AN INTERPRETATION OF THE THEME OF SNOPESISM

IN THE WORK OF WILLIAM FAULKNER

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THESIS

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Ever since the publication of the novel <u>Sartoris</u> in
1929, members of a strange new breed of people by the name
of Snopes have been "haunting the corners and shadows"[1] of
every Faulkner novel and short story which constitutes a
part of what is called the Yoknapatawpha chronicle. That
Faulkner placed a high value upon their purpose or their
usefulness is evident, for to no other group of characters
did he devote an entire trilogy, in addition to giving
them "walk-on" appearances in a wide assortment of other
selections from the Yoknapatawpha cycle. Their true meaning,
though, has long puzzled readers and critics alike.

Beginning with the publication of <u>The Hamlet</u> in April,
1940, criticism centering on the Snopeses began to appear
occasionally, but only with the publication of <u>The Town</u> (1957)
and <u>The Mansion</u> (1959) did these critical analyses flow more
steadily and with increasing regularity. Yet, until fairly
recently (primarily since Faulkner's death) such criticisms
concerned themselves to a large extent with pointing out

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[1]Maxwell Geismar, "William Faulkner: The Negro and the
Female," <u>Writers in Crisis: The American Novel Between Two
Wars</u> (Cambridge, 1942), p. 178.

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inconsistencies in characterization or with unevenness in
theme and content between the three novels of the trilogy
Snopes rather than with trying to determine what Faulkner's
real intention was, what universal truth or truths he was
trying to exemplify.

Because the Snopeses were central in the three novels
of the Faulkner trilogy (The Hamlet, The Town, and The Man-
sion) and ten short stories (many of which had first appeared
in the story versions but were later reworked into sections
of the novels of the trilogy) and they became supporting
players in five other major novels and at least three more
short stories, it is quite obvious that Faulkner considered
them to be of major importance and assigned to them a key
role in his scheme of things. Heretofore, it has been
popular to support the thesis that the Snopeses represented
the embodiment of crass commercialism, the inevitable
replacement for the dying cotton aristocracy, and the
direct retribution for the sins that had caused the downfall
of these degenerate Southern gentry. This thesis will
attempt to show, not that such a contention is wholly wrong,
but that the real meaning of Snopesism lies much deeper
than this, far beyond such a simple interpretation. The
old view stated above leaves unanswered far too many
pertinent questions. For example: What frailty or flaw
had originally caused the decline of the Southern aristo-
crats in such a way that they were unable to discover the

errors of their ways and to correct the flaws themselves; why

was there a "vacuum" of leadership in community affairs to

provide the Snopeses with easy access to positions of power

and why were they allowed to succeed in their takeover with

so little resistance from any of the former stalwarts of the

community; and, most of all, what caused the Snopeses to

follow so closely in decline and defeat the steps of those

whom they had struggled to replace?

The heart of the matter, or a clue to it, may be found

first stated in Faulkner's address on acceptance of the

Nobel Prize in Literature in Stockholm, Sweden, in December,

1950, restated and reaffirmed in his obtuse novel A Fable,

and more recently given as the sum of Faulkner's basic

ethic: that man will not only through a significant belief

find the strength to endure, but that through acquiring an

understanding of the truths of the human heart, he will also

prevail.[2] The Snopeses, in light of this view, become not

just a "Southern mercantile aristocracy elevated by clever-

ness and corruption into a ruling financial oligarchy,"[3] but

a part of a pageant, a parable, of Everyman in search of

himself. They had a belief in money, warped as it was, that

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[2]Robert L. Dorsch, "An Interpretation of the Central
Themes in the Work of William Faulkner," The Emporia State
Research Studies, XI, 1, 5-41.

[3]Geismar, op. cit., p. 178.

gave them the power of significant action, but their tragic flaw lay in the fact that they never did acquire the understanding of "the old verities and truths of the heart . . . love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice,"[4] that would allow them to prevail as well. And, to continue in Faulkner's own words, "Until he [meaning a Snopes of this interpretation] does so, he labors under a curse."[5]

In order that a comprehensive picture of Snopesism and its true meaning and purpose may be drawn, this thesis attempts to answer certain questions. Chapter II deals with William Faulkner's background. What in "the cult of his own experience," caused him to feel a need to create the Snopeses and inspired him to write their story so many years after the idea of Snopesism first germinated in his mind? Chapter III shows how the parallels between the rise and decline and fall of the Southern aristocrats and the opportunistic, commercial-minded Snopeses illustrate, even in their apparent failure, the hope of every man for finding success and a place in the sun. Chapter IV concerns what universal message or messages Faulkner hoped to convey through the Snopeses.

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[4]William Faulkner, "William Faulkner's Speech of Acceptance upon the Award of the Nobel Prize for Literature," The Faulkner Reader, pp. 3-4.

[5]Ibid., p. 4.

In his writing of the Snopes saga, Faulkner was acting out in his own life what he once suggested that any writer should do when he has said all that he has to say. His comment was to the effect that when a writer has finished saying what he needs to say he has accomplished his purpose in writing; it is time for him to "break the pencil and quit writing."[6] Only two or three years after this comment was made and after the Snopes trilogy was completed, William Faulkner figuratively did break his pen and quit writing. William Faulkner died of a heart attack on July 6, 1962.

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[6]William Faulkner, *Faulkner at the University, Class Conferences at the University of Virginia*, 1957-1958, edited by Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner (Charlotteville, 1959), p. 264.

CHAPTER II

THE INDISPENSABLE BACKGROUND

"Where you been farming?" Varner said.
"West." He did not speak shortly. He merely
pronounced the one word with a complete inflection-
less finality, as if he had closed a door behind
himself.
"You mean Texas?"
"No."
"I see. Just west of here. How much family
you got?"[1]

Thus did the ignoble Snopes clan make its debut in the

rural Mississippi community of Frenchman's Bend, and,

breeding like rabbits, they spread throughout the area under

the leadership of the "dough-faced," "frog-like" Flem,

extending their destructive, terrifying grasp, and with

silent, calculating deliberation, permeating the provincial

Mississippi landscape like a plague of locusts. In time,

the unfortunate citizens of the Frenchman's Bend community

could scarcely attempt the most trivial undertaking without

colliding, usually with violence, with some member of the

Snopes clan or without being stepped on, literally and

figuratively, by one of them. Snopes was the name, a

curious combination of the words snob and dope, and the name

came to have the same unpleasant, often repulsive, connotation

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[1]William Faulkner, The Hamlet (New York, 1940), p. 8.

that many other words beginning with _sn-_ (_snake_, _snarl_, _snob_, _sneer_, _snide_) also have. As Campbell and Foster point out, "Snopes,' then, is a caricature of all the _Sn_-ishness in human nature."[2]

The primary victims of the Snopeses' assault on Yoknapatawpha County were the citizens of Frenchman's Bend, although when that area became saturated with them, the county seat, Jefferson, and then the world at large, became their new targets. But upon closer examination of the historical background of this local Mississippi scene, one begins to suspect that the Snopses were not as new to the area as they first appeared to be. They had been active in mule-stealing and bushwhacking during the Civil War (_The Unvanquished_), and Faulkner himself described how, by the beginning of the twentieth century Snopeses were everywhere in the area, "not only behind the counters of grubby little side-street stores patronized by Negroes, but behind the president's desk of banks and the directors' tables of wholesale grocery corporations. . . ."[3] Actually the Snopeses had always "been." Not all of them had always carried the name of Snopes, of course, and not until the turn of the century did the opportunity arise for them to

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[2]Harry Modean Campbell and Ruel E. Foster, _William Faulkner: A Critical Appraisal_, p. 104.

[3]William Faulkner, "Mississippi," _Holiday_, XV (April, 1954), 34-47.

make their conquest of Yoknapatawpha, but in assorted genetic variations, Snopeses had always existed.

From the appearance of the first Snopeses in the early Faulkner novel <u>Sartoris</u> (Byron, Flem, and Montgomery Ward Snopes) to the publication of <u>The Mansion</u>, marking the completion of the Snopes trilogy, this singular tribe of poor-white, "red-neck," itinerant tenant farmers had been met with mockery, scorn, laughter, varying degrees of awe and astonishment, and grudging admiration for their opportunistic cleverness by professional and amateur critics, contemporary writers, university professors, publishers, librarians, and recreational readers alike. Reactions to the Snopeses and to the philosophy that they live and represent have been colorful and widely varied, but no reader can fail to respond to them, whatever his reaction might be. Whatever he feels about them, the Snopeses are a breed of human beings that the reader cannot ignore, whether he despises them for their corruptness as many do or whether he is forced to give them grudging regard for their demonic ingenuity in gaining economic power.

Because the Snopeses were originally regarded as just so many snakes, as such a low form of human existence that they merited only unfathomable disgust and contempt, few readers were able to understand what purpose any writer, especially one as obviously talented as Faulkner, could possibly have for creating such a tribe. This feeling was

especially common in the early history of "Snopes" criticism.
The first important critical article on the Snopeses and
Snopesism was an article by George Marion O'Donnell in The
Kenyon Review in 1939. Although not all that he proposed
has held up through the succeeding years of critical study,
his article is important because it was the initial step,
and it opened the door for more enlightened, more careful
study of Faulkner's universal themes in a new light.
Basically, he claimed that Faulkner used the terms Snopes
and Sartoris as labels to divide society into two restrictive
classes, the "bad guys" (Snopeses) and the "good guys"
(Sartorises). As he put it:

> In Mr. Faulkner's mythology, there are two kinds of
> characters; they are the Sartorises or Snopeses,
> whatever the family names may be. . . . And in the
> spiritual geography of Mr. Faulkner's world there
> are two worlds: the Sartoris world and the Snopes
> world. In all of his successful books, he is
> exploring the two worlds in detail, dramatizing
> the inevitable conflict between them.
>
> It is a universal conflict. The Sartorises
> act traditionally, that is to say, they act always
> with an ethically responsible will. They represent
> vital morality, humanism. Being anti-traditional,
> the Snopeses do not recognize this point of view;
> acting only for self-interest, they acknowledge no
> ethical duty. Really, then, they are a-moral; they
> represent naturalism or animalism. And the Sartoris-
> Snopes conflict is fundamentally a struggle between
> humanism and naturalism.[4]

Commenting on Mr. O'Donnell's statement, Lawrence
Thompson pointed out that such an approach ignores

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[4]Frederick J. Hoffman and Olga W. Vickery, Three
Decades of Criticism, with Introduction by Frederick Hoff-
man (East Lansing, 1960), p. 83.

Mr. Faulkner's

> . . . persistently ironic unmasking of those Sar-
> toris-like characters who, blind to their own inner
> elements of Snopesism, strike ridiculously pathetic
> postures of claiming that they detest and have nothing
> in common with Snopesism. That oversimplification also
> ignores . . . . Such members . . . as Eck Snopes and
> his son Wall, who are represented as decent human
> beings struggling against other members of their own
> family. [5]

It is also well to note that such a view as O'Donnell's

ignores and violates what Faulkner called "the problems of

the human heart in conflict with itself,"[6] one of his major

themes, for it allows no room for the possibility that man

will always struggle to endure and prevail, in addition to

and in spite of his yearning toward good and justice in the

face of his susceptibility to evil. O'Donnell presents

Faulknerian plots merely as a conflict between the traditional

(good) and the anti-traditional (evil) with one winning and

the other losing and with no third way.

Malcolm Cowley partially accepted O'Donnell's thesis but

added the provoking thought that the Sartorises and their

kind, the landed aristocrats of the Old South, originally

got their lands and money by methods equally as dubious as

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[5]Lawrence Thompson, _William Faulkner: An Introduction
and Interpretation_ (New York, 1963), p. 134.

[6]William Faulkner, "William Faulkner's Speech of
Acceptance upon the Award of the Nobel Prize for Litera-
ture," _The Faulkner Reader_, p. 3.

those of the Snopeses, and that there are several individuals in the Snopes camp (as Thompson also noted) who give promise of redemption and who give evidence that there is probably both good and bad in the Snopes family just as there is good and bad in the group of families represented by the De Spains, the Sartorises, and the Compsons.[7] O'Donnell's error, then, was in making Faulkner's world all black and white without allowing for any shades of grey in between.

The casual reader of Faulkner can easily miss a greater part of the meaning of the Snopeses and get the impression that Faulkner, in creating them, is merely using human foibles and folly and, occasionally, crudeness and ignorance to achieve what often amounts to ribald folk humor or that he goes to extremes, as Geismar and others have suggested,[8] to strike back at the encroaching "modernism," the worship of commercialism, which Faulkner felt was replacing all the gentleness and goodness that the Old Order of the South did contain instead of attacking the evils that were present in it. So strongly did O'Donnell see this quality in Faulkner that he labeled him "a traditional man in a modern South,"[9]

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[7]Malcolm Cowley, editor, _The Portable Faulkner_, (New York, 1961, p. 14.

[8]Geismar, _op. cit_.

[9]Hoffman and Vickery, _op. cit_.

unable to reconcile the two worlds of the Old Order and the New. Although the factors of folk humor and encroaching modernism do play moderate roles in Faulkner's scheme, they are far from being his primary purpose for establishing the Snopeses, in spite of the fact that the Snopeses were the embodiment of the basic tenets of commercialistic modernism --that anything goes as long as it brings in return profit or potential gain.

Considerable evidence will be shown below to indicate that to be sensational, to scandalize, to be crude was definitely not Faulkner's intention in creating the Snopeses--that he was probably more interested in and more concerned with them for what they could help him accomplish artistically than with any other group of characters in all his works, for the Snopeses are at the same time a caricature of all that the aristocratic families claimed to abhor but in reality embraced, and a strange kind of compass indicating the direction in which the path to redemption lay.

The Snopes saga had its real roots in many sources: the traditions and weaknesses of the planter aristocracy and the Southern Code they struggled to uphold; the evils that arose from the maltreatment and misuse of both land and human lives; the vacuum left in the community by the morally weakened Southern aristocracy who had no remaining sons strong enough to lead their people back to economic and to moral health; the social and moral and economic revolutions

that took place in the South, not in the days of the Civil
War, but in the years after; and in the individuals known to
Faulkner, both through personal acquaintance and in family
legend, as well as the entire community in which he grew up
and lived.

Born only thirty-two years after the end of the Civil
War, William Faulkner found his boyhood environment still
rich with embellished tales of gentlemanly courage and
gallant daring in the face of insurmountable dangers and of
the glory of the Old South which prevailed, supposedly, even
in defeat. The strength of this influence and the manner in
which it affected him personally are suggested in Coughlan's
description of his and Phil Stone's love for the familiar
Southern Civil War lore.[10] He and his friends would spend
endless hours listening to reminiscing war veterans recall
in vivid detail the battles in which they had fought, after
which the youngsters would race off to play at re-enacting
the battles they had just heard described. And, should they
forget the slightest detail of a battle, there was always an
elder observing their play who was more than willing to coach
them.

The Faulkner family itself had a Civil War hero of
sorts, William Faulkner's great-grandfather, Colonel William

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[10]Robert Coughlan, The Private World of William
Faulkner, (New York, 1954), pp. 39-40.

C. Falkner, after whom Colonel John Sartoris was largely
modeled. Colonel Falkner had been one of those fast-rising
young men who returned from the War full of ideas for getting
rich quick and eager to put his ideas into action. The
railroad he built right through the center of Lafayette
County succeeded in bringing him fame of sorts and a fortune,
but it also helped to bring tragedy to the Falkner family.
Colonel Falkner was a dashing figure and provided his great-
grandson with humorous, exciting legends on which he might
draw. Even the death of Colonel John Sartoris and the loss
of the De Spain bank to a Snopes were modeled after events
in Old Colonel Falkner's life.

Perhaps an even more important factor in setting the
stage for the advent of the Snopeses than Faulkner's child-
hood environment and family background is what might be called
the "cult" of Faulkner's own experiences, a composite of all
the experiences and friendships that helped to shape the
rather shy, ambitious youth into a brilliant writer. As an
adolescent and a youth, Faulkner was inclined to be rather
dreamy and somewhat reticent, preferring to spend his hours
alone, reading and composing what Philip Stone described as
not good but obviously talented verses[11] patterned after the
Romantics Faulkner admired.

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[11]Ibid., pp. 38-39.

> He had begun as an adolescent to write
> verses and at the same time other symptoms of
> poetic inclination set in: he became rather shy,
> dropped out of competitive sports, took less
> interest in his studies, avoided courses that did
> not interest him, and as a result never did acquire
> enough credits to graduate from high school.[12]

Lacking a great amount of interest in anything except

writing verse, he eventually quit school completely to take

a job in his grandfather's bank. He soon lost interest in

banking and for a while wandered from this job to that, but

he lasted no longer at any other job than he did in his

grandfather's bank--they were not related to writing and he

simply was not interested in keeping them.

It was about this time that Phil Stone, "scion of one

of the old families of Oxford (probably the De Spains of

Faulkner's stories)"[13] as a favor to Miss Maud, William

Faulkner's mother, asked to read some of "Billy's" verses.

Surprised by the talent the poems showed, he began to take a

personal interest in the young writer. Although Stone was

four years older than Faulkner and already the possessor of

a college degree, as William grew older they became close

companions and friends. Stone's influence on the young

William Faulkner would be difficult to estimate, for Faulkner

owes much to him not only as a friend and companion but also

as a teacher, editor, and literary mentor and patron. It was

Stone who subsidized the publication of Faulkner's first

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[12]Ibid., p. 37.   [13]Ibid.

book, a volume of poems. Stone added to Faulkner's erratic formal education at least the foundation for a good liberal education, emphasizing classics in literature and the great philosophers. He would pack his old touring car with a variety of good books, and send Faulkner off in it by himself to the country to spend the day doing nothing but reading and thinking. Later, the two friends would spend hours discussing at length what Faulkner had read, weighing and evaluating what the books had contained.

But literature was not the only interest the two shared. Stone had grown up in much the same environment as William Faulkner did, with the same romantic legends ringing in his ears and with the same love for them that Faulkner had. The South, the War and its aftermath, and the decline of the old traditions of the South (which were at that time rapidly being replaced by a newer way of life that they both distrusted) were also common topics of conversation between the two. Stone and Faulkner also enjoyed dreaming possible plots concerning various phases of what they had been discussing, basing the characters for these plots on assorted individuals around the community whom they knew. Their manner was sometimes serious, sometimes teasing. A large part of the Sartoris idea and probably almost all of the Snopes concept could well have arisen from these discussions through the years.[14]

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[14]Ibid., p. 40.

After Stone had been to Yale for another law degree and
Faulkner had spent some time in the Canadian air force, the
two returned to Oxford and renewed their friendship.
Faulkner, realizing somewhat belatedly that an education
could be very useful in a literary career, entered the
University of Mississippi as a special student. Several of
Faulkner's professors, Calvin Brown (a friend of the Faulkner
family) in particular, gave him needed encouragement in his
studies; he would frequently drop in informally to visit the
Browns and to seek advice on the wisest use of his time at
the university. For a time, Faulkner took what was for him
an almost enthusiastic part in university life, both socially
and academically, but soon, as with the assorted jobs he had
held, his interest lagged, the "rigidities of formal educa-
tion offended him,"[15] and he eventually dropped from the
university altogether sometime during his second year.
However, it might be found, if there were any to verify it,
that he had already got just about everything of value to
him as a writer, and he simply saw no need to waste any more
time there. Perhaps, also, he discovered in his fellow
undergraduates too many of the evidences of Snopesism that
were already beginning to disgust him. His fictional
characterizations of the shallow, empty-headed collegians of
the '20's like Gowan Stevens and Temple Drake enforce this
impression even more strongly.

[15]Campbell and Foster, op. cit.

The next influence of major importance in shaping
Faulkner as a writer was a friendship with Sherwood Anderson,
struck up during a stay in New Orleans. Although Anderson
and Faulkner eventually had a misunderstanding and went their
separate ways, Faulkner learned at least one valuable lesson
from Anderson, namely that an almost holy respect for and an
impermeable dedication to the art of writing were necessary
for success, that the "same striving to 'do the best you
know how to do,' the same urgent conviction that the telling
of a story, and the way it should be told, were very
important matters."[16] Faulkner himself wrote, "I learned
that, to be a writer, one does not necessarily have to pay
lip-service to any conventional American image. . . . You
only have to remember what you were."[17] He began following
Anderson's advice that "You have to have somewhere to start
from; then you begin to learn. It don't matter where it was,
just so you remember it and ain't ashamed of it. . . . You're
a country boy; all you know is that little patch up there in
Mississippi where you started from. But that's all right
too."[18] What Faulkner did know, though it certainly was no
ideal American type, was Snopesism.

Yet Faulkner did not follow this advice in his first
two novels, Soldiers' Pay (1926) and Mosquitos (1927), and

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[16]Coughlan, op. cit.   [17]Ibid., p. 52.

[18]Ibid.

much to his disappointment, both sold so poorly that his
publisher canceled the remainder of a three-book contract.
Faulkner had considered himself at last a full-fledged
writer, and his disappointment over the results was bitter.
It was in his third novel, Sartoris, that he began to turn
to subjective and local materials, but he still did not take
Anderson's advice completely to heart. "The theme," Coughlan
points out," --the juxtaposition of modern times and modern
men with men and times preceding, to the disadvantage of the
former--was a serious one and, in fact, basic to most of his
later work,"[19] but the desire to please the popular critics
and to write a book that would sell diluted this serious
purpose, and the compromise in principles showed. The book
remained for some time in the files of the publisher, who
showed little interest in actually publishing it. He had
found the Sartorises but had only a glimpse of the Snopses,
whom he needed to provide contrast and balance.

Stone at this time stepped in again and urged Faulkner,
since his efforts to please the critics and the public had
failed three times in a row, to forget them and to write a
book aimed to please no one but himself. Faulkner listened
to Stone's advice, and the result was what is probably his
greatest work, The Sound and the Fury. While The Sound and
the Fury was not a great popular success, it did receive

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[19]Ibid., p. 55.

wide critical acclaim and firmly established Faulkner as a professional writer. _Sartoris_ had helped to show him the way and had marked the beginning of the Yoknapatawpha chronicle, which he would use in his efforts to define Man's search for his own identity, and _The Sound and the Fury_ showed his depression at what he first saw in the hearts of men, but once these two novels were behind him, his future course had been charted.

Each of the experiences reviewed above played an important role in molding Faulkner's talents into a firm, sure knowledge of what he was trying to do, although there were never any of the romantic, almost overnight changes that popular legend has occasionally suggested. His early friendship with Stone, the time spent in the Canadian Air Force, the lengthy walks and discussions he and Stone shared after their return to Oxford, the friendship with Sherwood Anderson--all had helped to build slowly in Faulkner an awareness or a realization that the South was not all that glorious legend and tradition had claimed, that even in its most brilliant years glaring flaws and domestic and political evils were in existence, although they were always explained away, covered with the usual verbal whitewash, or made to seem trivial in comparison to the legendary gallantries that were so loudly touted by those who lived still by and on illusion. Faulkner loved his native South

and its gentle customs, but he could now see clearly its
flaws and faults. The Articles of the Southern Creed[20] go to
the very heart of what Faulkner knew to be the real causes of
many, perhaps most, of the ills plaguing the modern South.
Historical fact proved to him that the very existence of the
ante-bellum South came out of what he called the legal
fiction of ownership of the land,[21] that it rested on the
exploitation of both the uneducated, unsophisticated Indian
from whom the land had been "bought," and the poor Negro who
worked in slavery in order that the land might be profitably
tilled for his "aristocratic" master. Faulkner was dismayed
by the clear knowledge that those Southern gentlemen who had
been at least partially good and strong leaders did not
reproduce themselves but left behind in the succeeding
generations sons weakened by undeserved luxuries in both
moral and physical courage and in the ability to lead in the
community. They, in other words, left no guides, no believ-
able standards to follow. All that remained after they were
gone was a mere hull of the former greatness, kept up for the
sake of appearances by the few who still bothered to care.
Faulkner recognized and resented the denial to both the Negro
and the poor, landless, white tenant farmers the right to be

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[20]Joe C. Shaw, "Sociological Aspects of Faulkner's
Writing," Mississippi Quarterly, XIV (1960-61), 148-152.

[21]Coughlan, op. cit., p. 70.

considered as human beings rather than be treated as chattels long after the War was over and all slaves were "freed." Certainly the instruments of this oppression were not the futile Sartorises but a tougher breed.

These views Faulkner kept in mind as he began to form his Yoknapatawpha chronicle. He drew upon them to outline the decline and fall of the Compson dynasty. He kept them in mind as he wrote the various segments of the McCaslin story which explored the combined evils of incest and slavery for which one McCaslin, Uncle Ike, tried to atone by relinquishing all title to the lands he inherited from the forebears who had originated the curse brought upon the family. But he particularly applied what he had discovered about his homeland in his formation of the Snopes chapters of the Yoknapatawpha legend, for he felt that the curse placed upon the land by the morally defunct and sterile Southern aristocracy was the direct cause of those conditions which had opened the door to a more frightening philosophy--Snopesism.

He did not have to look far for models either. The Snopes prototypes lived right in his own town. These living models did have their good qualities and added a new vitality to a town that had long since grown lethargic, but Faulkner was never able to present them in anything but their most primitive, objectionable stage, because of their inhumanly cruel tormenting of an epileptic child in the neighborhood.

Faulkner's younger brother John recalls the incident in his warm biography of the writer:

> One thing that the Snopes children did, to me was one of our town tragedies. I know it affected Bill deeply, so deeply that it may have been the reason for his choosing the name he did for them. . . . Of all of us, I think, Bill was the most upset. And I believe that had something to do with his choice of that name and why he never protrayed them beyond the primitive stage. To him they never got beyond that. They were always the ones who had done that cruel thing to that boy.[22]

Oxford itself had been much to blame for allowing the conditions to form and to exist that set the stage for the coming of the Snopeses and their kind. The town had fared comparatively well during the Civil War and after, and it had little of the trouble recovering from the War that much of the rest of the South experienced. The town was more in the eddy of the war than in the main current. It suffered some occupation by Union troops, and part of it was burned, but, all in all, it came through fairly well. Oxford's lack of serious battle scars accounted largely for the bustle and industriousness that settled over it so soon after the fighting had ended. After minor skirmishes with the usual carpetbaggers, racial antagonists, and Union troops on their way home, it settled down and proceeded on its course much as before.

It was about this time that its former town leaders, along with several ambitious newcomers, returned to or

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[22]John Faulkner, My Brother Bill, pp. 271-273.

entered the scene to begin, like Colonel Falkner, their

post-war enterprises. For a while, the area flourished,

busying itself with returning to normal, but in a few years,

when reconstruction had been accomplished and the older pre-

and post-war community leaders began to die out without

reproducing themselves, lethargy and unproductivity set in.

The area began to stagnate, pre-War glories and war-time

gallantries were revived, and relived, and Oxford fell to

nurturing a mere shell of its former greatness and clinging

to its tissue-paper values.

The lack of strong, conscientious civic leadership, the

worship of false values, the social apathy that was developed

--each marked in part the moral sterility that was being

created. Oxford (and the rest of the South as well) had

made itself ripe for the New Breed, the opportunists, the

"modernists" as Faulkner sometimes called them, to move in.

Commercial interests were soon joined by rabble-rousing

popular politicians like the racists, Vardaman and Bilbo,

and the combined interests together made a fast, strong play

for the support of the "red-neck" sharecropper people who

moved, mostly for lack of knowing what else to do, from

worn-out tenant farm to worn-out tenant farm, and who now

had drifted into the edge of town hoping to find a better

life for themselves and their children. Most of them had

spent their lives in a sort of legal economic bondage to

their landlords, getting "furnish" from the landlord to tide

them over until the crops came in, crops which the land-
lord's banker already owned. Had the aristocratic South,
along with the rest of the nation, not walled itself off
from these peoples and their plight, shutting itself up in
an ivory-tower existence, a much happier relationship and a
much smoother and speedier settlement of their differences
could probably have been reached. Instead the poor share-
croppers, giddy with the realization that they had the right
and power to vote and to have a voice in the government of
their city and state, began a grim assault on the Bastilles
of Southern gentility, heretofore practically inaccessible
to them, and now very much within their reach if they worked
hard enough. Says John Faulkner of them:

>   As Bill described them, they moved first into
> the edge of town, into jerry-built frame houses
> that rented for only a few dollars a month. Such
> shacks had, at the most, but one or two bedrooms,
> and into these they crowded whole families and
> brought in their kinfolk, one at a time, until
> they spilled over into the town. First they took
> menial jobs, then got into businesses of their own,
> like cafes and small grocery stores. At last they
> moved onto our Square and became merchants and town
> clerks and aldermen. . . . They even got control of
> our banks and when we needed to borrow money we had
> to ask them for it. We didn't believe it could
> happen, but it did. . . . They took advantage of
> every opportunity. They were persistent and in-
> sistent, in an unobtrusive way, like they were part
> of the landscape. Then they reared up a mountain.
> Before you actually knew they were coming, to your
> surprise they were already there.[23]

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[23]Ibid., pp. 269-270.

A few succeeded in gaining positions and wealth equal to and often above that of their former "superiors," some continued to struggle, trying to claw their way to the top or even just to a comfortable plateau, a resting place, but some were crushed in the scramble by their own kind into conditions and positions as bad or worse than their original lot.

William Faulkner was, in every sense, "a part of all that he had met," a mixture of aristocratic temperament and breeding and modern intelligence and insight, and he hated the sins (the moral and social evils for which the South was responsible) and loved the sinner (the South itself). His discomfort with his ambivalent feelings is in evidence throughout all his work. Because the Snopeses had destroyed much of the gentle Southern customs in their drive for position and power, once they found it within their reach, it should not seem strange at all that Faulkner was so bitter and contemptuous toward them and their kind; what they had destroyed, the Old Order that they had replaced, was part of his very heritage. Yet, at the same time, he could not help being partially sympathetic toward some of them, for their original lot had been the direct result of the unethical actions of the aristocratic Old Order from which he had come. He had no honest choice but to recognize that the very economic and social foundations of the community and of the South had been founded upon values that were unrealistic but still held sacred by many. Faulkner's

contempt for the New Breed, nevertheless, was held no less
firmly after he had perceived that the aristocrats (who had
been thus defeated) had been the original harbingers of the
corruption and decay that had destroyed the Old Order of the
South, for instead of taking over again after the Civil War
and providing honest moral values on which the foundations
of a new way of life could be built, they had struggled
foolishly and vainly to restore the old ways to all their
former glory. Both Faulkner's Snopeses and their real life
counterparts were the almost inevitable result of all that
the fictional and real aristocrats had failed to do.

Why is it necessary and important to go so far into
Faulkner's life to dig out all the factors that gave rise to
the Snopeses? First, because all that Faulkner wrote was a
part of his universal theme, part of his examination of
human lives and hearts and passions and emotions for evi-
dence to support his fundamental belief that the human heart
can and will in time endure and prevail. Second, because of
the extensive amount of time and space that Faulkner devoted
to the creation and development of the Snopeses, it is
evident that he considered them to be of major importance to
his central theme, and to understand clearly their purpose
and meaning, one must examine in detail every discernible
factor that contributed to their creation. Third, Faulkner,
a complex man with ambivalent feelings toward his total
environment, past and present history, wrote his best work

in the form of a striking parallel to this environment, so that in order to understand the true nature of what he wrote, it is necessary to understand the role of his past experiences in making him what he was.

Because the man Faulkner can hardly be separated from what he wrote, once he began to take Sherwood Anderson's advice to write about what was closest to his heart, one has to consider that man as a vital factor in any kind of study of his work. Without a doubt his weakest works were those that strayed from the Mississippi scene so closely paralleled in the mythical Yoknapatawpha County and the real Lafayette County. The belief that the human heart will prevail is inherent in all of his best works and in many of his lesser ones. Because human beings in his opinion are basically weak and subject to indifferent actions if not to evil ones, he could not find his answer by dealing only with the "good" people. He had to look to those who appeared to be "bad" too.

Because that was where his first interest lay, Faulkner looked for the basic truths of the human heart first in the "quality folk," the aristocrats of the community who were supposed to be living examples of all that is moral and just and good. But these folk failed him, for they were moral and just and good on the surface only; inside they were filled with empty values and decay.

When the Old Order, the "Old Breed," failed him,
Faulkner turned to the group that had conquered and replaced
them--the vigorous "New Breed," the Snopeses. Faulkner could
see that much of the opportunism, the evils of "modernism"
that they embodied, was their sole defense against the con-
ditions imposed upon them by the old aristocratic group, and
in a sense they could hardly be blamed for fighting for
survival any way they could with whatever weapons the day
happened to present to them. For they did not have the
breeding, the training, the knowledge, that the aristocrats
had been fed upon since infancy. They could only use what
they had at hand. Possibly Faulkner felt that in this group
there was evidence of hope in spite of all the crassness,
the uncouthness, the ruthlessness they wore about their
persons like protective haloes.

But even this group eventually failed him. How? Why?
In what direction now did the path to redemption lie?

These, then, were the problems the Snopeses brought to
Faulkner. There are the reasons they fascinated him, why
they captured so much of his attention and time. Faulkner
must have felt that in them or through them or as a result
of them he would eventually find his answer, for he kept
returning to them again and again and again. And for one to
firmly establish and to interpret what Faulkner envisioned
in the Snopeses, it is necessary that he examine all the

factors that inspired their creation; that he trace the decline and fall of the "Old Breed" (who had caused the original misery suffered by the Snopeses and whom the Snopeses had replaced) in an effort to determine why a society which claimed to uphold such noble virtues could fail so utterly; and that he trace the rise to power of the New Breed along with their subsequent failure. Only then will it be possible to find Faulkner's ultimate purpose for these Snopeses and to discover (as he seemed to feel) how through them might be found the path to redemption.

CHAPTER III

THE OLD BREED AND THE NEW: COMPARISON AND CONTRAST

"He isn't John. He's Benbow Sartoris."
"What?"
"His name is Benbow Sartoris," she repeated.

Miss Jenny sat quite still for a moment. In the next room Elnora moved about laying the table for supper. "And do you think that'll do any good?" Miss Jenny demanded. "Do you think you can change one of 'em with a name?

The music went on in the dusk softly; the dusk was peopled with ghosts of glamorous and old disastrous things. And if they were just glamorous enough, there was sure to be a Sartoris in them, and then they were sure to be disastrous. Pawns. . . . But perhaps Sartoris is the game itself--a game outmoded and played with pawns shaped too late and to an old dead pattern, and of which the Player himself is a little wearied. For there is death in the sound of it, and a glamorous fatality. . . .

"Do you think," Miss Jenny repeated, "that because his name is Benbow, he'll be any less a Sartoris and a scoundrel and a fool?"[1]

With the above statement, Aunt Jenny Sartoris DuPre summarily dismisses Narcissa Benbow Sartoris' desperate efforts to protect her son, the last surviving Sartoris male heir, from the awful empty doom that had always accompanied the name Sartoris. And with the same statement, William Faulkner predicts his disillusionment with the shallow standards supported at the surface only by those aristocratic Southerners like the Sartorises upon whom the responsibility

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[1]William Faulkner, Sartoris (New York, 1959), p. 317.

of community leadership lay. In the novel Sartoris, the
first of the group to be called the Yoknapatawpha chronicle,
Faulkner is already touching on the hollowness permeating
the lives of the old aristocracy. He is laying the ground-
work for the Snopes saga, and is beginning his detailed
examination of each of three groups in the social strata of
Yoknapatawpha County in an at-first disillusioned and then
hopeful search for the path to redemption for the hearts of
men. Although Sartoris is not generally considered to be of
the same merit as some of Faulkner's greater novels like The
Sound and the Fury, it is of vital importance to the "master
plan" for the whole of Faulkner's work, for it is the source-
book for the majority of the families, the characters, and
the themes he would weave into the remainder of the work he
would produce during the remainder of his career.

At the time of Sartoris, the destructive forces of
commercialism or "modernism," of Snopesism, have already
gained a foothold in the community. The younger generations
of the aristocratic families have become disillusioned with
their shallow heritage; the Snopeses have already made an
indelible mark on the morals and the morale of the city of
Jefferson, and the general disintegration of the community
is well on its way. It has gone so far that one Snopes has
already managed to become the vice-president of the highly
respected Sartoris bank. Jefferson society is largely
divided into two camps--one side being those individuals and

families who in varying degrees accept or at least represent
the Sartoris standard--the De Spains, the Compsons, the
Sutpens, the Briersons, the Benbows, the plantation owners
and heroes of the Civil War and the other side being Ab Snopes,
patriarch of the Snopes clan, and all his brood--Ab himself,
the barn burner, who breaks the way for the Snopes invasion
of Yoknapatawpha by threatening to burn the barn of any land
owner who opposes him; his dollar-worshiping son Flem, who
becomes the banker; the idiot Ike, who falls in love with a
cow; the draft-dodging Montgomery Ward Snopes, who prospers
for a while running a dirty picture "studio"; the pitiful
murderer Mink Snopes who finally rids Jefferson of Flem;
Snopes clowns, sadists, pimps, perverts, crooked politicians,
blackmailers, embezzlers, and horsethieves--all operating
through a talent for bending the law enough to permit them
to swindle the honest country folk out of practically all
they have of value, yet doing it in a way that is enough
within the law that they rarely get caught (and when they
do, they are lightly punished). Technically unconquerable
opportunism, which seems to the honest country and city folk
to be genuine Horatio Alger-type shrewdness, is their chief
weapon. The Snopeses in their climb to the top bar no
holds; whenever necessary, they lie, cheat, steal, wheedle
their way into jobs for which they have little or no qualifi-
cations, and even trade their wives and children for leverage
to aid in their quest for positions of both economic and

political power, and they continue their pursuit of power and position unceasingly, devoting to it their total energies, ambitions, and talents.

Jefferson, by the time Aunt Jenny makes her unhappy pronouncement of the fate of young Benbow Sartoris, is almost completely under the control of the Snopeses and their like; in only a few more years Snopeses will be in complete control. The plantation-owner class, represented by the Sartoris group, has almost died out, and those few who are left care little about the need to resist the invasion by the Snopeses. The aristocrats of the community are the only citizens who have ever really had the standards that could have provided the community with moral courage and strength powerful enough to overcome the Snopeses, but they have long since abandoned all except the mere outward pretenses of upholding that which they represented. The descendants of Colonel Sartoris and his gallant contemporaries--the surviving members of the planter world--have become too weak and ineffectual to deal successfully with snopesism. Men like Horace Benbow of Sanctuary and Sartoris have become indecisive and unfruitful; Quentin Compson of The Sound and the Fury kills himself; Jason Compson of the same novel survives and holds his own against the Snopeses, but only at the expense of becoming a kind of super-Snopes himself. One wild Sartoris grandson (John) gets himself killed in the First World War, and the other (Bayard) drives

his car wildly over the country roads, insults the towns-
people, and throws his life away in contemptuous repudiation
of the empty heritage that has fallen his lot. And each
time a Sartoris, a Compson, a De Spain, or one of their kind
became disillusioned enough or careless enough to relax his
guard and to fall, there was a Snopes standing by not to
help him up and back into his place, but to step into his
shoes and to replace him, quickly, quietly, and efficiently.

There is a surprising parallel between the rise and fall
of the Sartorises and their kind and that of the Snopeses and
their kind. There are also some important contrasts.
Faulkner, when he first began writing about them, made
almost the same mistake as the aristocrats who were defeated
in his novels; he tried to argue for the merits of the
aristocrats and their "rightful" position as undisputed
moral, social, and cultural leaders in the community. He
sought to make these arguments even stronger by attacking
the powerful, energetic newcomers who were conquering the
aristocrats of the community with qualities as simple as
ambition, vitality, and willingness to work. In his efforts
to defend and to support this class to which his own family
belonged, Faulkner went further and further back in history
searching for some kind of proofs of the alleged merits in
which he had been taught to believe since childhood, but
instead he found more and more damaging evidence against his
forebears and their kind who had originally established the

community and had founded the culture into which he had been born.   His disillusionment prevailed through his first ten or twelve years of writing the Yoknapatawpha stories, and it was only after examining many groups of real and fictional people for promise of better things to come that an optimistic note began to appear in what he wrote.

Faulkner's search took him as far back in Mississippi history as the primeval state of existence in which only the Indian, untainted by the corrupt culture of the white man, lived and hunted and fought.   Primeval Mississippi, the Mississippi of this pre-white man era, was a wild and beautiful land, as Faulkner describes it in his assorted woods and hunting stories.   Vast forests, abundant game, and streams teeming with fish were commonplace.   Even the earliest of the white men who invaded the Mississippi wilderness but eventually pushed on west did not do much to change the original picture.   They did cut some giant trees just to get a handful or two of wild honey, and they did clear small amounts of land of most of its natural vegetation in order to plant enough crops to sustain them throughout their stay, but taking their actions altogether, what they took from the land which they then abandoned barely made a dent in the surface of the abundant natural resources.

It was those who came afterward, the land speculators, the large scale planters, who actually made deep and permanently damaging inroads into the beauty and abundance given

to the land by nature, and who established in the land the
culture that cursed it--the system of slavery necessary to
support their grandiose dreams of a culture and a way of
life defeated in Europe by the French Revolution years
before. These men came from many roots: some of them were
born aristocrats just arriving from--fleeing from--Europe;
others were second and third and fourth sons of Virginia and
Carolina planters leaving their homes because the eldest son
had already inherited all their father's holdings and there
was nothing left for them; still others were running for
safety just ahead of a sheriff's posse or some irate
father's shotgun; and some were just opportunists, specu-
lators, going to a country where they were not known and
where they might have a fighting chance to establish in a
new society the fortunes and the positions that were beyond
them in the community from which they came. But regardless
of their background, all these men had common goals and
reached them by similar methods; they established and main-
tained a feudal society that could satisfy their longings
for courtly society, for feelings of wealth and power, for
the evidence of personal control over land and human lives,
for all the symbols which, at that time, gave evidence of
status they could never have achieved under any other cir-
cumstances or system of society.

Also along with these men obsessed with magnificent
ambitions came others with dreams less grandiose but equally

strong--those sturdy, honest folk who wanted only the
opportunity of a new wilderness to conquer, a new challenge
to face, a new land to settle, a new freedom to enjoy.
Finding little land left over after the rich plantation
owners had established their claims, some of them went to
the hills to settle; some took the little scraps of land
left between the large plantations because they were too
small or too worthless to bother with and tried to eke out
an honest living from the little bit of soil that was there.
Many of these ended as landless tenant farmers working on
shares the lands of the plantation owners; and a few of
them--rootless, shiftless drifters--became the ancestors of
those horse-trading, sometimes-thieving, ever-itinerant,
share-cropping, dollar-grubbing, social misfits called
Snopeses. This latter group worked only when and only be-
cause they could figure no other way to gain a dollar or
two. They were scavengers who roamed the country, preying
upon anyone they could bully and bluff and victimize, and
breeding like flies. They did not really belong to the
"poor-white" or "red-neck farmer" class, although their
economic condition was in some ways comparable, for these
latter folk were basically honest and conscientious people
like the Ratliffs, the Littlejohns, and the McCallums.

Because of their drive and ambition (and their resultant
success) it was to the first and the last of these permanent
Mississippi settlers that Faulkner looked in his efforts to

find some explanation, some hope, for the decadent condition
of man as Faulkner saw him early in his career. He investi-
gated the two groups of people exhaustively, and in turn
each of the groups failed him, but out of his investiga-
tions there evolved a more optimistic view of mankind and an
indication of where the answer to this search lay.

In Sartoris two old men are discussing the Civil War,
reliving glories long past. But then, as the conversation
died down, one of them, old Bayard Sartoris--son of Colonel
John of The Unvanquished--asked the other, known just as old
man Falls, "Will . . . what the devil were you folks
fighting about, anyhow?" And old Will Falls answered,
"Bayard . . . be damned if I ever did know."[2] That much of
the aristocratic South realized the hollowness of the many
reasons given for fighting a costly Civil War is here made
plain. Regardless of anyone's efforts to justify or to
place blame for such a war, no individual or group or state,
especially in the South, went through the war unaffected,
unchanged. It changed long established customs and destroyed
long established cultures. The former ruler became the
ruled, and the penniless and rootless became the rich and
established. Yet the greatest tragedy of the war lay not so
much in the fact that a great nation was almost divided and
destroyed but in the fact that not only were the participants

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[2]Ibid., p. 199.

largely blind to what they had done and to why they were
fighting, but also that they had learned nothing about them-
selves and that they insisted on trying to re-establish the
very conditions that had led them into war in the first
place. The Civil War had wrought havoc upon the feudalism
of the planters and their class, and they with reckless
daring had rushed to battle like thousands of Don Quixotes
in vain efforts to protect what had become an empty, morally
defunct society. All the noble speeches praising the merits
of their society and condemning the injustices against it by
meddling Yankees amounted to little more than foolish
rationalizations. And when the false foundations of their
pride were destroyed, they had nothing stronger to fall back
upon. Their sins had long since been committed, and the
irreparable damage had long since been done--the Negro had
been cruelly enslaved; the unsophisticated Indians (who had
been tricked of their lands and corrupted by the false
standards of the ambitious white men) were leaving their
ancestral homes for patches of dry, almost barren, oil-
holding land further west; and much of the land was already
gutted, ruined, and left defenseless in the face of raging
floodwaters that drained away what little fertile top soil
was left, leaving in its place ugly gashes across a once
lush and lovely land. A handful of the plantation nobles
(Colonel Sartoris in spite of all his reckless bravery among
them) had had even long before the war a deep sense of

social awareness and responsibility. However, their aware-
ness was either not deep enough or their courage not high
enough to surmount the pressures upon them to maintain the
feudal system that was part of the curse of the South. The
following description of the Old Colonel could be generally
applied to all those of his generation who were formerly the
dynamic leaders of the community, and fairly close to being
the "quality folk" that many of their contemporaries claimed
to be and were not:

> In the Civil War episodes of The Unvanquished,
> Colonel Sartoris behaves with courage and ingenuity
> and with a patrician dignity that makes him, like
> Lee, an embodiment of the gallantry of the Lost
> Cause. The heroic recklessness of other branches
> of the Sartoris family has been checked in his case
> by his sense of social responsibility. Their failure
> to live up to his standard, and the difference be-
> tween the raw new South and the mellow plantation
> landscapes of his day and the courtly nobility of his
> generation, contribute to the torment of inadequacy
> of the generation of Quentin Compson and Bayard
> Sartoris. . . . Their conflict is not one of con-
> science, as in Hawthorne's New England but stems
> from a violation of their sense of quality. . . .[3]

The arising disillusionment reaches its apex, in
Faulkner's opinion, a generation or two later when Old
Bayard's grandson, young Bayard, and the other young men of
Jefferson who went to World War I with him return home from
this new war. Rebellion against everything old, cherished,
and established arises to such a degree that the long-hidden
disintegration of the old families and the traditions they

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[3]William Faulkner, Sartoris, pp. xii-xiii.

supported can no longer be disguised. The graciousness and grand rhetoric that characterized those who upheld or attempted to uphold the old traditions were largely wilted by the time the young men, bitter and disillusioned, returned, and if their desperate raging meant anything at all, if it had any real purpose, it probably was to suggest a strong need for something more substantial than the patterns of life offered by their elders on which they could base their raison d'etre. As has already been suggested, there is more than a coincidental relationship between young Bayard's troubles and the degeneration of the Sartoris (or Southern) code.

The impending disillusionment of the younger generations of the aristocratic families had been foreshadowed long before in the experiences of Old Bayard himself. He had been only fourteen when "the first Bayard, a good officer and a fine cavalryman, but . . . too reckless,"[4] galloped back recklessly and stubbornly in the face of an entire army to capture a symbolic can of anchovies, and he had been only fifteen when he followed the same reckless Sartoris code in getting revenge for the murder of his grandmother Rosa Millard. It was not until he was twenty-four, after his father's partner Redmond had shot and killed Colonel Sartoris (who himself had gone purposely unarmed in repudiation of

[4]Ibid., p. 39.

the violence inherent in the Sartoris name), that Bayard had met his greatest test. In facing his father's killer and in refusing to kill him through revenge, he grows up completely and breaks the chain of violence that had come down to him. But this note of hopefulness that entered the picture was to last through only two generations of Sartorises, for it would be broken again. It was in his later years as Old Bayard, the banker, that he failed to live up to the hope he had promised. In spite of knowing only too well the shallowness and futility of maintaining only the outward signs of the old traditions, he continued to do just that--his clinging to the old being symbolized by his continuing to ride daily to his bank in his ancient carriage. It was when he finally succumbed to the mechanical age, to the modernism represented by his wild, rash grandson and name-sake, that he died in the old Sartoris tradition of useless violence. In his acceptance of young Bayard's car and his consent to ride in it Faulkner symbolized his ultimate defeat by that very codeless culture that was destroying all that he and his family had ever represented. With Old Bayard's death, the code of the aristocrats was, for all practical purposes, defeated.

In his use of the Sartoris dynasty to trace the rise of the Southern aristocrat to wealth and power, the rise of the so-called planter society, Faulkner was rapidly approaching the necessity of turning to a new group of people in his

search for hope that man would both endure and prevail. He
had only one step further to go, and that he took in his
frequent use of a second "aristocratic" family (the Comp-
sons, who represented to him the ultimate in family
disintegration and moral decay, the lowest condition--social
and moral--to which the defunct planter society could stoop).
In his development of the Compson clan, he leads himself
directly to the next level in the social strata that he
would consider and evaluate--the Snopeses. Faulkner uses
the Compsons to make some of his most pointed and most bitter
commentaries on the real evil characterizing the old aris-
tocrats--the repudiation of one's responsibility to his
heritage through his blind adherence to mere tokens of the
ideals with which they were identified rather than to the
substance of them. In other words, Faulkner had found that
the aristocrats were a pointed illustration of what happens
when a group that has no remaining personal resources com-
pletely falls apart--the inevitable outcome when a society
does not retain its old strengths and ideals.

The main section of the Compson story is told in the
critically acclaimed novel The Sound and the Fury, a novel
which basically is concerned with the decline of a once
proud and honorable plantation family that had known
generals, governors, and wealthy planters in its proud
history. The Compsons had once owned an entire square mile
of the richest land in Yoknapatawpha County, but weakened by

excessive luxury, false values, and an unjustified pride in family name, they had fallen into disillusion and dishonor. Jason Lycurgus Compson III, a witty and sardonic alcoholic, fathered the last generations of Compsons and showed strongly the loss of faith and the depravity that came as the result of realizing, but being morally too weak and too cowardly to cope with, the terrible truth of his family's past. He expressed his reactions by retreating to his dust-filled office with a decanter freshly filled and a stack of the works of classical philosophers in which he could retreat and bury himself. His simpering, self-pitying, utterly self-centered wife occupied herself constantly with her "honor," the vanishing glories of the past, and present "indignities" heaped upon her since she "tainted" her Bascomb blood by marrying a Compson, instead of providing a home of love and acceptance and understanding for her four children. It is the failure of the neurotic Mrs. Compson to give her children and husband love that is the primary cause of the family's ultimate destruction. The responsibility for the failure of the family as a whole and of the individ-ual failures within it rests largely on her head. There is only patient, enduring Dilsey in the house to attempt to give Caddy and her brothers the affection they all, but Caddy in particular, need.

Faulkner made it plain on a number of occasions that The Sound and the Fury is largely Caddy's story; it is

definitely around her that the story pivots, for it is their reactions to her failures in love that illustrate most completely the family's state of corruption. Caddy's urgent search for love and her desperation at her failure are at the very heart of the novel.

Caddy's three brothers are each obsessed with her, but with each of them the obsession takes a different although still completely selfish, rigidly self-centered form. None of them is capable of loving her in a wholesome, normal fashion, and each persists in his efforts to force upon her for selfish reasons his own confining, rigid set of standards and patterns of behavior. Caddy's eventual rebellion against the rigidity of her family's actions and behavior leads to her sexual promiscuity and, eventually, to her flight to another world completely foreign to anything remotely connected with the Compsons. The reader in time comes to understand fully that more than anything else it has been the "failure of love and the triumph of selfishness and egotism that has brought about the degradation and disintegration of the house of the Compsons."[5]

The three Compson brothers represent three different phases of Southern aristocratic decadence: Quentin, the eldest, is the kind so obsessed with the past and so completely and exclusively believing in the past (living in a

[5]Michael Millgate, William Faulkner (New York, 1961), p. 34.

state of almost total recall) that he tries desperately to
alter the present through sheer exertion of will into a
state fitting his concept of what present family honor and
position and glory should be. His frustration at his
failure leads him to commit suicide, for he cannot face the
conflicts between the real present and the dream world he
tries to force upon it. Benjy (christened Maury but
renamed by his hypocritical mother when he stopped develop-
ing mentally) represents the essence of love and faith minus
the knowledge and understanding and sympathy that must go
with it before one can function significantly in the
present. Jason IV (for whom Faulkner had open contempt and
disgust) was the Compson who stooped the lowest of all. He
was the super-realist who surrendered in complete compromise
in order to share in the profits of the Snopeses' usurping
of his family's old position and power. Jason was the total
hypocrite, for although he never hesitated to adopt any
weapons of the Snopeses available to him when he found them
useful to his own money-grubbing and avarice, he retained
much of false pride in the Compson name and "honor," and he
never did equate himself with any of the "lower" elements in
the community who took over the aristocrats' former station
in life.

Even as a small child, Jason was already showing his
avarice and cruelty through a number of symbolic acts: his
continuous blackmailing of Caddy and Quentin into doing

whatever he wanted, his unreasonable cruelty in cutting up his idiot brother's dolls; his regular stance of hands-in-pockets was more than just a childish mannerism—it was a forewarning of his sadistic exploitation of his sister and her illegitimate daughter, once he gained control of the family fortunes (if such a term can be properly used here). Money was Jason's only god, and his every act took on the guise of a business transaction. Money was Jason's sole standard of worth, whether applied to material goods or to people. His was a philosophy that believed that every-thing, even human beings, could be reduced to simple equations in terms of dollars and cents.

> . . . and about that time Earl started yelling for me up front, so I put them away and went and waited on the damn redneck while he spent fifteen minutes deciding whether he wanted a twenty cent hame string or a thirty-five cent one.
> "You'd better take that good one," I says. "How do you fellows ever expect to get ahead, trying to work with cheap equipment?"
> "If this one ain't any good," he says, "why have you got it on sale?"
> "I didn't say it wasn't any good," I says, "I said it's not as good as that other one."
> "How do you know it's not," he says. "You ever use airy one of them?"
> "Because they don't ask thirty-five cents for it," I says. "That's how I know it's not as good."[6]

Peter Swiggart pointed out that Jason's fate, like that of his brothers, is linked to his sister's downfall, but his reaction was furious and unabating outrage, outrage based on

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[6]William Faulkner, "The Sound and the Fury," The Faulkner Reader, p. 146.

what he narrowly viewed as her behavior costing him the banking job (his money standard again) promised him by Herbert Head, Caddy's fiance. Jason had not even Quentin's dubious virtue of obsessive pride in family honor to dignity his rage; his absolute corruption was but a grotesque reflection of Quentin's more complex failure.

Jason's ruthlessness in his treatment of others knew no bounds, especially when those concerned were Caddy, her daughter Quentin, or the helpless idiot Benjy. Nothing illustrates his relentless harshness like his cruel arrangement with Caddy as she pleaded with him after Mr. Compson's funeral for just a minute with her daughter:

> . . . I saw her standing on the corner under the light and I told Mink to drive close to the walk and when I said go on, to give the team a bat. Then I took the raincoat off of her and held her to the window and Caddy saw her and sort of jumped forward.
> "Hit 'em, Mink," I says. . . . I could see her running after us through the back window. "Hit 'em again," I says, "Let's get on home." When we turned the corner she was still running.[8]

But in spite of his ruthlessness in his dealings with others, Jason's greatest sin was hypocrisy, one evil not known even to the Snopeses, upon whom he looked down as did the others of the aristocratic background. His mind was always filled with warped moral platitudes traceable to the

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[7]Peter Swiggart, The Art of Faulkner's Novels (Austin, 1962), p. 89.

[8]William Faulkner, "The Sound and the Fury," The Faulkner Reader, pp. 153-154.

Compson tradition of public integrity and personal honor, regardless of the fact that everyone in town was very much aware of his inhuman selfishness, cruelty, and domestic larceny. Arising from a background of decaying gentility and not, like Flem Snopes, "a symbolic outsider devoid of any feeling for morality and justice,"[9] Jason is a creature who, for vileness and ultimate meanness, none of Faulkner's best advertised villains like the Snopeses can touch.[10]

> Like those quasi-intellectuals who abandon old allegiances to become spokesmen of a rising new class, Jason formulates the values of Snopesism with a cleverness and vengeance which no Snopes could express. His motivation principle is never to be taken in, never to be distracted by sentiment or claims to selflessness; he knows better.[11]

Contrary to what George Marion O'Donnell proposed in his article in the Kenyon Review, the aristocratic faction and the modernist (Snopes) faction do not represent polar antitheses in a conflict of moral codes. The story of the Snopeses is in reality a re-enactment of the Sartoris-McCaslin-Sutpen-Compson group history, a situation where history is once more repeating itself and once more emphasizing the tendency in every man toward the evil of devoting his energies to self-perpetuation and to taking the easy way

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[9]Swiggart, op. cit., p. 103.

[10]Hoffman and Vickery, op. cit., p. 120.

[11]Irving Howe, William Faulkner: A Critical Study, p. 50.

out rather than to seek redemption. It is actually rather hard to reconcile such additional statements as "The Sartorises act traditionally; that is to say, they act always with an ethically responsible will. They represent vital morality, humanism,"[12] with a really close reading of such novels as The Unvanquished, Sartoris, Absalom, Absalom," and The Sound and the Fury, for from the beginning the Bayards, the Quentins, the Henrys, the Charles Bons have the curse of their fathers--the compulsion to glamorous self-destruction. In other words, "the Southern tradition, flawed from within, drives toward its own death. And whatever the undoubted attractions of glamorous self-destruction, it should really be kept distinct from 'vital morality.'"[13] And one of these novels in particular, Sartoris, also suggests that although somewhere there may be a sufficient tradition for the Bayards and Quentins and Caddys to discover, that the turbulent aristocratic families are hardly the place to start looking. They, like Faulkner himself, will have to go somewhere else.

Why did Faulkner turn from the aristocrats to a breed such as the Snopeses? Basically, because of their universality.

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[12]Hoffman and Vickery, op. cit., p. 43.

[13]Howe, op. cit., p. 40.

> Let a world collapse, in the South or in Russia,
> and there appear figures of coarse ambition driving
> their way up from beneath the social bottom, men to
> whom moral claims are not so much absurd as incom-
> prehensible, sons of bushwhackers or peasants drifting
> in from no-where and taking over through the sheer
> outrageousness of their monolithic force. They
> become presidents of local banks or chairmen of party
> sections, and later, a trifle smoother in appearance
> and style, without inhibition, they need not believe
> in the code of their society; they need only to learn
> to mimic its sounds.[14]

The "Age of Heroes" for the deep South had ended with the Civil War, and a new age--the "Age of the Common Man"-- took its place. Louis D. Rubin commented that Flem Snopes, who in a number of ways seemed to personify this new age, is about as common as they come.[15] That which was happening in America after the Civil War, but especially around the turn of the century, holds strong parallels with that which occurred in France in the period of adjustment after the French Revolution. The customs and standards of the "quality folk" were forced out of vogue and a bourgeois society took its place. The bourgeois society, the modern popular culture, that has now captured Faulkner's attention would be extremely comic if it were true that it existed only in Yoknapatawpha County, but quite the contrary is so. The Snopeses, the focal group in Faulkner's study of this stratum of society, arise in Horatio Alger fashion by shrewd attention to the

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[14]Ibid., p. 80.

[15]Louis D. Rubin, "Snopeslore: Or, Faulkner Clears the Deck," Western Review, XXII (Autumn 1957), 73-76.

best and quickest way to make a dollar in any form of business. With their talent for figures, their drive, their lack of inhibitions in the business world, they possess every quality considered essential for success in the "Poor-Richard" "Power of Positive Thinking" school of popular wisdom.

The Snopeses had arisen from an ignoble background. They were the progeny of an infamous Civil War Snopes who stole horses during the Civil War, and was hanged by his fellow Confederates because he got careless in his ability to differentiate between Union and Confederate purchasers.[16]

Faulkner did not turn directly to the Snopeses again until the story "Barn Burning," which relates how the frustrated, "soured" Ab gives vent to his proud rage against society in his almost pathological determination to preserve his honor and integrity, to save face through a dangerous confusion of moral and economic values. Although Ab was never able to become more than just a soured old man constantly at war with the frustrating world in which he lived, he served an important role in Snopesism's conquest of the twentieth century world. It was his reputation for barn burning when any landlord dared to cross him that helped his older son, Flem, to blackmail the Varners into giving him his initial introduction into the economic world.

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[16]Ibid.

The mainstream of the Snopes saga begins in The Hamlet
when Ab and his family drive up to Varner's store inquiring
whether he has a farm to rent. The local "village crier"
Ratliff tips Varner off about Ab's barn-burning reputation
and the blackmail starts. Until the advent of the Snopeses,
it had been the Varners who had lazily reigned over the
economic life of Frenchman's Bend. When he first enters the
economic stage in the form of clerking in Varner's store,
Flem, as Howe described him "imitates slavishly, almost to
parody, the dress and manners of the Varners--not merely
because, in ways not yet clear to him, he wants to move
beyond them. . . ."[17] More for not knowing any other way as
yet than for any other reason, Flem systematically sets
about mimicking and then taking over completely each of
Varner's mannerisms, especially those which contribute to
the vision of him as a bucolic Sartoris.[18] Flem's imitation
of Will and Jody is little short of out and out parody.

> Flem's shirts . . . his black tie is a copy of Will's
> . . . jerking his head at the men on the gallery . . .
> his secretness . . . parodies Will's bland inscruta-
> bility. Completing and extending this parody, Flem
> even provides himself with his own set of imitators,
> for as each new Snopes arrives, he is seen to be a
> slightly blurred carbon copy of the preceding one. .
> . .[19]

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[17]Howe, op. cit., p. 181.

[18]Olga Vickery, The Novels of William Faulkner: A
Critical Interpretation (Baton Rouge, 1959), p. 169.

[19]Ibid.

The Snopes were a curious group, perhaps all the more
frightening because they were completely unpredictable,
unscrupulous, untouched by any emotion except greed. They
were lead by Flem, undisputedly the arch-Snopes because he
was the successful one, the one who had made good. He had
led his tribe of rapscallions from a sharecropper's shack on
Will Varner's place "not fittin' for hogs to live in" to the
very bulwark of material success in Jefferson. Flem, of
course, was the main one, the leader, but following him
closely came I.O., the blacksmith and pseudo-schoolmaster
with his sons Byron, Virgil, Bilbo, Vardaman, and Montgomery
Ward; Ike, the idiot Snopes and the only one capable of real
although misdirected love; good-natured Eck (suspected
because he was good natured and honest of being the product
of "extracurricular night work" on the part of his mother)
and his industrious sons Wall Street Panic and Dollar Watch
Snopes--the Snopeses who did not fit the pattern of
unadulterated meanness and avarice set by the rest of their
relatives; the cousin Lump, or Launcelot, who was disgusted
that Mink hadn't even bothered to rob the man he had
murdered; and Mink himself, who was to be the world's
instrument of revenge against Flem.

Faulkner's Snopeses are poor and white, but they do not
belong in the category of "poor-white" as it is generally
conceived. They could almost be classified as outside of
society rather than being one level of it, for they regard

everyone as fair game to victimize and fleece. They progress from the sharecropper's cabin to the upper levels of Jefferson society by way of a series of tricks in which they take advantage of each other as freely as they do anyone else, in which they unload worthless Texas ponies upon a populace mesmerized by the chance of a bargain, and in which they sell worthless land by pretending the existence of buried treasure. Because they assume no ethical responsibility or moral code, the Snopeses have the advantage of weapons the citizens of Frenchman's Bend and Jefferson would never stoop to using; they lie, cheat, and steal so impersonally and so completely that their victims collapse in a helpless rage and frustration while they sneak quietly away fully within the letter of the law.

It is ironical that the Snopeses, hardy, prolific, ubiquitous, impersonal, practically indestructible, and imperturbable, are led by a man that is devoid of any type of human action; he--the head of the prolific Snopes clan-- is impotent, symbolic of the exploiter personality, and the embodiment of shrewdness without heart. None of the other Snopeses are quite as successful in living the philosophy of Snopesism as Flem, for none of the others are completely untouched by any kind of human emotion, yet few of them give up trying to ape everything he does. Flem is not without precedent in the history of Yoknapatawpha. He was preceded by Thomas Sutpen and Jason Compson, both of whom also

operated by the business ethic although they both had their
obsessive dreams that propelled them forward on their course.
Flem represents these earlier two Snopes prototypes without
any redeeming humanity. Broad, squat, with a face bland of
expression as "a pan of uncooked dough,"[20] he represents
obsessive avarice, an ethical nihilist.

Flem Snopes was not really sure himself what it was
that he wanted; he just knew that he had to escape from the
existence in which he was brought up. Flem's only possible
commendable feature or quality is his compulsive drive
toward a higher position in his community. It is quite
obvious throughout The Hamlet that at that stage of his
conquest of Yoknapatawpha he interpreted his goal as money,
money, and more money. Flem's chief weapon is his shrewd-
ness. Nothing in his background has instilled in him any
sense of his own dignity as an individual, so he could see
himself in no position except that of his station as agent.
Flem instinctively uses any tools at hand wherever he finds
them and takes any step which leads him away from the tenant
farmer shacks that he had known most of his life.

> Flem is a figure of evil in traditional terms
> cut off from what is decent and human not by what
> he is but by what he is not. He has intelligence
> without responsibility, desire without love; he
> does not even know what he wants, only what he does
> not want. He is menacing not because he has a

[20]Swiggart, op. cit., p. 119.

> positive power but because he does not have any
> of the usual human responses; what is evil about
> him is a negation of being, a failure to be.[21]

It took Flem a while, even after he moved on into Jefferson, to realize that money and position alone were not enough--that he had to have respectability too. But he didn't learn even that right away. It took a near disastrous miscalculation in the power plant affair and the combined plotting of Tom Tom and Tomey's Turl to defeat him and show him that money alone was not enough. And it took only a few embarrassing incidents involving his relatives (especially Eck in the hamburger joint, Mink on trial for murder, and Montgomery Ward's escapades with the dirty picture peep show) to show Flem that it was dangerous for him in his quest for respectability and position to have such potentially embarrassing, blundering, foolish relatives in town, and he proceeded to manuever them out of town one by one.

It was in his jockeying of relatives into position so that he could quietly remove them from the scene that Flem made his fatal mistake, that of repudiating his own blood through his refusal to come to Mink's aid when he was the only person capable of helping him if he wanted to. Mink was not a run-of-the-mill Snopes type, for he--like Ab--had

[21]Ann L. Hayes, "The World of The Hamlet," Studies in Faulkner (Carnegie Series in English, Vol. 6), p. 12.

that fierce intractability and anger against the injustice
of the social and economic position he and his family were
forced to inhabit. Mink, twice a murderer by the end of
The Mansion, felt that in committing his crimes he was
asserting his rights as a man and his dignity as an
individual.

These characterizations are vital in respect to
Faulkner's universal theme. His panoramic presentation of
the background and disintegration of the Southern aristo-
crat, and the ascendance of the incorrigible Snopeses is not
without visionary, long-range purpose. One of the primary
objectives of this thesis has been to explain the use of
the Snopes contingent in relation to Faulkner's thematic
vision. However, because of Faulkner's double-edged theme,
the Snopeses cannot be easily separated from the aristocrats
whom they displaced--thus the elaborate concentration upon
the Sartoris-De Spain-Compson group of families.

CHAPTER IV

THE UNIVERSALITIES IN SNOPESISM

It was the intention of Chapter III to picture the
dissolution, the dashed hopes, the general loss of faith
that becomes almost universal among the Southern aristo-
crats. As Faulkner carefully fabricates his Sartorises-
De Spains-Compsons from the clay of half-myth, half-reality,
he colors them in both description and dialogue to stress
the loss of belief. Belief in one's self and one's heritage
combined with the moral vigor to fight for something of
meaning is all important to Faulkner's world view. Even his
early work hints that loss of belief will bring forth great
"upheaval."

"Upheaval" does come and come rapidly to the Snopes
clan. But although the Snopeses possess no orthodox code of
morality in their conviction that the end justifies the
means, they firmly believe in themselves. It is ironic that
at the very point when the aristocrats have reached the
depths in loss of faith, the Snopeses enter the stage from
the wings. In contrast to the waning aristocracy, the new
loathsome breed has an awesome, indestructible vitality. It
may also be noted that the aristocrat, by comparison, is
pale and anemic, nearly listless, after decades of disin-
tegration.

The Snopeses are perhaps no worse in moral perspective than the aristocrats whom they displace. We must remember the employment of Negro slaves, the expulsion of the Indians, the Snopesian quality of Jason Compson, for example. They are, however, crude and uneducated, lacking the glorious trappings of the aristocrat. Lack of knowledge means that the uncouth Snopeses can never understand the full significance of what they are actually doing. But the aristocrat has this understanding, and it appears that Faulkner has captured the full consequences of the Compson-Sartoris-De Spain comprehension of it. His use of this knowledge gives us insight into their loss of the fiber of moral courage.

Dorsch illuminates this relationship between belief and understanding in "An Interpretation of the Central Themes of William Faulkner":

> Faulkner seems to have created contrasting characters who, because of the relative presence of belief and understanding, demonstrate the power of the essential qualities. To be of any importance in the novel a character must have some quality of belief or understanding; and by extension, it is only those members of humanity, those who have some part of one of those qualities, who are of importance to mankind. Faulkner does not say that the belief must be in something which is traditionally considered to be good, nor must the understanding be complete to bring the character into prominence. In this way, Faulkner permits the presence of both good and evil, and he is better able to contrast the two.[1]

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[1]Dorsch, op. cit., p. 58.

Dorsch asserts that Faulkner has "created contrasting
characters." Later he refers to the importance of these
characters as they relate to mankind. It is not really so
much a question of "black is black" and "white is white" in
relation to the aristocrat and the Snopes breed. Both
groups have their "evil members" and their "good members,"
yet the undeniable difference between the two exists in the
general understanding of the aristocrat and the dynamic
belief of the Snopeses.

These relationships drawn upon a basis of belief and
understanding bring several questions to the fore. Why
would Faulkner build an unscrupulous breed like the Snopeses
yet fashion them with a dynamic, pulsating vitality? Why do
they believe so firmly in themselves and their purpose,
never wavering in their insatiable quest for power? Then,
too, why does the dying aristocrat so epitomize the terrible
understanding of the past yet stand hapless before those who
will inevitably dispossess him?

It appears that Faulkner's primary purpose in creating
the loathsome Snopeses with such evident vitality is to
establish contrast with the dying aristocracy. The amazing
vitality of the Snopes clan is of course revealed in their
dogged determination to reach their goals at any cost. The
dispossessed aristocrats sit by and do nothing while the
Snopeses climb to the pinnacle of material success.[2]

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[2]Ibid.

No doubt Faulkner appreciated "the good things" of the aristocracy, but there is the other side, the smell of corruption that may be found in so many of his novels. The Snopeses are an integral part of the tragedy that comes with the complete loss of belief by the Old Order. Faulkner knew only too well of the evil of the aristocracy and accepted it, but he deplored its lack of a firm resolve in acknowledging the wrongs of the past and believing in itself in the present by correcting those wrongs.

Joseph Gold states:

> The story of the Snopeses is the story of man and the Fall. We are always confronted with the opportunity for salvation, and for Faulkner that salvation rests in eradicating the system which engendered the Snopeses. To abolish Snopesism is to live by the heart, to insist on truth, and to lead the selfless kind of existence that all of Faulkner's Christian Heroes demonstrate. . . .[3]

"To live by the heart" is definitely to believe in one's self with a marked sense of conviction. The tragedy of the situation is heightened by the fact that while the aristocrat either flirts with the ghosts of a grandiose past (like the Sartorises) or becomes a Super-realist in losing all belief (like Jason Compson), the Snopes dynasty marches onward with unlimited confidence. The depressing element in this case is that the aristocrat who possesses the knowledge for understanding is void of Faulkner's quality of belief, while

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[3]Joseph Gold, "Truth or Consequences: Faulkner's The Town," Mississippi Quarterly, XIII (1960), 112-116.

the Snopeses, who are uneducated, possess a very strong form
of belief. This is indeed a supreme irony.[4]

In the light of this supreme irony, could Faulkner's
theme perhaps extend beyond the realm of Yoknapatawpha
County and into the universal domain of human existence? Is
the rise of the Snopes clan perhaps a condition or situation
that has been repeated in the annals of human history many
times? The post-bellum world of the Southern aristocrat may
surely be compared to that of the fifth century Roman or the
late eighteenth century French nobleman. In all cases, they
epitomized the height of cultural attainment and understand-
ing of the situation, but rather than believe in themselves
they sought solace in the past. Both the Roman patrician
and the French aristocrat were each in his own time dis-
placed by a Snopes-like breed who in turn built a civiliza-
tion.

Viewing the Snopeses in a universal context removes
William Faulkner to some degree from his position as
twentieth century romanticist to one of eminent realist.
No doubt Faulkner presents a curious blend of the romanticist
and the realist. His use of the Snopeses in this context
appears to define his position as an author who grasped both
the essential truth and paradox of man's existence.

In his memorable Nobel Acceptance Speech, William
Faulkner stated his firm conviction that not only would man

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[4]Ibid.

endure but "that he would prevail." Man can only prevail
when he rids himself of the paradox illuminated by the
aristocrat—Snopes confrontation and moves toward regenera-
tion.

The painful steps that must be taken in order to reach
the lofty peak of an ideal existence may best be exemplified
through Faulkner's commentary on his heroes: ". . . the
first says, this is rotten, I'll have no part of it, I will
take death first." The second type says, ". . . this is
rotten, I don't like it, I can't do anything about it, but
at least I will not participate in it myself, I will go
into a cave or climb a pillar to sit on." The third one
says, ". . . this stinks and I'm going to do something about
it. Maybe I'll succeed . . . maybe I won't, but I'm at
least going to keep trying until I or someone succeeds."[5]

This passage is important when we consider Quentin
Compson of the "Old Breed" who kills himself in The Sound and
the Fury, and young Sarty Snopes who runs away from it all in
Barn Burning. Quentin Compson has acute intelligence and
sensitivity like the majority of his breed, but coupled with
it is a basic weakness that revolts Faulkner. Quentin cannot
face reality, so he takes his own life. On the other hand
young Sartoris Snopes is filled with the vigor and strength
of his class. He cannot kill himself when he learns

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[5]William Faulkner, Faulkner in the University,
pp. 245-246.

the truth about the father he idolizes in _Barn Burning_.
Instead, he stays and fights—though only for a moment.
Finally, he leaves forever to make a new life for himself.

Ironically, Quentin Compson and Sarty Snopes each
possesses what the other needs. Quentin has the sensitivity
and horrible comprehension of truth that would perhaps cause
a crude and uncouth Sartoris Snopes to stay and fight.
Sartoris on the other hand had the will to fight and to
defend what he saw as truth and honor and justice, but he
did not have the intelligence and awareness that gave
Quentin such depth of perception.

The third hero, who stays and fights whether he wins or
not, will bring forth regeneration in time. It is he who
will evidently have a great understanding of truth yet
believe in himself. Perhaps he may only reach the goal by
evolving through the "Snopes-State." It is a Promethean
struggle but, if we are to believe Faulkner, well worth the
sacrifice. From this vantage point, the Snopeses fit into
more than just a parable of the Romanticism and Realism of
the Old South. They are a vital element in the story of
man's quest for truth.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

One of the major factors supporting the existence of a
thematic unity, a master plan, in Faulkner's work is the
fact that most of his important novels (The Sound and the
Fury, As I Lay Dying, Sartoris, Absalom, Absalom! Light in
August, The Hamlet) are set in his mythical Mississippi
County, Yoknapatawpha. In these novels, the same charac-
ters and families of characters weave in and out of stories
and novels, appearing and reappearing at random whether a
particular work centers on them or not. These characters,
especially those in the family groups, play symbolic roles
and act out symbolic themes important to Faulkner's ethic:
themes such as the degeneration and decay of the South's
great planter aristocracy; the twin curses of the misuse of
the land and the exploitation and enslavement of the Negro;
the problem of man's true relationship with nature; and the
encroaching evil of commercialism or "modernism."

Because of the close identification of the history, and
cultural and economic environment, of Yoknapatawpha with
that of the real county in Mississippi in which Faulkner
resided, many have tended to read Faulkner as an allegory of
the South, but there is now arising a trend toward

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interpreting his work in a more universal way, as a parable of Everyman. Also because of the close identification between Lafayette County, Mississippi, and Yoknapatawpha, its fictional counterpart, it is possible to overestimate and to overemphasize Faulkner's alleged preoccupation with the South and its past. Faulkner was obviously very much interested in the romance of the South's legendary past, but what readers and critics may fail to acknowledge is Faulkner's equally strong concern for the realism of the present. Faulkner was perhaps far more interested in exploring and exemplifying the interacting and interdependent forces of the past and the present than he was in defending any particular philosophy or culture, as some insist, or in pointing an accusing finger at any disruptive, destructive forces in that particular stratum of society with which he was currently dealing, be it past or present.

It was natural that Faulkner should have a genuine affection for and an admiration of the romance and legend of the Old South; it had been a part of him since early childhood. But his vision of this heritage was altered and molded by an acute sensitivity to reality and an insight that has been a rarity in the Southern consciousness. Faulkner knew the danger and the self-deception that lay within the supreme irony of the myth of Southern tradition. Had he allowed himself to romanticize something that he knew was diametrically opposed to the true picture, he would

have allowed himself to commit knowingly the very act that
he was ever trying not to defend but to explain to the outer
world. Faulkner recognized in the romantic Southerner's
view of the Old South the hypocrisy of masking Cimmerian
deeds of misuse and maltreatment and (sometimes) even murder
of the innocent Negro and the unsophisticated Indian, on the
one hand, while on the other praising the "gentle Southern
tradition" in which gallant Southern colonels and their
ladies posed in tableaux of radiant gentility and innocence.
It was Faulkner's desire, then, to preserve the good that
this past actually did hold, at the same time acknowledging
the glaring flaws present in its historical reality.

It was elements in Faulkner's own background that gave
him the necessary ingredients to do two things: to explode
the Southern myth for what it really was—destructive, and
to go even beyond this step in realizing the key to a
universal truth of human existence when he saw the relation-
ship between the aristocrats and Snopeses (the Old Breed and
the New).

Faulkner was but a youth when he became aware of the
strange new breed of people that suddenly seemed to mushroom
before his eyes in the town of Oxford. His awareness of
them was probably even more intense because these new folk
in their ambitious industry were usurping all of the public
institutions heretofore held to be the sacred trusts of
established families of his town. These new people

supported none of the tenets of the code of his people and
all those of the same social stratum; neither were they
inhibited in their struggle for success by any of the rigid
social forms that constrict under the traditional code man's
desire for his fullest attainment. The inability of the
aristocrats to cope with the new breed of Southerner was the
natural result of a moral vitality weakened by loss of
purity of motive. The sincere effort to attain moral
uprightness for its own sake was corrupted in time to an
obsessive awareness of moral uprightness solely for the sake
of appearances. The aristocrats lost their spontaneity,
their freshness, their vitality, their potential for sig-
nificant action. Their complacent attitude, their content-
ment with the status quo, prevented them from defending
themselves against "termites that undermine an older social
order."[1] About this situation, John Faulkner writes:

> There is no doubt that the Snopeses did change
> Oxford. After we suddenly found them in charge of
> our banks and biggest stores and town government
> we became aware for the first time of the value of
> human endeavor.
> Until then our lives had been pretty well cut
> and dried. We were entrusted with our city govern-
> ment term after term and it coasted along in the
> same old rut that we considered good enough for all
> of us. Our banks were in the hands of what we called
> our upper class, our more substantial citizens, and
> our department stores were handed down from father
> to son.

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[1] John Faulkner, op. cit., p. 270.

When this new blood was infused into our daily
circumscriptions, we didn't like it. It was
probably good for us, for it made us hump along
more lively than we had before in order to keep
ahead or even to hold onto what we had. We still
didn't like what we saw happening, really, but we
didn't know what to do about it then, and we still
don't.[2]

Robert Penn Warren summarized the whole situation when he

said:

The constant ethical center of Faulkner's work is
to be found in the glorification of human effort
and human endurance, which are not confined to any
one time. It is true that Faulkner's work contains
a savage attack on modernity, but the values he
admires are found in our time. The point is that
they are found most often in people who are outside
the stream of the dominant world, the 'loud world,'
as it is called in The Sound and the Fury.[3]

The people referred to here are the Ratliffs, the Gavin

Stevens, the Charles Mallinsons, the Mrs. Littlejohns—all

of the honest, independent, conscientious people who weave

in and out of the background (and in several cases, the

foreground) of Faulkner's tales serving as moral reflectors

or stabilizers in the chaos arising from the struggle

between the old and the new dominant class. Faulkner even

suggests in a number of instances that it is even better to

be an idiot or a bastard than it is to be a hypocritical

aristocrat or an inhumanly materialistic modernist—a

Snopes.

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[2]Ibid., pp. 270-271.

[3]Robert Penn Warren, "William Faulkner," Selected
Essays (New York, 1958), p. 76.

It is probably Ratliff who best illustrates the type, or key, or vital element in man's quest for truth. Ratliff is the exceptional common man, unsophisticated yet intelligent, responsible, intuitive, shrewdly realistic, and plainly capable in a number of sectors. He is honest, often worried, wrung by compassion, but he never spooks.[4] The class of individuals epitomized by Ratliff are human yet basically free from enervating inner conflicts. Their way of life is simple. They are men of deed rather than words usually. They are the ideal, the illusionary.[5]

These good people represent not the Old Order that failed, nor the New Order that also failed, but the Order that is to come of which Ike McCaslin prophesied. This third group Faulkner had to bring to the fore, for in order to root out a popular evil like Snopesism, it is necessary to revert to a different sense of values, a system of values that will not permit one to become more concerned with respectability than with virtue.

What purpose, then, did the Snopeses serve? Perhaps it would be most accurate to say that for Faulkner they become a catalyst which served to reactivate the moral and social conscience of a stagnant culture, an empty society. If there

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[4]Warren Beck, Man in Motion: Faulkner's Trilogy (Madison, 1961), p. 68.

[5]Melvin Blackman, "Sickness and Primitivism: A Dominant Pattern in William Faulkner's Work," Accent, XIV (Winter, 1954), 61-73.

was ever any doubt before the completion of the trilogy
Snopes that the Snopes saga is a parody of Everyman at his
weakest, there should have been none after it was completed.
A short but penetrating passage from The Town perhaps defines
how and where Faulkner found the answer to his untiring
quest. The truth is pounded home that no external set of
standards, whether they be those of the traditional ante-
bellum culture, those of the dollar-worshiping, Horatio
Alger-Ben Franklin kind of modern commercialsim, or those of
any other philosophy or society or age—none of these
external standards can bring to man the strength, the
ability to endure and to prevail. The redemption must come
from a renewed sense of mankind, a revitalized heart; it
must come from within:

> "Yes," I said. "I've heard about that. I
> wonder why she never changed their name."
> "No, no," he said. "You don't understand.
> She don't want to change it. She jest wants to
> live it down. She ain't tryin to drag him by
> the hair out of Snopes, to escape from Snopes.
> She's got to purify Snopes itself. She's got to
> beat Snopes from the inside."[6]

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[6]William Faulkner, The Town, pp. 149-150.

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