brooks observes in William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country that more than any other novel of Faulkner's, this first volume of the Snopes saga introduces us to "a strange and special world," but this world is no fantasy. It is the Mississippi of the half century between Reconstruction and the Great Depression.

From outside, Mississippi looks like a monolithically single-minded place where the most unswerving kind of conformity in all things is not even demanded, but simply taken for granted as the price of bare existence. "White Supremacy" is, of course, the fundamental tenet of local faith, but Mississippians can agree among themselves on little but the divinely or-

dained inferiority of non-whites. If the racial issue did not necessitate a united front, Mississippi would probably be even more politically paralyzed by irreconcilable sectional cleavages than such sites of urban-rural friction as New York and Illinois. The causes of this disunity go far back into the obscure history of the state.

At the time of the Civil War, Mississippi was just emerging from frontier conditions. Its greatest growth occurred between 1830 and 1840 when migrants from the Eastern part of the South tripled the 1817 population of 70,000. This is the period that Faulkner vividly mirrors in the violent pages of Absalom, Absalom! and the inter-chapters of Requiem for a Nun, when plantations and communities were wrested from virgin soil. By 1860, the state boasted some of the wealthiest citizens of the nation.

The Civil War prostrated the state; many who had directed its growth were left dead or discredited. With the abolition of slavery, the plantation system needed a vast reorganization, for which the state had neither the money, the energy, nor the detached intelligence. Away from the regions along the Mississippi and Yazoo Rivers, which constituted the rich and powerful Delta, the thin, exploited soil was already showing signs of exhaustion.

The prosperous and flood-prone Delta dominated state politics; but there are two other large, less-favored sections in the state. The Piney Woods of Southern Mississippi are a sparsely settled region with poor soil. Most of the poverty-stricken population of the region that produced Theodore Bilbo is white; the Negroes are concentrated on the Delta plantations. East of the Delta, north of the Woods, rise the "red clay hills," on the western edge of which is Oxford, long Faulkner's home and model for the Jefferson of his Yoknapatawpha saga. This land of the "rednecks" combines the worst features of the other two sections of the state: the pretentiousness and aristocratic arrogance of the Delta with the poverty, exhausted soil, and bigotry of the Piney Woods. This combination is brilliantly caught in that scene in The Hamlet in which Ab Snopes grinds horse dung into Major de Spain's hundred-dollar French rug. Clearly this unfavored region, which has fewer Negroes than the Delta but more than the Piney Woods, holds the balance of power between the realms of the family-minded traditionalists and the illiterate fundamentalists.

After Mississippi regained its statehood in 1870, a struggle for political control began. The Radical Republican machine managed to force Negro rule on Mississippi longer than on most of the South, but it was at last supplanted in 1876, largely through the diplomatic machinations of Lucius Quintus Cincinnatus Lamar, who shrewdly succeeded in winning the confidence of even the most suspicious Northerners. Lamar provided almost the only powerful link between the Old and the New Mississippi. Born--like many influential Mississippians of his period--in Georgia in 1825, he had even served in the legislature of his home state before moving with his

father Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, the distinguished jurist and author of Georgia Scenes, who had become chancellor of the newly-founded University of Mississippi.

Lamar had soon thrown himself with enthusiasm into the affairs of his adopted home and had distinguished himself as the author of its ordinance of secession. Soon proving physically unable to endure combat, he had become the Confederate emissary to imperial Russia and after the war he returned to teach law at the University of Mississippi. From this strategic spot in Oxford, on the boundary between sections, Lamar exercised such remarkable powers of political manipulation that he became the first Democrat to be elected to the state legislature since the end of the War in the very year (1872) that the Amnesty Act restored full political privileges to disfranchised Southerners.

Subsequently he became the first White United States Senator from Mississippi since the War, and he capped his career by achieving the greatest national political distinctions for which a former Confederate could have hoped--a place first in Cleveland's cabinet as Secretary of the Interior and at last an appointment as associate justice of the Supreme Court. Albert D. Kirwan says with unquestionable accuracy that at the time White rule was restored in Mississippi, "Lamar's approval was almost sufficient to guarantee election--his disapproval, to insure defeat."³ Precisely thirty-five years later in 1911, James Kimbal Vardaman was in the same position; but he was by no means Lamar's heir. Indeed, "The Great White Chief" consolidated his power by crushing at last the spokesmen of that "Bourbon" party that Lamar had founded. The story of Mississippi politics in the years that Faulkner's The Hamlet illuminates is the story of the shift of power from Lamar to Vardaman, as the story of The Hamlet itself is that of the shift of power from Will Varner to Flem Snopes.

To understand what happened, we must first realize that the late nineteenth-century "Bourbons" in Mississippi were not identical with the "Bourbon" group that controlled the state before the Civil War. As Kirwan points out, those who stubbornly held to the past and refused to accept the war amendments, "were few in Mississippi politics and exercised little influence" (p. 8). The new "Bourbons" were not planters with dreams like Thomas Sutpen's of establishing baronial fiefdoms, but, like Lamar, principally corporation lawyers who identified themselves with the expanding railroads that were responsible for what small economic progress the state made before the end of the century. They inherited the "Bourbon" name, however, because like their predecessors, they considered themselves the stable and responsible element in the state in opposition to the poor and largely illiterate hill farmers who were beginning to cry for relief.

Agricultural reforms were especially difficult to achieve in Mississippi because the "Bourbons" decried any attempt to break with the party that they controlled as a threat to white rule in the state. The menace of

the Negro was used to hold dissidents in line while ignoring their complaints. It was argued that only complete Democratic unity could prevent a resurgence of Black Republicanism; nor did those in control rely only on argument. Every device for stuffing ballot-boxes and fixing returns was employed, and Negroes were not the only ones lynched. In a notorious episode in Kemper County in 1877, Judge W. W. Chisholm, a white independent who had been a Republican, two of his teen-aged children, and a British friend were shot as they fled from a jail that a mob had set on fire. Control of the state was almost completely in the hands of the Executive Committee of the Democratic Convention, which was in turn managed by Lamar and his fellow senator James Z. George, another corporation lawyer, who was apparently responsible for the provisions in the Mississippi Constitution of 1890 that solved the "problem" of formally disfranchising the Negro (the poll-tax and the "understanding" of the State Constitution clauses). Cleanth Brooks notes that "the Negro has hardly any part" in Faulkner's The Hamlet, and indeed during this period the Negroes did not play any effective role in the political life of the state.

The new Constitution, which did cut the actual vote in the state nearly in half, served, however, only to further dissension among the whites. By 1890, it had become apparent, for one thing, that the Delta, while monopolizing the political power, was not paying anything like its proportionate share of state taxes. The campaign of 1891 between incumbent Senator George and Ethelbert Barksdale, the representative of the farmers, for electors was one of the bitterest and most violent in the state's history.

The defeat of the farmers has generally been attributed to "Bourbon" control of the party machinery, but it is doubtful that affairs in Mississippi can be thus rationally explained. Another element that played an enormous role is explained in Kirwan's summary of the campaign in 1892 between the "Bourbon" candidates for Congress and the Populists, to whom the farmers had turned:

[The Populists] charged that "the Bourbon Democrats" had foisted [the franchise provisions of the Constitution] on the people in an attempt to curtail the privilege of voting.

The Democrats answered the challenge with the old rallying cry of white supremacy. They accused the Populists of favoring Negro suffrage To all the clamor which the Populists made for reform, the Democrats answered that there were some things more important than reforms in the economy. A Populist victory, they warned, would result in Negro supremacy and the degradation of southern womanhood (p. 95).

The things "more important" than reform, of course, were the Mississippi tradition, of which the Bourbons held themselves the defenders; as long as

they could persuade the voters to accept the Bourbon candidates in this role, the reform candidates could never hope to win by insisting upon debating economic issues on their own merits. The Hamlet suggests through the portrayal of characters like Henry Armstid and Mink Snopes and WallStreet Panic Snopes that many of Mississippi's "peasants" were actually paranoid; and here art seems to follow reality.

As if to test the hypothesis that the farmer's party could achieve victory only when it found a spokesman that could beat the "Bourbons" at their own game by outshouting them, James K. Vardaman appeared on the scene.

Vardaman provides the name for two of Faulkner's characters--the feeble-minded youngest Bundren child in As I Lay Dying and one of the loathsome Snopes twins who try to agitate the man who may be their grandfather into a stroke in The Town. Although he died in 1930, Vardaman lingers in our commercial folklore as the prototype of Al Capp's Senator Phogbound and other mass media solons. He injected new drama into political campaigning by arriving for speeches in an eight-wheeled lumber cart drawn by several pairs of white oxen. He dressed all in white, let his dark hair fall down to his shoulders, and demanded that the dangerous and wasteful practice of educating Negroes cease.

He was of the post-Civil War generation, having been born in 1861 of parents who had migrated from Mississippi to Texas, but returned home after the War. Vardaman attended public schools, which probably resembled the one conducted by I. O. Snopes in The Hamlet, in Yalobusha County, which is only a few miles from the fictional Frenchman's Bend country. When only 21, he qualified for the bar and founded a legal practice at Wivenona, a dreary county seat strategically located on the road between Memphis and Jackson that forms the boundary between the Delta and the Red Hills.

Soon he was editing the community newspaper, and in 1890--just as Flem Snopes progressed from the hamlet to Jefferson--Vardaman moved directly west into the Delta to the flourishing city of Greenwood, which he soon began to represent in the state legislature. In 1895 he turned up as a candidate for governor, but for obscure reasons he withdrew a month before the nominating convention. He proved less easy to deal with in 1899, when the last election was held in which the gubernatorial candidate was nominated by a state party convention. Vardaman had returned a hero from the Spanish-American War and was developing a following; but when he saw during the first night's balloting that he could not muster sufficient strength he, along with the other contenders, withdrew in favor of the retiring governor's candidate.

The situation changed vastly, however, when by political maneuverings that are still not clear, a law was passed in 1902 over Delta opposition providing for a statewide party primary to replace the scandal-ridden conventions. Vardaman was one of the two candidates with the largest share of

votes in the first primary; in the run-off, the newspapers of the state correctly observed that the fight was between "the conservative business element of the state," represented by an old Confederate soldier, and the upstart Vardaman. But instead of arguing "issues," as his predecessors had when they sought to unseat the "Bourbons," Vardaman went to the people with dramatic speeches on the racial issue, arguing against education for Negroes and calling for the repeal of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution. Even the opposition agreed that Vardaman owed his victory to the revival of the white supremacy question and the new primary law which allowed him to exercise his magnetism directly on the kind of rural audience that buys the spotted horses in Faulkner's The Hamlet.

Vardaman's greatest tests came, however, during his campaigns for the Senate. Senators were still elected indirectly, but in Mississippi the candidates had since 1890 been nominated in the party primary. Vardaman made his first attempt at a Senate seat in 1908, when he opposed incumbent John Sharp Williams in a campaign that featured--particularly as the principal issue in the only face-to-face debate between the candidates at Meridian on July 4, 1907--Vardaman's proposals for repealing the Constitutional amendments. So close was the election that Williams, the Delta planter, despite organizational support, won after a canvass by only 648 votes. Although the Bourbon press hailed his victory, it foresaw trouble.

It was not long coming. At Christmas, 1909, Mississippi's other senator died suddenly. Since the primary to replace him would not be held until 1911, the legislature had a free hand in naming his successor. As Kirwan says, "a contest was precipitated which was to have tremendous consequences on the politics of the state" (p. 191). Vardaman was pitted against Leroy Percy, Delta planter and graduate of the University of the South at Sewanee, Tennessee. No more ideal candidate to maintain Bourbon tradition could have been found; his son, William Alexander Percy, was later to produce in Lanterns on the Levee, an autobiography that is generally acknowledged to be the definitive articulation of the Bourbon position. Certainly W. A. Percy specified in this book the real issue in his father's jousts against Vardaman when he described the latter as "a kindly, vain demagogue, unable to think," who stood for all that his father considered "vulgar and dangerous." The sentiment that no Bourbon would have voiced publicly during the campaigns, young Percy also admits in this book when he describes the poor whites to whom Vardaman appealed as "intellectually and spiritually . . . inferior to the Negro, whom they hate." He also describes them as "a gang of poor degenerates" that lynch Negroes, that mistake hoodlumism for wit, and cunning for intelligence, that attend revivals and fight and fornicate in the bushes afterwards."⁴ Vardaman's party felt that the Bourbons harbored these feelings, but the problem was to trap them into expressing them, so that the traditionalists would discredit themselves in the eyes of those whose votes they sought.

There was no opportunity for a showdown during the legislative election, since the caucusing was secret. On the first ballot, Vardaman led with 71 out of 170 votes; but he was finally defeated by Percy, after all the other candidates had been forced out, six weeks later on the fifty-eighth ballot by 87 votes to 82. The caucus was marked by every conceivable illicit effort to influence votes, and its aftermath nearly led to the expulsion of Theodore Bilbo from the state legislature for his ambiguous role in some vote-buying.

The voting ended in February, 1910; although the next primary, for the full Senate term, would not be held for nearly two years in November, 1911, campaigning between the same two men started almost at once. This time Vardaman could make his sensational appeals directly to the people, and Percy relied, as usual, on a counterappeal to the people's conservatism that had helped the Bourbons retain control in Mississippi. But the contest was tense and, as the title of one section of The Hamlet points out, summers are long and hot in Mississippi. Tempers were already frayed by the long wrangle during the secret caucus. Violence sprang up again, centering around Bilbo, who was beaten into insensibility with a pistol by a man who he had said was "begotten in a nigger graveyard at midnight, suckled by a sow and educated by a fool" (Kirwan, p. 218). Such episodes served only, however, to build up sympathy for the group that cast itself in the underdog role. The catastrophe for the Bourbons, for which W. A. Percy has provided the wonderfully apt title "Sideshow Götterdämmerung," occurred on July 4, 1910.

As in previous elections, the candidates generally avoided confronting each other. At Lauderdale Springs near Meridian, however, on the holiday that would have probably brought out the largest crowds during the growing season, Percy was tricked into sharing the platform with Vardaman's lieutenant, Bilbo. Percy had promised his supporters to avoid personal attacks, but after listening to Bilbo, he lost control of himself and denounced both Vardaman and his ally. According to Kirwan, Percy said in part:

It was not unusual for people to assemble, "out of idle curiosity," to view an unusual dwarf, a three-legged man, or a two-headed calf. Such exhibitions of physical monstrosities had no elevating effect; but the "exhibition of a moral monstrosity," such as was made in the person of Bilbo that day, "has a debasing and degrading effect" (p. 221).

The Bourbon hailed the speech and reprinted it, but later had cause to regret its premature elation. All through Percy's diatribe, Bilbo had sat on a porch, in a manner remarkably like Flem Snopes's, smiling quietly and listening, as Snopes did to old Will Varner.

The greatest damage, however, was probably done the same day at Godbold Wells, where heckled by a crowd that may have known about the other speech, Percy completely lost control and called his auditors "cattle" and "rednecks." These remarks turned the tide. As Kirwan reports, "they were adopted by the Vardaman following, and wherever Vardaman went to speak he was greeted by crowds of men wearing red neckties and was carried in wagons drawn by oxen" (p. 212). In the largest vote cast in Mississippi up to that time, Vardaman won a clear victory in the first primary with 76,000 votes to his two opponents' combined 50,000. While many forces unquestionably influenced this surprising vote, the influence of Percy's ill-advised and widely-circulated attacks upon the "rednecks" is incalculable. The contempt of the Delta planter for the hill people was out in the open at last. Vardaman's blatant white supremacy had paid off handsomely, for he had succeeded in planting in the poor Mississippians' minds the idea that Percy's remark confirmed long-held suspicions that the Bourbons did indeed regard "white trash" as inferior to Negroes.

What must be observed with the same kind of horror that Faulkner's The Hamlet has inspired in many readers is that even this hurried account of thirty-five ugly years in Mississippi politics shows the lack of importance of significant economic and social issues in determining elections and the vast importance of irrational appeals to fears and prejudices, especially to the continuing fear of Black domination at a time when it was not actually a threat. How could the whole political history of a state hinge thus much on irrationality and opportunistic exploiting of it? History provides the record of what happened, but cannot tell us why. When we seek to understand the motives behind the events, we must turn to the intuitions of the perceptive novelist.

II

Although many critics have commented on Faulkner's Snopes trilogy, I cannot find that anyone has previously called attention to the way in which the geography of Frenchman's Bend, the community that gives The Hamlet its title, reproduces in miniature the physiological characteristics of Mississippi. In the first paragraph of the book, the setting is described as "a section of rich river-bottom country . . . hill-cradled and remote," and in the fantastic tale of an idiot's romance with a cow, we find a fuller description of the relationship between valley and hill:

A mile back he left the rich, broad, flat river-bottom country and entered the hills--a region which topographically was the final blue and dying echo of the Appalachian mountains . . . Now it was a region of scrubby second-growth pine and oak among which dogwood bloomed until it too was cut to make cotton spindles, and old fields where not even a trace of fur-

row showed anymore, gutted and gullied by forty years of rain and frost and heat into plateaus as choked with rank sedge and briars loved of rabbits and quail coveys, and crumbling ravines striated red and white with alternate sand and clay (p. 196).⁵

The story is thus set against the background of a tiny area beset by the same tensions that existed between the Delta and hills of the state.

Originally the hamlet had been the site of the Old Frenchman's Place, "a tremendous pre-Civil War plantation." Much of the character of the people of the region is established by Faulkner's description of the reaction of three successive waves to this landmark.

Its builder had "quite possibly been a foreigner, though not necessarily French. . . . all that remained of him was the river bed which his slaves had straightened for almost ten miles to keep his land from flooding." "Even his name was forgotten," Faulkner continues, "his pride but a legend about the land he had wrested from the jungle and tamed as a monument to that appellation which those who came after him . . . could not even read, let alone pronounce" (p. 4). The "Old Frenchman" typifies that first generation which built Mississippi, but which had vanished almost without record, leaving only a myth behind it to be fleshed out as Faulkner's Quentin Compson and his Harvard roommate reconstruct the similar tale of Thomas Sutpen in Absalom, Absalom!. But though he has become a myth, the Old Frenchman still exerts, like the pre-war Bourbons, a tangible influence on later generations through "the stubborn tale of money he buried somewhere" (p. 4).

At the time the novel begins, the plantation that the phantasmal Old Frenchman wrested from the wilderness is a ruin in the receivership of Will Varner, as all of Old Mississippi is a waste land at the disposition of the ambitious railroad builders. Varner is perhaps the most difficult character in the novel for the non-Mississippian to understand, for he seems as avaricious and amoral as the Snopeses; yet the author's sentiments towards him are clearly ambiguous. The ambiguity is caught in a description that Faulkner attributes to Judge Benbow, one of Jefferson's patricians: "a milder-mannered man never bled a mule or stuffed a ballot box" (p. 5). Varner not only exploits Frenchman's Bend himself, but he exposes the hamlet and subsequently the whole county to the depredations of the Snopeses. One understands how, upon learning of the Snopes's reputation as barn-burners, Varner acts first out of prudence and fear, especially in view of the havoc already wrought in the state; but he tolerates Flem Snopes far beyond the demands of prudence, connives with him (just as the Bourbons did at first with Vardaman), and eventually calls upon him to save his daughter's reputation. But despite this trafficking with evil, Varner is never denounced.

Faulkner apparently felt--as L. Q. C. Lamar must have--that there was little one could do but compromise with evil if Mississippi was not to revert to wilderness. Varner occupied the same position in relationship to his tiny suzerainty that Lamar did to the state; Varner was "the fountain-head if not of law at least of advice and suggestion to a countryside which would have repudiated the term constituency if they had ever heard of it. . . . He was a farmer, a usurer, a veterinarian" (p. 5). He owns most of the land in the region, although he was not essentially a planter, but a merchant and investor and even inventor, who had tried to keep the stagnant community moving. Lamar had been obliged to resort to fraud and demagoguery to restore Democratic control in Mississippi; but the region could have been in even a worse condition without his efforts. Historians like Kirwan can be justly critical of Lamar's saving the region for obviously selfish reasons, but they must recognize that it all might otherwise have reverted to the wilderness much of it has become. A modern novelist like Pat Frank can write in Mister Adam of Mississippi as an expendable site for nuclear tests, but William Faulkner couldn't. Behind his writing lies a love of the native soil as passionate and irrational as that the narrator expresses at the end of Gogol's Dead Souls.

Varner, from the viewpoint of one who cares about Mississippi, has one redeeming virtue. His efforts, like those of Lamar and his generation, are guided by a desire for the success that eluded the Frenchman and the older Mississippi rather than for the glory they sought. Varner says that the reason he sits "against a background of fallen baronial splendor" in a flour-barrel seat is that he's "trying to find out what it must have felt like to be the fool that would need all this . . . just to eat and sleep in" (p. 7). Varner, from this viewpoint, is a tragic figure, too, for just as he is bewildered by the past, he is puzzled by the future. Of his many children all but two--a bellicose coward and a sensual animal--have left home like many other ambitious young Mississippians. Varner is trying to maintain some human order in a region where generally only those with less than normal drive or less than normal humanity remain.

Small wonder then that he is willing to close his eyes to the inhuman characteristics of Flem Snopes, who, as William Faulkner's brother John has said, is representative of a group who by usurping power made the old residents "aware for the first time of the value of human endeavor."⁶ Snopes is, however, as both a fantastic vision of his besting the devil and his impotency suggest, entirely inhuman. He sees the ruined Old Frenchman's place not as the source of wonder it is to Will Varner, but simply as something else to be exploited in his drive for success. Flem belongs to the same breed as Vardaman and his creature Bilbo. It is significant that Faulkner began publishing the stories eventually incorporated into The Hamlet in 1931, immediately after Bilbo's infamous rape of the Mississippi system of higher education, in which Faulkner's own father

was one of many sufferers. Faulkner had personal as well as broadly humanitarian reasons for feeling that Snopesism was monstrous and that Frenchman's Bend had fallen into the hands of fiends, who made their fortunes by preying upon the ignorance and passions of the "peasants," for whom he names the last section of The Hamlet, just as Vardaman and Bilbo preyed upon them in campaigns designed to inflame "White supremacy" sentiments.

The comparison between Snopesism and Vardamanism is most manifest, however, in the portrayal of the conflict that really serves to link together the sometimes apparently only casually related episodes in The Hamlet--that of Flem Snopes to complete the subjugation of his environment by overcoming the itinerant sewing machine salesman, Ratliff.

Ratliff is something far more than a detached observer who gets drawn into the affairs of Frenchman's Bend. The crucial statement about this apostle of modest progress occurs immediately before a conversation he has with Will Varner about the gift of the Old Frenchman's Place to Flem Snopes in return for marrying Varner's pregnant daughter Eula:

[Varner] sat the old horse and looked down at Ratliff, the little hard eyes beneath their busy rust-colored brows glinting at the man who was a good deal nearer his son in spirit and intellect and physical appearance too than any of his own get (p. 180).

Faulkner, in short, conceives of Ratliff as Varner's true heir, because if the region has any intellectual and spiritual future at all, it lies not in the hands of Varner's remaining apathetic and trouble-making children, but of Ratliff, who has stayed on here even though he, like Will Varner, has abilities that might have assured his success elsewhere.

Through this intimation of the relationship between the two men, Faulkner suggests that the expedients to which the men of Lamar's generation yielded were inspired by their hopes for the future. Certainly if Flem Snopes is able at last to defeat Ratliff, the victim will be not just one man or one small community, but a way of life.

The struggle that dominates the book first comes into focus when Ratliff, discussing efforts of Varner's son Jody to cope with the Snopeses, comments, "there ain't but two men I know can risk fooling with them folks. And just one of them is named Varner, and his front name ain't Jody." When Varner asks who the other is, Ratliff replies "pleasantly," "That ain't been proved yet neither" (p. 31).

Shortly afterwards Ratliff first "risks fooling" with the Snopeses by attempting to outwit Flem in a deal involving some apparently worthless goats. Ratliff does best Snopes to the extent of making Flem see "what it feels like" to burn up a piece of money, but he loses his own profit in the transaction because he has not been cautious enough to discover before getting deeply involved that Flem has no compunction about exploiting a feeble-

minded relative. Whereas Ratliff would use his strength to protect society from being debased by the idiot, Flem will use his to exploit the idiot in victimizing society. This incident suggests that John Faulkner is probably quite right when he attributes his brother's hatred of Snopeses to their cruel treatment of the epileptic son of an old Oxford family.

The incident draws the line between the two men's concepts of social responsibility and establishes Ratliff's fatal weakness for acting too precipitately when his emotions are aroused. This shortcoming is noted by Flem, who will be motivated in the future by a desire to defeat this man who has bettered him. After the episode, Ratliff simply sends back to Varner the cryptic message, "It ain't been proved yet neither" (p. 101).

The next round is Ratliff's. Flem learns as Vardaman did during the secret caucus that one can control situations only by direct personal manipulation. Vardaman was defeated in the caucus because he could not discover what his rivals were doing behind his back and bring public pressure to bear upon them. The Snopes cause suffers while Flem is off in Texas waiting for Eula's baby (which he did not father) to grow big enough to bring back, because Lancelot Snopes is no match for Ratliff, who simply uses his strength to frustrate Flem's deputy's scheme to profit from notifying the hamlet's idly curious when his feeble-minded cousin is about to make love to his cow.

The next brush with Flem himself, however, produces equivocal results. The episode of the sale of the spotted horses from Texas remarkably parallels the controversy about vote-buying during the secret caucus for the Senatorial nomination, since Flem Snopes (like Vardaman) never shows his hand directly, but allows subalterns to bear the brunt of the ensuing litigation. Ratliff manages to preserve his honor, since he is not duped into buying one of the worthless monsters, but he is embarrassed--as the Bourbons were by the counter-revelations during the lurid Bilbo trial--by being obliged to jump from his hotel window when one of the horses gets as far as his door, and he is obliged to watch his friends suffer, while further incurring the wrath of the Snopeses for avoiding their trap, just as Percy aroused Vardaman's enmity by failing to yield to the mandate of the people. Snopes, after all, by allowing the farmers to buy the worthless, vicious horses had given the public just what it wanted.

Discussing the episode of the spotted horses, Ratliff most fully articulates just what the struggle with the Snopeses means to him. Asked if he had given money to the grotesquely pathetic Henry Armstid, who had bought a worthless horse with the few dollars his wife had earned weaving at night, Ratliff answers that he could have, but didn't, for the same reasons that his earlier burning of a promissory note had not been out of sentimental concern for the feeble-minded Snopes:

". . . I wasn't protecting a Snopes from Snopeses; I wasn't even protecting a people from a Snopes. I was

protecting something that wasn't even a people, that wasn't nothing but something that dont want nothing but to walk and feel the sun and wouldn't know how to hurt no man even if it would and wouldn't want to even if it could, just like I wouldn't stand by and see you steal a meat-bone from a dog. I never made them Snopeses and I never made the folks that cant wait to bare their backsides to them. I could do more, but I wont. I wont, I tell you!" (p. 367)

Ratliff does not consider himself his brother's keeper, and he is no tender-minded sentimentalist. He is a sharp man in a business transaction, and he is not the victim of noble illusions about himself as he points out when he deprives the feeble-minded Snopes of the cow for which he has developed an infatuation. He acts because he is "stronger," not "righter" or "any better, maybe." What Ratliff wishes to create is an atmosphere in which decency can flourish, as it cannot in a place where men watch quietly as another beats his wife, "their faces lowered as though brooding upon the earth at their feet" (p. 337). Ratliff desires an atmosphere in which one can act spontaneously in behalf of what he believes in. But the Snopeses prevent the maintenance of such an atmosphere, for a Flem, who can without showing any emotion quietly watch the man beat his wife, is constantly scheming to take advantage of any action by the man who is either not cowed into complete submission or motivated by unfeeling calculation.

And finally Flem Snopes does defeat Ratliff. The last sale of the Old Frenchman's place is tragically parallel to the turning point in the Percy-Vardaman campaign of 1910. The trick in both situations is to devise a strategem that will incite one's opponent to the impulsive action that will defeat him. Bilbo sits quietly by in Lauderdale Springs while the crowd heckles Percy into revealing the Bourbons' long-concealed contempt for the "rednecks"; Flem Snopes manages--also without saying a word himself--to persuade Ratliff and his cohorts that there is indeed, as has long been rumored, money buried on the ruined estate, by salting the ruins with a bag of coins. Gulled, Ratliff gives Flem what the latter wants by offering to trade an interest in a lunch counter in Jefferson for the worthless property, so that Flem is finally seen riding toward his next conquest, while Ratliff is left quite literally holding the bag.

Flem is able to trick Ratliff for two reasons that have profound psychological implications. In the first place, Ratliff has never been able to give up a baseless feeling that the ruins, which are the symbol of the mythical ante-bellum land of wealth, still hold a buried fortune. His feelings reflect the persisting notion that there was still something for the present in the glamorous past that led the Bourbon party, beset by upstarts, to turn to a candidate like Leroy Percy, representative of the traditional departed glories.

In the second place, Ratliff would never have been victimized if he had not, in his enthusiasm, failed to open one bag of coins that he and his fellow excavators found. If he had, he would have discovered that they were minted after the Civil War and thus had to have been planted since the disappearance of the Old Frenchman. Flem Snopes had at last found a way to exploit Ratliff's all too human weakness for acting in a moment of passionate enthusiasm without calculating all possible consequences. This is precisely what Bilbo and his supporters had done on July 4, 1910, when they succeeded in baiting Leroy Percy into his intemperate attack upon "red-necks." A single slip sent Snopes riding toward Jefferson, Vardaman toward Washington.

By treating such a turn of affairs as a defeat, Faulkner suggests that spontaneous outbursts of feeling must not be inhibited if man is not to be reduced to an unfeeling automaton. The vice of Snopesism is that its practitioners ape human traits without being fully human. As Warren Beck writes in Man in Motion, a study of Faulkner's Snopes trilogy, "Flem is, even more than Popeye [the grotesque criminal in Sanctuary], the modern automaton bred by materialism out of original crudeness."⁷ The automatism of Faulkner's characters results not, however, from the dehumanizing forces of a mechanized society that many critics have condemned, but from the peculiar political atmosphere in a state in which any true assertion of one's feelings might ruin one's prospects.

Leadership in Mississippi became not a matter of positive action to improve conditions, but the negative business of waiting for one's opponent to make a misstep or misstatement that one could pounce upon. Small wonder that the state often resembled an armed camp and that many young people like most of the Varner children went away. This atmosphere of constraint is, of course, not unique to Mississippi, but it has been fostered especially there by the unusual poverty and the constant threat of Negro resurgence. Thus the state has been left almost completely in the hands of the apathetic characters that gather around Varner's store in The Hamlet, the completely irrational buyers of spotted horses, and those sufficiently immune to any concept of human dignity to choose to advance themselves by callously exploiting the apathetic and irrational.

Faulkner commented on this callous exploitation as characteristic of the Snopeses when he told an undergraduate audience at the University of Virginia that Flem "had to teach himself a certain shrewdness about people in order to make the money which he believed was the end of existence. . . . He probably understood all of his life [all] that he ever needed to understand."⁸

The same thing could surely have been said of Vardaman. The Hamlet is thus, while not a mirror of Mississippi politics, a revelation of the inner workings of the culture that produced these politics. It is no reflection on its artistic value to say that it has a value beyond the literature

classroom. It can give the sensitive student of history and the other social sciences evidence that will help him "Think Mississippian." Perhaps this is a dubious distinction, but it is one that can provide a vital perspective on some of the spasms that continue to wrack our nation.

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Footnotes:

¹ Faulkner at Nagano (Tokyo, c. 1956), 197.

² Ibid., 13-14.

³ Revolt of the Rednecks (Lexington, Kentucky: 1951), 4. This invaluable book is the only detailed, objective account of turn-of-the-century Mississippi politics that I can locate. I have drawn upon it extensively. Subsequent references to it are identified in the text.

⁴ William A. Percy, Lanterns on the Levee (New York, 1946), 148-150.

⁵ William Faulkner, The Hamlet (New York, c. 1940). All page references incorporated into the text are to this edition.

⁶ My Brother Bill (New York, 1963), 270. Chapter 25 of this book discusses at length the origin of the Snopeses and William Faulkner's attitude towards them.

⁷ (Madison, Wisconsin: 1961), 89.

⁸ Faulkner at the University, edited by Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner (Charlottesville, Virginia: 1959), 108-109.