CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Faulkner's Snopes Trilogy has received much critical attention, but critics often seem to be preoccupied with defending its structural coherence or trying to see its incoherence in terms of its episodic structure and overlapping characters. For example, two of the three narrators appear in *Intruder in the Dust, Knight's Gambit* and a mention is made of Snopes in *Sartoris*, Faulkner's first significant novel. *Ab Snopes*, the barn burner appears in *The Unvanquished*. From the existing evidence, it appears that *The Hamlet* though started as a novel has produced two important stories "Spotted Horses" and "The Hound". Much later, Faulkner has picked up "Spotted Horses" and "The Hound", rewrote a major portion of the present *The Hamlet*. *The Town* and *The Mansion* are the later products which round off the Snopes Saga. Chronological approach and scholarly discussion of the trilogy may lead us away from the art and themes of the trilogy. Nobody need labour the point that the trilogy has some sort of coherence. A much better way to spotlight the thematic complex of this remarkable trilogy is to discuss it in terms of Faulkner's themes in general.

Alone among modern American novelists Faulkner has a very wide canvas and a variety of characters whether one
looks at his major fiction like *Absalom, Absalom!* or minor masterpieces like *Go Down, Moses*. It is easy to note that he brings into light those perennial and enduring values the absence of which does not depress him nor the presence of which elates him. As Warren Beck rightly points out:

"His strong ethical bent, obviously central in the conceiving of his fiction, is but the basis for it, not the accomplishment, the work of art. Yet it is only in terms of Faulkner's ethical themes that the dramatic structure and aesthetic realization are to be fully apprehended in the novel."¹

In *Intruder in the Dust* Gavin Stevens tells Charles:

"Some things you must always be unable to bear. Sometimes you must never stop refusing to bear. Injustice and outrage and dishonour and shame: No matter how young you are or how old you have got."² Through Gavin, Faulkner seems to be voicing an ethic, which seems to inspire most of his good characters like Quentin, Dullea, Ike McCaslin, Ratliff, Gavin Stevens and his nephew Charles. Faulkner's bad characters, even though they recognize the value of values, are always moving and acting with their demonic wills to achieve their mean ends. Jason in *The Sound and The Fury* and Jem in the trilogy are characters who value only money above everything else. There is always a kind of tension in Faulkner's fiction between these two types of characters, and it gets modified by other factors like racial problem.

There are various references to the Snopes family in *Sartoris.*

"(Montgomery Ward) Snopes was a young man, member of a seemingly inexhaustible family which for the last ten years had been moving to town in dribbles from a small settlement known as Frenchman's Bend. Flem, the first Snopes, had appeared unheralded one day behind the counter of a small restaurant on a side street, patronized by country folk. With this foothold and like Abraham of old, he brought his blood and legal kin household by household, individual by individual, into town, and established there where they could gain money. Flem himself was presently manager of the city light and water plant, and for the following few years he was a sort of handy man to the municipal government; and three years ago, to old Bayard's profane astonishment and unanswerable annoyance, he became Vice President of the Sartoris bank, where already a relation of his was a book-keeper."3

Long ago writing in "Faulkner's Mythology" George Marion O'Donnell has said, "In Mr. Faulkner's mythology there are two kinds of characters; they are Sartorises or Snopeses, whatever the family names may be. And in the spiritual geography of Mr. Faulkner's work there are two worlds: the Sartoris world and the Snopes world. . . . The Sartorises act traditionally; that is to say, they act always with an ethically responsible will. They represent vital mortality, humanism. Being anti-traditional, the Snopeses are immoral from the Sartorist 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 moral conflict, it is important only philosophically. But it is important artistically, in this instance, because Mr. Faulkner has dramatized it convincingly in the terms of particular history and of actual life in his own part of the South — in the terms of his own tradition."4


The earlier quotation from Sartoris and the observation of O'Donnell together suggest the significance of Snopes's Saga in Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County Tales. Since Faulkner is not a historian but a novelist, an artist, dramatizing the tensions which are a part of his cultural inheritance, it becomes imperative for a student of Faulkner to evaluate any of his fiction in terms of his general themes.

Faulkner's general themes are rooted not in sociology but in a sociological myth associated with the south. The southern temperament, as Wilbur J. Cash described it in his mastery study *The Mind of the South*, is characterized by individualism, a code of personal honor, pride of race and family, chivalrous attitude towards women. The sociological myth, which is also a part of the southern history, doesn't lend itself to rational interpretation. This may be one of the reasons for its being the perennial source of tragic themes. It provides the southern artist with a usable past. The past consists of tales and legends about various men and women and their families. Inspite of the variety and diversity the whole sociological myth lends a sort of cultural unity and counteracts some of the conservative tendencies of the southern temperament.\(^5\)

When Faulkner wrote *Sartoris* he discovered for himself the raw material of his later fiction. As Dorothy Tuck rightly points out:

"The book is not so much about anyone Sartoris as it is about the myths of the entire family, the legend, history, and tradition associated with the name. The very name Sartoris has in it not only a "glamorous fatality" but an obligation to its owner to live up to its traditions, to embody the ideas and ideals—courage, honor, foolhardiness and glorious violent death—of Previous Sartoris".

II

The first Yoknapatawpha novel gives some prominence to the Snopeses, a family known for its cunning. Explaining the significance of the Yoknapatawpha county folk Faulkner created, Hoffman observes, "A look at the families he created and defined in terms of family and social relationships will convince one of the "infinite variety" he has communicated in his imaginary world. Aside from the Indians and Negroes of the early nineteenth century... there are twelve major families in the county: Habersham, Holston, Grenier, Benbow, Stevens, Sartoris, Compson, McCaslin-Edmonds, Priest, Sutpen, McCallum and Snopes. Of course, these vary immensely in size and station. There

are a great many examples of "crossing over" and of rises and declines in the century and a half of time in which Faulkner places them. Even Flem Snopes gains (Plots for) "respectability" in Jefferson before his cousin Mink murders him."⁷ In The Snopes Trilogy Faulkner deals with various families like Compsons, Sartoris, McCaslin, Stevens. Some of the characters who play a significant role in the trilogy are the descendants of Jefferson's first settlers. For instance V.K. Ratliff, the sewing machine agent is a descendant of the original Ratliffs of Jefferson's early history. Gavin Stevens' father is a judge whose genealogy is a long one. These few facts suggest that the various families of Faulkner's imaginary county have their roots in the southern past. When we talk of society in Faulkner we use it as an inclusive term. It is not fair to think that Faulkner has admiration or respect for some of the aristocratic values of characters like Bayard or Sutpen and that he has low estimate of the peasants and the poor whites. Discussing the place of the farmer in Yoknapatawpha County Richard Gray says:

"No impression could, I think, be more misleading. To accept such an interpretation of Faulkner's work it is necessary to ignore a good half of it, and to forget that the barriers that Yoknapatawpha society erects between the Privileged and the dispossessed are fairly easily surmountable. There is an extraordinary richness and fluidity about Faulkner's"

portrait of his environment, even on the simple journalistic level of reporting what he has seen, and that necessarily means an avoidance of the kind of mythologizing that would identify the Sartoris family with tradition first and last, or with their homestead with the entire South. Existing alongside the plantation order the Sartorises represent, sometimes mingling with it but always retaining its separate identity, is another world altogether that has nothing at all to do with vast cotton fields, slaves, or bold cavalry charges against the Yankees.

Frenchman's Bend is a small hamlet consisting of poor farmers of English Scotch-Welsh origin. It is a rich river bottom country where cotton and corn are grown. The people of the place have their churches and schools. They married and committed infrequent adulteries and more frequent homicides among themselves and were their own court judges and executioners. Various legends about the Frenchman who gives his name to the place about Pat Stamper and what happened to Sartorises in Jefferson are a part of the gossip of the poor peasants who squat near Varner's stores or in the plank edifice known as Little John's Hotel. Ratliff, the sewing machine agent is a rich source of information because he moves from place to place to transact his business and is popular among the peasants of the area. Since the place is small and most families live in close proximity there is nothing that can be hushed up about anyone. No secret exists as secret. As Mink later says in The Hamlet:


"Frenchman's Bend was too small; everybody in it knew
everything about everybody else." In this respect the
small town Jefferson no way differs from Frenchman's Bend.

Dilating on Gavin Stevens' relations with Linda, Rat-
liff tells us:

And that bachelor lawyer twice her age, that was al-
ready more or less in the public eye from being county
attorney, not to mention in a little town like Jefferson
where every time you had your hair cut your constituency
knew about it by suppertime.

Even earlier reflecting on the same topic Ratliff says:

"And in a little town like Jefferson where not only
everybody knows everybody else but everybody has got to
see everybody else in town at least once in the twenty-four
hours whether he wants to or not."

In The Row Charles Nullison, giving his version of Flem
Snowes' activities in Jefferson says:

"So when I say "we" and "we thought" what I mean is
Jefferson and what Jefferson thought." In such a close-
knit society as Frenchman's Bend or Jefferson there is a
possibility for the existence of certain basic human values
which we notice in characters like Mrs. Littlejohn, Ratliff,
Buchwright, and others. Their lives are not dedicated to

11. Ibid, Pp. 130–31
12. Ibid., P. 113
13. William Faulkner, *The Farm* (London: Chatto & Windus,
1967), P. 7
accomplish a grand design like Thomas Sutpen's nor they solely governed by the motive to amass wealth for its own sake as it is in Jason Compson and Flem Snopes. Jack Houston and Mink Snopes, the two tragic characters and their conflict bring to the fore the tension that exists between haves and have-nots. It is pride and false sense of status that make Houston refuse to recognize Mink's place in the society. Mink on the other hand rightly or wrongly feels that Jack Houston and people like him refuse to recognize his manhood. Mink's sense of the importance of the self can be described as a sort of code—the code of the self. His tenacity and endurance amply demonstrate what Faulkner calls "the verities" of human heart.

The intrusion of Flem Snopes into Frenchman's Bend and Jefferson are significant in more than one way. First Flem adds an economic dimension to the society based on Cash nexus. While to the peasants of the place the land and the crop are means to an end, to Flem Snopes the dollar bills and the interest he collects on small loans are ends in themselves. The frequent use of the dog image with reference to Eula's premarital affairs suggests that in this kind of society sex is not a sophisticated game but a natural and brute activity. When Flem Snopes married Eula sex is lifted from the natural and the human plane to that of economics. And this is given greater dramatic
intensity in The Town. Secondly Flem is not interested in land and agricultural pursuits. Right from the beginning, ever since he joined as a clerk in Varner's stores, we have seen him as a shrewd businessman and a capital builder. May be this suggests the transition of an agrarian community to that of a business one. The other Snopeses, except Mink, though inferior to Flem in cunning and shrewdness also like to thrive in society by their business instinct. Even Ike's attachment to Houston's cow which I.O. and Lump Snopes exploit to make money is a grotesque variation on Flem and Bula theme.

III

Throughout the Trilogy Faulkner uses the Comic mode which becomes a subtle and supple device in exploring the cultural and political aspects of a community in transition. No doubt Mink, Houston and Flem strand of the Plot in all the books of the Trilogy is tragic enough, the overall treatment of characters and tales is that of the comic, sometimes bordering on the grotesque. Commenting on Faulkner's treatment of Flem Olga Vickery says:

"... he is a comic version of Thomas Sutpen forcing his way into an ordered and hierarchical society and confronting it with his own mirror images. Both to some extent, share the same innocence which consists of acting in terms
of a design, the one social and the other economic from which all vital instincts and feelings have been eliminated. Thus through Flen's exclusive Preoccupation with business the nature and limitations of the economic man and the ethics of business are demonstrated. For Flen does have ethics, but they are ethics concerned with a ledger rather than with people.\footnote{14}

The comic mode of dramatization has always a corrective purpose. Instead of moralizing on human weaknesses and ills, the artist makes his audience aware of them by making them comic and grotesque. In \textit{The Hamlet} most of the minor characters bubble with rich humour and are enthusiastic. We notice this specially when Ratliff is on the scene. His folk dialect, his method of reminiscing the Yoknapatawpha legends punctuated by rich insights and thematic generalizations make him a master story-teller with in the Trilogy.

In the followong chapters an attempt has been made to interpret the thematic significance of the Trilogy in terms of self, family and society. The self, family and society is not a critical concept, nor a yardstick to measure the artistry of Faulkner. A critical study of the Trilogy makes one see that by and large Faulkner's preoccupation seems to be to high-light the tensions that grew between self and society, when both are changing.