CHAPTER II

FRENCHMAN'S BEND

Any sound reading of Faulkner's fiction has to focus its attention on the self-integrating and the self-destroying activities that stem from the southern past and the present of which he is very much aware. In the trilogy under consideration Faulkner keeps at the centre of the trilogy Flem Snopes whose career is presented through three intelligent narrators of varying sensibility - Nolliff, Gavin Stevens and Charles Mallison. The Hamlet, which largely employs the omniscient point of view, introduces Flem Snopes with Frenchman's Bend as a suitable setting for his activities. It is a commonplace of Faulkner criticism to say that Flem symbolizes simple and unalloyed self-interest and greed. But a closer scrutiny of the text reveals that in Frenchman's Bend Flem Snopes finds himself among the southern folk who are not unlike him in their greed and love of money. Will Varner, the largest land holder of Frenchman's Bend and his son Jedy are interested in getting as much advantage as they can from any financial transaction with the peasants of the place. We are told that these who saw Will Varner sitting in a home-made chair on the jungle-shaded lawn of old Frenchman's Bend homestead, "believed that he sat there planning his next mortgage foreclosure in private", 1 Jedy who agrees to rent

a farm to Ab Snopes has no idea of continuing the contract the moment crop is gathered. But when he learns from Ratliff, the sewing-machine agent, that Ab Snopes was mixed up in a barn-burning case two years ago, he becomes more careful and tries to woo his son, Flem whom he keeps as a clerk in his stores. Varner's have no hesitation in arranging the marriage of their daughter with Flem the moment they realize that she is a difficult commodity that cannot be easily disposed off in the matrimonial market. Initially it is Varner's grabbing instinct and opportunistic attitude that help Flem to succeed in establishing himself in the small hamlet. In the first novel of the trilogy, it is not Varner, but Ratliff, the sewing-machine agent that opposes Snopesism. Before we analyse Ratliff's attitude and methods it is imperative to examine the implication behind Faulkner's presentation of Flem in the novel. One striking detail is the animal and bird imagery that crops up when any one of the snopeses appears. Ab Snopes' beard is "as tight and knotted as a sheep's Coat."² I.O. Snopes has "a talkative weasel's face".³ On one Monday morning when Flem Snopes accompanied by another Snopes walks towards Varner's house the men squatting about the gallery of the store saw "a face quick and bright and not decisive exactly, but profoundly and incorrigibly merry behind the bright, alert, amoral eyes of a squirrel or a chipmunk".⁴

---

2. Ibid., p. 8
3. Ibid., p. 63
4. Ibid., p. 144
Flem has "a tiny predatory nose like the beak of a small hawk." As Warren Beck says: In Flem and in such lesser kinfolk as Montgomery ward, I.O. Snopes, and Lump, the grotesque more or less elides the human. When such deformation is traced to its source, it seems to rise out of nature itself, grossly atavistic and unamenable as in all the Snopeses, the life process at its most alarmingly mutative until to judge the species by the sport would be to see man as Stevenson's — "master of the agglutinated dust." Moreover, there is in Flem and other Snopes a self-destroying and cannibalistic instinct as Ratliff repeatedly observes.

After talking to Flem about Ike Snopes he observes "I went as far as one Snopes will set fire to another Snopes's barn and both Snopeses know it, and that was all right. But I stopped there. I never went on to where that first Snopes will turn around and stompt the fire out so he can sue that second Snopes for the reward and both Snopeses know that too". He also observes that, "A Snopes carries the death penalty even for another Snopes".

Flem's recurrent gesture is spitting. He always spits. When he refuses any demand he doesn't vocalize it but spits. When Mrs. Armstaid demands the money back which the Texen

5. Ibid., p. 51
8. Ibid., p. 261.
had refunded on the purchase of the horse that injured her husband, Flam spat neatly past the woman. When he was leaving Frenchman's Bend for Jefferson, Flam turned his head and spat over the wagon wheel. Examples could be multiplied. This suggests that he is not only greedy and crafty but instinctively indifferent. His self knows no law except that of self-perpetuation. He fills Frenchman's Bend with his imported kinsfolk who are his equals in greed but his inferiors in self-perpetuating and self-demacinating manipulation of human material.

From the foregoing analysis of Flam in *The Hamlet* it becomes clear that he and his attitude, though signifying an aspect of the corruption of the southern tradition, convey in general terms the reduction of the human to the brutal in modern life and existence. In the novel Snopesism appears to be self-destroying. Ratliff's struggle against Snopesism which also victimizes him is to affirm the survival of the self and of those qualities which, Faulkner as he explains in the Nobel-prize speech, will make men ultimately prevail.

The novel as it exists now has four important episodes: Bula's pre-marital affairs, Houston's marriage and murder, Ike Snopes' yearning love for Houston's Cow, the auction of spotted horses. Although Flam and Ratliff are not directly involved in any of these episodes, their indirect parti-
ception in a way clarifies for the reader the self-dissolving force embodied in Suspanism. Suspanism is not an abstraction but an actuality realized in terms of dramatic conflict involving character and motive. Book two of The Hamlet presents Eula not as mere adolescent daughter of Will Varner but as something suggesting "Symbolology out of the old Dionysic times". The first person to fall for her was the athletic school master.

He has rightly felt, "We could almost see the husband which she would some day have. He would be a dwarf, a gnome, without glands or desire, who would be no more a physical factor in her life than the owner's name on the fly-leaf of a book. There it was again, out of the books again, the dead defacement of type which had already betrayed him: the crippled Vulvan to that Venus, who would not possess her but merely own her by the single strength which power gave, the dead power of money, wealth, gowns, baubles, as he might own, not a picture, statues: a field, say. He saw in: the fine land rich and sacred and soul and eternal and impervious to him who claimed title to it, oblivious, drawing to itself tenfold the quantity of living seed its owner's whole life could have secreted and compounded, producing a thousandfold the harvest he could ever hope to gather and save". 10

This is a crucial passage for assessing the symbolic suggestion behind Faulkner's characterization of Eula.

Unlike other women, Eula cannot be possessed but can only be owned like a field. The adjectives 'rich', 'sacred', 'soul', 'eternal', 'impervious', definitely underscore

9. Ibid., p. 95
the sexual and economic implications of Bula not as a human being but as an object that could be used for self degrading ends. The passage in a way prefigures Flem's deliberate effort to pawn her for his own ends in The Town. Moreover, the passage under consideration throws light on Bula's lack of human sentiment. Even her parents are interested in her not as their daughter but as an object that could be conveniently handed over to somebody when it becomes difficult to keep it in safe custody. The mild turbulence and turmoil that Bula's affair with McCarron creates in Frenchman's Bend is a further inflection of Lebov's characterization of Bula. Flem and Bula's father have similar attitude towards marriage and family. Bula's father, a a man "who cheerfully and robustly and undeviatingly declined to accept any such theory as female chastity other than as a myth to hoodwink young husbands", \(^{11}\) tells his son, "Hell and damnation, all this hullabaloo and uproar because one confounded running bitch finally foxed herself. What did you expect - that she would spend the rest of her life just running water through it?"\(^{12}\)

Unlike Flem and Varner, Houston is a character who is anti-Snopesian. He has "inherited Southern-provincial-Protestant fanaticism regarding marriage and female purity, 

---

11. Ibid., p. 140.
12. Ibid., pp.143-44.
the biblical Magdalen, but his long stay in the west has to an extent mitigated it. Unlike Varnese and Snopeses he is neither too rich nor too poor and lives beyond his means. He marries a woman who was much too junior to him in age not because of love but because of compulsion. His wife married him because she "elected him out of all the teeming earth, not as one competent to her requirements, but as one possessing the possibilities on which she would be content to establish the structure of her life". At this point it is safe to assert that Houston's attitude, though not self-effacing, is ambiguous. Impetuous, brash and serious, he is also ignorant. The ignorance manifests itself as lack of awareness of the possibilities on which one can establish the structure of life. Even his earlier affairs during his stay in the west indicate that he is incapable of loving. His solemn mourning after the death of his wife, six months after their marriage, indicates not love but fanatical loyalty, which is almost puritanical.

Issac Snopes love for Houston's cow, juxtaposed with Eula's affairs and marriage with Flen and Houston's episode, reveals the possibilities of love. In a society which is largely ridden by lust and lucre, while Lump Snopes and other Snopeses exploit it to make money, Ratliff alone has

13. Ibid., p. 212
14. Ibid., p. 207
the humanity, decency and courage to stop it. As Lawrence Thompson rightly points out, "Ike's actions can be interpreted poetically as providing a kind of moral mirror. In what the actions of certain other characters are implicitly reflected and contrasted. Ike's love for the cow is a disinterested activity. Love for Love's sake. Though bordering on the grotesque the episode illuminates a kind of awareness which is not conscious and deliberate but instinctive and temperamental. Even among Snopeses there are men who are capable of love and charity. Dock Snopeses once tells Ratliff that he got for Isaac the wooden effigy of a cow because 'I felt sorry for him. I thought maybe any time he would happen to start thinking, that egg would give him something to think about'. 15

Mink Snopes, who delivers the last blow to Flem and Snopesism in The Mansion as a whole is an underdog for whom Faulkner seems to have had some sympathy. He shoots and kills Houston as one who resists the encroachment of the rich on the rights of the poor. Mink gets involved in a legal dispute with Houston about the ownership of a yearling bull, which was maintained and housed by Houston for ever a year. Mink doesn't protest because his poverty doesn't permit him to house it and feed it. Later when he claims it Houston protests and asks for compensation.

---

Will Varner as justice of the peace supports Houston which irritates Mink who kills Houston lying in ambush. We shall elaborately discuss this episode in the chapter dealing with *The Mansion* because in that novel the episode is narrated from a different point of view. What is of interest here is Mink’s relationship with his wife. He beats her, beats his children. When in prison he refuses the ten dollars she gives him because they are acquired by immoral means. Like Houston Mink is incapable of love. On the other hand, he acts in his relationship with others from a preconceived estimate of himself as one of the harrassed members of society. From the above analysis of the three episodes the following points emerge. Snopesism, likelust is a natural phenomenon which makes man an animal in search of lucre, but all snopeses are not of the same kind. Some of them are capable of love and charity. But the degree of awareness differs. Even those who are aware of the possibilities of love, charity and self like Ratliff some times behave like Snopeses. Ratliff is prepared to give up his share in the restaurant in Jefferson, merely to acquire the right over the desolate mansion lands which he can excavate during night time in order to unearth buried gold coins.
"The spotted Horses" episode, coming as it does in the last section of the book, brings the thematic patterns discussed in the foregoing pages to a central focus. Returning from his honeymoon Flem brings the horses and also a Texon who would help him in disposing of the wild horses to the Peasants in Frenchman's Bend. The poor peasants who lead a hand to mouth existence readily fall a prey to Flem's lucrative trade tactics. Knowing Flem for what he is why did they readily purchase the wild horses which they could not control? What do the horses symbolize? When these questions were posed to Faulkner himself during his stay in the University of Virginia, he said, "(Horses) They symbolized the hope, the aspiration, the Masculine part of society that is capable of doing, of committing puerile folly for some gewgaw that has drawn him, as juxtaposed to the cold practicality of the women". 

From this it follows that one need not be pessimistic or without hope. Snopesism is an actuality but anti-Snopesism, in the sense of an awareness of the self, manifesting in love, and simple acts of charity is also real. Almost all the episodes in a way suggest this dual inflection which does credit to Faulkner's deft use of irony. Frenchman's Bend is not a part of Faulkner's mythic land but everywhere exhibiting people involved in the "human dilemma" of love and lucre, life-promoting, self-integrating, lifestifling self-disintegrating activities.