"A larger imperative" the vengeance of Mink Snopes.

Roy J. Hertz

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"A LARGER IMPERATIVE"
The Vengeance of Mink Snopes

by

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Professor in Charge

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"A Larger Imperative":
The Vengeance of Mink Snopes

Abstract

The apotheosis of Mink Snopes at the conclusion of the Snopes trilogy is an unexpected climax. It is unexpected because there is no apparent indication that it will occur. Most critics, however, accept the elevation as reasonable, in keeping with William Faulkner's basic humanism, and not working against the main thrust of the narrative.

The trilogy must be viewed as embodying several non-conflicting themes blending into a generally satisfying whole. There is the background of the lives, conflicts, and maneuvers of the rustics found in The Hamlet. The mood is generally comic but sturdily interlaced with the pathetic or macabre visitations of the put-upon. The mood shifts to gossipy in The Town, and in The Mansion explores man's inhumanity to man. Through it all, as a recurring reminder, is woven the story of Mink Snopes, a small but powerful sharecropper, isolated by his poverty and his pride. One of the goals of this study is to delineate the principled morality that shapes Mink's actions and places him in the role of hero. There is the repeated refrain of his mania to exact vengeance on Flem
Snopes, the man who dishonors him by not responding to
the call of blood kinship. Mink and the pursuit of his
revenge bracket the action of the trilogy.

Mink is a man of diminutive stature, short on intel-
lect, and almost bare of worldly goods. Yet he is appro-
priately chosen by Faulkner to be the agent by which the
evils of Snopesism, a profit-at-all-costs-oriented phi-
losophy, are destroyed. Mink regards the killing of Flem
as sufficient payment for Mink's having been dishonored
by Flem. Elevation to the company of shining phantoms is
more than he would contemplate.

The story is presented through the ever-altering
viewpoints of omniscient, limited, and participating nar-
ators. They vary in the intensity and excitement they
generate but are responsible for delivering an interest-
ing series of aspects and analyses. Of special merit,
particularly because of his reliability, empathy, and
shrewdness, is the voice of V. K. Ratliff, an itinerant
sewing-machine salesman.

The theme of the destruction of Snopesism is univer-
sal and could be related to other growth periods in other
social structures. There is some drifting into carica-
ture, but the message is clear: when selfish motives
control the world around us there must be an end to it.
It is significant that the destruction of Snopesism comes
from within, and this may be the reason for the apotheosis of Mink. He is a man, in community at last.
CHAPTER ONE

"Destiny's Rattlesnake": Mink the Avenger

When Mink Snopes, struggling against the restraints of two officers and three bailiffs, calls into the courtroom, "'Flem Snopes! Is Flem Snopes in this room? Tell that son of a bitch--,'" he is charting a course of action, a mission of one deed, clear and inflexible: the death of Flem.

For thirty-eight years "the long-burning fuse of Mink's wrath" will sustain Mink through the indignities of imprisonment and betrayal. His appeal for assistance is not made for the first time at the moment of his sentencing but is one of a series of appeals repeated by Mink, who assumes, out of the simplicities of his traditional upbringing, that blood will answer to blood and Flem will support him. But Flem fails to recognize the ritualistic responsibilities of kinship, and Mink "considers it a monstrous dishonoring" when his pleas do not

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3 Beck, p. 21.
produce the hoped-for response.

James Gray Watson feels that "Mink demonstrates that the principles which motivate his revenge transcend momentary individual animosities....A larger imperative is at issue: revenge upon Flem Snopes. To this end Mink's fearful capacity for belief and endurance is directed, accentuating with renewed emphasis Flem's amorality."

Most of Watson's thematic approach to the trilogy follows this proposition: countering Flem's amorality is Mink's morality. Faulkner allows that a simple thematic concept as presented by Watson may not be adequate. In response to a relevant question at the University of Virginia, Faulkner said, "Maybe the writer has no concept of morality at all, only an integrity to hold always to what he believes to be the facts and truths of human behavior, not moral standards at all."

The specific nature of Flem's obdurate incapacity to accept for himself any sense of human compassion finds itself doing battle with the surprising moral stand of

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5 Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph E. Blotner, Faulkner in the University: Class Conferences at the University of Virginia, 1957-1958 (Charlottesville, Virginia: The University of Virginia Press, 1959), p. 267.
Mink, who must redress the wrong done to him and must destroy Flem if he, Mink, is ever to achieve the essence of his challenged manhood. "It is on this recurrent thematic contrast that the Snopes trilogy is structurally poised, and the opposition of these forces provides the major source of organic unity in the novels."\(^6\)

Warren Beck modifies but accepts this major premise:

Once more a Faulknerian theme has been evolved, in an opulently detailed yet scrupulous fable of the human condition, with recurrent conflict between ruthless aggression and a principled resistance which is only partially successful, barely forestalling despair.\(^7\)

Richard P. Adams regards the purification of Snopes as "The grand theme of the trilogy... The final purification is indeed accomplished from the inside."\(^8\) Adams suggests that, even though Mink fires the bullet that kills Flem and does indeed have reasons for vengeance, he is acting as an agent for Linda. This theory tends to diminish the stature Mink acquires as he fulfills his mission.

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\(^6\) Watson, unpaged endpaper.

\(^7\) Beck, p. 10.

The fiber of Mink Snopes' vengeance is spun of two threads. One is the simple cord of blood-kinship. The other is the skein of circumstance based on his minimal physical, social, and intellectual qualifications. Together they produce an indestructible rope pulling Mink toward the completion of his fated responsibility, the killing of Flem.

The inevitability of the act of revenge is recognized by Gavin Stevens: "'We wont stop him. We cant stop him--not all of us together, Memphis police and all. Maybe even a rattlesnake with destiny on his side dont even need luck, let alone friends.'" 9

The inevitability of the act of revenge is also recognized by Mink at the moment of his sentencing. He knows now that Flem is not going to honor his obligation. The mission crystallizes before he ever reaches Parchman. He is addressing his lawyer: "'I got something I got to attend to when I get back out'"(M44). On his admittance to Parchman, "he thought, tried to remember, with a kind of amazement of the time when his only reason for wanting to get out was to go back home and farm, remembering it only for a moment and then no more, because now he had to

get out" (M48). He understands the difference between desire and destiny: "'If a feller jist wants to do something, he might make it and he might not. But if he's GOT to do something, cant nothing stop him'" (M49).

There is no cloudiness in Mink's mind surrounding the precision of his mission. In a conversation with Parchman's warden, Mink feels it is not necessary for his wife to visit him since "'I'll be home soon'" (M50). When the warden reminds him that, "'You've already been here three'" (M51), Mink replies, "'Have I?....I aint kept count.--No....Not right away. There's something I got to attend to first....Something private. When I finish that, then I'll come on home. Write her that. Yes sir...he thought. It looks like I done had to come all the way to Parchman jest to turn right around and go back home and kill Flem'" (M51). The preparation for Mink's decision is fixed by immutable laws covering the responsibility of kinship and the true nature of justice. We receive an early indication with our introduction to the world and behavior the Snopeses represent. They "committed infrequent adulteries and more frequent homicides among themselves and were their own courts, judges and executioners" (H5).

The inhabitants of the county understand the sense of justice within the group: "The betrayal of honor
which makes the sharpest impression on the community—at least on some of its more thoughtful members—is Flem's refusal to aid his cousin Mink.\textsuperscript{10} Bookwright, a simple countryman, understands, but believes that "'Even Flem Snopes aint going to let his own blood cousin be hung just to save money'" (H270). But Flem does not respond to the call for tribal responsibility. Even a superior Yoknapatawphian like Gavin Stevens senses the inevitable direction the course will run. When the sheriff is advised of Mink's release from Parchman and his plan for revenge, he expresses intense disbelief that any man could serve so long for one murder and then emerge determined to murder again: "'Even a fellow like they say he was would learn that much sense in thirty-eight years'" (M 377). But Stevens says with authority, "'You were not in the courtroom that day and saw his face and heard him. I was'" (M 377).

\begin{quote}
Mink feels that he has been deliberately betrayed by his kinsman. Thus, in wanting to kill Flem, he is not only seeking personal vengeance, he is also making himself an instrument of retribution for Flem's violation of the ancient laws of blood kinship.
\end{quote}

Thus Mink is part nemesis, harking back to the primitive roots of justice, part simple disaccommodated man, from whom all has been taken—freedom, wife, children, even citizenship. He is totally bereft of all but his condition as a human being.  

When Mink is initially jailed after his murder of Houston, his wife, Yettie, finds work to help out. Ratliff, a member of the community, has sufficient compassion to help Mink's family by taking them in and giving them shelter. But Flem, who is looked to for help, absents himself and denies any concern with the basic worth of clanship. "Flem's heedless disregard for his kinsman is illustrative of an inhumanity that is the more profound for being premeditated. It constitutes a denial and negation, not only of blood ties and human community, but of those individual rights and that dignity which Mink strove to assert and achieve by murdering Houston." Flem's "violations of blood kinship and family become the metaphor by which his exploitation of all human principle is expressed." 

Backman envisions Mink's central focus as a com-

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12 Watson, p. 58.
13 Watson, p. 148.
pounding of physical and economic limitations, against which he kept fighting, striking out to accommodate his frustrations. In analyzing the Houston murder scene, Backman says Mink "pulled the trigger not only against the man who had impounded his yearling but against the whole scheme of his existence." Mink's restricted intellectual capacity does not allow for subtle evaluations. When something runs sharply against his clear and simple understanding, he strikes back. "Murder was his last protest against the entrapment."  

Genetic controls foreordained that Mink would be small. His efforts to compensate drove him to monstrous physical labors such as his round-the-clock efforts in Houston's fields and his battling the superior numbers of the court attendants.

His inability to comprehend a larger philosophy of human behavior is extreme. His only recourse is to resolve all problems of human right in direct relationship to his ongoing adherence to his simple narrow belief in the elemental teachings of clan loyalty and blood respon-


15 Backman, p. 155.
Mink's drive for revenge never really disappears, never really abates, though there is mention of the possibility that it might have lessened. But this is not suggested until after Flem perpetrates the shame of an improperly-clothed attempt to escape and provides an extended jail-term for Mink: "Tell him he hadn't ought to used that dress. But it don't matter. If I had made it out then, maybe I would a changed. But I reckon I wont now. I reckon I'll just wait" (M 86). Mink is "sustained by his code of vengeance and by his underdog philosophy."\textsuperscript{16} Blind chance controls much of Mink's performance. He recognizes this in his acceptance of the embodiment of a force more of reality than of religion: "'Old Moster jest punishes. He don't play jokes'" (M 398). But he interprets this element as supportive of his own efforts rather than as absolute control: "'It was as if Old Moster Himself had said, 'I aint going to help you none but I aint going to downright hinder you neither'" (M 403).

Another pressure of circumstance which grinds Mink down is the desperately inadequate economic level of the sharecropper. Poverty tends to intensify itself. As the

\textsuperscript{16}Beck, p. 28.
absence of means for upward movement restricts entry to a better standard of living, the realization that a man is not able to provide necessities for his family enrages him. The realization that Houston's Negro servant lives better than Mink does is painful and extremely frustrating. "Mink's outrage is not directed against Houston but against the very condition that fate has imposed upon him." 17

Acceptance of chance affecting the lives of people and the ability to understand and accept the murder of Flem give us "no alternative but to join Faulkner and Gavin and Ratliff in their summation of the human plight ....The process of preparing us for that knowledge consists of engaging our sympathies for Mink." 18 Faulkner wants us to follow the path of growth he has walked from the start to the end of the trilogy and accept the "contradictions and discrepancies due to the fact that the author has learned, he believes, more about the human heart and its dilemma than he knew thirty-four years ago" (M-preface).

Some of the critics deal with the possibility that

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18 Volpe, p. 336.
Mink is an instrument of divine justice:

The role of chance in the fulfillment of Mink's revenge—the theft of his money, the generosity of Goodyhay, the functioning of the worthless pistol, the timing of his arrival at Flem's house during the short period that Biglin is not on guard, the futility of Gavin's efforts to intercept him, and Flem's failure to resist his terrified murderer—create an aura of divine retribution about the mission.  

Faulkner introduces the idea in a conversation between Stevens and Ratliff. After Mink's release from Parchman, Stevens marvels at the fact that Mink, with a minimal amount of cash, a vague instinct about distance and geography, is progressing toward his goal. Stevens feels that this is being accomplished only because a busy God is personally overseeing Mink every step of the way. Ratliff understands. He says, "Don't that maybe depend on who God wants shot this time?" (M 389).

Millgate says that Mink is "The dedicated instrument of vengeance," but feels that Linda gives divine justice assistance by manipulating Mink or, certainly, in turning Mink's plan to her own advantage, the vengeance of her mother, Eula. Adams believes that even Flem, by

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19 Volpe, p. 336.

virtue of his acceptance of the fact that his time to be killed has arrived, assists Mink by offering no resistance. "Flem's death, like Bula's, is apparently a suicide."\textsuperscript{21} Millgate sees "poetic justice in Flem's death as if Snopesism were finally defeated."\textsuperscript{22} Howe supports this belief. Flem, apparently invulnerable to the corrective pressures of the laws of the outside world, "must find his destruction at the hands of a nemesis from within his own tribe."\textsuperscript{23}

Vickery refines the reason for Mink's being the most logical candidate to be the executioner of Flem and the closer of the trilogy. She says they share certain specific traits:

Like Flem, he [Mink] can ignore all those factors which might interfere. The claims of his wife and children cease to matter. Living itself is reduced to waiting because 'nobody, no man, no nothing could wait longer than he could wait when nothing else but waiting would do' (M 22). In short, Mink and Flem both reveal the same implacable self-sufficiency and the same ruthless determination.\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{21}Adams, p. 160.
\textsuperscript{22}Millgate, p. 248.
Because so much time has lapsed between the injustice to Mink and Flem's killing by Mink, Millgate feels the circumstances make "the revenge almost as anachronistic as Mink himself." Faulkner, however, has the answer. He tells us he "thought of the whole story at once like a bolt of lightning lights up a landscape." Faulkner assures us that he never forgot the characters even though he might have forgotten some of the things they did. He feels that even after the story is over the characters he has told us about are so vital that "that character is not done, he is still going on at some new devilment that sooner or later I will find out about and write about."

A reasonably clear motive is established for Mink's determination to murder Flem: the need to avenge a deep personal rejection. "He finally realized that Flem wasn't, had never intended to [save him]"(M 92). There is no monetary or property consideration. It is a resounding blow to Mink's deeply felt need to establish the dimensions of his manhood. But what are Flem's motives for ignoring Mink? Volpe says "There is no evidence of-

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25 Millgate, p. 248.
26 Gwynn-Blotner, p. 90.
27 Gwynn-Blotner, p. 78.
ferred to indicate that Flem could have helped even if he had tried." Longley feels that "even a moderately competent lawyer could have got Mink off on a plea of self-defense. It seems clear...that Faulkner wishes us to understand that Flem could have got his cousin off if he had chosen--and he does not choose." Watson finds a workable logical motive for Flem, a typically selfish one:

Having been threatened by Mink with fire and having suffered a financial loss in the goat trade because of Ike's note, which Mink gave to Ratliff, Flem is coldly and efficiently thwarting the possibility of any such threats in the future by making certain that Mink will be imprisoned. Characteristically his motives are those of ruthless self-interest.

Because there is no 'profit consideration' in Mink's killing Houston, there is no benefit to Flem in saving Mink, and, while Ratliff and Mink himself clearly believe that Flem could save him, he does not.

Somewhere during the creative process Faulkner decided to alter his presentation of Mink from the animal

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28 Volpe, p. 334.
30 Watson, p. 67.
31 Watson, p. 99.
whose name he bears to a softer, more sympathetic set-upon man. He shifts the viewpoint from the critical narrators to a point from which our attention is engaged by the interior of Mink, his attitudes and drives. We tend to understand the pressures that motivate, control, and direct Mink's behavior. We accept his attitude of the necessity for fulfilling his destiny and exacting vengeance on Flem. We go along with the ideal that the murder is not only justified but necessary and good.

But not all of us. Sullivan feels that:

Mink's quest for vengeance fails to achieve the thematic priority that Faulkner claims for it.

We follow Mink in his journey from Parchman to Memphis to Jefferson, and every step is a parodic reminder of similar ways others have walked or ridden in moral significance and dramatic fulfillment....Rather he goes toward a shedding of blood that intends only to get even for past offenses, and which has no gravity or dimension beyond the paltry act itself.32

The novel [The Mansion] at its best delineates and embraces mankind's common fate. We know that one aspect of life is to endure suffering and bereavement; to forego that which we most desire; to stand firm against destiny that seemingly would destroy us.33


33 Sullivan, p. 9.
Mink the avenger is more than a piece of the pattern to be manipulated by the author. He is more than a murderer needed to bring the Snopes Saga full circle. He is "a man who epitomizes human pride in a struggle against the cosmic forces that buffet all men."\footnote{Volpe, p. 332.}
Chapter Two
"The Value of the Individual Man": The Principles of Mink

If we are to accept Watson's explanation that the thread uniting the trilogy is a contest between Flem's amorality and Mink's morality, we must clarify the driving force of each of the combatants. They are as one only in the intensity with which they are controlled by the tenets of their attitudes. The areas of their most critical opposition focus on their concern with two matters: man's responsibility to man and money.

Volpe envisions Flem as "the only Snopes guilty of the worst crime in the Faulkner canon--a lack of humanity, a complete failure to recognize the integrity, the needs and the feelings of other human beings." It is not that Flem could not be aware of the rights of others; it is simply that he chooses to ignore them, to intrude on them without concern as long as they satisfy his own personal acquisitive nature. Flem does not see others as having rights or desires of their own that should be respected.

Flem's attitude is essentially economic. Everything has a value in cold cash even, at one point, his own

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1 Volpe, p. 309.
life. When he is concocting the plot with Montgomery Ward to arrange for Mink's aborted escape attempt, Montgomery Ward suggests Flem stop bargaining, pay someone the top dollar, and have Mink killed. There is a pause and Montgomery Ward says, "'So there's something that even a Snopes won't do'" (M 67). But Flem is only haggling and eventually gets Montgomery Ward's price down from ten thousand to five thousand dollars. This is not a triumph for Flem as much as it is for Montgomery Ward, who has some of the Snopesian sense of dickering. Flem's original plan was to offer five hundred dollars.

Mink's situation is not new: "Bad luck had all his life continually harassed and harried him into the constant and unflagging necessity of defending his own simple rights" (M 7). His rights are not intrusive on others and seek only to obtain or retain his own legitimate if meagre, rights. "These rights consist of being accepted and treated as a man by other men....Mink is asking for recognition. . .of the value of the individual man." When he murders Houston because of the injustice and intolerable indignity of the pound fee, it is in "vindication of his rights and the liquidation of his injuries" (M 218). According to Watson, when Mink murders Hous-

\[\text{Vickery, p. 205.}\]
ton, "Given Mink's concept of a fundamentally just des-
tiny, the murder is an assertion of his identity as a man
and his right as a man, to the least minimal humanity."³

Mink is scrupulously honest. His less-than-subsist-
ence economic level might seem a strange companion for
his infinite sense of honesty; it appears a luxury which
desperate men might ignore in the face of dire need. But
Mink is extremely persistent in adhering to his beliefs.
As strong as is his need for a weapon to dispatch Flem,
he points out clearly, when he has an opportunity to
steal Goodyhay's gun, "'I aint never stole. I aint never
come to that and I wont never'"(M 274). Even under
Lump's prodding he refuses to divulge Houston's body's
hiding place so they can share the proceeds of Houston's
wallet. "Mink refuses to prostitute the self-assertion
of personal pride, symbolized in his murder of Houston,
by robbing Houston's corpse....Mink reaffirms the funda-
mental dignity that he found in murdering Houston. He
asks simply to be let alone."⁴

He rejects the money his wife offers him after she
sells her body to help him. He refuses Linda's offer of
$250 because he feels there are strings attached. (Later

³Watson, p. 157.
⁴Watson, p. 56.

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he does accept but only without conditions.) He will not cheat or take advantage of the shopkeeper's error though the shopkeeper does later cheat him. These are all luxurious gestures indeed for one so low on the economic ladder, but this maddening sense of honor is closely tied to his own code and his own understanding of its part in maintaining his tenuous grasp on his manhood.

The trilogy contains a certain foreshadowing of Mink's attitude and sense of innate honesty. His uncle "'Ab wasn't going to beat Pat [Stamper] bad. He just wanted to recover that 'eight dollars' worth of honor and pride of Yoknapatawpha County horse-trading, doing it not for profit but for honor'"(H 36). Vickery sees that "The last of the Snopeses, Ab and Mink share Flem's excessive concern with economics but not his ability to exclude all other considerations. Both of them show an almost pathological determination to preserve their honor and dignity."\(^5\) Vickery sees the pound fee as such an insult to his honor that only the violence of murder can assuage the injury. She calls the murder a "ritual act intended to preserve a minimal kind of integrity and so effect a crude kind of justice."\(^6\) Backman feels that "Ab and Mink

\(^5\) Vickery, p. 171.
\(^6\) Vickery, p. 171.
Snopes are essentially different from Flem because their lives are founded on thwarted pride, not on self-interest. In his own misdirected way Mink was indomitable."\(^7\)

There is a constant struggle between the dollar-oriented man and the moral man.

Part of the structure of Mink's journey from Parchman through the world he barely recognizes is a series of testings of his honor, his willingness to work, his personal feelings about a personal God, his capacity to adapt to a strange community. Watson believes that the successful surmountings of all these challenges "increase his stature by further defining his concept of honor and his will to endure...forced to seek work, subordinating his pride in himself as an independent man to his need to justify himself as a human being."\(^8\)

Mink does not possess a capacity for intellectual analysis sufficient to review and detail the tenets of his philosophy. He does little formalizing at all. He reviews aspects of it, as in his evaluations of "Old Moster," but he never gives us the shape of his inner self. However, it filters through, and what does become quite clear is that he recognizes both that there are

\(^7\) Backman, p. 141, p. 156.
\(^8\) Watson, p. 195.
forces of conduct that control us and that man must none-
theless accept responsibility for his behavior. When his
prison escape fails, he recognizes Flem's part in it and
will deal with him in time, but he acknowledges his own
part in the debacle: "'I was warned'"(M88). He is dis-
turbed not so much by the failure of the escape plot as
by the attack on his manhood: "'a man should be permit-
ted to run at his fate, even if that was doom, in the de-
cency and dignity of pants'"(M85).

Of urgent concern to Mink is the maintenance of his
precious status as an individual, as a man to be accepted
as an individual, a matter that transcends economic and
social factors. Faulkner makes real our recognition of
Mink's need. He shifts the portrayal of Mink from exter-
nal to internal sources. "Faulkner is tolerant of a man
guilty of a crime of passion: he can view Mink, the mur-
derer with compassion."\(^7\) We are able to sympathize with
the single-minded directness Mink uses to restore his
challenged manhood. He is not specifically aware that he
is taking on the mores of the world. "His problem is
that he cannot reconcile himself to, cannot submit to the
idea of being valued less than other men."\(^10\)

\(^7\)Volpe, p. 309.

\(^10\)Longley, p. 161.
His reputed meanness comes to be beside the point, and his plight as a man in irreconcilable conflict with his environment forms the center of the story, The Mansion. His sense of himself as a man and his need to be recognized as such drive him to see the killing of Houston as the only possible way in which he can live with himself after Houston's arrogant treatment of him. Since in Mink's primitive simple moral code the injury to his manhood can only be effaced by the death of the man who insulted him, the conflict is not essentially an inner one; it is an external conflict between Mink's personal and the social morality that forbids murder. Mink is not unaware of the social code; he knows that he will be expected to pay for his murder of Houston. He also knows, however, that the social code has its loopholes, and he confidently expects that Flem, with his influence, not only can rescue him, but would have to save him whether he wanted to or not because of the ancient immutable laws of simple blood kinship.\footnotemark

Mink appears a solid adherent to the laws of "Simple blood Kinship"\footnotemark, and he exhibits ongoing traits of unsupervised honesty. These are not only deeply held reactions, but are really all he has, in his own opinion, to give him stature as a man among other men. He has nothing else, no position, no money, no champion. Beck says, "...he lives by that endurance Faulkner finds in mankind, with a quiet courageous persistence making survival something more than a brute manner. He plays the game,\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemark\footnotemarks
too, according to dim but steady lights of his own."¹² His misdirected sense of self-sufficiency, that he needs only his precious rights to support him, causes him to reject "not only bond (if he could have made one), but counsel" (H 264) at the time of his hearing. He strongly suspects that his court-appointed lawyer may not be serving his best interest: "'I aint got time to waste twenty or twenty-five years to find out whether you know what you're talking about or not'" (M 44). He is puzzled by the fact that at prison they would, horrendously, "'feed niggers before a white man'" (M 258).

Mink's actions throughout are based on a "principled violence"¹³. He is obsessed with preserving the sanctity of his own rights, no matter how simply they are conceived or precipitously maintained. "Even his most violent acts are assertions of honor without regard for practical advantage."¹⁴ Mink would not understand any such analysis of his condition. In his own words, "'Not justice; I never asked that; jest fairness, that's all'" (M 106). This is a reasonable simplification of the goals of civil law.

¹² Beck, p. 28.
¹³ Beck, p. 17.
¹⁴ Beck, p. 78.
Watson summarizes: "Mink's feelings are a mixture of determination, pride and regret: determination to be avenged, pride for his having planned his vengeance well and regret for the circumstances that necessitated his revenge."

But Mink's summary is simpler and more direct: all he needs to care personally for his needs, responsibilities, and rights is "'one more day'" (M 264).

What of the mentality behind all this nurturing of rights, this tremendous obsession with the preservation of self? There is a mind, not illiterate, but not developed beyond the bare three-R's, possibly learned surreptitiously at the knee of his foster mother. He is literate enough for skullduggery, to be able to sign Flem's name to Ratliff's note (H 76). But when he gets a letter from Yettie, he seeks help because "'I can read reading, but I can't read writing good'" (M 50). His understanding of mathematics is confined to rudimentary arithmetic. When he has a problem in calculation, he has a devious technique whereby he solicits an answer (H 76). But he has enough brains to get by. If he were more intelligent, he could not serve Faulkner's need.

What he does lack is a sense of intellectual curiosity. It is most difficult to accept the idea that his

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15 Watson, p. 156.
isolation in Parchman was so complete that the thousands of men who circulated in and about during those thirty-eight years did not drop any more information than was indicated about the outside world. After all, Mink's exemplary prison behavior, except for the attempted escape, gave him freedom to move about. Since he had been a farmer, it is difficult to believe, except for the heightened dramatic effect, that "something else he had forgotten about during the thirty-eight years: The Seasons....But now they belonged to him again" (M 104). "...the most terrifying thing that had happened to him in the thirty-eight years; he had forgotten distance" (M 259). He was not familiar with economic growth and inflation. The current cost of sardines and soda pop was beyond him (M259). An old puzzle returned when he found a Negro better off than he, but he accepts a ride from one because his need is great enough (M262). He must accept the fact that the dirt roads have given way to bands of concrete (M 262). Instinct, derived from his youthful brothel-crawling, renders Memphis passable. He has only the vaguest notion of the drastically altered social pattern. He thinks of the "W P and A" (M 287) and innocently regards the fifty cents given him by a responsive policeman as "Relief" (M 287).

Reed characterizes as external this confusion as
Mink embarks on his homeward swing:

Mink is Rip Van Winkle: surrounded by confusion and doubt and he finds his certainty within. His internal resolution and his law—all he can bring to bear to free not just a world he never made but a world remade while he was out of it—is what he knows from his inner experience while sealed off from the world. He is frozen in the certainty of his own consciousness. It is the strongest characteristic carried over from his appearances in The Hamlet and this calm and common sense of internal self-rationalization here [in The Mansion] seem even more reasonable, even more justified than in the earlier book. We know that Mink is in a way mad, but at the same time we recognize obstacles placed in his path by the town's guardians as ineffectual and in a way, irrelevant.16

But Mink yearns for the comfort of a remembered past. The world has accelerated its pace during Mink's stay in Parchman. "He finds himself not just old—but also an obsolescent man....The world he reenters bewilders him not only by its strangeness but by its inconsistencies."17 But Mink's inner strength is supported by "a grim sense of provocation and his unrelenting purpose."18 His indomitable will feeds his need. Vickery

17 Beck, p. 175.
18 Beck, p. 28.
likens his obsessive single-mindedness to that of "a child who must perform the act he has set himself though he has long ago forgotten his own reasons for doing so".\textsuperscript{19}

A proper house for this childish single-mindedness is Mink's diminutive body. He appears animalistic with "child-sized hands like the hands of a pet coon"(M 415), deceptively "frail and harmless and not much larger than a child"(M 104). To his remarkably perceptive lawyer he is "...slight and frail and harmless-looking as a child and as deadly as a small viper--a half-grown asp or cobra or krait"(M 45). To Ratliff he is..."that durn little half-starved wildcat"(M 374). To the warden he is "'a small frail creature not much larger than a fifteen-year old boy'"(M 50). To Montgomery Ward, who knows his age, he is "'a darn little worn-out dried-up shrimp of a man not as big as a fourteen-year old boy'"(M 84). To Flem he is "'not much bigger than a twelve-year old boy'"(M 380). To the intuitive Memphis policeman he is "looking no larger than a child and no less waif, abandoned... but no more pitiable than a scorpion"(M 287).

There is no question about Faulkner's wish for us to see Mink physically as "the underfed, overworked sharecropper

\textsuperscript{19}Vickery, p. 297.
... a stunted little fellow." This is an effective dramatic concept that the force to rid us of the evil of Snopesism should be enclosed in the pitiful frame of Mink.

Despite Faulkner's constant reminders that Mink is noticeably shorter than most men, Faulkner also reassures us that the strength encased in this sub-normal body is that multiplied to the level of a demon worker. Even in prison, Mink "assumed his assigned task each morning and worked steady and unflagging in the cotton as if it was his own crop he was working bringing to fruit" (M 50). But as an orphan, he had long been an hard-working unpaid sharecropper on his relatives' farms. Repeated illustrations indicate the super-human power he possesses. When doing Houston's chores, he is a demon worker, slaving through the night, around the clock: "... a man can bear anything by simply and calmly refusing to accept it, be reconciled to it, give up to it" (M 21). Mink echoes this philosophy of unflagging, continuous striving during his journey: "A man can get through anything if he can jest keep on walking" (M 289).

He performs repeated feats of super-human strength. After he murders Houston, he is "dragging the body which

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outweighed him by fifty pounds" (H 229) and then "hand
over hand hauled up the body which was half again as
large as he" (H 229). Montgomery Ward poses the question
how anyone "as small and frail could have held enough
mad, let alone steaded and aimed a ten-gauge shotgun, to
kill anybody" (M 84). Fate much earlier arranged a simi-
lar scene. When his beset stepmother, who had taken care
of him "because she was a Christian" (M 104), was ill, he
shot a rabbit for her with a stolen shotgun, "the weapon
even taller than he was" (M 105).

It was from his stepmother that he received what hu-
mane consideration he experienced during his formative
years. Orphaned at an early age, Mink was locked into
drab, earth-bound sharecropper existence. This small
pinched human learned only the barest rudiments of the
communicative arts and accumulated the religious stric-
tures of his fundamental Southern Protestantism, which
would include the desire that his bride be a virgin
(H 242). Yet, even with these limitations Mink becomes
aware of further horizons. He "tries to escape the fate
of his people. He sets out to go to sea, but en route he
falls in love . . . cannot resist the loggerman's nympho-
maniac daughter. He falls in love and marries her.
Their love persists." 21 Faulkner describes Mink's and

21 Volpe, p. 313.
Yettie's relationship as "a tumescence which surrounded nothing and asked no quarter, and which made a monogamist of him forever, as opium and homicide do of those whom they once accept" (H 242). Mink recognizes he must do constant battle with "the ghostly embraces of thirty or forty men" (H 242).

In spite of his small stature, Mink is able to compensate. He is shorter than Yettie but earns and retains Yettie's love through the power of his sexual prowess. "Mink is sexually potent, emotionally vigorous, able to love and hate deeply." And their love lasts. "Romance is totally missing and has been replaced by obsession." Mink recognizes it is not spiritual; purely physical, almost animal, but it serves. There is no indication that Mink seeks anyone else and Yettie indicates that Mink satisfies her: "'I've had a hundred men, but I never had a wasp before. That stuff comes out of you is rank poison. It's too hot. It burns itself and my seed both up'" (H 243). Mink's sexual success is another proof of

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23 Tuck, p. 75.
his masculinity. But Yettie is wrong about burnt seed. They do have two daughters to attest to the success of their coupling. One of them moves successfully upward out of her class and becomes a madam in a Memphis whore-house. Mink unknowingly passes this house on his journey. Such is the nature of Faulknerian irony.

Yettie is able to put aside her former need for indiscriminate love-making and remains faithful to Mink. She moves once out of the orbit of marital fidelity; but it is to earn money for Mink, not out of any pleasure-seeking on her part. "She was the woman for him . . . and he was--and still is--the man for her . . . . Theirs is a relationship apparently founded upon pure passion, but it exerts a kind of intense idealistic hold upon her which has nothing to do now with bodily gratification . . . . he treats his wife harshly and in doing so, perhaps answers her need."\(^{24}\) She becomes so much a wife that she can turn concernedly and desperately to him (after his murder of Houston) and remonstrate with him not for the deed but for his bad timing: "'not for killing him, but for doing it when you had no money to get away on if you ran and nothing to eat if you stayed'" (H 244).

\(^{24}\)Brooks, pp. 178-179.
Gentleness is not part of their relationship. At one point, Mink slaps Yettie and draws blood out of a sense of "extreme and patiently indomitable and implacable weariness" (H 225). The rigors of the sharecropper existence of degrading poverty wear down physical endurance: "that soft mysterious one he had touched that first time with amazement and reverence and incredulous excitement the night of his marriage," now worn to such leather-toughness that half the time, it seemed to him most of the time, he would be too spent with physical exhaustion to remember it was even female (M 90). Mink recognizes that even in this state of weariness, life will cycle and renew itself: "'Every spring we can set you afire again and you know that too'" (M 91).

Mink is, prior to his incarceration, concerned about his family. He wants to provide them with some of the niceties, but only what he himself can earn. When he is in jail awaiting trial, he watches his wife and daughters coming and going on their daily visits to him. There are quick references to his wife's letters, but once he

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\(^{25}\)This imagery is remarkable in itself, but more remarkable in its contradiction. Because of his youthful brothel-crawling and the open farmer view of sexuality, Mink was no stranger to the female body, but the heightened rapture indicates an aura of innocence that all but says that their love is, at long last, a first love.
leaves Parchman he gives no indication of concern or even recollection of his family. He has put them from his mind. He is obsessed with his mission.

Vickery takes a cold and realistic viewpoint of the relationship between the sexes, though she does accept the fact that Mink is capable of love within the strictures of predestined ritual. What she prefers to gloss over is the fact that she is talking about love and lovers. The terms "male" and "female" are interchangeable and equally apropos:

The lover neither chooses his role nor the object of his love. He is driven by his own nature to enact the ritual of sexual pursuit even though it means the surrender of his cherished masculine freedom, his ingrained beliefs, and his personal plans and ambitions. Compelled by that natural force which he both acknowledges and resists in the woman, he is transformed into the lover whose sole objective is to achieve union with the beloved. In the process, men are reduced to a common denominator—the male. For the idiot Ike and the scholar Labove, the victim Houston and the murderer Mink, all share the same identity as lover and all become part of the natural and timeless world of love.26

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26 Vickery, pp. 167-168.
Chapter Three
"The Altering Angle": Mink's Change of Personality

Given a reasonable exposure to normal growth, changing times, and a maturing intellect, a non-fictional person would be expected to alter, modify, and reshape a human personality. The changes would be noticeable to any onlooker. In a fictional character, however, these changes are controlled to serve the purposes of the author and may not be evident or even marked. There is no independent development. A character like Mink is never given sufficient powers of the mind to force the issue past Faulkner's control.

Faulkner, at one point, questions whether any man will remain earthbound for a sufficient period to "attain ultimate goodness . . . . But he does improve, since the only alternative to progress is death."¹ Perhaps Mink does enter the Kingdom of the Dead "equal to any, good as any, brave as any, being inextricable from, anonymous with all of them" (M 435). The author would want us to accept the fact that Mink's life-long goal of wanting to be accepted as a man among other men, as one with all the human rights, is finally achieved. This is perhaps true.

¹Gwynn and Blotner, p. 5.

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Mink is awarded a certain dignity. But the question remains whether or not there has been any altering of his character, any refinement of philosophy.

In another response, Faulkner thinks "the writer is not really interested in bettering man's condition. . . . He's interested in all man's behavior with no judgment whatever. That it's motion, it's life, the only alternative is nothingness, death. And so to the writer, anything man does is fine because it's motion."² It is true: Faulkner does not better Mink's condition. All he does is release the pressure on Mink's monomania, satisfy his mission, and remove his reason to exist any longer. There is only death. Mink's entrance into the select company says more for Faulkner's humanism than it does about any change in Mink.

What we are experiencing is an accumulating opinion about Mink from the succession of narrators. Because each introduces a different viewpoint on a matter reviewed previously, we are affected by a sensation of change. But, what we are experiencing is a carefully conducted tour through our own consciousness. Faulkner is our guide, and it is we, the readers, who are changing our estimation of Mink. Beck feels that "those recurrences

²Gwynn and Blotner, p. 267.
of detail are never merely repetitious if considered from the altering angle of new context and with something of Faulkner's own willingness to take a second look for a possible refinement and enlargement of awareness.\textsuperscript{3} There is no doubt in my mind that Mink remains static as a personality, even if commendably single-purposed. There is no question about his being in motion. Once let loose from Parchman, really sprung, he moves relentlessly toward his goal. "He had learned to wait" (M 93).

The Mink we meet in The Hamlet is, whatever his motivation, a deliberate enraged murderer, cold-bloodedly evening scores in his own primitive way, ignoring access to any other possible solution. In The Town, the murder is recounted by V. K. Ratliff, normally a most compassionate and understanding observer. But he is influenced by the starkness of the deed and its uncomplicated simplicity. He says, "'Mink Snopes was mean. He was the only out-and-out mean Snopes we ever experienced . . . just mean without no profit consideration or hope at all.'\textsuperscript{4} In The Mansion, we are treated to a multiplicity of viewpoints: we hear from Ratliff, Montgomery Ward.

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{3}Beck, p. 5.
\textsuperscript{4}William Faulkner, The Town (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), p. 79. Subsequent quotations are from this edition and pagination is included in the text: (T--)
\end{quote}
and the unseen narrator. What they compile is an aspect of Mink softened by the passing of time and their understanding of Mink's drive. Because we get this interior view of Mink, according to Beck, we see "... a formerly flat character emergent in the round, a primitive done with arresting detail."

Any discrepancies in the retelling are a natural by-product of the development of folk lore, recounted and embellished as suits the narrator, his time and his purpose, much the same as the epic works of Virgil and Homer went through variations until they were written down. It is a most acceptable technique, but it should be viewed clearly. As the reader meets and remeets the characters and events, "one gets a renewed sense of how one of the primal powers of literature is to raise mythology to the level of history, to treat the material of the imagination as if it were indistinguishable from the actuality it invades and transcribes." This is precisely what Faulkner claimed he set out to do. Such is the glory of Yoknapatawpha County.


Reed praises Faulkner's skill in the "development of Mink . . . [Faulkner] takes the stupidity, stubbornness, and pride of the small-time killer through the refining and concentrating process of the convict's contemplation and emerges with a human image which, . . . demands our censure as it commands our respect for human consistency and strength."\(^7\) There is no question of consistency and strength. What does appear to subside somewhat under the rigors and routines of a thirty-eight-year hiatus is the depth of Mink's call for vengeance. But it is there and, if we choose, we can vow that it intensifies as, at last, it is back in motion. The smouldering fire is simply fanned into flame and fed by mad determination. Vickery feels that, "After forty years in prison, Mink does not kill Flem in the heat of anger. Indeed he kills with regret and almost with pity for himself and his victim."\(^8\) There is certainly a marked emotional tension: Mink's hands are shaking and his panicked reaction is to throw the gun toward Linda and beat a faulty retreat into a closet. However, earlier, Mink does admit to the possibility of a gentler moment. He regrets that

\(^8\)Vickery, p. 196.
they will both be old men and should be able to sit peacefully together "not even remembering no more about hurt or harm or anguish or revenge" (M 94). But he is honor-bound to vengeance.

From his beginning, Mink is driven by bad luck, a shorter-than-normal stature and back-breaking drudgery that must be endured and overcome. And so he fights desperately for recognition of his dignity and humanity. In The Mansion, "Mink has been greatly humanized from the outright meanness which was his characterization in The Town." Again, it is we readers who make this evaluation. We are compassionate and empathize with Mink's groping for acceptance. We see Mink pushing to the limit of his capabilities, fighting against terrible odds to achieve his goal, a recognition of his own individuality. The means by which this goal is to be achieved is his vengeance of Flem.

Most critics see a kind of change in Mink. The strongest dissenter is Walter Sullivan, who will have none of it. He feels that "Mink's talk of Old Moster, his ramblings about the mortality of man are a violent distortion of his character and the apparent evasions of an artist grown tired or confused or both. For whatever

9Everett, p. 55.
the Snopeses are, they are not philosophers, not metaphysi-
cians . . . The deterioration in style and content in The Mansion can be at least partially accounted for by the decline of Faulkner's moral vision."\textsuperscript{10} And he calls The Mansion "surely the worst book Faulkner ever wrote."\textsuperscript{11}

Beck, in the forefront of the champions of a chang-
ing Mink, states that "The trilogy has shown Stevens and Ratliff constantly learning."\textsuperscript{12} True, they have the mental capacity, they have a social curiosity, and they are on the scene. They have the opportunity. We have altered our opinion and may see change. But does Mink learn anything? He finds only a changed world he can accept, if scarcely comprehend. He has forgotten almost everyone and everything, except the need to exact revenge of Flem. But Beck persists: "Mink has come to apprehend something . . . To be judged with compassion under the common law of life as ordeal, endured in representative human terms."\textsuperscript{13} I feel this is philosophy beyond Mink's comprehension. Beck says, "Mink is progressively developed

\textsuperscript{10}Sullivan, p. 9.
\textsuperscript{11}Sullivan, p. 14.
\textsuperscript{12}Beck, p. 58.
\textsuperscript{13}Beck, p. 181.
for the purposes of the trilogy."\textsuperscript{14} I feel he is manipulated for those purposes.

If there is a sense of change to be recognized, we should explore the basis against which the change is to be measured. The base is Snopesism, described as "the practice of meticulous adroitness in financial dealings of all types; it often involves actions which are unethical though just within the limits of the law."\textsuperscript{15} There is no real question of Mink's being a genealogical Snopes, but he is certainly not a match for anyone in the financial arena. He has no natural shrewdness. What he does have is his precious honor and a violent response to passion his relatives do not share. With the exception of Wallstreet Panic and possibly Montgomery Ward, no Snopes is able to achieve any prosperity without Flem's help. Mink has no resources at all and he does not have a deep enough sense of financial dependence of Flem to earn Flem's help and sponsorship. He does recognize the value of money as it represents salary for labor and purchase of bare necessities. But this is no altered position. Mink is a Snopes, but he does not represent the essence of Snopesism.

\textsuperscript{14}Beck, p. 17.
\textsuperscript{15}Everett, p. 37.
Hoffman categorizes some of the degrees of Snopesism, "ranging from pure Snopes (Flem) to adulterated Snopes (Mink) to Non-Snopes (Eck). The pure Snopes is shrewd and cunning and deceptive and amoral." Flem is the embodiment of amorality, and Mink is his honorable contestant. His moral standards, however, are a jumble of uncurbed vengeance and a self-concern for his rights so intense it excludes most other social needs and emotions. His vengeance is out of proportion to Flem's insult.

"Mink, the only vicious Snopes, who is associated with love, is the most nearly human of the tribe . . . . 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." Certainly, Mink is always a man from another time. As a young man, he clings desperately to an ancient code of conduct, and when he is released from Parchman, he is still imprisoned by the code. Of course, at this point he has nothing else to sustain him,

17 Tuck, p. 80.
only his need for proving his manhood. Brooks feels that
Mink, perhaps subconsciously, accepts the new world into
which he is released. It "would be frightening to anyone
less resolute than Mink . . . . But Mink refuses to be
bewildered by it . . . . Part of the adjustment is a
willingness to accept anything."\(^{18}\) Mink is only passingly
aware of the world. His world is still the confined
universe of two people, himself and Flem. Any other hu-
mans he encounters are simply forces which hinder or abet
him as he purposely proceeds on his mission. His journey
does end, his vengeance is realized and, according to
Beck, Mink does change: "Mink ceases to be the man of
violence".\(^{19}\) He seeks to indicate the altered image by
dropping the name of Mink. He instructs Stevens to send
money to him: "Send it to M. C. Snopes....That's my
name: M. C."
\(^{(M 433)}\). There is no earlier indication
that this may be so, but it is not unusual for Southern
men to be given and go through life with only initials.
What is significant is that Mink sees the need for imple-
menting the change in status as he completes his mission.

"It took him a lifetime to reach this moment of vi-
sion and identification, so by Faulkner's great skill

\(^{18}\)Brooks, p. 233.

\(^{19}\)Beck, p. 179.
Mink has been seen all along more and more clearly, cumulatively revealed throughout the trilogy, less in his own growth than growing upon the spectator, who is called to a role of insight and empathy."^20 Mink "grows in stature as The Mansion develops."^21 "Mink begins as a hot-tempered, murderous bushwhacker who kills from ambush, to be transformed at the end of The Mansion, purified by his suffering, into the agent of divine retribution."^22

Two areas of the make-up of most humans are likely to suffer revision, certainly reappraisal: an individual's concern about religion and his place in a community. Mink does, in his lifetime, suffer a diminishing of the intensity of his relationship to God and the strictness of his Calvinistic upbringing. But he does hang on to a thread of predestination. He is "a fatalist with a stubborn sense of justice."^23 He has a sense of accepting what befalls, but he wants to be a part in directing his fate and correcting his insult. "In the predestinarian universe that Mink envisions, man's only hope lies in his

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^20 Beck, p. 182.
^21 Brooks, p. 230.
^22 Longley, p. 225.
ability to endure until the time arrives for his personal retribution." He discards his early-held beliefs in Old Moster. He assumes that if Old Moster existed and was all powerful, "He would have done something about [it]. Besides, he, Mink, wasn't religious. He hadn't been to a church since he was fifteen years old and never aimed to go again" (M 5). He is extremely critical, with possible reason, of the deviousness of preachers who use their positions of confidence to satisfy their sexual longings.

It is ironic when Fate, The Hand of God, saves him. When Stilwell, a fellow prisoner at Parchman, gets away despite Mink's effort to abort the escape, he threatens Mink with death. This threat is removed when Stilwell, hiding, is killed by the collapse of a disenfranchised church.

When talking to the warden about his unsatisfactory relationship with his father and step-mother, Mink indicates he accepted them and their beliefs "'until I got big enough to burn out on God like you do when you think you are already growed up and dont need nothing from nobody'" (M 99). He has not been to the prison chapel because "'I didn't need no church . . . . I done it in con-

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24 Watson, p. 150.
His willingness to commune privately with God coincides with his belief in an all-seeing God who needs no letter because "'He has done already seen inside you long before He would even need to bother to read it'"(M 100). He finds peace in a practical way. After his failure to break out of prison, he became "known as a sort of self-ordained priest of the doctrine of non-escape"(M 94).

If he does not accept God at times and does not believe in a Being usually incorporated in religious rites, he certainly adheres to a kind of justice. "Mink does not believe in a personal God but in a kind of impersonal power of justice."25 Howe feels that Old Moster is "standing in reserve, not to interfere or help but to draw a line, like Mink himself, and say that beyond this line, no creature, not even a wretched little Mink, dare be tortured or tried."26 When Mink is standing on the threshold of retribution and is convincing himself of the gun's need to work he assigns the responsibility for performance to God. But he sees him as a God of vengeance, serious and concerned with justice. "'Old Moster jest punishes; He dont play jokes'"(M 407).

25 Brooks, p. 413.
26 Howe, p. 293.
What finally becomes the controlling factor for Mink is his life-long position as an isolate. He is in the community but never of it. He is different in many ways from others, even his own relatives. He is smaller, harder-working, more self-sufficient, more individualistic. His is an "alienation from all civil institutions and social rituals. Not only is he set apart by his debilitating poverty, but his isolation extends to all aspects of his life." 27 He is physically apart from the world during his imprisonment, and he is suffused with strangeness when he returns to an altered world. "Isolation is seen as a concomitant of man's existence, an adjunct of consciousness and the conscious striving to achieve selfhood." 28 His honor and his drive are monomaniacal and isolate him from the community. "Isolated from life, he becomes a pariah in the prison community also . . . . His destiny is to endure imprisonment in order to earn the right to kill Flem." 29

Swiggart deals brilliantly with the matter of isolation, which, in summary, is the capsule of Mink's life. He was born an isolate. He grew up in loneliness. He

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27 Watson, P. 149.
28 Tuck, pp. 90-91.
29 Watson, p. 167.
sought solutions to his problems independently. He endured his punishment away from the world. He concludes his vengeance without asking for help.

Loneliness has its particular origin at the heart of puritan self-consciousness, when man tries to create a bulwark of morality and reason against the fear that nothing in this world really matters. Only Faulkner's non-rational characters are free of the destructive fluctuation between moral pride and amoral despair. His primitive characters are never lonely; they never see themselves as isolated human agents.

Faulkner's success in portraying human loneliness lies in the fact that only individuals can be lonely... Loneliness is not an abstract concept of human experience but the world in which each individual must live.30

Mink never really sees his isolation. He simply recognizes the forces that press upon him and the drive that propels him toward the reproving of his manhood. He generates his own reasons and structures his own beliefs. He is alone on an island in the midst of a swirling humanity which does not share his life, understand his goal, or appreciate his brutality. "Mink of The Mansion will no doubt be generally recognized as one of Faulkner's major characterizations."31

31 Beck, p. 181.
Chapter Four
"The Spectator-Interventionists"

The reliability of a narrator and his responsibility in influencing our reactions are direct reflections of the responsibility the author assumes in establishing tone and the picture he wishes projected of his protagonists. It is more than simply shifting the focus and accumulating miscellaneous viewpoints. It is a structured program to give us a picture preferred by the author.

If a central figure is sufficiently communicative, he could be relied on to tell his own story. We would be able to get his specific viewpoint. Whether or not we would get accuracy could be determined only as we measure one version against the other versions of alternate narrators. But Mink, in concept, does not give any real indication of garrulity. Scholarly depth is not the criterion for presenting a character's viewpoint. After all, Faulkner brilliantly presented the viewpoint of an aging idiot in *The Sound and The Fury*, when he conducted us through the memory of Benjy Compson. Mink is above this level. However, Faulkner has a bit of a problem: having established the essentially brute image of Mink in the early part of *The Hamlet* through the omniscient narrator and confirmed it with Ratliff's opinion in *The*
Town, he must now soften the image in The Mansion if he wants to solicit our concern for Mink. Having placed Mink in an heroic rolè, he shifts his tonal emphasis. He does this through the use of the omniscient narrator, who gives us an opportunity to see a changing Mink. We become aware of the sensitive drives that torment the isolated little man.

"Faulkner could not permit Mink to be viewed through eyes the reader could not completely trust; the slightest doubt that our sympathies for Mink are justified would be fatal to the work".¹ If Faulkner had been less painstaking in his selection of narrators, he might not have been able to evoke the true shifting tonality of the movement of Mink from brute to instrument of justice and companion to angels. I believe this despite Faulkner's oft-repeated protests that he thought of the entire trilogy before he began. After all, The Hamlet was an artful assembling of some previously told tales into an exciting and remarkable novel. What mutations were actually invisibly pencilled into the author's mind in the beginning is a matter of conjecture. We have no real reason or need to accept Faulkner's later protests. What is important is that a need arose for a more strongly directed develop-

¹Volpe, pp. 336-337.
ment of Mink. Faulkner rethought the narrative and made acceptable accommodations. The use of Mink to bracket the trilogy is masterful. The Hamlet has many good things going for it, but The Mansion (and, eventually, the Snopes Trilogy) "stands or falls . . . on the character of Mink. Mink is some kind of triumph."²

Beck titles the participating narrators as "Faulkner's spectator-interventionists . . . protagonists of a humanistic ethic . . . very real human beings, both in their lonely falterings and in their recurrent resoluteness."³ Each, in his own special way, contributes a segment to the progression leading to the final moment of triumph. The pink-cloud picture of Mink's acceptance into the company of "the beautiful, the splendid, the proud and the brave" (M 435) is Faulkner's final gesture to human values and dignity.

Watson feels that a participator-narrator has a greater responsibility than simply telling a tale or embroidering one in the retelling, that he has an obligation to become involved in the needs and lives of those characters whose plight demands attention. These would include Mrs. Armstid, Ike, Yettie, and Mink. Mink is not

²Reed, p. 252.
³Beck, p. 11.
likely to solicit help, except that due him because of Flem's blood-relationship, but his independence does not relieve Ratliff and Gavin Stevens of their moral responsibilities as extensions of the author. "Intervention on their behalf will constitute moral affirmation; failure to intervene will signify self-betrayal and a denial of principled existence."^4 We must be careful, in assigning these talents and behavior to the spectator-interventionists, that we recognize that they serve the author's purpose and are characters developed by him to participate in the narrative even as the less articulate characters they are observing, describing, and controlling.

The omniscient narrator dominates The Hamlet and then moves strongly to Ratliff, Stevens, and Mallison in The Town and, later, The Mansion. Watson feels:

This change in narrative technique deprives The Town of some of the sweep, the large panoramic scenes that we find in The Hamlet, and which brings to the novel the subjectivity of the limited point of view along with the complication that results from the imposition of a fictional character's judgment on the fictional events that he relates .... We need the personal views of the first-person narrators to help us through the new conditions of the story, and there is an inevitable change of direction.^5

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^4 Watson, p. 44.
^5 Watson, p. 7.
By the time we reach *The Mansion*, we are bound to the surge of the intensely personal nature of the narrative. The pastoral landscape with its rich comic inventions supporting the story of a community gives way to a more individualized narrative of vengeance, Linda's as well as Mink. Where elements of the macabre could be accommodated in *The Hamlet*, particularly Mink's struggle with Houston's corpse, the total tonal sense in *The Mansion* is much darker with only modest lighter moments. It all works well in "elevating Mink in stature as a principled and starkly moral man."6

Of all the narrators, it is Ratliff who most engages our affection. It is he who recognizes the nature of men and their yearnings and goes furthest to participate in solutions to their problems. He is garrulous and curious anxious to be where the action is, but he is motivated largely by humanity and generosity. "He is principled, courageous, and gifted with unusual insight."7 In the course of following the demands of his profession as a salesman of sewing machines, his peregrinations carry him through four counties. He serves as a messenger, a courier, a friend: "He never forgot a name and he knew

6Watson, p. 161.
7Watson, p. 67.
everyone, man, mule and dog within fifty miles" (M 13). This capacity is pointed out when there is a concern about heading off Mink. "Ratliff alone out of Yoknapatawpha County would know Mink on sight. To be unschooled, untravelled, and to an extent, unread, Ratliff had a terrifying capacity for knowledge or local information or acquaintanceship to match the need of any local crisis" (M 381).

His business and his avocation are the same: "retailing" of geegaws and gossip. Because he may tell any one story again and again and because he has a facility for embellishment, he may heighten the interest of any event and incorporate it in his stock-in-trade, his catalogue of folk lore. However he may participate in the action, Brooks feels that, as a spokesman for Faulkner, "Ratliff significantly views the world with a measure of detachment." 8 Yet he remains a part of the action.

He has the gifted narrator's talent for analysis and blends it into an "eloquent flow of salty, semiliterate talk and...sardonic humor." 9 In his characteristic comment about Mink's being "'a different kind of Snopes like

8 Brooks, p. 172.

a cotton-mouth is a different kind of snake'" (H 92), he is clarifying a point of degree, translating it into an easily recognized local rural simile. He is embroidering a bare fact.

Of himself he says, "'I'm a--what do you call it? optimist?....Like any good optimist, I don't expect the worst to happen'" (M 383). But he is not one always to let nature take its course. Maybe he will enter the action as when he assists Yettie and her two daughters. Or he may arrange to embarrass Clarence out of politics. He allows he may be the "'anonymous meddler'" (M 319), that he may have functioned as a "'kind of a hand of God'" (M 315) as well as "'this here anonymous underhanded son-of-a-gun'" (M 317). He is a man of frugal needs, able to satisfy his wants by his labors, but not averse to taking a loss, as he does because of Ike. "Pragmatic in his operations, Ratliff still is basically principled and when he cannot see his way, he feels it."  

Of the part he plays, Backman says, "The chief commentator [in The Hamlet] ... is Ratliff, who serves like the chorus of ancient drama to give voice to the community's sanity and conscience. It is his ironic humor, as well as Will Varner's, that provides the novel

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10 Beck, p. 65.
with its perspective and tone."

The greatest attesting of his reliability as a narrator and the broadest accolade is accorded Ratliff by Joseph W. Reed, Jr.:

Basically Ratliff is our center. In a variety of methods ranging from omnipresence through intense point of view to internal monologue, he is our representative. When he leaves town time passes, when he returns there is a reconstruction of what has happened. He is our locus and our receptor.

He is the perfect figure for the center of this rather odd comedy. His control of tone is almost flawless. He won't laugh while he's telling it or anticipate his own punch line. His canniness and calculation transfer readily from the careful construction of anecdotes to the equally careful arrangement of human situations (like the sale of the machine to Mink) in order to find out something that he (and we) need to know.

This element in his narrative function raises some questions about his human ethics: he is malevolent in the sense that he feeds on what other people do while remaining safely divorced from such actions himself, and there is a certain amount of sadistic delight involved in his stringing along of Jody or Will or Mink as he does in order to bring them to comic peak.¹²

Ratliff has a recognized sense of authority in the eyes of his fellow characters. The omniscient narrator

¹¹ Backman, p. 142.
¹² Reed, pp. 225-226.
in *The Hamlet* tells us that Will Varner, himself a man of considerable authority, recognizes that it is only to "Ratliff—a man less than half his age—that he ever gave a reason" (H6). Chuck Mallison acknowledges that "Ratliff was how we first began to learn about Snopes. Or rather Snopeses" (T4). It is Ratliff who develops the art of Snopes-watching and serves as a bridge to the past for Stevens and Mallison and gives them a deeper understanding of "the phenomenon of Snopesism."  

It is through Ratliff's efforts that a sense of continuity is maintained and that a feeling of mutual reinforcement among the three major first-person narrators is established. He is "the elder statesman, the senior philosopher of Snopes-watching."  

Ratliff is more accurate about events and people in the trilogy, even though he tends to embroider his tales to heighten their effectiveness. He is the most objective of the narrators and Brooks calls him "the most nearly trustworthy observer in the novel [The Town]. He lacks Gavin's book learning, but he also lacks (and this may be an advantage in a witness) Gavin's romantic imagination....It is Ratliff who is the spokesman for the tra-

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13 Vickery, p. 182.
14 Longley, p. 77.
ditional society." He more than makes up for his deficiencies: he is one of the people whom he is observing. He understands them: he has known them all his life. He knows of their struggles and their hopes. He is the only narrator with any real comprehension of Mink's thought processes. However, he does recognize the options in the process of watching and evaluating people: "So my conjecture is just as good as yours, maybe better since I'm an interested party, being as I got what the feller calls a theorem to prove" (M122). He tends to be reliable because his insight enables him to see the drives underlying the behavior of the people of his world.

Brooks feels that Faulkner's "point of view is not identical with that of any of his characters. His attitude is closest, of course, to that of Ratliff, and Ratliff significantly views the world with a good measure of detachment." Ratliff serves Faulkner well. He is wise and understanding of the people in that area of the South he is charged to view and evaluate.

In contrast to Ratliff's ready acceptance as a qualified spectator-interventionist, the validity of Gavin

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15 Brooks, p. 217.
16 Brooks, p. 172.
Stevens' papers are challenged. Critics and reviewers find him substantially unsuited for his role as narrator. He lacks the drive, decision, affability, understanding, and widespread concern in which Ratliff gets such high grades. However, he does afford a contrast to Ratliff. Ratliff's gift for analysis is sequential and painstaking. He is capable of arriving at a solid conclusion. Gavin will talk and rationalize and usually needs a sounding-board. About Stevens, Faulkner says, "He had got out of his depth...He got into a real world in which people anguished and suffered, not simply did things which they shouldn't do. And he wasn't prepared to cope with people who were following their own bent, not for

17The reviewers, at the time of publication of The Mansion, were reasonably of one mind on two matters. They felt Mink was the high point of the novel, if not the trilogy, and that Stevens was inadequate to his job: "Gavin Stevens and Charles Mallison . . . probably the biggest blight that has hit Yoknapatawpha County since the boll weevil. They are talkers, not doers . . . But fortunately one Snopes is left, and whenever he appears in The Mansion, it comes to life with all the old powers. The saving remnant is Mink Snopes." (Paul Pickrel, "The New Books", Harper's Magazine, 219, November, 1959, pp. 102-104); Gavin "talks too much and becomes fatuous in the process . . . one is left to wonder how well Stevens understands himself, how much he is drawn into action he never comprehends." (Martin Price, "Dreams and Doubts: Some Recent Fiction," Yale Review, 49, December 1959, pp. 278-280); "Faulkner recognizes the emotional sterility with which he invests Stevens, but he tries to negate it by making him a center of dramatic focus." (Peter Swiggart, "The Snopes Trilogy," Sewanee Review, 68, Spring 1960, pp. 319-325).
profit but simply because they had to...he knew a good
deal less about people than he knew about the law......
when he had to deal with people, he was an amateur."18

Stevens' capacity for vacillation is enormous. He
has an opportunity to write a request to Linda possibly
to postpone her intercession on Mink's behalf, but he
writes it only in his mind because he, uncharacteristi-
cally, feels he is "'an advocate of fate and destiny, I
admire them; I want to be one of the instruments, too, no
matter how modest'"(M 368). When he is urging Ratliff to
sign the petition for release, Gavin asks, "'what do you
think I am--a murderer?'"(M 369). He has arranged for
Linda to sign, as well as Ratliff. Ratliff challenges
Stevens: "'Destiny and fate. They was what you told me
about being proud to be a handmaid of, wasn't they?....
'So what?' Stevens said"(M 370).

The cap is put on Stevens' performance as a credible
narrator by Howe. He feels Faulkner has not only pre-
sented us with an unreliable commentator, but he has im-
peded progress by restraining Ratliff in favor of a less-
er contributor:

The action of The Town and, to a
large extent The Mansion is usually strain-

18Gwynn and Blotner, p. 140.
ed through the blurred and blurring consciousness of Gavin Stevens, surely the
greatest wing-bag in American literature,
and Charles Mallison, who shows promise
of becoming the runner-up . . .

In The Town Ratliff, by far the most
attractive and successful of Faulkner's
commentators, is made to withdraw into
the background and is not allowed to speak
with the authority he commanded in The
Hamlet. Most of the time, in The Town
and The Mansion, we see the action through
the coarsening vision of Stevens and the
callow vision of Charles Mallison and we
find ourselves yearning for the cool hu-
mor, the kindly humaneness and the simple
maturity which Ratliff brought to The
Hamlet.19

Stevens is suffused with the ambivalence and naivete
of a man from another world and another time. He is Jef-
ferson's intellectual and a "dream-smitten romantic."20
When he urges Linda to leave Jefferson it is "to fulfill
the romantic dream."21 When he is asked to describe New
York's Greenwich Village he says, "'It's a place with a
few unimportant boundries but no limitations, where young
people of any age go to seek dreams'"(T350).

He has nurtured a "youthful dream of restoring the
Old Testament to its virgin's pristinity. But he was too
old now"(M427). He is not a practical man, nor a man of

19Howe, pp. 286-287.
20Brooks, p. 201.
21Brooks, p. 201.
action. He is not sufficiently aware of the intensity of the feelings of other humans. He is not aware of the fact that he has been used by Linda, manipulated to serve her purpose. After Ratliff convinces him that Linda coldly and deliberately assisted in Mink's release for purposes of her own revenge, he is so enormously agonized that he bursts into tears.

Gavin Stevens is not the narrator to whom we can turn for an understanding evaluation of Mink. Stevens has spent an entire life accumulating a limited outlook, elevated social standing, rigid rules of conduct and massive romantic idealism. But Stevens might be the one to approve of Mink's apotheosis. Stevens is beginning to understand. He endures a shocking learning experience: "A sinner among sinners, a man driven into wrong by his own idealism and love, Gavin knows at last the full burden of the human dilemma." ²²

Lesser narrators have a modest value simply because they offer a little contrast. Charles Mallison "is a passive observer of accomplished facts." ²³ He tends to be flippant, and, though he has clear eyes to recommend him, he does not have the experience to make solid evalu-

²³ Watson, p. 112.
ations, but this does not keep his tongue still. Even Faulkner "thought it would be more amusing as told through the innocence of a child that knew what he was seeing but had no particular judgment about it."\textsuperscript{24} Mallison is outclassed.

In spite of his flippancy and youthfulness, Charles Mallison is alert and open. He has acknowledged his debt to Ratliff for the introduction to Snopes-watching and he also tells us that a great deal of the information he relates to us took place before he was born and was told to him by his cousin Gowan. He is honest: "'So when I say 'we' and 'we thought' what I mean is Jefferson and what Jefferson thought'" (T4).

Mallison is, in many ways, more sophisticated and understanding than his Uncle Gavin, whose interest in people was limited to clear personal relationships. Charles is a more questioning and cynical observer: he cannot readily accept the fact that the intimacy shared by Linda and Gavin is not provoked by sexual interests.

Charles has an easy grasp of human motivation. When analyzing Ratliff's and Gavin's interest in the Snopeses he says, "'Because what I always thought they were mainly interested in was curiosity. Until this time, that is."

\textsuperscript{24}Gwynn and Blotner, p. 116.
Because this time it has already gone a good deal further than just curiosity. This time it was alarm" (T4).

Montgomery Ward has a very real sensitivity to the people and is an excellent narrator for Mink and Flem, to both of whom he has access. He has his own devious ways and his overflowing cupful of chicanery, but he does understand. He recognizes Flem's corrupt behavior and double-dealing, perhaps admiringly, but he knows that his investment in lost time is measured in money. "In Montgomery Ward's self-accusation, 'just another Snopes son-of-a-bitch', he not only bespeaks a morbid sense of class as predestination, but by the stock expletive he unconsciously sets up an ironic connection with a larger theme that echoes through The Mansion." 25

Faulkner uses this recurring technique of building his narrative by the introduction of contradictory, or recurring, viewpoints. His "Spectator-narrators must be capable of a doubly manly commitment, meeting circumstance and facing issue." 26 But they can serve only as long as there are characters to observe and comment on. After the murder of Flem, Stevens and Ratliff are "mere shadows of their old selves, uncertain philosophers of a

25 Beck, p. 73.
26 Beck, p. 59.
new dispensation and, on the fumbling note of their attempt to create a do-it-yourself morality, the novel ends."27 One of Stevens' last comments is one of his most comprehensive and indicates he learned something: "'The poor sons of bitches that have to cause all the grief and anguish they have to cause!'" (M 430).

Vickery feels that Faulkner's use of the three prime narrators is part of the way he envisions the structure of recorded history: a multiplicity and an overlapping of viewpoints in order to more accurately reproduce the story of a people. The narrators collectively represent "the voice of protest which keeps society from becoming moribund."28 A valid picture of the characters is projected as the narrators' contradictory views, when superimposed on one another, produce a reasonable and acceptable composite. The narrators "are able, for the most part, to balance the claims of the individual and of society, to temper reason with emotion, impulse with precept. Accordingly, they can accept moral responsibility."29

Volpe says that "None of these narrators can be des-

27 Sullivan, p. 17.
28 Vickery, p. 185.
29 Vickery, p. 208.
ignated as the spokesman of the author."\(^{30}\) Faulkner has shown such control that no individual narrator can have all the facts about anything. Ratliff admits he speculates. Mallison acknowledges the hearsay aspect of his information. Stevens proves the narrow limit of his worldliness. "It is a natural result of the first-person technique that each individual narrator must select details because they are relative to his particular narrative."\(^{31}\) And to his own point of view.

When Faulkner wishes us to have an uncluttered picture of Mink he resorts to the use of the omniscient narrator. By combining this multiplicity of narrative techniques, "Faulkner reveals how difficult it is for the human mind to approach truth and how isolated one individual is from his fellow men. The mind sees what it is prepared to see."\(^{32}\)

Each novel of the trilogy has a basic tonal overcast. That of The Hamlet is generally regarded as richly comic. It is "a great folk legend in which bawdy anecdote is intermingled with myth and the stories of prodigies."\(^{33}\) There is irony in referring to currently sub-

\(^{30}\) Volpe, p. 318.
\(^{31}\) Reed, p. 241.
\(^{32}\) Volpe, p. 318.
\(^{33}\) Brooks, p. 168.
stantial Will Varner as sitting on his barrel throne in "fallen baronial splendor . . . planning his next mort-
gage foreclosures in private" (H 6). There is overem-
broidered joy in seeing Eula's thigh "looking as giganti-
cally and profoundly naked as the dome of an observatory" (H 101). There is almost casual acceptance by Mrs. Var-
ner, herself mother of sixteen, of the intrusive fact of
Eula's pregnancy: "'Turning up pregnant and yelling and
cursing here in the house when I am trying to take a
nap'" (H 144).

But there is more than the comic side of the rus-
tics. There is alarm for Labove, whose unworldly idola-
try is blasted by a thoughtless Eula. There is tender-
ness for Ike, whose unselfish adoration of his love has
moved beyond his intellectual control. There is pity for
Armstid, whose poverty-induced disaster is compounded by
his need to escape. And, of course, there is Mink:

What really darkens the comic spirit is
the story of Mink Snopes. In this har-
assed and tough little sharecropper Faulk-
ner caught the bleakness and hopelessness
of the sharecropper's existence, but he
cought too a resistance, a pride, an in-
domitability. Faulkner managed in the
various stories of The Hamlet to fuse
their discrete, discordant qualities:
pathos with terror, outrage with hilar-
itv, poetic fantasy with earthy realism,
and comedy with tragedy. He created his own kind of tragicomedy.  

The essence of *The Hamlet* concentrates on individuals putting their hopes for salvation on chance, dreams, ancient rites, human worth. The fallibility of their approach makes them prey for Flem and his tribe.  

Brooks refers to *The Town* as "a cozy world of little rivalries and social feuds, scandals and church suppers." As indicated earlier, the most fitting narrators for this mood are the young Mallison and his babbling mentor, Stevens. Mink, our chief concern, is not prominent in this novel. But Ratliff, Mink's most reliable narrator, retells, in brief, the events that brought Mink to Parchman, his threat to Flem, and Mink's attempt at suicide: "Not even despair: just simple anger and outrage: to show Flem Snopes that he never gave a durn about him neither" (T 80). He wedges his neck in the stanchion and tries to throw his body over the side.  

"*The Mansion*, partially chatty, reflects the small-town evaluation of Gavin Stevens and cynic nephew Charles Mallison." But the action, the real control, is essen-

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34 Backman, pp. 181-182.  
35 Brooks, p. 193.  
36 Brooks, p. 219.
tially concerned with and framed by the somber story of Mink. We also are presented with Mink's side of the story, the thought process which created the urgent need for the crusade of personal vengeance. "In general, then, the tone is one of diffused melancholy, weariness, and sense of loss that permeates both the human and the natural wonders. The triumphant celebration of youth, nature and sex in The Hamlet and the intense passions of The Town are only memories shared by childless people." 37

Now certain somber realities assail Mink. Where once he was one with the land he worked, he finds "He no longer belonged to the land ... He belonged to the government, the State of Mississippi" (M 91). He has learned that the responsibilities of blood clanship are not mutually supported. He recognizes the inevitability of man's end: "The very moment you were born out of your mother's body, the power and the drag of the earth was already at work on you" (M 402). This mood of final aloneness is a continuation of his journey through unfamiliar territory, "fleeing in terror, in solitude from solitude" (M 287). Whatever happens to Mink is "conveyed within the limitations of that wretched obsessed little man's consciousness, yet made striking by his pathetically mor-

37 Vickery, pp. 199-200.
bid purpose and by the grotesque shadowing forth of his animal endurance and relentlessness...with endurance as life's irreducible integer, the last resource for a brave, brutal quest persisted in against terrific odds. "Brooks feels that this is a heroic world and that Mink assumes the stature of a hero. Mink has remained faithful to his beliefs, clear to his purpose, oblivious to the minutiae of a world about him in which other people live and pursue their own dreams. Mink and his story are the focus of the trilogy. "What comes first and what comes last matters more in a trilogy than it does in a single novel. The first novel has the freedom to make the premises and the last is under compulsion to make some endings. That Mink comes last matters a great deal." 39

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38 Beck, pp. 174-175.
39 Reed, p. 253.
Chapter Five
"Community at Last"

Assume we were sitting in judgment on Mink Snopes about three-quarters of a century ago but applying more recent discoveries in the field of criminology and social reform. He is on trial for the murder of Jack Houston. There is every reason to believe that, from our research and knowledge of what makes a killer kill, we might offer Mink the opportunity for corrective rehabilitation, a chance he never had. Studies of violence in our culture would clearly indicate that the common thread that runs through the case-histories of murderers is a disturbed childhood and a punitive, oppressive environment. All this applies to Mink.

Longley refers to "those fanatic, furious creatures like the young Mink Snopes...who drive their hot hearts against the immovable mass of circumstance or personal inadequacy until they are destroyed or go mad."¹ Mink had a brute of a father and the depersonalized minimal concern of a stepmother. He was markedly small in stature and spent most of his early life laboring grindingly

¹Longley, p. 13.

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for relative sharecroppers. Prior to his establishing
his passionate relationship with Yettie, we know of no
deep mutual concern with another. And he is always sub-
ject to poverty so abject that this mere recognition of
his inability to provide basic minimal needs for his
family erodes his pride and his manhood.

Faulkner generalizes when he describes the nature of
the world as "men and women, human beings, the human
heart in conflict with its self, with its fellows, or
with its environment." This too applies to Mink, but
two specific aspects should be restressed: Mink's unusu-
ally strong sense of honor and his destructive belief in
the responsibilities of kinship. These traits are exag-
gerated to isolate Mink from the rest of society for the
author's purpose. Faulkner admits they are "simply over-
emphasized, burlesqued." He prepares us for the fact
that "The Snopeses will destroy themselves." He just
does not tell us how. Perhaps he had no concept when he
began in 1925, but when he made the above statement, the
conclusion of the Snopes story was already written.

If the stature and role of Mink in the resolution of

2Gwynn and Blotner, p. 132.
3Gwynn and Blotner, p. 282.
4Gwynn and Blotner, p. 282.
the trilogy are not a beginning concept, then certainly Faulkner was fixed and clear "on the theme of ubiquitous evil and its opposition....Ethical evaluation is constantly evoked, never imposed." As Mink was moved into his eventually heroic role as the destroyer of Flem, the archetype of Snopesism, he is repeatedly tested through "life as ordeal ... in the prolonged not-death but deadly trial of the heart which they all, as Faulkner says, endured." He waited for his private justice.

Though the trilogy is laced with humor, particularly *The Hamlet*, there is no reason, other than cruelty, to laugh at Mink. He is not a clown. He does nothing deliberately amusing. He does not recognize humor around him. He is serious and unimaginative. What humanizes him early is his strong adherence to his code even as he is performing murder. If we laugh at him, it is only because we have difficulty at first accepting the mad drive and the macabre humor of his struggle with Houston's corpse. I think we have an initial inability to place ourselves in his position. So we laugh out of hysterical disbelief. Nothing that Mink does is funny, just simple and pathetic. The introduction of the sobering tale of

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5 Beck, p. 3.
6 Beck, p. 183.
Mink into the wild and bawdy or romantic elements of the story is Faulkner's masterful balancing of tone in the trilogy. Mink is not a figure of fun; even the picture of him in dress and sunbonnet is shaded with cruelty.

He is so consistent, so true to the demands of his code. "Whereas, in the earlier novel, Mink's violence is treated as the logical end of unbearable oppression, in The Mansion it is shown to be commensurate with his primitive cosmology." He is typical of the sharecropper group, but in no way is he offered to us as truly representative of them. He is his own man, a strange but complete individual with a reasonable understanding of his limitations and his needs: "patience was his pride too: never to be reconciled since by this means he could beat Them" (M 22). He knows he must wait for his vengeance and he also knows there is no way to alter it. He knows that the world offers him one hope for his soul's redemption or else life is not worth the living. Yet, when that deed is at last accomplished, he no longer has any need to linger in this world and he moves into the next. He does, throughout the trilogy, exhibit an heroic dedication to achieving his just goals. It is not readily visible that Mink has heroic stature, but Howe explains:

7 Watson, p. 149.
Mink drives steadily toward his end, without fear or hope, unblinking and serene.

The portrait of Mink is beyond praise: a simple ignorant soul who sees existence as an unending struggle between Ol Moster (God) and Them (the world), with Them forever and even rightly triumphant . . . . Mink's is the heroism of the will, a man living out his need, the last and in some ways the most moving embodiment of what I have earlier called the Faulkner gesture.

Released from his vow, his mission completed, he can move freely. He elects to walk west "Since that was the direction people always went: west" (M 434). He feels the earth, with which he had so long been associated as a farmer, drawing him back but now for a different and final reason with a "gentle tug like the durned old ground itself was trying to make you believe it wasn't really noticing itself doing it" (M 435).

"Mink finds community at last in death. The heights that he attains in death bespeak forever the depths of amorality in him whom he endured a lifetime to kill." 9

In reflection, looking back over the trilogy, it is not easy to detect at an earlier stage that Mink would ascend to such lofty heights. When he pitches his gun to Linda,

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8 Howe, pp. 292-293.
9 Watson, p. 221.
he is dramatically bringing to an end his concern with vengeance: he never refers to it again. He has become plain old M. C. Snopes—a new name, a new man, and a new goal of the earth and community. The vicious varmint with murder on his mind has become a free old man with nothing on his conscience. "It is something for Mink to have promoted himself into a sense of belonging, if only to the kingdom of the dead . . . . it took him a lifetime to reach the moment of vision and identification."\textsuperscript{10}

Beck tends to endow Mink with a great deal more knowledge and sensitivity than I feel the character can justify. He feels that "Faulkner may allow one Snopes, little, ignorant Mink, vengeful murderer by a primitive code, to approach the fringe of such a glorious company, to be judged with compassion under the common law of life as ordeal, endured in representative human terms."\textsuperscript{11} He recognizes "Mink's paradoxical progress, a flight into a sense of community as a mortal."\textsuperscript{12}

If there is some question about Mink's feeling comfortable and at ease with the angels, there is no question about Faulkner's recorded humanism. He sees all men

\textsuperscript{10} Beck, pp. 181-182.
\textsuperscript{11} Beck, p. 181.
\textsuperscript{12} Beck, p. 183.
as reasonable equals, subject to the same needs for
dignity, acceptance, and pride. Though each man will
have a varying amount, they will be commensurate with his
yearnings. That all men will meet as equals eternally is
good fundamental doctrine. It would be interesting to
get Mink's opinion on this.

"Mink more and more compels our reluctant admira-
tion, and in displaying so great a capacity for dignity
and endurance even in a man otherwise utterly vicious and
degraded Faulkner makes a magnificent gesture of admira-
tion and faith towards mankind as a whole .... Mink is
not a Christ-figure, simply a man."\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{13} Millgate, p. 250.
Bibliography


Vita

Roy J. Hertz was born in Springfield, Massachusetts, March 11, 1918. His parents were Louis and Sophia Hertz. He attended public schools in Springfield, New York City and Allentown, Pennsylvania. He graduated from Allentown High School (William Allen High School) in 1934. He has a Bachelor of Arts in English degree from Lehigh University and is on the rolls of the Class of 1938. He had a long career in business, most recently completing 26 years with Hess's, an Allentown-based department chain. For the past two years Mr. Hertz has been teaching business courses at Kutztown State College and the Allentown Business School.