

COMMENTARY

SNOPEs TRILOGY

The Hamlet (1940), *The Town* (1957), *The Mansion* (1959)

William Faulkner

(1897-1962)

“The trilogy traces the rise of the Snopes family, symbols of modern commercial avariciousness, from the arrival of Flem Snopes in Frenchman’s Bend in the early 1900s....

MAIN CHARACTERS

Flem Snopes (1880?-1946)

Will (Uncle Billy) Varner, *autocrat of Frenchman’s Bend*

Jody Varner, *his son*

Eula Varner (1889-1927), *His daughter, later Flem’s wife*

V. K. Ratliff, *sewing-machine salesman*

Gavin Stevens (1888?-), *lawyer*

Charles (Chick) Mallison (1914?-), *his nephew*

Linda Snopes (1908-), *daughter of Eula Varner and Hoake McCarron*

THE SNOPEs

Byron Snopes, *bank robber*

Clarence Egglestone Snopes, *Mississippi state senator*

Doris Snopes, *erstwhile ‘trainer’ of Byron Snopes’s vicious children*

Eck Snopes, *blacksmith*

I.O. Snopes, *swindler*

Lump Snopes, *clerk*

Mink Snopes, *murderer*

Montgomery Ward Snopes, *purveyor of pornography*

Orestes Snopes, *hog-raiser*

Virgil Snopes, *sexual athlete*

Wallstreet Panic Snopes, *grocer*

Watkins Products Snopes, *carpenter*

Four nameless children of Byron Snopes and an Apache squaw

THE COUNTRY PEOPLE

Henry Armstid

Odum Bookwright

Jack Houston

Mrs. Littlejohn

Hoake McCarron

Solon Quick

Vernon Tull

THE TOWNSFOLK

Manfred de Spain, *mayor of Jefferson, president of bank, and lover of Eula Varner Snopes*

Melisandre Backus Harriss, *later Gavin Stevens’ wife*

Gowan Stevens, *young relative of Gavin Stevens*

Grover Cleveland Winbush, *Jefferson's night marshal*

The Hamlet is devoted to the importation of Snopeses into Frenchman's Bend and to Flem's rise from the clerkship of Will Varner's store, through usury and sharp bargaining and a gradual accretion of financial power, to his marriage to Varner's daughter Eula, pregnant by another man.

In *The Town* Flem, having outgrown the Bend, moves with his family to Jefferson, where he contrives to progress from the ownership of a small back-street restaurant to the superintendency of the town power plant to the vice-presidency of Colonel Sartoris' bank. The novel ends with Flem's successful maneuver to oust Manfred de Spain both from the presidency of the bank and from Mrs. Snopes's bed. Flem becomes bank president and moves into the former De Spain house, the 'mansion' of the last volume.... *The Town*, less episodic than simply loose, continues this theme in Flem's acquisition of money and power set against Eula's overwhelming sexual attractiveness. It also reiterates the opposition between social economics and nature, this time in the character of Gavin Stevens. As a lawyer, Stevens is a representative of civilization and lawful commerce; he is also a lover manqué, attracted to the lush femininity of Eula and later to a more diluted form of it in Linda, but unable to come to terms with it....

In *The Mansion*, Flem is a wealthy and seemingly respectable man, a deacon of the Baptist church. However, the novel deals primarily with his pretended daughter Linda and with Mink Snopes, a murderer in Parchman Penitentiary who has sworn to kill him.... *The Mansion* combines the multiple narrative of Stevens, Ratliff, and Chick Mallison with sections of omniscient narrative by the author. It links up with *The Hamlet* by recounting a longer version of Mink Snopes's murder of Jack Houston and his sense of betrayal by Flem, who made no attempt to help his relative escape the penalty for his crime. Though structurally a far better novel than *The Town*, *The Mansion* suffers in the long section on Linda from rather extreme discursiveness and from the repetition of events occurring in the earlier volumes. Furthermore, the shrewd economic manipulations of Flem that gave sharpness to the previous books are almost entirely absent. The Flem of *The Mansion* pursues respectability as hotly as he had once followed cold cash, and the natural splendor of Eula is unhappily dimmed in Linda and in her unimpassioned relationship with Stevens. The element of natural sexuality seems to be present, if at all, only in the adolescent and occasionally crude remarks of Chick....

UNITY

The three novels are unified by the tracing of Flem's rise, the presence of largely the same cast of characters, and the technique, used in *The Town* and in part of *The Mansion*, of multiple narration by Gavin Stevens, V. K. Ratliff, and Chick Mallison. However, whereas *The Hamlet* is broadly comic in tone, the two later books are primarily serious and less dramatically immediate (with the exception of the sections dealing with Mink in *The Mansion*), and focus less on Flem than on Gavin Stevens, both as an interpreter and as a character. These differences in tone and approach are partially explained by the fact that *The Hamlet* was published almost twenty years before the two succeeding volumes, and that many of *The Hamlet*'s episodes were previously written and published in stories in magazines between 1931 and 1936. *The Hamlet* is almost entirely episodic, unified by the presence of one Snopes or another in each of the episodes and, more significantly, by the theme of economic man vis-à-vis earthy sensuality or even to Ike Snopes's absurdly romantic love for his cow."

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Michael Hollister (2015)