

## ANALYSIS

*The Hamlet* (1940)

William Faulkner

(1897-1962)

“In the 1890s, Will Varner, the mild-mannered economic power of Frenchman’s Bend, Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi, rents some land to Ab Snopes, whose grotesque, ruthlessly greedy son Flem is installed by the 30-year-old Varner heir Jody as a clerk in the Varner store to dissuade Ab from burning the barn, his usual way with landlords. Instead, Flem takes over Varner positions, property, and power as his relatives, including the shrewd, weasly I. O., the idiot Ike, and the primitive Mink, begin to dominate or demoralize the town, to the horror of the compassionate and rational V. K. Ratliff, a back-country trader. When Varner’s daughter Eula, a mindless, sensual female, becomes pregnant, she is married off to Flem in return for cash and the deed to the crumbling pre-Civil War mansion, Frenchman’s Place.

A different passion overwhelms Ike, who falls in love with a cow belonging to the morose farmer Jack Houston, and their daily relationship is made another subject of profit as Lump Snopes sells secret viewing places of the encounters. Another heifer causes different troubles between Houston and a Snopes when Mink’s rudimentary sense of justice is outraged because he is charged for letting his stock gaze on the farmer’s land, and in retaliation he kills Houston and hides his body. Lump’s demands for the \$50 carried by Houston almost lead to another murder, but Mink is imprisoned for life and comes to realize that Flem, absent in Texas, will not aid him.

Flem returns from his trip with a herd of savagely wild horses, which he auctions to the townspeople. He then mulcts them of even more money by inducing them to buy Frenchman’s Place as a site of hidden treasure, but it is actually only the place where Flem has buried, and publicly dug up, a little bit of gold. Henry Armstid not only breaks a leg capturing a wild pony, but is maddened by fruitless digging for riches, thus representing the whole community as it is bilked and corrupted by the Snopes.”

James D. Hart

*The Oxford Companion to American Literature*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition  
(Oxford 1941-83) 309-10

“Ratliff is Faulkner’s ‘rational man’... And in his person Faulkner has explored the possibilities and limitations of a rational mind in its relation to the world of Yoknapatawpha County. Ratliff is a rational observer of the cunning and amoral skill of the Snopes invasion of that county. He is shrewd, as are the Snopes; he understands the skills required to put over a ‘good deal’; he is, moreover, a folk comic spirit, able to interpret the progress of the Snopeses with the shrewd, folk insight of Frenchman’s Bend. But his rational view is too pure to be effective. He can appeal to the victims of Snopes treachery only on that irritatingly sober plane of recognizably intelligent behavior. The point of view is ineffectual because, as Faulkner, points out, victim conspires with villain in the Snopes triumph over the county. In the anxiety of Henry Armstid to buy his horse at whatever cost to him and his wife, the irrational urge toward such victimization is most thoroughly described. Ratliff ends his attempts to save the victims from themselves on a note of exasperation.”

Frederick J. Hoffman

*The Modern Novel in America*  
(Regnery Gateway 1951-63) 174

“*The Hamlet* differs considerably from the novels of the ‘major phase,’ 1929-1936. It comes at a point in the development of the Yoknapatawpha Cycle when the early conflict between legend and reality which so disturbed Quentin Compson had been largely resolved, and it is concerned with themes that had earlier been of peripheral interest. It presents as protagonists a class of Yoknapatawphas who are relative newcomers to the cycle. These things together—the lessening of tension and the use of new material—are reflected in the unique tone of *The Hamlet*... Further, since the novel is leisurely in its narrative method

and relatively lucid in its style, it does not at first glance seem to demand or merit the sort of exhaustive readings which have been given, say, to *The Sound and the Fury*....

The Snopes family appears as early as the Civil War (Ab in *The Unvanquished*) and as late as 1929 (Senator Clarence in *Sanctuary*), so that the narrative of Flem Snopes's ascendancy in *The Hamlet* has ramifications extending both backward and forward into the cycle. As for the setting, the stage of *The Hamlet*, with its piney hills and red bluffs, is isolated almost as if by Snopesian design. The people of the Bend, with few exceptions, are 'rednecks' and sharecroppers, ready victims of whichever Snopes or Varner is, for the season, providing them 'furnishings.' In Frenchman's Bend, Faulkner has created a 'control condition' where Flem can practice his wiles before moving on to the less susceptible society of Jefferson....

Here, in the symbols of Eula and the cow, the conflict between Flem and Ratliff, Faulkner relates the minor theme most significantly to the major one. Only as he learns properly to value emotion, to venerate nature, will man recover his integrity and achieve a meaningful relationship with his fellows.... The development of the novel is governed...by a yet more significant contrast, that between reason and emotion. This conflict, of recurrent interest in American literature at least since Melville and Hawthorne, has been implicit in other works of Faulkner as well. Jason IV in *The Sound and the Fury* is made despicable largely because he possesses none of the compassion which gains our sympathy for the ineffectual Quentin. Even Isaac McCaslin fails at last because he has forgotten all he ever knew about love, and again and again, as between Chick Mallison and Gavin Stevens, Faulkner's sympathies lie chiefly with children, with women, with 'primitives' who retain in its most elemental degree the ability to respond with sincere emotion....

One may think of the structure of the novel as a single, undeviating line opposed and crossed by many, always fore-shortened, lesser lines. The central line denotes Flem's rise, his progress along a coldly rational plane, 'beyond appetite,' from a clerkship in Varner's store to his victory over Ratliff. The opposing lines, ineffectual but sharply drawn, indicate those points at which Ratliff, Flem's only possible antagonist, attempts to forestall or mitigate the Snopes influence. Finally, the lines which rise from and return to the center denote actions stemming from passions foreign to Flem, actions which, nobly or violently conceived, prove futile when they come in contact with the rational plane. A concept of this sort leads, of course, to oversimplification...

Book I, which describes the arrival of Ab and Flem, the Varners' intimidation and Flem's symbolic ascension to Will's barrel chair, is the lightest and most objectively written of the four. These qualities result from the predominance in the first book of the point of view of V. K. Ratliff, whose function in the novel is a double one, that of participant and observer-commentator. Faulkner's characterization of him as a man 'affable, courteous, anecdotal and impenetrable' with his 'shrewd brown face' may well be supplemented by Constance Rourke's description of the 'Yankee peddler'.... That these details are so readily applicable to Ratliff makes him one with such classic American humorists as Sam Slick, Seba Smith, and Sut Lovingood. Critics have found him influenced chiefly by G. W. Harris' Sut and Augustus B. Longstreet's *Georgia Scenes*....

In the first book of the novel [Ratliff] has two excellent opportunities to practice his forte, the humorous narrative, when he describes Ab's first triumph over Major de Spain and his later defeat at the hands of Pat Stamper in a horse trade. The first and more immediately significant story is related to Jody Varner as he rides confidently to Ab's with a rent contract. Ratliff is seeking to bait Jody....The pace of the narrative is slow, and Jody champs helplessly as Ratliff delights in the hyperboles, rustic comparisons, and comic juxtapositions. These and the other devices, characteristic of such humorists as Twain and Longstreet, are couched in an idiom reminiscent of Huck Finn's and Sut Lovingood's, greatly moderated of course....

In his second anecdotal narrative, of Ab's being duped by Pat Stamper, Ratliff, aware now of Flem's threat, seems almost regretful of his first characterization of Ab. Reminiscently, and in a tone different from that of the De Spain story, Ratliff speaks of Ab in the days before he was 'sour'd,' when he relished a sharp trade and was capable of a certain resignation when defeated.... At two points in the novel horses act to determine the actions or fates of characters: Houston's wife is killed by a stallion, and the havoc of Book

IV is wrought by Flem's 'spotted ponies'.... Much of the novel is concerned with the lives of various pairs of 'lovers,' and Ab and Mrs. Snopes are the first of them. Ab in his trading uses money which she has set aside for a cream separator, just as Henry Armstid is later to use his wife's meager savings to buy one of Flem's ponies; but not even a distaff Snopes can be expected to show Mrs. Armstid's resignation, and Ab's wife caps the comedy by swapping the cow for a separator which she can operate only with borrowed milk. The pattern, then, is one of parallels and, more importantly, contrasts. Flem's touch has yet to 'sour' events. Only with his emergence does the horse become a destroyer, the wife a helpless victim.

Ratliff is quick to perceive that it is not Ab's headstrong pride or his vengefulness which must be feared. Rather it is Flem's utter lack of sensibility, his irresistible and amoral logic. When he returns after an absence of some six months to discover that a plague of Snopeses has descended on the Bend, Ratliff seeks to counter Flem's wiles.... In image after grotesque image Faulkner creates about Flem and the rest an impression of animal greed and amorality. Flem 'lurked among the ultimate shadows' of the store 'with a good deal of the quality of a spider of that bulbous blond omnivorous though non-poisonous species.' I. O. has 'a talkative weasel's face'....the brutality and depthlessness...[of] animal opportunism. Had Ratliff acknowledged these facts in time, he might have triumphed....

Ratliff achieves little success with his first counterattack... Thus Book I, dominated by his detached ironies, the arid setting, the sterile interplay of calculating minds, ends with Flem alone at the annual settlement, boarding at Varner's and, most importantly, symbolically enthroned in Will's barrel chair at Old Frenchman's Place.... The undeviating line of Flem's rise is now fixed, but it is not until Book II that the full significance of his rational victory is made clear. Earlier Faulkner has mentioned Jody's sister, Eula, who impassively dominates the second book and, transformed into a symbol, becomes central to the meaning of the novel. At her second appearance she suggests 'some symbology out of the old Dionysic times,' and immediately the tone of the novel changes... This aura of fecundity permeates not only the dry air of the Bend but the style of the novel....

When she is eight, Jody insists on the girl's entering the village school and persists in his endeavor until her quality, like that of 'the very goddesses in Homer and Thucydides,' has transformed the 'wooden desks and benches' of the school 'into a grove of Venus,' the hapless teacher, Labove, into a satyr. Eula in the schoolroom abrogates 'the whole long sum of human thinking and suffering which is called knowledge, education, wisdom'.... Labove is drawn back by Eula to the Bend. Under her influence his transformation into satyr begins: his legs are described as 'haired-over like those of a faun'... Goaded by this sense of waste, Labove finally assaults Eula, but fails because....reason, morality, reassert themselves; his violence is made meaningless as Eula dismisses him: 'Stop pawing me...You old headless horseman Ichabod Crane.' This is in 1890 and for three years, the center of an ever more mature, more intensely watchful circle of admirers, she remains inviolate. Then appears Labove's antithesis, Hoake McCarron, the embodiment, in his dashing buggy, of the aggressive male principle....

Eula's seduction gives it certainly a central status. If rationality pervades the first book, then utter moon-struck madness is the tone of the second, where in passages rich with suggestive diction, assonance, and image Faulkner describes the frustration of Eula's suitors, who at last succeed in waylaying her with Hoake, breaking his arm in the melee. Later, symbolically, Eula must support his injured side to facilitate her ritual impregnation.

After the relief of a comic scene which reveals the Varners' total unawareness of the true nature of their tragedy, Flem's triumph ensues. Hoake, fearful of convention, has fled; the Varners, bound by it, must find a husband; and Will, in the central irony of the novel, chooses the sterile Flem, even deeding him Old Frenchman's Place and purchasing the wedding license. The earth goddess has been sacrificed to the pagan and from this point Eula's face is not only beautiful but 'damned'... This is the crux of the novel, that the favor of the gods—Love, Fertility—has been sacrificed to rational opportunism. The union of Anchises with Venus produced Aeneas and inaugurated a golden age. The daughter of Eula and Hoake is barely mentioned in the novel, and of their union comes only tragedy....

Ratliff's humorous detachment, under the pressure of this awareness, has deserted him.... Ratliff's bitterness is suddenly transformed, and he conjures a vision of Flem in Hell, comically triumphant over

Satan himself. But the humor is that of a new Ratliff, no longer gentle in his ironies. In his fantasy he seizes on the elements of the Snopes-Varner conflict and incorporates them with embellishment into an extended and accurate analogy which serves as a turning point on the humorous level as Eula's marriage does on the serious one. Flem's victory—from tenancy, to barrel chair, to Satan's throne—is now complete, and he disappears from the scene during the whole of Book III. The vague threat to sanity posed by the conflict between Mink Snopes and Jack Houston at the end of the first book breaks in Book III into violence, after Mink loses a suit for the recovery of his cow....

Here, in his first use of word play and sharp irony, Ratliff abandons humor and deliberately seizes on wit as his weapon. This form, forged by the critical intelligence, untempered by sympathy, now becomes his favorite mode, a fact which serves to gauge his increasing bitterness and frustration. Thus all is now distorted, and when Ratliff's tirade is interrupted by a bid to watch some salacious occurrence in Mrs. Littlejohn's barn, our expectations are of the worst. This event, the nature of which is revealed only slowly, has almost the significance of Eula's seduction and marriage in the thematic development of the novel. Hoake, the goddess' consort, is with sudden and tragic irony replaced by Ike Snopes, idiot; and the 'shape of love' is transformed grotesquely into that of a cow. But the ironies here stem not only from diminution. As Faulkner develops one of his most brilliant symbols, Ike's relation with the cow becomes a metaphor of love, sharply contrasting with Flem's 'courtship' of Eula....

On the way home Ike loses a coin which Houston has given him, but he refuses to search for it, this un-Snopeslike rejection marking him as a courtly lover who accepts no material compensation. Immediately afterward, however, he returns and leads the cow from her stall. He has braved the dragon and in the idyll which follows he rejoices in his reward. Not only do these events suggest the medieval romance but so does the tone in which they are treated. Eula was often described in bovine terms, but the cow in Astarte, 'maiden, meditant, shame-free'; and Ike, weaving for her clumsy garlands, is devout priest and swain together. The style, purple as any in modern prose, has the richness of Spenser.... It elevates the lovers again into symbols, encouraging the reader to seek in myth and legend for its rationale. Indeed these two lovers, 'original, in the womb-dimension, the unavoidable first and the inescapable last, eyeless,' seem at times archetypes, but the style has a surer justification. In the wasteland any love, though it conventionally be a perverse one, is a promise of redemption...

The poetic quality...derived from parallelism, repetitions, periods, and assonances—establishes the emotional rhythm of the entire idyll. The primordial quality of the moment before dawn is conveyed chiefly through evocations of darkness, lethargy, and enriching decay. The classical and medieval allusions especially suggest the permanence and fecundity of Nature until, after the carefully wrought, richly detailed transition, they give way to the sun and bucolic reality. The implications of fertility are then made explicit, so that the progress is from slumbering potency to inchoate and, finally, aroused desire. The symbolic and objective levels of Ike's experience are perfectly merged....

Mrs. Littlejohn suggests that Ratliff is guilty of the same fear of convention which has sacrificed Eula; though acknowledging the injustice of his attitude, he nonetheless embraces it. Ratliff, the rational, the conventional, overbears Ike, the passionate, the natural. Ratliff is as humane, perhaps as good, as a man may be, but the ravished land will be redeemed by an act of love, not of righteousness. Rain is described but once in *The Hamlet*: it falls on Ike and his beloved....

After Mink's imprisonment to await trial, nature, in the bonds of winter, becomes sterile. At no other point in the novel is winter described, but now much is made of it.... Here the novel reaches its point of deepest negation. During the summer that follows, however, this bitterness by the injection, again, of frontier humor, by the lessening of tensions, and by Ratliff's admission of defeat at Flem's game. In May, Flem arrives from Texas with a string of wild ponies. These animals and their sale dominate the fourth book and are important because, given demonic proportions, they act as catalysts and serve to clarify two aspects of the theme: the destructive nature of purely acquisitive instincts and the susceptibility of acquisitive man to rational manipulation.... For every man in the Bend the ponies are a fatal temptation. Ratliff alone demurs.... Ratliff's skepticism is immediately justified as the ponies become a center of catastrophe.

The most important injury, if we are finally to understand the horse as symbol, is done the Armstid family.... When one recalls how Henry and his wife, after the death of a mule, were forced to sell each other in the traces, he recognizes that in the economy of the Bend ownership of a horse represents not only affluence but a factor of survival as well. Further, to outwit one's opponents in a horse trade is to gain the immediate respect of one's peers. Corollary to this is the fact that to own and trade in horses is a purely masculine prerogative: that 'bitless masculinity' which is relinquished not only in marriage but in subjugation of any sort....a last token of irresponsible individuality....

In the pear tree a 'mockingbird's idiot reiteration pulsed and pearled'... In a series of synecdoches the whole novel seems to be implied. The moon pours its magic rays onto a land where, for the moment, man is given up to the pursuit of a bootless freedom. The pear tree is like a drowned woman sleeping, but it is sure to 'make,' suffer a sea change. Eula, however damned, remains inviolate, a goddess supreme over a sterile domain. The bird's song is an 'idiot reiteration,' to which the pear tree is insensible, just as Eula is insensible to 'that man'...

Essentially, *The Hamlet* culminates in the stampede of the ponies: from the ensuing chaos only Flem and the land emerge unaltered.... After the injustice to Mrs. Armstid, Bookwright half expects Ratliff to return her money as he had Ike's, and his rejoinder is the bitterest of the novel: 'I could have,' he said. 'But I didn't....' Ratliff is making here his sharpest rejection of human sympathy.... Ratliff is a transitional figure; his faith in man shaken, he begins to abjure responsibility, foreshadowing, perhaps, Isaac McCaslin's withdrawal. Ratliff's pride, however, proves of a sort which precedes a fall. Himself ensnared, his sympathies will be renewed and deepened.

Ratliff's purchase of Old Frenchman's Place is made plausible not only by his loss of detachment. Afflicted already with a fatal acquisitiveness, he too readily trusts Will Varner's judgment.... Also he had become infected by Henry's madness and the general atmosphere of irrational excitement. By his naïve negotiations with Flem, his superstitious use of a divining rod, his hysterical digging, Ratliff shows himself for a time transformed by money-lust and guilt... It is this guilt, however, Ratliff's self-awareness, which permits reason once more to function. Perceiving Flem's arch deception and almost as if relieved that his turn has come and gone, Ratliff recovers his equanimity. At the same time, thanks to Ratliff's having deeded him interest in a restaurant, Flem sets out for Jefferson....

Flem pauses in his progress toward new conquests to contemplate the token of his first: Henry, 'got back into the trench and began to dig. Snopes turned his head and spat over the wagon wheel. He jerked the reins slightly. 'Come up,' he said.' This juxtaposition of Henry, the earth, and Flem objectifies the central irony toward which the novel has been directed: All men are thralls to the earth, but in his respect for his servitude lies man's chief hope of endurance through human sympathy and mutual respect. This thesis is developed on two levels, the mythic and objective. On the primary level as major symbols stand Eula and the cow, while on the secondary are Flem and Ratliff; and out of the parallel and conflicting development of these levels the novel grows....

Labove fails because the instinctive rightness of his desire is repudiated by his overly developed rational will.... Flem, whose utter lack of passion makes him irresistible on the rational level, can neither conceive of nor respect the values which Eula embodies. The Varners, though capable of pity and reverence, abet Flem in his corruption by sacrificing love on the sterile altar of conventional morality.... Eula is transformed into a cow and love becomes perverse; the fist fights of Eula's suitors become a murderous quarrel between Mink and Houston. Flem triumphs while Ike, Houston, and Mink, all capable of love, are deprived or destroyed. Even the earth, in the grip of winter, becomes sterile; and finally the humane, objective Ratliff shares the guilt of the Varners as he works the destruction of the cow, the last vestige in the land of 'the shape of love'.... It is through humor—Ratliff's ironic comments, Faulkner's grandiose distortions—that the events of the novel are for the most part made acceptable....

The development of *The Hamlet*, like that of 'The Waste Land,' is contrapuntal. The myth gains immediacy from its juxtaposition with the contemporaneous, the rational; conversely, in a series of ironic contrasts, the contemporaneous derives meaning, universality, from its juxtaposition with myth. By

indirection, Faulkner thus achieved in *The Hamlet*, to a higher degree than in any succeeding work, an effective union of art and morality.”

T. Y. Greet  
“The Theme and Structure of Faulkner’s *The Hamlet*”  
*PMLA* (September 1957) 775-90

“*The Hamlet* is less a novel than an integrated set of sketches, some of them first published as magazine stories, centering around the crossroads village of Frenchman’s Bend in Yoknapatawpha County. The dominant theme is the emergence and rise to power of the Snopes clan in the eighteen-nineties, and the central character is Flem Snopes, the most efficient and ruthless of his clan.

The novel is divided into four sections. In the first, titled “Flem,” the hamlet of Frenchman’s Bend with its ruined ante-bellum mansion is dominated by the Varner family, who own the local store and control the region’s economy. The Snopes clan soon arrive and begin to work their way into the community. Flem, one of several sons of old Ab Snopes, goes to work for the Varners as clerk in their store, and through his uncanny and intelligent perspicacity soon makes himself an essential part of the business. He saves his money and presently buys the local blacksmith shop as an investment; he has begun the first of his ‘capitalistic’ enterprises. The section also introduces V. K. Ratliff, a shrewd but friendly itinerant peddler who serves as an observer and commentator in the novel. A comic interlude relates how Ab Snopes sells the farmer Pat Stamper a horse which has been ‘fattened’ by blowing it up with a bicycle pump.

The second section, ‘Eula,’ relates the history of Will Varner’s daughter Eula, whose phenomenal sexual charms attract half the men in the region before she is twelve. When one of her swains gets her with child, Flem quietly makes a deal with Varner to marry her, thus acquiring the most desirable woman in the country and simultaneously assuring his penetration into the Varner family.

‘The Long Summer,’ the third section, contains two main incidents. In an ironically related idyll, Ike, an idiot offspring of the Snopes clan, becomes romantic over a cow and finally ‘elopes’ with it. Meanwhile Mink Snopes and the farmer Jack Houston quarrel over a bull which wanders into Houston’s pasture, and Mink murders Houston from ambush. He hides the body in a hollow tree, and he and his brother turn to squabbling over the money Houston was carrying when he died. At the end of the section the Snopes clan agrees to cure Ike of his infatuation by killing the cow and feeding him a steak from it.

In ‘The Peasants,’ the final section, Flem Snopes achieves two crowning triumphs. Returning from Texas with his bride, he brings along a herd of wild horses in charge of a Texan hostler. The Texan sells the beasts to the local farmers and then vanishes, whereupon the horses break out of their corral and disappear into the countryside. When the farmers remonstrate with Flem he claims he has nothing to do with the horses. Later he carefully drops hints that treasure is buried on the grounds of the old mansion, which he now owns. By ‘salting’ the ground with coins he manages to trick the astute Ratliff and two other men into buying the place for an exorbitant price. The money from these and other successful ventures in his pocket, he then moves on to Jefferson and greater triumphs, leaving the village ruined and demoralized.

*The Hamlet* is the most satirical of Faulkner’s novels; parts of it are virtually parody. Ike’s romance with the cow and the various horse-dealing incidents are related in the tradition of American folk humor; they suggest Mark Twain or Bret Harte. Behind this satire, however, lies a serious pattern: the rise of the brash Snopes clan and its victory over the Varners, who are squeezed dry and cast aside like a lemon before the novel is over. Thus *The Hamlet* shows the beginning of the process of the commercialization of the South, the climax of which is shown in *The Sound and the Fury*, *Light in August*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, and other novels. In a broader sense the theme is the struggle between the Snopes, whatever name they assume, and the Sartoris tradition of aristocracy. The dominant quality of the Snopeses, the shrewd and ruthless aggressiveness which earns them their success, is clearly shown in this novel. The characters of Ratliff and Houston are also superbly drawn.”

Donald Heiney  
*Recent American Literature* 4  
(Barron’s Educational Series 1958) 218-19

“Spanning almost fifty years in time, the trilogy is centered on the innumerable and vicious Snopes family, the first of which invades Yoknapatawpha County in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the hamlet of Frenchman’s Bend, Flem Snopes begins as a clerk in Will Varner’s store, and, through usury, conniving, and thrift, becomes part owner of the store and the husband of Varner’s daughter Eula. In the town of Jefferson Flem works his way into Colonel Sartoris’ bank, finally becoming vice-president. In order to enrich himself still further, he drives the bank president, Manfred De Spain, from town. In *The Mansion* Flem moves into the now-vacant De Spain mansion, one of the largest and oldest houses in Jefferson. Flem is purely mercenary, without human feelings of any kind, caring only for money and for the outward appearance of respectability. He imports a number of cousins—Mink, I. O., Lump, Ike, Eck—whom he installs in various positions in the community, until the local citizens feel they are overrun with Snopeses.

The novels are loosely episodic, humorous, and ironic; *The Hamlet* is made up of stories dealing alternately with horse-trading and with love—economic life vis-à-vis emotional life. *The Town* continues this contrast on a more sophisticated level, centering on the hopeless and almost comic love of Gavin Stevens first for Eula Varner Snopes and then for her daughter, Linda, and on the machinations used by Flem to acquire more money. *The Mansion* departs from this scheme, dealing primarily with the attempts of Mink Snopes to return to Jefferson and murder Flem, and with the relationship between Gavin and Linda. Each of the novels is made up of sections narrated for the most part by characters whose main purpose is to observe the action rather than take part in it: V.K. Ratliff, the ubiquitous sewing-machine salesman; and Chick Mallison, the young nephew of Gavin Stevens.”

Max J. Herzberg & staff  
*The Reader’s Encyclopedia of American Literature*  
(Crowell 1962) 423

“Except for Malcolm Cowley and Stephen Vincent Benet, *The Hamlet* was received with disfavor, on the usual counts of its unintelligibility, obscenity, and lack of purposeful direction. The Snopeses are all bad; there is an unnecessarily long documentation of this fact. ‘It’s a nice bucolic idyll of insanity, avarice, cruelty, rape and murder, centering around the meanest passel of white folks this side of a nineteenth-century novel.’ The principle objection was to the ‘spectacular’ accumulation of evil, large and small, with no relieving contrast. Ratliff seemed to most reviewers scarcely to have existed. Benet, however, saw his importance as a specially designated Faulkner personality (*Saturday Review of Literature*, April 6, 1940): ‘He doesn’t, it is true, get anywhere in particular, but his disillusioned comment represents the defeated virtues of civilization—at least by comparison with the Snopeses’.”

Frederick J. Hoffman, Introduction (1960)  
*William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism*  
eds. Hoffman and Olga W. Vickery  
(Harcourt/Harbinger 1963) 21

“*The Hamlet* (1940) opens a further period in Faulkner’s development. Certain Snopeses, particularly Ab Snopes, the Civil War bushwhacker, tenant farmer, and barn-burner, had appeared earlier (see ‘Barn-Burning’), but the hamlet of Frenchman’s Bend now begins to witness the rise of Flem Snopes and his clan, ‘locusts’ who swarm into the area and eat out the Varners and the other farm families. Ratliff, the sewing-machine agent and town crier of the region, serves both as witness and judge of the six episodes in the rise of the Snopeses. His own defeat as head of the opposition, through Snopes cunning and his own weakness, is therefore rendered doubly impressive.

But Ratliff is a humorist, and the vital principle of *The Hamlet* is its humor, very much in the spirit of Mark Twain’s dictum that laughter is man’s chief weapon against fraud and cruelty and humbug. It is dry and sardonic in Ratliff’s comments, wildly hyperbolic in the depiction of Eula Varner’s beauty and earthy sexuality, grotesque to the point of pain in the community’s adventure with the calico horses, and lushly lyrical in the depiction of the idiot Ike Snopes’s love for a cow. In *The Hamlet* Faulkner is a brilliant successor of Mark Twain and the humorists of the South and the Southwest. The second volume in the Snopes trilogy, *The Town* (1957), is a lesser work than the first, in that Flem Snopes is less devilish, Gavin Stevens more foolish, and Ratliff more garrulous. For all its repetitions, however, *The Mansion* (1959)

finds its fitting climax in the escape from Snopesism of Flem's daughter and the death of Flem, murdered by a kinsman."

William M. Gibson & George Arms, eds.  
*Twelve American Writers*  
(Macmillan 1962) 728-29

"*The Hamlet*, like *Go Down, Moses*, is an episodic novel, its four long sections self-contained yet interrelated in theme and plot.... Picaresque, by its very nature, inclines toward the episodic, and in *The Hamlet* a strand of it is present—the rise of Flem Snopes being an inverted and sinister picaresque adventure. A strand of the tall tale is also present, and that genre too, with its need to court its subject through indirection, inclines toward the episodic.... It unfolds a major theme—the demoralization of Frenchman's Bend by the Snopes clan.... Faulkner spirals his narrative with a leisurely amusement, a relish in seeing it spin and twist through the hands—and mouths—of a variety of characters.... The spiraling, the circling, the meandering, all have a way of coming back, with a comic exasperation and finality, to the steady growth of Flem's power....

If the novel does not progress on a strict and austere plot line, there are within each section parallel sets of events, rotating, as several critics have remarked, about the economics of trading and the hazards of love, public and private activities which both occasion and mirror Flem's history.... No matter what the situation or who opposes him, Flem Snopes cannot be stopped in Frenchman's Bend.... Still more important for creating a unity of effect is the presence of Ratliff, weaving in and out reassuringly in his buck-board and watching first with a mildly contemptuous amusement and then with growing alarm, the descent of the Snopeses. The best drawn and most intelligent of Faulkner's observers, Ratliff provides a fineness of response which, until the very last section of the book, keeps it from collapsing into mere anecdote. And together with Ratliff there is a strongly felt community—felt all the more as we witness its decay—which serves as the locus for the physical and spiritual action.

In *Light in August* the community is also a powerful force, but in a negative way: it is the background against which a drama of isolation is enacted, it represents the unsatisfied desire of the characters for a place that is truly theirs.... In *The Hamlet*, however, the community is in the forefront of the action; Will Varner is its economic center at least until Snopes takes over, the bench before the Varner store is its meeting place, and Ratliff, though a back-country traveler occasionally passing through Frenchman's Bend, serves the farmers as spokesman, critic and defender. The shift of power from Varner to Snopes is, in an oblique sort of way, a social revolution; while the Varners may be...parasites, the Snopes are deadly reptiles; and once Flem and his cousins are done with it, Frenchman's Bend has been shattered. It is a shift of power which Faulkner depicts with his customary shrewdness.

Will Varner is not very kind, he cheats his customers regularly, he behaves with an almost feudal imperiousness. Flem Snopes mimics the manners of the Varner family in a way that is at once comic, pathetic and ominous; but soon it becomes clear, as the neighboring farmers sense uneasily, that he is a creature of an entirely different cut, a grotesque who is beyond ordinary comprehension or assuagement. Flem shows neither affection nor anger, he wastes no time in friendly chatter, he acts with impersonal correctness and he conspicuously avoids cheating the customers. On the spectrum of values that the book establishes Flem stands at the opposite pole from Ratliff, and in the intensifying opposition between the two, which finds its way into almost all the stories and anecdotes, there is still another source of structural unity.

This is a novel that needs most of all to be appreciated...in somewhat the same way that one appreciates the novels of Dickens. Of all Faulkner's works *The Hamlet* is the most brilliantly colored, the most racy inventive. Only a virtuoso superbly indifferent to the cautions of his craft would bring together such a pell-mell of genres and perspectives, of tones and emotions: the hilarious tall tale of Ab Snopes and Pat Stamper swapping a horse that had been blown up with a 'bicycle pump valve under its hide just inside the nigh fore-shoulder'; the dithyramb, at once touching and repellent, of Ike Snopes's romance with a cow; the fierce Western humor of the spotted horses story (perhaps Faulkner's greatest feat of virtuosity) followed directly by the pathos of Mrs. Armstid's begging for her husband not to waste her last five dollars on one of the ponies; the fury of the Houston episode juxtaposed to the macabre grubbiness of Mink



Snopes's feud with his more successful cousin; the fantasy in which Flem Snopes routs the devil out of hell; the outrageous by-play of Mrs. Varner's complaint that Eula's pregnancy is disturbing her nap; and the skepticism, humane and troubled, with which Ratliff watches, intervenes, and then falls in defeat. A prose extravaganza striking almost every pitch and mood, among all of Faulkner's books *The Hamlet* is the most astonishing testimony to his native endowments, his sheer abundance of imaginative gifts. It is, in the very best sense, Faulkner's last great display....

The strength of *The Hamlet*, a strength typical of Faulkner, lies in its characterization. The Snopes horde is etched with a bitter precision. What could provide a finer insight into human character than the picture of Flem helping Varner at his yearly settlement with the farmers, 'Varner and Snopes resembling the white trader and his native parrot-taught headman in an African outpost'?... Seldom has Faulkner noted manners with more ease and humor than in his description of the way two farmers, Bookwright and Tull, share a meal in a Jefferson restaurant; seldom has he more strikingly shown that even in so narrow a world as Frenchman's Bend there can be an immense range of conduct and character.

Finally, however, it is Ratliff who is the triumph of the book, a major even if a marred triumph at the end. For the habitual Faulkner reader it comes as a decided pleasure to find at the center of the novel a truly intelligent and rational man who neither moons nor rants, who is not overwhelmed by neurotic fantasies, who is capable of disinterested observation, who has a highly developed moral sense yet extends his sympathy to those he judges, even to some of the Snopeses.... Ratliff is an extremely likable man in a way few of Faulkner's people can be said to be; weaving in and out of the book like a cooling stream, he brings the clarity of his mind and the wit of his speech to the turbid struggle of Frenchman's Bend....

The talk of the novel is superb—richly idiomatic, virile, brimming with high humor. When Faulkner confines himself to concrete presentation, be it of the wild chase of the ponies or the chatter of I. O. Snopes or the conversation of Ratliff, *The Hamlet* achieves the order of creative genius.... In the passage, for example, in which Flem and Ratliff, cagily trading, face each other in the store, their very gestures [reflect] the social and moral meanings of their struggle.... *The Hamlet* is a superb comic novel. As a product of the American folk imagination, with its sharply jostling exaggerations and silences, its broad jokes and sudden tenderness, *The Hamlet* ranks second only to *Huckleberry Finn*."

Irving Howe  
*William Faulkner: A Critical Study*  
(Random House/Vintage 1962) 243-49, 251-52

*The Hamlet* contains the major themes found in the novels of Faulkner's major period—1929 to 1936—transposed, as it were, into another key. While the backdrop of the aristocratic Southern past and the tragic agonizing of the deracinated Southerner are absent, the events of *The Hamlet* still, in the final analysis, may be reduced to a concern with the conflict between the accepted standards of a given society and the asocial nature of the human needs and passions of its members....characters whose relative lack of complexity makes them easily assume a stature [that is] allegorical....

*The Hamlet* is composed of four sections, each dominated by one of four different but closely related modes: comedy, myth, romance, and what might be called nightmare-comedy, or the grotesque. The tone of the book as a whole, however, is one of carefully controlled comic realism. This results largely from two devices: the contrast between events and the reactions they elicit from their observers (cf. The comic effect achieved when Mrs. Varner, learning that Eula is pregnant, gasps at Will and Jody: 'Turning up pregnant and yelling and cursing here in the house while I am trying to take a nap!' and the detached, wry comments of Ratliff, whose colloquial speech and dispassionate observation transform realism into comedy and often, even further, into irony....

In the beginning of *The Hamlet* Will Varner rules the village with an iron and autocratic, though not unpaternal, hand. Placidly surveying his domain from his barrel-chair on the ruined gallery of the Old Frenchman Place, he has almost the position of a feudal lord. If he does not own the souls of his serfs, he at least owns everything else in sight; and if he is not averse to giving credit, he does not overlook the fact that there is interest accruing to it. Ironically, his son Jody, in trying to save the Varner barns from the barn

burner, Ab Snopes, and simultaneously cheat Ab out of his crop, delivers the Varners into the hands of the Snopeses.

Flem becomes a clerk in the Varner store and systematically begins to out-Varner the Varners in acquisitiveness. Meticulously exact in matters of money, he extracts a nickel for a plug of tobacco even from old Will himself, and, unlike Jody, never makes mistakes in change even in his own favor. He adopts Jody's habit of wearing a white shirt, and, when he later moves from the tenant farm to board in the village, he becomes the only man in the community besides Will Varner to wear a tie. Having taken over Jody's former duties in the store, he next succeeds to Jody's role as supervisor of the ginning and weighing of cotton in the fall, then steps into a place beside Will at the old man's yearly settlement of the accounts of his tenants—a position that even Jody had never been allowed to occupy. As Flem had imitated the Varner dress and mannerisms, he now begins to import other Snopeses who appear to be carbon copies of himself. However, if they are hardly less rapacious, they are less shrewd than Flem, and therefore less successful.

The name Snopes itself suggests a variety of unpleasant things: snail, snake, snarl, sneak, sneer, snide, snoop, snot, snout. In addition, the various Snopes are identified with animals, usually rodents. Mink is named after a vicious member of the weasel family; I. O. is described as having a 'rodent's face'... Lump has the 'bright, alert, amoral eyes of a squirrel or a chipmunk'; St. Elmo is 'worse than a rat'; and Flem is a 'bulbous spider,' a 'dog,' or, most frequently, a 'frog.' Predatory and rapacious, with the vicious characteristics of feral animals but lacking an animal's innocence, the Snopeses are only half-human. They possess the human qualities of shrewdness, acquisitiveness, and self-interest—human in the sense that they are not shared by animals—but they almost totally lack the humanitarian virtues as Faulkner has elsewhere defined them: 'the verities of the human heart...courage, honor, pride, compassion, pity.' All of the Snopeses, and Flem in particular, are economically oriented to a degree that excludes almost all other human interests.

The name Flem is a homonym for phlegm, suggesting both the qualities of coldness and moistness with which it is identified in the early physiological theory of humors, and the viscid, opaque nature of mucus. Accordingly, Flem's character is opaque, almost two-dimensional, like that of a figure cut from cardboard or (like that of Popeye's in *Sanctuary*) from tin. He is seen always from the outside, more in terms of his mannerisms than his actual words, but most of all in terms of his activities—all of which are directed toward the financial aspects of existence. Paralleling this is his complete indifference to and incompetence in affective action. Flem is completely 'cold' to any human claims made upon him (cf. His refusal to give credit while working at Varner's store), as well as being sexually impotent—certainly a physical equivalent of his emotional inadequacy.

At the opposite end of the Snopes spectrum from Flem is the idiot Ike, a completely 'natural' man in the sense that he is incapable of responding to either the economic or social values of civilization. Significantly, Ike is the only Snopes (with the exception of Eck and Wallstreet Panic, who are not 'true' Snopeses) who is not characterized by a similarity to some kind of obnoxious animal. The animality of the other Snopeses is an index of their viciousness and their total failure in humanitarian action; Ike is an animal only insofar as he is motivated by essentially innocent animal instincts. Ike's only inheritance from his Snopes forebears is his idiocy, which, paradoxically, renders him innocent. The innocence in turn makes his love for his cow a natural rather than a perverse passion. It is only in a social context, i.e., when seen and judged by others who are not innocent, that Ike's animal love becomes an act of bestiality.

The contrast between the purely economic man and the totally natural man provides the major theme of the novel. It is exemplified in the episodes dealing with barter—Ab Snopes' horse-trading with Pat Stamper, the auction of the spotted horses, and even Flem's marriage to Eula—and those having to do with love—the pursuit of Eula by the schoolteacher Labove and by McCarron, Ike's love for his cow, Houston's marriage and his despair over his wife's death, and Mink's marriage. Both acquisitiveness and passion are seen in the extreme, almost pure, forms in Flem and Ike. In all the major characters except Ratliff one is dominant almost to the exclusion of the other.

As Olga Vickery has pointed out in her study of Faulkner, the most important difference between economic and sexual activity is that the former is a product of society and custom whereas the latter is

inherent in human nature. When carried beyond satisfying the simple needs of existence, economic activity becomes something undertaken for its own sake, and the acquisition of money or property becomes either an end in itself or is combined with a desire to exercise one's shrewdness and ability to outtrade or outsmart another. Ab Snopes attempts to vindicate his honor as a horse trader by beating Pat Stamper in a deal; Flem outrades Will Varner, the shrewdest non-Snopes in the country, in the matter of the Old Frenchman Place; Mink attempts to take advantage of Houston and get his scrub yearling wintered free in Houston's pasture. Economic activity becomes something that is inevitably carried out at the expense of another, either in terms of actual money or of pride. Passing beyond the realm of necessity, it becomes a competitive obsession destructive of human relationships and humane values.

Passion, on the other hand, is an innate rather than an acquired characteristic. Significantly, the lovers are committed to love almost in spite of themselves, against their own wishes; love becomes an obsession to which the lover must surrender not only himself but his freedom and, in some cases, his masculinity. Thus, Houston runs from his sweetheart for fifteen years before he is finally and inexorably driven back, only to lose her when she is killed by the stallion he had ostensibly bought for her, but in which he sees the 'polygamous and bitless masculinity which he had relinquished' in marriage. The schoolteacher Labove, obsessed with the thirteen-year-old Eula, is unable to tear himself away from the school and the adolescent girl he wants, not as a wife, but just 'one time as a man with a gangrened hand or foot thirsts after the axe-stroke which will leave him comparatively whole again.' Mink is summoned to the bed of the mill owner's nymphomaniac daughter, and the experience 'made a monogamist of him forever, as opium and homicide do of those whom they once accept.'

Both obsessive love and obsessive acquisitiveness reduce their subjects to a state of pure concern with one thing. The lover—Labove, Houston, Mink, even Ike—becomes simply the male desiring the beloved, a profoundly and basically human (as well as mammalian) condition. The acquisitive man, however, is reduced—or raised—to a state in which no human claim or interest can compete with the single-minded desire for gain. Thus these two extremes of human endeavor come to symbolize humanity in its most basic aspects and at its furthest remove from concern with other human beings.

Two systems of ethics emerge from these two extremes. At one end is Ike, whose love for his cow renders normal social morality inoperative as far as he himself is concerned, and to whom the good (assuming him to be capable of ethical judgment) resides solely in the attainment of the beloved; in the same way, Mink overcomes his Southern rural Protestant training that would demand that his beloved be virgin and accepts a nymphomaniac as his wife. At the other extreme stands Flem, the epitome of economic man. His ethics are the ethics of strict legality; not even the devil himself can bribe him, for he asks only what is legally his. Flem's legality is carried out in the letter, not the spirit, of the law, and takes no recognition of extralegal human claims. He refuses to return Mrs. Armstid's five dollars (though this bit of sharp dealing is so clearly untenable morally that even he is forced to offer a nickel's worth of 'sweetening for the chap') because it cannot be legally proved that he did not return her money to the Texan. Flem's 'legality' ultimately proves so watertight and so immoral that the justice of the peace presiding at the suit instituted against Flem and Eck Snopes by the Armstids and the Tulls throws up his hands in despair, crying 'I can't stand no more!.... I won't! This court's adjourned! Adjourned!'

The ethics of the majority of characters are largely only spurious attempts to justify their cheating of one another. Jody Varner decides to cheat Ab Snopes out of his crop on the specious grounds that 'a man that's got habits that way will just have to suffer the disadvantages of them.' I. O. Snopes, by fast talking and remarkable arithmetic, manages to persuade the goodhearted Eck into paying nearly ninety-five per cent of the cost of buying Ike's cow. Lump Snopes urges Mink to go back to Houston's body and relieve the dead man of the money he presumably was carrying, arguing that if they don't get it 'that darn Hampton and them deputies' will.

Mink, the only vicious Snopes who is associated with love, is the most nearly human of the tribe (cf. the extended treatment of him in *The Mansion*). His ethical beliefs, however, are a hopeless confusion of passion and Snopes self-interest, and he judges Houston's life to be the only possible payment for Houston's injury to his pride in the matter of the pasture fee for the strayed yearling. His jealousy for his rights as a human being are all out of proportion to the nature of the affront he suffers and his vindication of

his honor becomes a kind of grotesque version of the ante-bellum Southerner's exaggerated sensitivity in which the abstract idea of honor becomes of greater importance than all other human considerations (cf. Quentin Compson in *The Sound and the Fury*). Mink—like his relative Ab Snopes, whose sense of his rights as a man compels him to burn the barns of men who have slighted him—acts out of pride as Flem acts out of avarice, with complete indifference toward other human claims. Yet Mink's integrity, though perhaps of dubious moral value, still places him several notches higher than the totally amoral Lump or the hypocritical I. O. Snopes.

Whereas the Snopeses embody the extremes of natural passion and inhuman acquisitiveness, V. K. Ratliff provides the norm of social and economic behavior. He is a shrewd enough trader to enjoy making a modest profit as a traveling sewing-machine salesman, but he is without either avarice or excessive pride, fallible enough to fall for Flem's trick of salting the Old Frenchman Place with buried money, and sufficiently detached to be able to laugh at himself for his mistake. Sympathetic and humane, Ratliff is able to see the good even in Ab Snopes, whom he pronounces to be 'not naturally mean' but 'sour' from his experiences. However, he is no blind optimist seeing good in all men. He is indignant at the salacious Lump Snopes's exploitation of Ike's relationship with his cow, and, with fine irony, coerces the schoolteacher I. O. into thinking of the unsullied name of Snopes and putting an end to the business. Out of pity for Mink's wife, he takes her and her children to stay at his sister's house while Mink is in jail and buys the children new raincoats.

Yet he is unwilling to abet the others in their foolishness and refuses to give Henry Armstid the money he lost on the spotted horse: 'I never made them Snopeses and I never made the folks that cant wait to bare their backsides to them. I could do more, but I wont. I wont, I tell you.' His 'I wont' echoes that of the justice of the peace, who also finds the Snopeses and their financial involvements more than he can bear. Because of Ratliff's essential humaneness, it is doubly ironic that his exchange of his share of his Jefferson restaurant for an interest in the Old Frenchman Place starts Flem on his way to Jefferson, where he can carry out his depredations on the larger and wealthier community....

Because of Ratliff's almost constant presence and his first-person narration of the Ab Snopes-Pat Stamper tale, Part I (Flem) is predominantly comic. In Part II (Eula) comedy is raised to the level of ironic myth through the figure of Eula, an early-flowering, indolent Helen of Troy, whose 'entire appearance suggested some symbology out of the old Dionysic times—honey in sunlight and bursting grapes, the writhen bleeding of the crushed fecundated vine beneath the hard rapacious trampling goathoof.' Though Eula herself is clearly a mythic creature, an anachronistic goddess stolen from old Greece and misplaced in a rural Mississippi village, irony is maintained in her section both through the reactions of her family to her and through her emergency marriage to Flem Snopes—an irony that is underlined by the intensely romanticized rhetoric of the passage describing Eula's departure from the hamlet, now only 'a little lost village, nameless, without grace, forsaken, yet which wombed once by blind chance and accident one blind seed of the spendthrift Olympian ejaculation and did not even know it.

In Part III ('The Long Summer') a short introductory section, in which Ratliff departs from his normal detachment and attacks the Snopeses with a vicious parody of I. O.'s use of proverbs, establishes the contrast for the major mode of romance. In rich, poetic prose that, though purple, is as carefully controlled as a poem, Faulkner presents the courtly love, the idiot Ike Snopes, and his coy and maiden mistress—a cow. Again irony is maintained by the implicit contrast between the reader's awareness of the reality of the situation and the highly romanticized description of the lovers, the sublimity of the presentation balanced against the ludicrousness of the objective scene. In the first section of Chapter 2, which concerns Jack Houston and his wife, romance is more closely aligned with reality, both in the more straightforward, almost restrained prose and in the relative appropriateness of the lover's view to the reality of the beloved.

In the second section, Mink Snopes is introduced as the last of the triad of lovers, the third phase of love, as it were, in which romance is totally missing and has been replaced by obsession ('It's like drink. It's like dope to me,' he thinks). Mink is married to a former prostitute, a nymphomaniac whose aggressive sexuality has made him feel himself the passive, prone recipient in their relationship. The roles of the lovers have been figuratively, at least, reversed, and romance has turned inward upon itself and become its

opposite, no longer courtliness toward the tenderly beloved maiden but passionate hostility toward a 'fierce lioness' simultaneously desired and hated.

As a result of this reversal, the second section tends away from romance into the grotesque; beginning with Mink's murder of Houston over the matter of a three-dollar pasturage fee (significantly, the account of the murder and the hiding of the corpse are interwoven with the story of Mink and his wife) the element of the grotesque becomes more and more dominant. It culminates in Lump Snopes's attempts to force Mink to go back and steal fifty dollars from Houston's body, and in Mink's outraged belief that everything was 'all right' until Houston's body fell apart when he tried to move it to a new hiding-place. The final section moves again toward comedy with the presence of Ratliff, but there are overtones of pathos for the plight of Mink's wife; for Mink himself, hopelessly awaiting deliverance by Flem; and for the idiot Ike, left only with a wooden effigy of his beloved cow....

Part IV ('The Peasants') begins in a kind of nightmare-comedy of grotesquerie with the hobgoblinish spotted horses. Interwoven with the moonlit scene of plunging, harlequin-patterned animals and the half-comic, half-grotesque attempts of men to capture them is a second mythic vision of Eula standing in the window of the Varner house.... There is an additional suggestion of the ancient, golden mythic days of Eula's Olympian avatars in the blossoming pear tree in front of Mrs. Littlejohn's lot. Aside from being a fertility symbol, the pear tree is associated with medieval romance... The mockingbird (a sexual symbol) that comes to sing in the pear tree is probably the Mississippi counterpart of the nightingale, identified both with the romantic tradition and with sexuality.

Playing in counterpoint with these mythic, romantic elements are the mundane, sometimes pathetic and sometimes ludicrous country people: the harried Eck Snopes, trying to keep little Wallstreet Panic from being trampled; the petulant Armstid, determined to buy a horse he cannot afford; his gray overworked wife, incapable of restraining her husband's rashness; the benighted and literally overridden Tulls; and the stolid, sensible Mrs. Littlejohn. Toward the end of the section the blend of grotesque comedy, myth, and romance fades again into comedy and irony as Ratliff takes a dominant part in the conversation and observes Mrs. Armstid's attempts to get her five dollars back from Flem. In the second section, which deals with the Armstids' suit against Flem for the return of the five dollars and the Tulls's against Eck for damages sustained when Eck's spotted horses upset the Tull wagon on the bridge, the comic mode continues, and is carried on to the conclusion of the book."

Dorothy Tuck  
*Crowell's Handbook of Faulkner*  
(Crowell 1964) 72-81

"Written during Faulkner's great period of creativity, *The Hamlet* is by far the best book in the trilogy and deserves a place beside *Sanctuary* just below Faulkner's greatest novels. The book throbs with passion and with life. Its stories range from the mock-heroic to the grotesque, encompass comedy and tragedy, and introduce some of Faulkner's most memorable characters. Structurally, the novel is centered upon Flem Snopes. At the beginning, he arrives in Frenchman's Bend; at the end he leaves, having wrested from the hamlet not only all the success that it can offer him but the tools he will need to become an important citizen of Jefferson: experience in usury that will lead him into banking, a beautiful wife whom he can barter for social position, and a half-interest in a restaurant that provides him access to the town....

After an absence from the village, Ratliff discovers that Flem has moved to the village and rides Jody Varner's horse. After another absence, Ratliff returns to discover that Flem goes about with old Will Varner in his buggy and that he lives at Varner's house. In only a few scenes of the novel is Flem an active participant: his encounter with the Varners, when he blackmails Jody into making him his clerk and when he insists that Will pay for his chew; his temporary and minor defeat at the hands of Ratliff in the goat trade; the finale of the horse trade; and the scene of the buried treasure. Throughout the novel and the whole trilogy, Faulkner never provides a closeup view of Flem's mind.... The Snopes tribe represents not so much specific and specialized Snopesian sins as a general social and moral pollution. There are few sins which any Snopes commits in *The Hamlet* that Will Varner has not also committed. Even the Snopes reputation for breeding is undeserved by comparison with Varner's sixteen children. The Snopes proclivity

for multiple bed-partners, in the case of I.O., at least, makes him a bigamist, but not a Varnerian seducer of morgagees' wives.

As soon as Faulkner approaches a Snopes closely and presents him individually, the individual becomes detached from the tribe. Eck, who is the first Snopes that Flem brings into the hamlet, is an affable, pleasant, and kind person. When Ratliff demands that Ike's relatives deal with the problem of sodomy, Eck gives twenty dollars for the cow and, moved by pity, buys a toy replica for the idiot to hold. We learn later in the trilogy that Eck wears a brace around his neck. He incurred the injury when he refused to let a log that he was holding slip and crush a Negro. This Snopes is so good that when Montgomery Ward Snopes thinks about him, in *The Mansion*, he decides that Eck must have been the product of some extra-curricular night work.... I. O., the proverb-quoting Snopes, is more a comical scoundrel than an incarnation of the repulsiveness of Snopesian generally conveys. The idiot, Ike, is too much a victim of fate to arouse any feeling but pity... Even the murderer Mink, whose grotesque attempts to hide the body of his victim in a hollow tree by jumping up and down on it are horrifying, displays a certain pride and integrity....

As soon as the Snopes tribe begins its invasion of Frenchman's Bend, Ratliff becomes a defender of the community...the reaction of a member of the in-group to the invasion of the out-group. In many ways, this anti-Snopesism reflects a feeling that is identical with the feeling every new immigrant group in the United States had engendered in the entrenched social group. Before individuals have emerged, the new group is collectively considered immoral, unsanitary, excessively prolific, socially obnoxious, and economically unscrupulous and pushing—in short, a menace to the community. These are the very characteristics of Snopesism... The aura of evil that Faulkner creates about the group is far in excess of the evil it actually does.... Though Faulkner sustains throughout the three novels an aura of Snopesian evil, he detaches so many Snopeses from the group by presenting them as individual personalities that in the second volume, the intense anti-Snopes feeling of Ratliff and Gavin Stevens, and their enthusiastic anti-Snopes campaign, strike the reader as too much ado about too little....

Actually, Snopesism merges into Flemism, an abstraction which is sustained far longer, but only because Flem is not presented as an individual human being until the end of *The Town*. Flem is the only Snopes guilty of the worst crime in the Faulkner canon—a lack of humanity, a complete failure to recognize and respect the integrity, the needs, and the feelings of other human beings.... Faulkner is tolerant of the man guilty of a crime of passion: he can view Mink, the murderer, with compassion; Montgomery Ward, he treats with much sympathy; but the money-maker who violates no law but is empty of feeling, he makes into an incarnation of evil....

The American experience has proved that men like Wall who devote so much time and energy to money-making have little chance of developing into much more than human cash registers. But the approval with which Wall is presented indicates that the evil Flem represents is not the dehumanizing influence of the American rags-to-riches dream. Flem's uncanny, cold rapacity makes him evil. Like Snopesism, however, Flemism also dissolves when Faulkner finally approaches Flem as a human being. The abstract idea of the Snopeses as a polluting menace, which seems to reflect an in-group prejudice against an out-group, diminishes gradually in the trilogy, as it does in society, when individuals become detached from the group. The presentation of Flem as an emotional zero is the controlling principle in the structure of *The Hamlet*. Each character and incident in the novel serves as a moral or emotional contrast to Flem. The most dramatic and effective contrast is the character of Eula Varner. The marriage of Flem and Eula unites the epitome of human frigidity with the epitome of human passion....

Eula is the fertility goddess, the symbol of that passion in the human being that fixes him in the continuum of nature. She is 'the supreme primal uterus'.... Eula symbolizes the passion that gave birth to the enduring symbols (in a male world and a male literature) of Lilith and Eve and Semiramis and Helen. Though man refines the passion, incorporating in its symbol his ideals of beauty and truth and goodness (as tradition does with Helen, and as Gavin Stevens does with Eula, in *The Town*), fundamentally, the passion is sex. Faulkner devotes two of his longest sections in *The Hamlet* to two sexual symbols—Eula and the cow. In the descriptions of Eula, her bovine qualities are emphasized; and in the Swinburnian descriptions of the cow, the distinction between female animal and human female is difficult to discern. In both sections, the allusions to classical fertility images abound, and the idiot's pursuit of the cow symbolizes the

human being's unity with nature. The idiot is the lowest common denominator of humanity, as close to the animal as to the human species, united to both by the passion of sex. The idiot's perversion is transformed into a powerful and moving evocation of human love....

The history of Labove complements the love story of Ike Snopes. Labove's is the same passion on a higher level. Driven by a passion not unlike Flem's, Labove struggles and sacrifices to become a lawyer.... Labove offers a close-up view of the passion that Eula will arouse in all the men from nine to ninety who come into her orbit, except the man she marries—Flem.... She comes to life, at last, on the night she helps Hoake McCarron fight the local wooers. In that scrimmage, which is a village replica of the Trojan conflict, Hoake (with the aid of Eula) beats off the attackers.... Symbolically Eula is Helen, but Hoake is obviously no Paris. As soon as he learns that she is pregnant, he flees. And this village goddess, who sets aflame so many men, becomes the property of the passionless Flem. Altogether there are five stories of irresistible passion in the two middle sections (entitled 'Eula,' and 'The Long Summer'), which are enclosed by two sections which deal more directly with Flem's manipulation of others for profit....

Mink's story is more than a love tale, though love plays an important role in it. Mink carries the cognomen Snopes, but he represents the poor, defeated, exacerbated, earth-bound tenant farmers who populate Frenchman's Bend... The son of sharecroppers, Mink tries to escape the fate of his people.... He does not kill Houston as the man who pushes him too far, but Houston as the agent of a force beyond man which violates basic human rights and dignity. Just as the story of Ike and his cow pulsates with love, so the story of Mink and his cow pulsates with seething fury, a fury that boils up frequently in Faulkner's fiction when he presents downtrodden farmers.... Henry Armstid actually goes mad. His truce with 'primal justice' has apparently long since been abrogated; he exists in a constant state of fury. Armstid provides the serious note in the wonderfully comic horse-auction episode, and the tragic note in the buried-treasure tale, as he insanely digs and digs for nonexistent treasure. Armstid is thrust over the border of sanity by Flem's rapacity....

The Prince of Hell, himself, offers Flem every temptation man is subject to. Nothing interests Flem but fulfilling the bargain to the letter, and the fantasy ends with the devil scrabbling hysterically across the floor to escape the new incumbent of the throne. It is not Flem's shrewdness in barter that defeats men and the devil; it is his immunity to feeling. As a trader, Ratliff is his equal, even beating him in their initial encounter, the goat trade. But Ratliff sacrifices ten of his fourteen dollars profit to redeem and destroy the idiot's note so that Flem cannot use it again. Ratliff and Flem are, of course, direct opposites in their response to people. Even the clothes they wear indicates this difference. Ratliff's immaculately clean, homemade blue shirt aligns him with the poor farmers from whom he sprang. Flem, a sharecropper's son, begins to wear an unclean shirt and a machine-made black bow tie as soon as he begins to make money....

The varied tones and styles of these stories—the poetic mock heroic of the idiot's tale, the grotesque horror of Mink's struggle to hide Houston's body and ward off Lump's attempt to take money from the dead man's pocket, the wild humor of the horse auction—all serve to isolate Flem in a black nimbus of cold horror.... Basically, *The Hamlet* is thematically unified by the moral conflict between the community, which is a mixture of human weakness and sinfulness, and Flem, who is single-minded in his rapacity.”

Edmond L. Volpe  
*A Reader's Guide to William Faulkner*  
(Farrar, Straus/Noonday 1964) 306-16

“The other two novels that Faulkner published during the last decade of his life—*The Town* (1957) and *The Mansion* (1959)—are the last in a series of stories and novels that chronicle the rise and proliferation of the Snopes family in Yoknapatawpha County. With *The Hamlet*, published in 1940, they constitute a trilogy of sorts in which we see the career of the archetypal Snopes, Flem, who after consolidating a base in the hamlet of Frenchman's Bend manages to penetrate the larger community of Jefferson, bringing with him a host of rapacious relatives. Thereafter, raising them and himself by varying degrees through the stages of power and superficial respectability, he manages to achieve a position of dominance in the demoralized town only to fall victim to the combined outrage of one of this own kind whom he has neglected to protect, the weasel-like Mink Snopes, and the un-Snopesian daughter of the wife whom he has

driven to adultery and suicide. Neither of these two late novels reaches the level of technical brilliance that a younger Faulkner had managed to sustain throughout much of *The Hamlet*, but they are essential parts of the Yoknapatawpha story.”

J. A. Bryant, Jr.  
*Twentieth-Century Southern Literature*  
(U Kentucky 1997) 115-16

Michael Hollister (2015)