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“You’re Like Me”: Flem Snopes and the Dynamics of Citizenship in William Faulkner’s *The Town*

ON THE FIRST PAGE OF WILLIAM FAULKNER’S *THE TOWN*, IN THE VERY second paragraph, Chick Mallison asserts himself, and by relationship and affiliation the other narrators in this novel, as the voice of establishment Jefferson: “So when I say ‘we’ and ‘we thought’ what I mean is Jefferson and what Jefferson thought” (3). Gavin Stevens soon thereafter excludes the Snopes family as Others with a we/they dichotomy: “when I say ‘they’ I mean Snopeses” (29). Since no narrator holds any qualms about speaking authoritatively, the reader faces considerable challenges throughout this novel in separating fact from speculation or projection. Many events in *The Town* are told secondhand—often reported but not witnessed, filtered through consciousness, preconception, and especially the social privilege and unspoken rules of the “we” group.

Gavin Stevens’s chapters, in particular, seem marked by obsessive, unyielding antipathy to all things Snopes, especially to Flem Snopes. Gavin never understands, or perhaps simply refuses to understand, that Flem adopts and appropriates the social processes in Jefferson that have long been practiced and maintained for the benefit of established persons and families. While Gavin sees Flem as creating evil where there was before only virtue, Flem actually becomes a mirror, the most honest reflection of all that Jefferson really believes about civic virtue and justice.¹

Faulkner’s narrative strategy in *The Town* has led some critics to limit their views of Flem Snopes to the pronouncements of Gavin Stevens and V. K. Ratliff.² These two characters are accepted and established

¹Woodrow Stroble describes Flem Snopes as a “crazed mirror reflecting man’s troubled nature” (210).

²Social dynamics in Jefferson have long been established by the time the events in the novel occur. Members of Gavin’s privileged generation benefit from whatever ruthlessness their predecessors engaged in to create their version of respectability.

members of the Jefferson social and economic hierarchy, with Gavin much better placed by birth. Neither character views Flem sympathetically, though Gavin remains unrelentingly harsh. Raymond J. Wilson, III, provides an excellent overview of criticism situating Flem as evil usurper in Jefferson, in line with Gavin's view. For example, Wilson quotes Paul Levine as writing, "Society does not corrupt Flem Snopes; instead he corrupts society" (432). Wilson bases his reading of *The Town* on Flem's ability to imitate the behavior of privilege in Jefferson, pointing out that critics have erroneously emphasized "the unique characteristics which they believe Flem inherently possessed" (432). Wilson would have us consider instead how "the steps of Flem's climb reveal the moral shortcomings of Jefferson" (433). Frances Louisa Nichol reports, "Faulkner scholarship traditionally follows Gavin Stevens and V. K. Ratliff, two narrator-characters, in depicting Flem Snopes as an evil and inhumane barterer, despite Faulkner's own explanations" (494). She also notes that Flem "merely follows the already-established rules of the game" (496). Mauri Skinfill warns that reading "Flem as a simply despicable capitalist is to miss the point of his social failure" (141). In a recent article focusing on Mink Snopes, Debra MacComb describes "Flem's coldly calculated self-advancement in the New South" (345).

Richard Godden creates much-needed critical space for reconsideration of the Snopes Trilogy through his "Anti-Ratliffian Reading" of *The Hamlet*. Godden argues that "While not simplifying Flem, critics have tended to narrow the focus of his complexity" (82). He adds that "Flem may be misread if he is too readily allegorized as the agent of something as generic as 'capital'" (83). Godden correctly resists reading Flem backwards from *The Mansion* because to do so is "to embourgeoisify Flem too soon and too emphatically" (85). Ratliff's, and I would add Gavin's, view of Flem is "partial, interested, and class based" (87). Godden concludes with a call for new views of both Ratliff and Flem: "Revision is overdue in that readers have generally found Ratliff persuasive, and as a result have tended to cast Flem as some species of capitalist, and to give him bad press" (114). One would hesitate to give Flem good press, for he is indeed as grasping and greedy as critics have noted, representing many of the worst aspects of what would eventually

Through the application and maintenance of semi-feudal practices, the scions of privilege inherit good jobs in Jefferson, as Chick Mallison reports: "Grandfather had begun to retire and now Uncle Gavin really was the city attorney" (14).

become mainstream twentieth-century American culture. At the same time, however, the reader should resist Gavin's invitation to create a dialectic with Flem as antithesis to Gavin and Ratliff's thesis: they are not opposites at all, no matter how much Gavin wishes they were. After his initial, almost fatal, miscalculation with the brass, Flem learns to use the same hypocritical, meaningless language as the established and respectable members of Jefferson's social hierarchy for the same hypocritical and self-interested purpose: the pursuit of private interests under the cover of civic virtue. Rather than creating something new in Jefferson, Flem watches and learns until he understands fully the tactics, words, and phrases that well-established families consider their right and privilege. In *The Town*, Flem never tries to become creative or to act originally.

Establishment Jefferson's first impression of Flem is of "a squat uncommunicative man with a neat minute bow tie and opaque eyes" (4). He arrives with his wife Eula and a "baby girl a little larger than you would have expected" (6). Hee Kang places Flem's marriage to Eula as the key to his social and economic advancement: "Along with his mimicking and mastering of the dominant economic/social structure, it is ultimately the marriage and Eula's destiny that Flem utilizes to rise above his marginal status" (496). Owen Robinson points out, "Even more than Thomas Sutpen, Flem is portrayed as a man from nowhere" (70). In fact, the Snopes family has been in Yoknapatawpha County as long as the socially and economically well-established ones. As Chick reports, "there had been a Snopes in Colonel Sartoris's cavalry command in 1864" (4). The Snopeses have remained economically and socially unimportant enough that, in Frenchman's Bend, Flem "and an old man who seemed to be his father appeared suddenly from nowhere one day and rented a little farm" (4). The only name Flem has, and will ever have, is the one he makes for himself. Snopes will never join the roll of "Sartoris and Compson and Edmonds and McCaslin and Beauchamp and Grenier and Habersham and Holston and Stevens and De Spain" (278). From his always-disdainful position of privilege, Gavin Stevens remembers that Flem had "to start from scratch," adding, "scratch was a euphemism indeed for where he started from" (248).

In the early days of Flem's residence in Jefferson, the "we" faction was not yet "against Mr Snopes; we had not yet read the signs and portents which should have warned, alerted, sprung us into frantic concord to

defend our town from him” (13). Following Gavin and Ratliff, Chick will later add “that Snopes had to be watched constantly like an invasion of snakes or wild cats and . . . Uncle Gavin and Ratliff were doing it or trying to because nobody else in Jefferson seemed to recognize the danger” (94). Unlike Frenchman’s Bend in *The Hamlet*, Jefferson offers no blank slate awaiting Flem’s inscription, and the town teaches him a quick, hard lesson. Flem outrages his critics for the first time when they learn that he “was now superintendent of the town power plant” (8). They were all caught completely by surprise:

Our outrage was primarily shock; shock not that Flem had the job, we had not got that far yet, but shock that we had not known until now that the job existed; that there was such a position in Jefferson as superintendent of the power plant. . . . Yet suddenly and without warning, we needed a superintendent for it. And as suddenly and simultaneously and with that same absence of warning, a country man who had not been in town two years now and (we assumed) had probably never seen an electric light until that first night two years ago when he drove in, was that superintendent. (8)

Once established in his first professional position, Flem’s frenetic movement, as if he is making up for lost time, leads to his major blunder with the brass, which could have been a fatal miscalculation. Flem the unschooled autodidact attempted to transfer lessons learned in Frenchman’s Bend to Jefferson, but the force and reach of respectable Jefferson far exceeds that of Will and Jody Varner. Much like Thomas Sutpen before him, he faces “a world that seems to be set up to enforce anonymity upon him” (Robinson 84).

Jefferson can, and does, fiercely strike back at Flem’s presumption. Certainly, the “we” faction wishes that the water tower would offer a “monument” to their victory over Flem (25). They would be happy were Flem’s epitaph to be “*At least I got this far*,” which is further than they would like (26). His critics fervently hope that Flem has been taught his lesson and will spend his time sitting “on the gallery of his little back street rented house” contemplating his utter defeat at the hands of his social superiors (25). However, this is the beginning of the story of Flem and Jefferson, not the end; there will be no monuments in the novel until the one marking Eula’s grave with its false epitaph: “A Virtuous Wife is a Crown to her Husband / Her Children Rise and call Her Blessed” (312). After the fiasco with the brass, Flem retreats, watches, and learns—active ratiocination obscured by marked passivity—until he

knows enough to act again. As Woodrow Stroble notes, "the lesson Flem learns from Jefferson is easily inferred—thievery is an unacceptable road to respectability, but hypocrisy is not" (203).

When Gavin visits Flem's house for the first time, Eula explains how Flem's search for knowledge sent him to Memphis shopping for furniture immediately before he became vice president of Colonel Sartoris's bank. The salesman suggests that Flem should buy antique furniture, proudly offering to "take this piece here for instance and make it look still older," to reflect "background" (195). Flem rejects this appeal categorically: "I had a grandfather because everybody had. I dont know who he was but I know that whoever he was he never owned enough furniture for a room, let alone a house" (195). In words that could serve as epitaph for Flem's career and character, Eula tells Gavin that Flem "only knew he wanted, had to have" (194). He went to Memphis, outside the reach of prying eyes and wagging tongues in Jefferson, "to find somebody who could tell him what he had to have" (195). Outside the world of trading, Flem finds himself without resources: "This was something he had to have and knew he had to have: he just didnt know what it was" (195). For emphasis, Faulkner repeats this idea three times in the space of a single page. Flem wants and must possess, but he cannot conceive of the object capable of satisfying his desire. He only knows that the vice president of a bank must have suitable furniture in a suitable house, without pretense. In his words, "I dont aim to fool anybody. Only a fool would try to fool smart people, and anybody who needs to fool fools is already one" (195).

Virtuously approaching Flem's house for the high-minded purpose of meeting Eula to discuss Linda's future, furthering civic virtue, Gavin feels secure in his false knowledge that he enters "through the little rented (still looking rented even though the owner or somebody had painted it) gate up the short rented walk toward the little rented veranda" (193). When faced with the reality that this is the furniture Flem owns in the house Flem owns, Gavin retreats to a state of psychotic thought disorder and inarticulateness almost resembling Benjy Compson's "trying to say" (*Sound* 916-17): "sitting there saying *Flem Snopes Flem Snopes* until I said, cried: 'I dont want anything! I'm afraid!' until I finally said 'What?'" (196). As he prepares for his conversation with Eula about Linda attending an Eastern college, Gavin steels himself with a grim interpretation of Flem's desire to furnish his home:

The furniture. That day in the store. Didn't know what he wanted because what he wanted didn't matter, wasn't important: only that he did want it, did need it, must have it, intended to have it no matter what cost or who lost or who anguished or grieved. To be exactly what he needed to exactly fit exactly what he was going to be tomorrow after it was announced: a vice president's wife and child along with the rest of the vice president's furniture in the vice president's house? (196-97)

Flem shows no more originality in furnishing his home than in any other aspect of his life. He does not need to: there is an emerging American industry supplying "exactly" the goods people like Flem need to legitimate the social position they have assumed. Although unusual, perhaps unique, in Jefferson, Flem is common enough to be a member of a mass market. Flem's vice-presidential furniture is not intended, designed, or manufactured to be original. When Gavin enters Flem's house, he finds it "exactly like something else I had seen somewhere but didn't have time to remember" (193). Gavin later recalls that he has seen it in mass market advertisements appearing every month in "say *Town and Country* labelled *American Interior*, reproduced in color in a wholesale furniture catalogue, with the added legend: *This is neither a Copy nor a Reproduction. It is our own Model scaled to your individual Requirements*" (194). As Skinfill points out, the lack of capitalization of "individual" subverts "the claims to individuality the American Interior purports to satisfy" (141). Flem has no need for manufactured individuality, only for what a knowledgeable vice president of a bank, with no need for a person to advise him, would choose. Completely adrift in a furniture store, the first question Flem asks the salesman in Memphis is, "When a man dont intend to buy anything from you, how much do you charge him just to talk?" (195). At this point, money remains the only fact for Flem, and he is ready to pay for accurate knowledge of what he must have to be whom he is becoming the very next day; as Eula explains, "It had to be exactly what it was, for exactly what he was" (195).³

The salesman begins his pitch in the language of marketing with the most profitable solution: "A man who came that far in that short time, is not going to stop just there, and why shouldn't everybody that enters

³Eula seems strangely removed from the entire procedure of furnishing the house and reports that she had no involvement in the process: "She said to me: 'What are your ideas?' and I said, 'I dont care.' And she said, 'What?' and I said it again and then she looked at Flem and I watched them looking at one another, a good while" (195).

his home know it, see it?" (195). He calls this option "Successful," though Flem understands that it really means "expensive" (195). The next option would be "Antique," creating the illusion of a solid base, which, as noted above, Flem categorically rejects (195). Although Flem and the many others like him see through the ideology of commercial mass culture, they need its products. The exasperated salesman calls his wife, who understands that Flem is buying what he needs, not creating status through illusion: "You're a trader. I'll make a trade with you" (196).

Once installed as vice-president, Flem the autodidact masters what he needs to learn about banking without schooling, yet through a systematic and orderly progression that resembles a curriculum. When Flem begins working at Colonel Sartoris's bank, he stands "a little back from the window watching the clients coming and going to leave their money or draw it out" (121). Once he understands who is coming and going and why, Flem expands his focus: "He was standing where he always stood, back where he would be out of the actual path to the window but where he could still watch it" (122). Finally, Flem moves to the teller's cage: "he was not watching the money any longer; he had learned all there was to learn about that. Now he was watching the records of it, how they kept the books" (122). As he watched and learned, Flem "found out for himself how a bank was run" (123). What Gavin does not add is that Flem also mastered the social rules and dynamics by which established people live in Jefferson.

Faulkner provides a case study of what Flem learned and how he uses this knowledge in the events following the robbery of Uncle Willy Christian's drugstore. Jefferson society tolerates, even aids, illicit activity for certain people but becomes morally outraged when others break the law. Uncle Willy's addiction to morphine has long been an open secret; everyone knows that "at the wrong time of the day he even snarled at children too" (137). Uncle Willy develops intense anger over the robbery of his store because someone "stole all his morphine and sleeping pills" (136). He "raised the devil himself" when he discovers that his drugs are gone (137). Uncle Willy knows that he has lost "three hundred dollars' worth of valuable medicine," but has no real idea how much money is missing (139). Gavin directs a crowd to keep "Uncle Willy more or less quiet without actually holding him until Doctor Peabody came in with the needle already in his hand" (138). His fix secured, "Uncle Willy settled down into being just mad" (138). The presence of sworn officers

of the law and many of the leading citizens and residents of Jefferson does not dissuade anyone from satisfying Uncle Willy's craving for morphine before the investigation begins.

Marshall Buck Connors understands the myriad benefits of ambiguous language. He reminds Uncle Willy, "There's a right way and a wrong way to do things. We want to do this one the right way" (138). He also declares that since "folks have probably done trompled up most of the evidence" (138), it will be difficult for anyone to declare with certainty exactly what happened. When he promises "an investigation according to police procedure regulations" (138), Jefferson's establishment understands that these are circumstances offering great advantages. While everyone remains present, Sheriff Hampton reminds Uncle Willy "to make a list of what's missing for the narcotics folks and the insurance too" (143). Since only Uncle Willy knows what should be on that list, a clear path appears for him to solve any lingering problems with his inventory.

In this chapter, Montgomery Ward Snopes serves as a hammer to Flem's mirror. As the proprietor of what comes to be called "a club" (142), he understands that Jefferson will never allow the truth about what he sells to be exposed to the cleansing light of day: "the God-fearing christian holy citizens of Jefferson . . . cant have it known that this is what their police do when they're supposed to be at work" (144). Like Flem, Montgomery Ward understands, though instinctively and vaguely, the processes conflating public and private interests in Jefferson. He cannot resist taunting Gavin and Hampton: "You dont think I got into this without reading a little law myself, do you?" (144). However, Montgomery Ward completely misses the function of the social dynamics in Jefferson when he assumes that Hampton could be transparently corrupt: "Maybe that's what you wanted, to begin with: not the postcards but the list of customers; retire from sheriff and spend all your time on the collections" (144). The necessity of civic virtue as cover for the intense pursuit of private interests in Jefferson eludes Montgomery Ward.

Hampton's corrupt actions display a veneer of purity, as they are undertaken in pursuit of civic virtue, not for profit. To be accused of base corruption is almost more than he can take. The law can be bent, even broken, but only for certain understood purposes and always to do the right thing and pursue justice. Rather than appeal to civic virtue, as Flem

learns is always necessary, Montgomery Ward compounds his error by offering a bribe: "I've got close to a hundred bucks in my pocket. I'll lay it on the table here and you and Stevens turn your backs and give me ten minutes" (146).

Gavin should have known the nature of the service Montgomery Ward offered in his Atelier; one could argue that he bears some responsibility for these events. When Gavin returned to Jefferson after leaving Germany, Chick reports, Montgomery Ward "came to Uncle Gavin, to go to France with Uncle Gavin in the Y.M.C.A." (92). As unexpected as this request was, what is even more surprising is that "Gavin did it. I mean, took Montgomery Ward" (92). By the time the war ends, Montgomery Ward has created "the most popular canteen the army or even the Y.M.C.A. either ever had in France or anywhere else" (100). Montgomery Ward shares with Flem a nose for business opportunity, though his first contribution to the expanding Snopes business empire is a French bordello:

Montgomery Ward had cut off the back end and fixed it up as a new fresh entertainment room with a door in the back and a young French lady he happened to know in it, so that any time a soldier got tired of jest buying socks or eating chocolate bars he could buy a ticket from Montgomery Ward and go around through the back door and get his-self entertained. (100)

Ratliff speculates to Chick that perhaps Gavin drew upon his grand reservoir of civic virtue, maybe even a touch of *noblisse oblige*, to rescue Montgomery Ward from the consequences of his actions: "Maybe your cousin couldn't bear the idea of Jefferson being represented in Leavenworth prison even for the reward of one Snopes less in Jefferson itself" (101). Back in Jefferson, Montgomery Ward's affected French sensibility offers a walking reminder that the world is changing in a direction Jefferson society may not like:

he wasn't in uniform but in a black suit and a black overcoat without any sleeves and a black thing on his head kind of drooping over one side like an empty cow's bladder made out of black velvet, and a long limp-ended bow tie; and his hair long and he had a beard and now there was another Snopes business in Jefferson. (106)

Once the Atelier opens, two years pass before "we begun to realise that most of his business was at night like he did need darkness" (109). Indeed, he does: "men, the same kind of usually young men that his

Jefferson customers were—were beginning to come from the next towns around us . . . by that alley door at night” (109).

Grover Cleveland Winbush, the sworn night marshal, is nowhere to be found during the robbery of the drug store, having long been enthralled by the images Montgomery Ward offers the upstanding men of Yoknapatawpha County. Winbush, pursuing civic virtue, offers a preemptive defense against anyone who would think to sully the good name of the Atelier. On his own initiative, he reports to Gavin “that he had been spending a good part of the nights examining and watching and checking on the studio and he was completely satisfied there wasn’t any drinking or peddling whiskey or dice-shooting or card-playing going on in Montgomery Ward’s dark room” (110). As a man among men, a citizen among citizens, he adds that “we were all proud of the good name of our town and we all aimed to keep it free of any taint of big-city corruption and misdemeanor and nobody more than him” (110). He takes these extraordinary steps to ensure the lack of drinking and gambling “which was his sworn duty to do even if he didn’t take any more pride in Jefferson’s good name than just an ordinary citizen” (110-11).

Much to Gavin’s surprise, Flem visits his office the morning following Montgomery Ward’s arrest. With these two characters together for the first time, the reader sees that Gavin and Flem are not as separated as Gavin would like: “it took him a minute or two to realize that he and Mr Snopes were looking at exactly the same thing: it just wasn’t with the same eye” (147). This first meeting allows Gavin to reinforce his privileged social position and superiority while affording Flem his first real opportunity to join the social processes of Jefferson as an insider. Full of hypocritical and meaningless civic virtue, Flem begins with an unambiguous declaration: “I’m thinking of Jefferson” (147). Such words serve as a necessary prelude to all that follows, justifying himself and his actions in unimpeachable terms. Fully in accord with expectation and custom, Flem expresses his deep concern for the plight of Grover Winbush’s mother should her son no longer be able to send her weekly “furnish” (147).

Gavin begins by taunting Flem’s lack of name and family position, assuming he has arrived as supplicant for his relative: “somebody will have to save your cousin, nephew—which is he, anyway?” Ignoring Gavin’s “irony and sarcasm,” Flem stakes his claim to an influential

position in Jefferson by reminding Gavin that he manipulated the law to arrest Montgomery Ward. Flem has an idea of what might happen to Montgomery Ward, but now he is established in Jefferson solidly enough to pay Gavin "to figger different" (147). Flem does not want Montgomery Ward tried in federal court, as that would interfere with his emerging plan to solve his problem with Mink. He shows his mastery of the social processes of Jefferson, quite in contrast to Montgomery Ward, when he couches his pursuit of private interest in the language of civic virtue and pride. As would any other leading citizen, Flem wants Montgomery Ward fully punished: "But not this way. I'm thinking of Jefferson" (148).

Gavin actively contributes to the process of keeping tawdry facts in darkness, while remaining just and virtuous. First, he proclaims in no uncertain terms that he serves only Truth, come what may. If something awful and damaging emerges from Montgomery Ward's case, "Then it's just too bad for Jefferson" (148). The reader is sorely tempted to accuse Gavin of willful and rank hypocrisy as he plays his part in Jefferson's drama of civic virtue. More or less through instinct, he carefully offers justification for whatever malfeasance follows as Jefferson solves this crisis. Should Judge Long, the federal judge assigned to Jefferson, see even one of, much less all of, the pornographic pictures Montgomery Ward possesses, Gavin would "almost feel sorry even for Montgomery Ward" (148). At the same time, the pictures would create innumerable problems for Jefferson; their shadows would linger long in local memory and legend. Gavin proceeds to "figger different" regarding Montgomery Ward's case, though he offers his thoughts without demanding a fee and seemingly without preconception, as if what he says occurs to him spontaneously. He tells Flem the story of Wilbur Provine, who had been sentenced to five years in Parchman for bootlegging. The preliminaries complete, a gentleman's understanding between equally interested parties almost reached, only the details remain to be decided. Flem asks Gavin to "Send that boy out" (149). Gavin refuses because he is "thinking of Jefferson too," adding "I'm even thinking of you" (149).

Once more, Gavin demonstrates his lack of understanding of who Flem has become, of what he has learned, and of what he wants. Gavin later tells Ratliff that Flem approached him like "Montgomery Ward himself tried it" (150). However, for Flem to offer a bribe would be completely out of character; he knows full well that Jefferson does not tolerate overt corruption. Nonetheless, Gavin continues to congratulate

himself for virtue when he claims Flem left his office “because he knew that by refusing to send Chick out I had already refused to be bribed” (150). He willfully ignores the meaning and implication of Flem’s claim to be thinking of Jefferson. Were he to ponder Flem’s words without the filter of enduring antagonism, Gavin would credit him with claiming a position in Jefferson and the full knowledge of exactly how—and why—things operate as they do. A skillful and consummate trader, Flem will protect the soiled reputations of Jefferson’s men in exchange for a free hand with Mink. No matter what Gavin claims later, he was the first established member of Jefferson society to help Flem “outguess and outfigure and despoil” (231).

Gavin learns what action Flem has taken the next day as he and Chick prepare to drive out to Wyott’s crossing, “where they were having some kind of a squabble over a drainage tax suit” (152).⁴ Sheriff Hampton enters Gavin’s office with the astonishing news that seven gallons of moonshine whiskey have been found in Montgomery Ward’s Atelier: “Two of them gallon jugs on that shelf that I opened and smelled yesterday that never had nothing but kodak developer in them, had raw corn whiskey in them this morning, though like I said I could have been wrong and missed them” (152). Should Hampton not protest this discovery, he will absolve himself from any blame for not being thorough and competent in his police work: he tells Gavin, “as you say, I could be wrong” (153). To his credit, Gavin refuses to relieve Hampton

⁴Faulkner alludes to the importance of education to the Jefferson establishment. Dr. Wyott is one of the most educated local people:

old Doctor Wyott, president emeritus of the Academy (his grandfather had founded it) who could read not only Greek and Hebrew but Sanskrit too, who wore two foreign decorations for (we, Jefferson, believed) having been not just a professing but a militant and even boasting atheist for at least sixty of his eighty years and who had even beaten the senior Mr Wildermark at chess. (268)

Faulkner summarizes an entire life and the system of social relationships in one sentence. Doctor Wyott has been the privileged recipient of “absolution” for his atheist views, whether he would seek, much less accept, such forgiveness or not. There is a hint of anti-Semitism, in the report that he “even” beat a Jew at chess. His daughter is Vaiden Wyott, the schoolteacher who inspires Wall Snopes to a life of success built on industry and hard work. She taught him as a child that “Wall was a good name, having been carried bravely by a brave Mississippi general at Chickamauga and Lookout Mountain” (127). Faulkner reveals the reach of ideological processes constraining meaning in Jefferson, for there appears to have been no Mississippi general of the CSA named Wall. Vaiden is admired for accomplishing good, even if she did so by lying to a child.

so easily: "As *you* say" (153), though his rebuttal does contain more than a hint of disdainful class privilege. The cycle of incompetent police work in Jefferson approaches completion. Grover Cleveland Winbush was not where he should have been to see what he should have seen, and now the sheriff himself could have overlooked seven gallons of moonshine in his search of a crime scene.

In Jefferson, those with something to lock up tend not to do so. Uncle Willy keeps his morphine "in that little flimsy wooden drawer that anybody with a screwdriver or a knife blade or maybe just a hair pin could prize open" (137). Hampton reports that the key to Montgomery Ward's studio is missing: "I dropped it into the drawer where I usually keep such, handcuffs and a extra pistol. Anybody could have come in . . . and taken it" (153). The sheriff's habit of keeping guns and the tools of his trade, even keys to crime scenes, in an unlocked drawer, turns out to be fortuitous this time. Gavin seems almost halfhearted when he scolds Hampton: "You really should start locking that place, Hub" (153). Hampton will not seek out the perpetrator of this deception because "Somebody took that key and planted that whiskey. It could have been any of them" (153). He and Gavin know very well it was Flem, of course. There is no way to identify who planted the whiskey if the sheriff does not want to know who it was. Hampton now is free to destroy the pornographic photos because, "After all, the whiskey is enough" (154). With his processes of self-protection fully operational, Hampton declares himself satisfied with the outcome because "it's Jefferson. We live here. Jefferson's got to come first" (154). Although his lax security compromised a crime scene, he will avoid scrutiny and things may proceed as usual. Flem trades Jefferson an extraordinary pornographer for just another common bootlegger. Gavin accepts the exchange, couching his conscience only slightly as he reports that Hampton "let Flem Snopes or *whoever it was* walk right in his office and steal that key" (154, emphasis added).

Contrary to Gavin's expectations, Flem returns to his office one more time to drop off "the key to Montgomery Ward's studio" (155). This act shows how well Flem understands the way things really operate in Jefferson; he now holds position in the social order. Flem uses civic virtue the same way as anyone else and forces this knowledge upon Gavin as *de facto* co-conspirator. In the bigger picture, Flem does serve civic virtue, as everyone, even Montgomery Ward, agrees that nothing

will be served if the names of those men who have come to view his images are made public. Reputations for uprightness would be soiled irrevocably, and Jefferson would suffer social consequences from loss of its most important and least substantial illusion. Although Gavin begins by protesting loudly, fully in accord with every expectation that the truth must emerge regardless of damage to any reputation, in the end, Flem's seven gallons of planted moonshine make Montgomery Ward's crime something everyone can understand and accept. Moonshine represents a completely routine and understandable crime; pornography would offer something new and terrible. Hampton's "felonious malfeasance" (154) remains ignored, and Grover Winbush's mother will continue to receive weekly supplies from her son. Justice of a sort has been fully served through hypocritical and self-serving civic virtue.

In a quite remarkable statement, Gavin tells Flem, "You're like me" (155), though he never fully contemplates the implications of his insight. Indeed, Gavin goes to great lengths, occasionally to the point of ridiculousness, to argue just the contrary: that Flem is different, that Flem is the Other, and that Flem shares nothing with the educated and cultured Gavin Stevens. Here, fleetingly, Gavin seems to understand what really has happened: "You don't give a damn about truth either. What you are interested in is justice" (155). These are not just lies Gavin tells himself as he pursues what he considers the just outcome; they are not flimsy cover for wrongs done in pursuit of the right. Flem clearly understands the social compact underlying such claims and, with hypocrisy equaling, if not exceeding, Gavin's, simply replies, "I'm interested in Jefferson . . . We got to live here" (155). For the first time, Gavin and Flem look at the same thing the same way with the same eye.

Gavin and Flem join together one more time when I. O. Snopes becomes an immediate threat to Flem's position. Old Het brings Gavin ten dollars as retainer on behalf of Mrs. Hait who is "fixing to need a lawyer" (215). Almost immediately thereafter, Flem asks Gavin to "take a case for me" (216). Flem chooses Gavin "For the same reason I would hunt up the best carpenter if I wanted to build a house, or the best farmer if I wanted to share-crop some land" (216). Actually, Flem would pay Gavin to serve as witness to what will follow: "I don't want a lawyer because I already know what I am going to do. I just want a witness" (216). Flem knows he can rely on Gavin to spread the story of this night far and wide. When I. O. finally finishes his long monologue on mules

and railroads, Flem hands Mrs. Hait "the mortgage on your house" so that all funds coming for her husband's death "will be clear money" (221). Flem has paid the debt as a public act of mercy. Money alone no longer provides the sole meaning in Flem's life. In the situation concerning Montgomery Ward, Flem felt it was adequate to express his concern for Grover Winbush's widowed mother through words alone. This time, he pays off a widow's mortgage. The stakes are very high, indeed, this night.

After giving Mrs. Hait the mortgage paper, Flem pulls out a roll of bills large enough to "choke a shoat," offering I. O. "nine hundred dollars," though I. O. wants "Ten hundred and fifty," on the condition he "move back to Frenchman's Bend and never own a business in Jefferson again as long as you live" (221-22). As he could not speak when he learned that Flem owned a house, now Gavin cannot hear: "Mr Flem had to speak to him twice before he heard him" (223). Flem has nothing more to say anyway:

And now Mr. Snopes was going and Uncle Gavin said how he expected that he might even have said Are you going back to town now? Or maybe even Shall we walk together? Of maybe at least Goodbye. But he didn't. He didn't say anything at all. He simply turned and left and was gone too. (223)

With his acts of mercy and civic virtue complete, public, and witnessed, Flem moves hard and fast to secure the presidency of the bank, at last.

Although Flem's actions lead to Eula's suicide and send Linda to exile in Greenwich Village, his civic virtue and mercy will be unimpeachable and attested to by the best witness: Mr. Flem Snopes is developing a reputation as unassailable as that of the late Colonel Sartoris, almost filling his footprints. Wilson intriguingly suggests the "possibility that his [Colonel Sartoris's] shortages were blamed on Byron Snopes and made good by the Colonel's successors" (437). Outrage against Byron's thievery could have provided a welcome and useful cleansing distraction from the truth of the Colonel's embezzlement (Wilson 438). Indeed, Faulkner offers a tantalizing hint that things were not at all straightforward in the bank under Colonel Sartoris. After starting "on the books that Byron kept" (104), it was "not until two days later that the head auditor was ready to commit himself roughly as to how much money was missing" (105). At the very least, there is much activity out of public view before De Spain assumes the bank's presidency.

Gavin's fury towards Flem climaxes as he recounts the day Will Varner came to Flem's house at 4:00 a.m. One is sympathetic to Gavin's situation, if not his conclusions, as his view of Flem here is colored by grief, even rage, for his having set in motion the chain of events that ultimately result in Eula's suicide. Gavin's Flem becomes a static caricature, exactly what Gavin's projection wants him to be. Gavin never reaches the final conclusion that Flem is a mirror to Jefferson, reflecting the tyranny of leading families established long ago.⁵ In spite of witnessing events to the contrary, Gavin views Flem through the magnifying lens of greed and hunger for money; he uses a microscope when he needs a telescope. Gavin places Flem's baseness of desire as resulting from lack of education, allowing for no sensibility other than that of profit. For Gavin, Flem's early time at the bank constitutes his full education; he will learn until "he—Snopes—would know all there was to learn about banking in Jefferson, and could graduate" (123). Commencement will occur when Flem knows "how to write out a note so that the fellow borrowing the money couldn't even read when it was due, let alone the rate of interest, *like Colonel Sartoris could write one*" (123, emphasis added). In Gavin's world, education, not ability, or diligence, or even grief and sacrifice, marks the difference between proper privilege and encroaching usurpation. While Flem, newly arrived in Jefferson, lives with Eula and Linda in a tent behind the restaurant he obtained from Ratliff (through a ruse Ratliff should have seen through), Gavin "was in Harvard . . . working for his M.A. After that he was going to the University of Mississippi law school to get ready to be Grandfather's partner" (4). Before his fight with De Spain at the Cotillion Ball, Gavin "didn't know he would ever go to Germany to enter Heidelberg University" (4). When events rapidly spin out of his control, Gavin reverts to dependency, asking his father, childlike, "What must I

⁵According to Chick, Jefferson is "a town founded by Aryan Baptists and Methodists, for Aryan Baptists and Methodists" (268). Citizens and residents alike are

descendants whose ancestors hadn't quitted home and security for a wilderness in which to find freedom of thought as they claimed and oh yes, believed, but to find freedom in which to be incorrigible and unreconstructible Baptists and Methodists; not to escape from tyranny as they claimed and believed, but to establish one. (269)

do now, Papa? Papa, what can I do now?" (87).⁶ Gavin goes to Heidelberg for a Ph.D. The plan is that when he returns after a suitable period of exile everyone will pretend they forgot why he left. Education provides a graceful, even noble, path for Gavin to extricate himself from unfortunate circumstances of his own creation.

In Gavin's view, this same education also places him far ahead of Flem's "innocence; ignorance, if you like" (241). Without an education, there was no way "for the idea even to have occurred to him [Flem] that there was a morality to banking, an inevitable ethics in it" (230). The irony in this statement almost overwhelms the reader, the more so because Gavin offers it as product and proof of his superior educated sensibility. Gavin actually approaches the truth of all banking when he dismisses Flem for thinking that "the looting of them—was the reason for banks, the only reason why anybody would go to the trouble and expense of organising one and keeping it running" (232). Gavin's Flem thinks that beginning with Colonel Sartoris, the people who operate Jefferson's banks have known how to loot them "so cleverly and quietly that the very people whose money had been stolen would not even discover it until after the looter was dead and safe" (233). Colonel Sartoris's accomplishment was that he "had robbed it for twelve years yet still contrived to die and be buried in the odor of unimpugnable rectitude" (233). In fact, this may well be what happened.

Despite Gavin's witnessing and reporting events that show Flem as dynamic in Jefferson, his Flem statically holds money as his sole focus, what he "sacrificed all his life for, sacrificed all the other rights and passions and hopes which make up the sum of a man and his life." Flem gathered money "terrible and picayune nickel by nickel" (231). Defenseless against those with education and means (like Gavin), Flem lacked "nature, biology, nepotism, for his weapon" (244). His Flem experienced humility only when "he knew now that he not only had not the education with which to cope with those who did have the education, whom he must outguess and outfigure and despoil, but that he never would have that education now" (231). Gavin's study in Classics provides a source for his claim that Flem's "fate [was] to have first the need for the money before he had opportunity to acquire the

⁶One could argue that Gavin displays a lack of manliness here by pointing out that Eula, too, was sent away for a while after she became pregnant with Linda. Gavin does the same thing women do when they have made a "mistake."

means to get it" (231). Surely Gavin knows, as do all educated people, that the Greeks saw fate as fixed and inalterable: only the uneducated and the foolish struggle futilely against the position and path Zeus has assigned.

Education affords Gavin two levels of privilege: a person without means cannot easily obtain a veneer of respectability and education provides the way to the necessary means. Gavin holds no respect for those who rise by applying "ruthless antlike industry" (231). He turns ridiculous when he claims that Flem had "nothing save the will and the need and the ruthlessness and the industry and what talent he had been born with, to serve them" (232).⁷ The last phrase in the sentence seems particularly telling, as the antecedent for "them" remains unclear even in the larger context of the novel. Perhaps Gavin means that all the Flems in the world should serve "us" and has simply misspoken. If so, Gavin unconsciously expresses his rage at Flem's transgression of accepted forms of social tyranny. Flem Snopes should remain Other, a cursed descendent of Ham, serving "them" who are privileged, educated, and born respectable. In the last sentence of this same paragraph, Faulkner capitalizes *Education* to create a failed metonymy, further illustrating the impotence of Gavin's thinking. Gavin tries to create new meaning so that *Education* signifies the creation of a weapon, not the myriad and subjective benefits of forming personhood through a course of study.

Gavin never misses any opportunity to minimize or dismiss Flem's accomplishment. He is willing to admit that Flem had "to try," but not that he succeeded by learning and applying the rules of Jefferson society that the well-born Gavin fully understands and supports. Gavin is correct that Flem's cultural development lags behind his economic success, but this merely makes him part of a large group of people in exactly the same situation. As noted above, Flem joins a commercial middle-class so stereotyped and common that an entire industry

⁷These same qualities are routinely praised in the Horatio Alger myth, for example, in which a working-class white male rises to a high position. In line with the Alger myth, Flem even marries a wealthy woman and actively seeks respectability. On the surface, Flem seems to realize the American Dream in which one rises based solely on one's own abilities, not on one's origins in the social structure. Flem's success in capitalism, what he calls "trading," reminds Gavin that his own position was obtained through privilege, plain and simple.

manufactures the goods people like him need to be whom they have become: is, not was.

In his anti-Flem rant, Gavin reveals himself as no more original than the target of his wrath. If Flem's baseness and lack of education restrict him to merely reflecting and embracing established social processes in Jefferson, the educated and privileged Gavin does not ennoble and transform those same processes into something representative of the ideals taught at Harvard and Heidelberg. Neither Gavin nor Flem offers anything new or original, though Gavin claims to be equipped through *Education* to do so. Not only does Gavin's false metonymy fail to produce any new meaning, its impulse is firmly in opposition to the emerging culture and grand narrative of modernism.⁸

Gavin correctly identifies Flem's discovery of "civic jealousy and pride" as self-serving (236), but he fails to add that all civic jealousy and pride in Jefferson are self-serving. Gavin never credits Flem for his appropriation of the established processes and methods of privilege. At the time of the robbery of Uncle Willy Christian's drugstore, Flem plotted and acted to "evict and eliminate from Jefferson one of his own kinsmen," and two years later he would "evict and eliminate from Jefferson another (and the last) objectionable member of his tribe" (236). Gavin moves even further from reality, into the realm of pure projection, when he claims that Flem sees De Spain as Satan himself. Having evicted and eliminated his troublesome relatives, Flem's next step, in Gavin's mind, should have been the elimination of De Spain: "he could with that same stroke evict and eliminate from his chosen community its arch-fiend among sinners too, its supremely damned among the lost infernal seraphim: a creature who was a living mockery of virtue and morality because he was a paradox" (237). Gavin's Miltonic vocabulary and phrasing is not lost on the reader, and, indeed, only an educated person could utter such a sentence. Not content with Milton, Gavin

⁸As Sheila Webb points out in her study of the ideology of the lifestyle presented in *Life* magazine, modernist popular culture was "presenting a model of society that nurtured and valorized the new professional class, which was the group best suited to lead the way" (2). Education in the form of "a college degree was viewed as the key to professional status, which in turn was seen as embodying an American ethos: advancement built of merit and hard work, not birth" (2). As early as the 1920s, higher education was increasingly seen as something most people could benefit from; the curriculum shifted to practical subjects, such as "social sciences, engineering, and the arts, as well as physical education and home economics" (3).

accesses the Old Testament to claim that no less than Yahweh Himself offers Flem “vengeance and revenge on the man who had not merely violated his home but outraged it” (237). In the end, the image and idea of Flem serves as some sort of vessel for Gavin’s rage over fate leaving him bereft after twelve long years of barren longing and desire.

In *The Town*, Flem appropriates the social processes, long in place in Jefferson, that allow the ruthless pursuit of private interests under the guise of civic virtue. In the two encounters with his relatives Gavin witnesses, Flem carefully furthers the illusion of his upright morality in Jefferson, appearing as conservative as Gavin in his actions and attitudes. While ruthlessly pursuing self-interest, Flem acts completely in line with social expectations by repeatedly declaring that his disinterested actions only support the community they all love passionately. For his part, Gavin enables the processes of justice that allow one man’s felonies to be ignored while another man is convicted with evidence that everyone knows was planted. Always a trader, Flem gains twenty years of life for seven gallons of moonshine whiskey. Gavin knows it as well as anyone, and, although he protests loudly and often to the contrary, he is correct to tell Flem, “You’re like me.” Unlike Gavin’s confused and often sterile thinking, which obfuscates and distorts reality, Flem’s mirror-like reflection of the truth of Jefferson offers a crystal-clear image.

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