CHAPTER III

JEFFERSON

The Town which was published 16 years after The Hamlet is perhaps the most domestic of Faulkner's novels. Though it appears as if it were a sequel to The Hamlet, it is a unified work of fiction in its own right. A thorough knowledge of The Hamlet would definitely be an asset to the reader who approaches The Town. There is a reference to the events in The Hamlet in this novel, especially in those sections narrated by Mr. Ratliff. After moving to Jefferson, Flem Snopes's rise to power and respectability in that town is presented through three narrators - Charles Mallison, his uncle Gavin Stevens and V.K. Ratliff. In this novel Snopesism doesn't dramatize itself as in The Hamlet as a course of action which is reductive and self-destroying. Basing itself on the most significant social unit, the family, snopesism consolidates itself as a force which promotes the growth of inner cohesion within the family or one which breaks it up.

Most of the episodes in the novel are filtered through the dialogue between Charles and Gavin, Gavin and Ratliff. Bula's suicide and Linda's helpless plight are tragic enough, but the overall tone of the novel is governed by

an iconic view of all human relationships which results in comic inflections.

The truth of the foregoing remarks would be seen in the following passage:

He (Flem Snopes) had his bank and his money in it and his self to be president of it so he could not only watch his money from ever being stole by another twenty-two-calibre rogue like his cousin Byron, but nobody could ever steal from him the respectability that being president of one of the two Yoknapatawpha County banks tested along with it. And he was going to have one of the biggest residences in the County or may be Mississippi too when his carpenters get through with Manfred de Spain's old home. And he had got rid of the only two downright arrant outrageous Snopeses when he run Montgomery Ward and I.O. finally out of town so that now, for the time being at least, the only other Snopes actively inside the city limits was a wholesale grocer not only as respectable but may be even more solvent than just a banker. So you would think he would a been satisfied now. But he wasn't. He had to make a young girl (Woman new) that wasn't even his child, say "I humbly thank you, Papa, for being so good to me".2

The above passage, coming from V.K. Ratliff sums up Flem's achievement in Jefferson. The Snopesian mentality of various characters in The Hamlet as we have seen in the earlier chapter has contributed to the success of Flem in Frenchman's Bend. The quixotic and half baked idealism of Gavin Stevens, his consistently inconsistent chivalrous knight errantry, have greatly contributed to Flem's achievement in The Town which has been succinctly summed up by Ratliff. As Ratliff tells us, Flem's strategy consists

in his game of testing the patience of entire Jefferson. "It was like he was trying to see just exactly how much Jefferson would stand, put up with. It was like he knewed that his respectability depended completely on Jefferson not just accepting but finally getting used to the fact that he not only had evicted Manfred de Spain from his bank but he was remodelling to move into it De Spain's birthsite likewise. From this it follows that Gavin's strategy in combating Snopesism does not succeed, not because it is a wrong kind of strategy but because it is rooted in an idealism of dreamland entirely divorced from the actual which corrects the ideal.

Our appreciation of Snopesism and what it means in terms of the various Southern families that constitute Jefferson will be lucid, if we analyse the development of Gavin Steven's character. Since there are few incidents in which he actively participated, we have to look for what he feels and thinks in his own statements, from the folklorish and sometimes unreliable narrative comments of Charles Mallison, and from what Ratliff thinks of Gavin Stevens.

Mallison tells us, we were simply in favour of De Spain and Bula Snopes, for what Uncle Gavin called the divinity of simple unadulterated, uninhabited immortal lust which they represented. In chapter III, the same

3. Ibid., p. 299.
4. Ibid., p. 17.
narrator tells us, "Uncle Gavin not even pretending any more to eat: just sitting there talking about Snopeses like he had been doing now through every usual meal for the last two weeks." That Mr. and Mrs. Snopes were haunting his mind is made obvious by the two quotations cited above. Later in the same chapter we are told that he punishes Mr. DeSpain for dancing obscenely with Bula, at the "Cotillion Ball" because he thought that he was simply defending forever with his blood the principle that chastity and virtue in women shall be defended whether they exist or not. 

What Mallison's mother says to Gavin and her husband is an apt comment on Gavin's lopsided idealism. She tells her husband and Gavin. "Even if Mrs Snopes is what you say she is, as long as what you and Gavin both agree I am since at least you agree on that, how can I run any risk sitting for ten minutes in her parlour? The trouble with both of you is, you know nothing about women. Women are not interested in morals. They aren't even interested in unmorals. The ladies of Jefferson don't care what she does. What they will

5. Ibid., p. 43.
6. Ibid., p. 69.
never forgive is the way she looks. No: the way the
Jefferson gentlemen look at her. This is precisely
the point which Gavin Stevens seems to miss whenever
he tries to idealize about the status of women not
only in Jefferson but anywhere else also.

In chapter V, in which he is the narrator, we can
notice his bewilderment when Bula comes to see him in
his office. The following passage spotlights Gavin's
predicament:

If she had ever even seen me yet while I was too
busy playing the fool because of her to notice,
buffoon for her, playing with tacks in the street
like a vicious boy, using not even honest bribery
but my own delayed vicious juvenility to play on
the natural and normal savagery ............... 
....... to gain what? for what? what did I want,
what was I trying for: like the child striking
matches in a haystack yet at the same time
triumbling with terror lest he does see holocaust. 8
Here he comes very close to an analysis and aware-
ness of his own motives and purposes.

To characterize Gavin as "one who resolutely subordinates
desire to duty, personal to the socio-ethical, passion
to a sustained affectional devotion" 9 as Warren Beck
does is to miss the implication of Gavin's idealism
in terms of Ratliff's comments quoted earlier.

Since he was opposed to DeSpain he seems to feel
some pity for Flem for marrying old Will Varner's damaged

7. Ibid., p. 45.
8. Ibid., p. 81.
   (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1961),
   p. 110.
daughter. "So in return for that worthless dowry ...... he had assumed the burden not only of his wife's moral fall and shame, but of the nameless child too, giving his name to it". He sees civic jealousy, pride, virtue in Flam's triumph over De Spain who has been ousted from the Bank Presidentship and here he exactly commits the mistake of which Eula warns him. Not to pity Flam.

In the same way he has been always corrected by Ratliff in his estimate of Flam Snopes. Ratliff tells him "No no, I tell you! ... ................. I tell you, you got Flam all wrong, all of you have. I tell you, he ain't just got respect for money; he's got active .......... reverence for it. The last thing he would ever do is hurt that bank. Because any bank whether it's his or not stands for money, and the last thing he would ever do is to insult and degrade money by mishandling it. Likely the one and only thing in his life he is ashamed of is the one thing he won't never do again. That was that-ere power-plant brass that time". Gavin's natural bent is towards mythologizing and fabulation so that in terms of sheer factual information he is n't as well informed as Bula Snopes


11. Ibid., p. 126.
about the happenings in Jefferson.

As Michael Millgate rightly points out, "So persistent is this mythologizing tendency in Steven's imagination that it comes as a shock to him and to the reader to discover that Bula is of normal size, to be confronted with the crude physical facts of Bula De Spain to realize that Flem and Bula having lived together for 18 years must necessarily talk to each other from time to time and come to agreements about practical and everyday affairs." When Bula requests him to marry her daughter Linda he leaves her without saying anything. But his hesitancy is understandable. We are told earlier he is already in love with Melisandre Beckett. And his cousin Gavin makes fun of him when he says, "That the one that marries cousin Gavin will have to be a widow with four children." 

Though he failed to help Bula Snopes to disentangle her daughter from the financial issues associated with varner's assets both in Frenchman's Bend and Jefferson, he shows a disinterested interest in Linda's future. He is the last person to see Bula Snopes before her suicide and promises to marry Linda and also swears

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to that effect. He only keeps his promise in smuggling Linda out of Jefferson. From the text itself it is not easy to account for the suicide of Bula Snopes or as Ratliff puts it, "she might have been bored now". When this question was posed to Faulkner during his stay in the University of Virginia he said: It was for the sake of that child. She at that time had realized that every child, a young girl especially, needed the semblance of an intact home - that is to have a mother and a father, to have the same things that the other children had. And she has reached an impasse where her lover would have demanded that she leave her husband and then that child would have found out that it had grown up in a broken home. Upto this time, whether the child loved Flem or not, atleast he was the symbol of the father which all other children had, and with the mother felt that it would be better for this girl to have a mother who committed suicide than a mother who ran off with a lover. Which was - that may have been the wrong decision she made but that was the decision she did make. That atleast this girl would have had the similitude of an intact though a tragedy-ridden home, just as other children did.  

This extra-textual clue, which the author has given, brings into right focus the predicament of Gavin Stevens, who plays the role of lover, father and friend, all rolled into one, to Linda Snopes. From the above analysis of Gavin Stevens, who, according to some critics, is the central character in *The Town*, emerges the various thematic threads that are loosely interwoven in the narrative. Coming from a family which has a good record and achievements of its own, Gavin Stevens is not only intelligent but is educated both in America and Europe. His half-baked idealism and myth mongering chivalrous imagination trap him in embarrassing situations, like the one in which he promises Bula that he would look after her daughter, if necessary marry her. All this suggests that he has not understood the enormity of Snopesism as a phenomenon that diverts and cracks, rends, and deracínates the unity and married calm of home and family. To quote Michael Millgate, "It is one of the most pointed ironies of the novel that when ever Stevens achieves some form of positive action he does precisely that will assist *The Snopes*: his failure as an opponent of Snopesism is more radical even than Ratliff's had been in *The Hamlet*, and a good deal more culpable."15

The most significant feature of *The Town* is its narrative method which also defines its structural peculiarity. In this novel we have three narrators. The twenty-four chapters which constitute the novel are distributed between the narrators unequally. Charles Mallison tells what he knows about the main events in ten chapters. Gavin Stevens imaginatively reconstructs some of those events in which he participated in eight chapters. The remaining six chapters given to Ratliff are short but crucial. From him we gather reasons for Steven's failure to understand the true nature of Snopesism. In some of the Ratliff's chapters we get a review of some of the events narrated in the earlier novel *The Hamlet*. When asked to comment on the functions of all the three narrators in *The Town*, Faulkner said:

Just as when you examine a monument you will walk around it. You are not satisfied to look at it from just one side. Also it was to look at it from three different mentalities—

one was the mirror which obliterated all except truth, because the mirror didn't know the other factors existed. Another was to look at it from the point of view of someone who had made of himself more or less artificial man through his desire to practice what he was told was a good virtue, apart from his belief in virtues; what he had been told trained by his respect for education in the old classical sense. The other was from the point of view of a man who practiced virtue from simple instinct—

because it was better. There was less confusion if all people didn't tell lies to one another, and didn't pretend. That seemed to me to give a more complete picture of the specific incidents as they occurred if they could be 'viewed' three times.16

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What is of significance in Faulkner's explanation is the complete picture of the specific incidents he tries to present through his three narrators. One advantage Faulkner seems to have by this kind of narrative method is to lend a greater solidity of specification to the events and characters and at the same time evaluate them. The structure of the book performs the two-fold function of revelation and evaluation, although it poses a lot of problems to the reader. It is on the whole effective in making him see and infer for himself what the novel is about. This could be illustrated by examining the views of various narrators on Flem Snopes and the other members of his clan.

Charles Mallison tells us, "... we saw the stranger in the other greasy apron behind the counter - a squat uncommunicative man with a neat minute bow tie and opaque eyes and a sudden little hooked nose like the beak of a small hawk." From Mallison we also learn that the plural stands for Jefferson. In a matter of six months Flem leaves the restaurant keeping in his place another Snopes. What he learns from Ratliff he communicates to us when he says, "... so-

ending to Ratliff, they had covered Frenchman's Bend, the chain unbroken, every Snopes in Frenchman's Bend moving up one step, leaving that last slot at the bottom open for the next Snopes to appear from nowhere and fill". 18

Flem Snopes's appointment as the Superintendent of the Power Plant and his failure to exploit the two negroes Tnull and Tom Tom over the theft of brass coverings of the boilers and his consequent resignation make Mallison say, "So he could sit all day now on the gallery of his little back-street rented house and look at the Shape of the tank standing against the sky above Jefferson roof-line — looking at his own monument, some might have thought. Except that it was not a monument; it was a foot print. A monument only says At least I got this far while a foot print says This is where I was then I moved again." 19

Mallison, of course, precisely characterizes here the quality that we associate with Snopesism. It is not something static, though it may appear like that. It is something which is ongoing but not easily per-

18. Ibid., pp. 11-12.
19. Ibid., p. 29.
ceptible and palpable. In chapter 23, Ratliff tells us about the monument erected on the grave of Bula on which there is the following epitaph:

**EULA VARNER SHOPE**

1889 1927

**A Virtuous Wife Is a Crown to Her Husband**

**Her Children Rise and Call Her Blessed.**

which has been chosen by Flem himself. Even after becoming the President of the bank and having achieved that sort of respectability which Jefferson accords to its foremost citizens, we find that Flem is in no way developing deference and respect for others and that he continues to be the same old indifferent Flem of *The Hamlet*. This is borne out by what Ratliff says towards the end: "Him setting there chewing, faint and steady and her still and straight as a post by him, not looking at nothing and then two white balls of her fists on her lap. Then he moved. He leant a little and spit out the window and then set back in the seat."

What is to be noticed here is that Flem has n't given up his characteristic gesture, spitting. That means except to his own needs and goals, to all other things

20. Ibid., p. 304.

21. Ibid., p. 305.
and aspects of life Flam is indifferent and insensitive. It is this that makes Snopesism a modern phenomenon which Faulkner detests. In chapter VIII, Gavin Stevens tells us that when Byron Snopes ran away with the bank money, "To save the good name of the bank which his father had helped to found, Mandfred De Spain had to allow Flam Snopes to become Vice-President of it — the single result of all this apparently was to efface that checkered cap from Flam Snopes and put that hotlooking black politician — preacher's hat on him in its stead." In the same chapter we are given a number of details concerning Flam's activities as the Vice-President of the bank. What now Flam seems to have learnt is to cash on the vulnerability of his enemies and victims alike. He seems to have developed what Ratliff sarcastically christens as "Civic virtue." And this has been very well explained by his wife to Gavin Stevens when she meets him for the second time and discusses her daughter's future. He doesn't want to send Linda to a good school away from Jefferson because he doesn't want the secret of her birth known to the public. As she tells Gavin, "He is Vice-President

22. Ibid., p. 125.
23. Ibid., p. 154.
of a bank and now a meddling outsider is persuading
the child to go away to school, to spend at least the
three months until the Christmas holidays among people
none of whose fathers owe him money and so must keep
their mouths shut, any one of whom might reveal the
fact which at all costs he must now keep secret . . .

. . . . . He forbade her to leave Jefferson, and black-
mailed you into supporting him by threatening you
with what he himself is afraid of: that he himself will
tell her of her mother's shame and her own illegitimacy.
Well, that's a blade with three edges. Ask your father
for the money, or take it from me, and get her away
from Jefferson or I'll tell her myself who she is—or
is not." 24 More than Ratliff, it is Bula who clearly
analyses Flem's motives for the continuous blackmail
he practises on his victims, because more than any one
else she knows him in close quarters. All this defi-
nitely suggests that Ratliff is right in saying that
Flem has become aware of the need to adopt flexible
tactics in the form of 'civic virtue': respectability.
He doesn't want to be respected but wants to be
accepted by Jefferson not for what he is but for what
he is not. That he has no respect for any homely virtue,
even for familial ties, is borne out by what Bula says
in the passage cited above.

24. Ibid., p. 196.