

“HOW MANY MORE ARE THERE? HOW MUCH LONGER IS THIS GOING ON?”:

EUGENIC DISCOURSE AND THEMES IN FAULKNER’S

SNOPE’S TRILOGY

by

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ABSTRACT

William Faulkner's Snopes trilogy (comprised of *The Hamlet*, *The Town*, and *The Mansion*) follows the rise of the Snopeses, an impoverished white family that moves into Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi, and begins to replace the area's aristocrats. It is remarkably easy to read the Snopes trilogy as an epic saga primarily revolved around social climbing and class anxieties, but a reading such as that must take into account how the socioeconomic themes in the trilogy are intersected and influenced by eugenic discourse. This thesis argues that, in all three novels, Faulkner engages in eugenic characterization, rhetoric, and language and portrays eugenic situations in order to capture the zeitgeist of the American eugenic era and expose eugenic discourse as illogical and potentially dangerous. While Jay Watson believes that eugenic discourse simply "represented a complex, ambiguous cultural legacy for Faulkner" and that Faulkner may have had complicated sentiments regarding the eugenics movement, this thesis will establish the idea that the Faulkner that appears in the Snopes trilogy is staunchly critical of eugenic ideology and continuously warns the reader of the folly and danger that lurks within it (J. Watson 53). A thesis of this sort is especially relevant today since the eugenic panic is just now reemerging into the public consciousness after years of being a distant memory avoided by history teachers who feel pressured to obscure one of America's darkest moments.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to 60,000+ people who were cruelly sterilized by state institutions throughout the course of the twentieth century. It is also dedicated to my partner, Leah Pease, who offered me an abundance of support while I wrote this manuscript.

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INTRODUCTION

The first chapter of William Faulkner's 1940 novel *The Hamlet* (the first installment of the Snopes trilogy) comes to a close as middle-class Jody Varner agrees to hire impoverished Flem Snopes as an apprentice as a measure to keep Flem's barn-burning father, Abner, from destroying the Varners' property. As Jody and Flem solidify their informal contract, Jody offers Flem a cigar, which the latter declines on the account that he "[doesn't] use them." Upon hearing this, Jody softly mutters, "And I hope to God you and nobody you know ever will" (*The Hamlet* 26). This quip is, without question, puzzling and quixotic. Some readers might read Jody's statement as one of care; perhaps Jody is making an attempt to dissuade Flem from smoking, something he himself typically does not do since he is "by nature so happily metabolised" (26). In other words, one could argue that Jody wants to keep Flem from taking part in bad habits and intoxicating pleasures which pale in comparison to natural feelings of contentment. If, however, Jody himself rarely smokes and sees no reason to, it is unusual that he chooses to do so after meeting Flem.

When interpreting Jody's action and statement, it is important to focus on the tobacco products in this scene: Jody smokes a cigar while Flem "chew[s] up a nickel [of chewing tobacco]" (26). According to Knut-Olaf Haustein, the cigar has always been "the status symbol of the socially ambitious middle classes" and "the hallmark of the capitalist" (Haustein 5). On the other hand, chewing tobacco, according to surgeon Daniel M. Holt, was associated with the class middle-class whites often call "*poor white trash*," a class to which—according to Justin

Mellette—the Snopes family belongs (Holt 263; Mellette 42). Jody smokes a cigar to remind Flem that while he may now have a job as a clerk, he is still poor white trash in his eyes, and the Varners will always be members of the Yoknapatawpha County bourgeoisie. By stating that he hopes Flem and his associates (presumably other Snopeses) never smoke cigars, Jody essentially proclaims that he hopes that the Snopes family is never granted the privilege of consuming the luxury items that belong to his class. He asserts that he wants the Snopeses to stay put in their place in the socioeconomic hierarchy of Frenchman’s Bend, a hierarchy which has remained stable for decades. Unfortunately for Jody, though, the basic premise of the trilogy is that Flem accumulates an abundance of wealth and displaces the Varners.

As the analysis in the previous paragraphs might suggest, it is easy to read the Snopes trilogy as an epic saga that is primarily revolved around social climbing and class anxieties. In fact, most academic articles on the trilogy engage in similar socioeconomic readings of the text. However, while it is true that the plot-driving anxieties expressed by Jody and others have their roots in classism, I believe that this classism is intersected by a subscription to eugenics. A few pages before the passage I previously alluded to, Faulkner describes Flem as having eyes “the color of stagnant water” and a face “as blank as a pan of uncooked dough” (*The Hamlet* 24). Flem has an unhealthy-looking appearance that matches his poverty, and he is immediately set apart from the richer, healthier Jody, who is described as a “prime bulging man” (7). Immediately, the trilogy becomes not just a war between those with wealth and those with nothing. It becomes a war between the healthy and the degenerate, a war that many leading American intellectuals concerned themselves with all throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. This established physical dichotomy between Jody and Flem sets the tone for the trilogy, which repeatedly indulges in eugenic rhetoric, language, and themes all throughout.

The physically otherized Flem (whose appearance belies “the essence of the alien” according to James Gray Watson) is but one person in a large tribe of unhealthy people who engage in behaviors considered degenerate by middle-class white standards, and—on the surface—it appears as though this tribe is genetically predisposed to its condition (J. G. Watson 22). Furthermore, its members all seem—on the surface—to possess a shared, inherited disposition which leads them to steal, grift, kill, and destroy property. Without question, the Snopeses are painted in the same brushstrokes favored by the twentieth-century eugenicists who read the works of Cesare Lombroso and Robert Louis Dugdale and believed that criminality and supposedly degenerate behaviors could be inherited along with disabilities and other non-normative physical attributes (both of which they believed had a correlation with criminality and degeneracy). Two of the trilogy’s narrators, V. K. Ratliff and Gavin Stevens, seem to have picked up on this brand of eugenic rhetoric since they believe that the Snopeses are one and the same in their criminality and perceived degeneracy and see them as “a zoological category” that must be dealt with (*The Town* 113).

Ratliff expresses dread over “the idea of Snopeses covering Jefferson like an influx of snakes or varmints from the woods” and even goes as far as to say that “the only thing to do is get completely shut of them, abolish them” (*The Town* 118, 107). The phrase “like an influx of snakes or varmints from the woods” and the word “abolish” are frighteningly reminiscent of the discourse that circulated during the eugenic panic that gripped America in early twentieth century (around the time the trilogy takes place). Tens of thousands of Americans (most of whom were disabled) were forcibly sterilized by the state during this period, and an alarming number of these individuals happened to be branded as “white trash” like the Snopeses. According to Nancy Isenberg, the white middle-class eugenicists saw poor white Southerners as

“congenitally delinquent,” “a withered branch of the American family tree,” and a threat to whiteness. In doing this, the eugenicists perpetuated the pre-existing phenomenon of scapegoating, which upper-class Southerners had engaged in long before the advent of the eugenics movement.¹ When the eugenic panic finally hit the South, poor whites who were marked as “feeble-minded,” “degenerate,” and not quite white due to their lack of education and poverty became prime candidates for eugenic practices (Isenberg 180). With this in mind, it becomes clear that when Ratliff expresses his animosity towards the Snopeses and his wish to see them removed from Jefferson society, he parrots the voices of these eugenicists, who tried to remove an entire class of people from the gene pool simply because their differences and economic statuses marked them as racial others.

Interestingly, Faulkner never grants Ratliff his wish, though he is the moral backbone of the trilogy and “[a] character Faulkner fell in love with,” according to John Gray Watson (20). On the contrary, the Snopeses avoid literal sterilization, move up the socioeconomic ladder, and continue to spread throughout the county while Yoknapatawpha County’s paralyzed would-be saviors Ratliff and Gavin look on in horror. As Barbara E. Ladner states, “[The Snopes family is] from the very sort of background against which the eugenicists warned, and depicting it as financially successful might have been Faulkner’s joke” (Ladner 176). Certainly, Faulkner may be engaging in a bit of humor in his portrayal of the Snopeses, but I believe that the real reason for his ironic use of eugenic discourse and his depiction of the Snopeses as successful is more urgent.

¹ According to Angel Price, the scapegoating of Southern poor whites deemed “white trash” first became prevalent “during the postbellum period when defenders of the Old South used generalized ‘white trash’ characteristics to justify retaining power in the hands of the gentry and plantation owners (Price). In other words, these upper-class white Southerners weaponized the “white trash” stereotype against poor white Southerners, casting them as “immoral, degenerate, and violent” in order to argue that they (the upper-class whites) should be granted complete socioeconomic power since it would allow them to “protect others from this underclass who did not have a “role” in society” (Price).

As the previous paragraphs may suggest, I will argue in this thesis that the Snopes trilogy consistently references and alludes to the rhetoric and practices which prevailed during the American eugenic era but largely in an ironic and critical sense. In all three novels, Faulkner engages in eugenic characterization, language, and rhetoric while also portraying eugenic situations, but he allows the eugenic discourse to fall apart and reveal itself as illogical and potentially harmful. Ladner makes a similar argument in her book chapter “The Descent of Yoknapatawpha: Eugenics and the Origins of Faulkner’s World,” where she focuses on eugenic discourse and characterization, but the only Snopes novel she covers is *The Hamlet* and she does this quite briefly. This paper—being a thesis—will be much longer and more thorough, covering all three novels. Furthermore, while Ladner simply focuses on Faulkner’s explicit use of eugenic language and characterization, this thesis will also discuss situations where characters engage in understated eugenic practices or—at the very least—become seized by understated eugenic desires.

This thesis is divided into four chapters excluding this introduction and the later conclusion. The first chapter (“Eugenics at a Glance”) will trace the history of eugenics and solidify the methodology of this thesis. The second chapter (“Born Criminals, Degenerates, and ‘Sons of Bitches’: Questioning Hereditary Criminality and Degeneracy and Mocking Eugenic Classifications”) focuses on the allegedly biological criminality and degeneracy of the Snopeses, how the notion of “a family, a clan, a race, maybe even a species of sons of bitches” falls in line with the claims made by Cesare Lombroso and Robert L. Dugdale, and how Faulkner subverts those claims by using certain characters to enter the “nature versus nurture” debate and mock those who subscribe to Lombroso’s and Dugdale’s ideas (*The Mansion* 96). The third chapter (“The Reason I Aint Going to Leave Him Have What He Does Have is Simply Because I Am

Strong Enough to Keep Him from It”: Policing of Disabled Sexuality in *The Hamlet*”) focuses on how Ike Snopes’ disabled sexuality is policed by the people of Frenchman’s Bend and the eugenic motives behind it. The fourth and final chapter (““To Save Jefferson from a Snopes is a Duty; to Save a Snopes from a Snopes is a Privilege’: The Dark Side of Gavin’s Obsessions with Eula and Linda”) focuses on Gavin’s quest to “save” Eula and Linda from the Snopes family and restore their middle-class white femininity and the eugenic, middle-class misogyny present within that quest (*The Town* 193).

Ultimately, the Snopes trilogy serves as an excellent exploration into the eugenic sentiments that flourished in the United States around the time the trilogy takes place (the trilogy starting when the Snopes move into the region in the year 1905 and ending when Flem dies in 1946). The decision to focus on eugenic discourse in a trilogy which, admittedly, was written towards the end of the eugenics era² may seem strange, but this focus is nonetheless important since eugenics-era practices were still present at the time the books were written and continued for decades afterwards. In fact, several states continued to allow compulsory sterilizations as late as the 1980s, long after the publications of the books in the Snopes trilogy (Silver 863). Furthermore, the ruling in *Buck v. Bell* (the Supreme Court case which served as the moment of climax for the era of eugenics and led to thousands of compulsory sterilizations) has yet to be overturned, and therefore compulsory sterilization is still technically legal. This technicality has recently reentered public discourse as news about ICE allegedly performing “unnecessary hysterectomies” on detained female immigrants continues to leak (Moore). Without question, eugenics has once more become relevant after years of existing as a subject high school history teachers refuse to mention. Works of literature have always bestowed vivid depictions of past

² According to Edwin Black, the American eugenics movement began to wane when “the truth about Nazi experimentation became known” to the American public (Black xvii).

events and phenomena upon its readers, and there can be no doubt that the Snopes trilogy—with its frequent references to the twentieth-century eugenic movement— provides a priceless glimpse into one of America’s darkest periods, a period that still informs practices which persist in the supposedly post-eugenics United States.

EUGENICS AT A GLANCE

In order to discuss how the Snopes trilogy references America's eugenic movement, it is necessary to delve into the history of eugenics (more specifically, its origins and applications). This chapter will first look at the pseudoscience's origins in Europe and its derivation from and similarities to the already-existing degeneration theory and then turn to its emergence and reign of terror in the United States.

Perhaps an explanation of what exactly eugenics entails is pertinent as well. According to the notorious British zoologist and eugenicist Mary Weston (who wrote under the name Mrs. R. J. J. Hawkes), the word "eugenics" comes from the Greek word "eugenes," which means "good in stock." Simply put, Weston and her ilk believed that eugenics was "the science of producing a well-bred race, i.e., a race good in physique, intellect, and morals" (Hawkes 3). An unbiased, undogmatic definition from the *OED*, on the other hand, defines eugenics as "(the study of) the arrangement of human reproduction in order to increase the proportion of characteristics regarded as desirable (or to reduce the proportion regarded as undesirable) within a population or the species as a whole, also: the advocacy for or implementation of policies and practices intended to influence human reproduction in this way" ("eugenics, n.1"). In this paper, the term "eugenics" is used to interchangeably refer to ideologies which state that some classes of people are superior or inferior based on characteristics taken to be hereditary (characteristics which must either be preserved or eradicated) and the advocacy for or the actual implementation of practices

meant to curb the sexual reproduction of those with “undesirable” characteristics (practices such as sterilization).

While America was a hotbed of eugenic practices in the twentieth century (according to J. M. Friedman, over 60,000 people were sterilized by the state), the pseudoscience did not originate in America (Friedman 147). In fact, the first iterations of eugenic discourse dates back to antiquity. One prominent example of ancient eugenic discourse can be found in Plato’s *Republic*, where Plato states that selective breeding of citizens is necessary “if the flock is to be maintained in first-rate condition” (Plato 64). Most historians, however, agree that modern ideas regarding race betterment through reproductive control first appeared in England during the 1860s (with the advent of Darwinism, approximately) and that these ideas can be traced back to the works of Sir Francis Galton, who first coined the term “eugenics.” Although Galton was already an established statistician by the late-nineteenth century, he is now more widely known for spending the last decades of his life applying animal husbandry tactics and his half-cousin Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution to human beings (Parrinder 1).

In his 1869 book *Hereditary Genius: An Inquiry into its Laws and Consequences*, Galton proclaims:

Man’s natural abilities are derived by inheritance, under exactly the same limitations as are the form and physical features of the organic world. Consequently, as it is easy, notwithstanding those limitations, to obtain by careful selection a permanent breed of dogs or horses gifted with peculiar powers of running, or of doing anything else, so it would be quite practicable to produce a highly-gifted race of men by judicious marriages during several consecutive generations. I shall show that social agencies of an ordinary character, whose

influences are little suspected, are at this moment working towards the degradation of human nature, and that others are working towards its improvement (Galton 1).

As one can glean from the previous quote, Galton genuinely believed that civilization and “human nature” were in a state of decay, and that the only way to reverse this decay was to promote positive eugenics or practices which “[maximize the number] of ‘superior’ individuals” through arranged marriages.” Yet—according to Melvyn Conroy—while Galton championed positive eugenics, he “skirted around” the issue of negative eugenics (or practices which “restrict the ability of ‘inferior’ individuals to procreate”). Galton merely stated that the “refuse” of the world should be “discouraged” from breeding, though he never specified the means by which they would be “discouraged,” leaving the door open for the negative eugenics of later eugenicists (Conroy 26).

Although Galton’s ideas regarding the application of positive eugenics were novel for the time period, his statements regarding the perceived degeneration of the human race mirrored older statements made by degeneration theorists such as French-Austrian psychiatrist Bénédict A. Morel and Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso. In 1857, Morel published *Traité des dégénérescence*, a treatise which argues that “most illnesses are the result of incurable hereditary disorders” (Conroy 24). In this way, Morel was one of the first modern doctors to sound the alarm regarding genetic diseases, but he remains a controversial figure since he was also one of the first to clinically connect hereditary disability with immorality and sin. According to Dennis L. Durst, Morel was a devout Catholic who was primarily concerned with “the philosophical and theological problematic of the relation between the soul and the body,” and therefore he believed

that mental illness, epilepsy, alcoholism, intellectual disabilities, and other conditions were not just hereditary signs that the body was sick but signs that the soul was sick as well (Durst).

The problem with the reproduction of “degenerates” was two-fold for Morel: the human race would suffer in terms of both racial and spiritual purity should able-bodied society allow mental patients, epileptics, alcoholics, and intellectually disabled people to reproduce. Yet while Morel voiced his concerns regarding degeneration, he did not possess a decisive plan for how to stop the “inferior” classes of people from reproducing aside from allowing them to degenerate to the point of sterility (Conway 24).

It is impossible to know how familiar Galton was with Morel’s work, but Lombroso, another notorious degeneration theorist and Galton’s contemporary, was well-versed in it. Lombroso fashioned a career out of applying Morel’s theories regarding degeneration and the link between the body and the soul to the field of criminology. Lombroso, like Morel, believed immorality could be read on the body, and he was convinced that criminals could be spotted by physical anomalies such as “[facial] asymmetry, macrocephaly... strabismus, ears badly placed or too large, enormous jaws, etc.,” all of which he believed to be “of atavistic or degenerative origin” (Lombroso 90; Wolfgang 369). Lombroso noticed that these anomalies seemed to be hereditary, and he deduced that criminality must be hereditary as well and that some people are—to quote Elisabetta Sirgiovanni—“born to offend” (Sirgiovanni 166). Just as Morel feared that the reproduction of disabled people would lead to moral and racial degeneracy, Lombroso feared that his “atavistic” “born criminals” would “take [humanity] back to the prehistoric world” should they have children (Lombroso 53). Both Morel and Lombroso were deeply concerned with some form of degeneration, but Lombroso was more of an alarmist than Morel. For Lombroso, letting “degenerates” reproduce would not just taint races; it would lead to the

evolutionary regression of the human species. Yet while Lombroso fretted over the possibility that certain people would incite devolution, he—once more like Morel—had no real solution for his imagined scenario.

Morel and Lombroso's degeneration theory and Galton's eugenics were both based in the belief that humanity had sunk into a state of degradation due to the presence of bad genetic traits in certain individuals. However, what distinguishes the two pseudosciences from each other is that the latter actually proposed active plans—albeit deplorable, unethical ones—to reverse the problem. Morel and Lombroso may have provided the stepping stones for eugenic discourse, but for the most part, their theories were merely bleak positivist statements. It was up to Galton and others to take these statements and offer solutions to the problems the degeneration theorists invented.

These offers gained traction with intellectuals as the nineteenth century fed into the twentieth century, thanks in part to the rediscovery of Gregor Mendel's research in hereditary traits (Watson 6). With Mendel's work circulating throughout England, Galton and his followers finally had scientific facts they could distort for the sake of their agenda, and they were better able to draw in new disciples. By 1904, eugenics had done what degeneration theory could not; it had become—as Galton declared—“[the] orthodox religious tenet of the future” (qtd. in Conroy 29).

All religions must have their space for prayer and practice, and the United States proved to be the ultimate temple for eugenics in the twentieth century with men such as Charles Davenport and Harry Laughlin acting as its high priests. The building blocks for the temple of eugenics, however, were established long before these two intellectuals began their mass assault on the “unfit,” and they were tragically established by accident. In 1877, sociologist and prison

reformer Robert L. Dugdale published a book entitled *The Jukes: A Study in Crime, Pauperism, Disease, and Heredity*. The book focuses solely on an impoverished, disabled, morally degraded white family from rural New York that consists of “709 persons of all ages, alive and dead,” all of whom Dugdale dubs “Juke” (Dugdale 15). Dugdale delves into the family’s pedigree and criminal records and highlights the fact that out of 709 Jukes, there are 128 prostitutes, ninety-one illegitimate children, 206 paupers, and 76 criminals (69). While Dugdale concludes his study of the family by stating that its members are burdens on society (he estimates that the Jukes cost the State of New York \$1,308,000), he also concedes that their degeneracy is largely a product of an “invariable environment” rather than genetics alone (which he claims are influenced by the environment) and that the family can be reformed through environmental changes (70, 66).

Unfortunately, Dugdale’s conclusion was either misinterpreted or completely ignored by bigoted readers who desperately wanted to believe that immorality could be explained biologically. According to Elof Axel Carlson, the eugenicists who emerged in the decades following *The Jukes*’ publication twisted the study’s data to fit their narrative, rendering the study one steeped in “bigotry, naïveté, and inhumanity” (Carlson 535). Charles Davenport, the Connecticut-born heir to Galton’s legacy, was one of the worst offenders in this case. According to J. M. Friedman, Davenport was “a staunch Mendelian” who took pleasure in collecting pedigrees of thousands of “defective” families, and he naturally took interest in the detailed pedigrees and statistics found in *The Jukes* (Friedman 146). His fascination with the Jukes study was so fervent that he even went so far as to pen the preface to *The Jukes in 1915*, Arthur H. Estabrook’s unofficial “sequel” to Dugdale’s work. In this preface, Davenport refers to the Jukes as “persons whose [constitutions] did not fit them for participation in a highly organized society” and states that “the chief value of [the Juke family study] lies in that...it demonstrates again the

importance of the factor of heredity” (Davenport iii, iv). Davenport, however, goes further than just distorting Dugdale’s research; he offers solutions to the Juke “problem” as well. The Jukes, according to Davenport, can be reformed either through dispersion or the “superior” option that is segregation (iii).

Though the solutions in Davenport’s preface (particularly the last one) are unethical, he did not advocate for sterilization, the tactic that became best loved among eugenicists following him, in that particular instance. Carlson states that Davenport was always “ambivalent” about sterilization (though he found it “lawful...and effective”) since he believed that the “unfit” would have more incentive to engage in licentiousness if the state removed their ability to reproduce (Carlson 537). Instead, Davenport primarily suggested that the “unfit” be “[placed] in an institution under State care during at least the entire reproductive period” (qtd. in *Sex, Race, and Science* 23). Being the director of the Station for Experimental Evolution and the Eugenics Record Office at Cold Spring Harbor, Davenport had incredible influence and his methods were, at first, embraced by a large number of Americans, including powerful philanthropists such as the Rockefellers (Friedman 146). Unfortunately, however, fear of difference was on the rise throughout the nation, and many could not be satisfied with just segregation.

During the first decades of the twentieth century, middle-class whites spent much of their time fretting over the future of whiteness and their own waning social authority. Wendy Kline states that the middle class felt as though the economic depression of the earlier Gilded Age had inscribed “internal symptoms of increasing fragility and weakness...in the male body,” and for this reason, middle-class white men grew fearful of being replaced by “African-Americans, immigrants, and the working class” whom they perceived to more virile than themselves and drastically growing in number (Kline 9, 11). In addition to this, they were

perturbed by the fact that the “feeble-minded” or “mentally defective” population appeared to be growing at an alarming rate, although—in reality—the number of disabled people only appeared larger than usual after many of the “the healthiest, strongest men” in America were killed in WWI (15). In short, the white middle class became hypervigilant and hyperfocused on the minority groups they saw to be “unfit” and dangerous to the concept of whiteness. They believed that these people would continuously reproduce like “cancerous growths” and lead to tainted bloodlines should they impregnate middle-class white women and the death of white middle-class supremacy should their numbers surpass those of the white middle class (15).

These fears could only be abetted by the reassurances of men like Harry Laughlin, who promised the middle class in 1914 that all their problems could be solved if “the lowest one-tenth of the population” was forcibly sterilized (qtd. from *Sex, Race, and Science* 29). Upon hearing these words, many middle-class whites became zealous supporters of negative eugenics. The first compulsory sterilization law was actually enacted earlier than that in Indiana in 1907, but many more states began to pass such laws with Laughlin’s coaxing (*Sex, Race, and Science* 27). According to Friedman, more than half of all American states enacted sterilization laws by the year 1930, and they primarily targeted “individuals who were insane, mentally retarded or epileptic” as well as “certain classes of criminals” (Friedman 147).

Though California sterilized more people than any other state, Faulkner’s native South was guilty of similar eugenic horrors, one of which went to the United States Supreme Court. While this fact might suggest that eugenics was popular in the South, Edward J. Larson states that eugenics was actually less popular in the South than it was in other regions of the United States, primarily due to the fact that the tenets of eugenics ran counter to two Southern mainstays: the region’s “sense of family responsibility” and its Evangelism (*Sex, Race, and*

Science 9). Nevertheless, eugenics was well-received by Southern upper-middle-class whites, especially nonworking upper-middle-class white women who were members of elite social clubs (“In the Finest, Most Womanly Way” 122). Their eugenic anxieties were as strong as those of their Northern counterparts, but the South’s bogeyman was distinct and different from the North’s.

The South’s bogeyman and scapegoat was the poor rural white pejoratively called “poor white trash.” According to Matt Wray, the white middle-class first began to turn their gaze towards poor whites living in the South in the decades following the Civil War, as Northern progressivism made its way south (Wray 65). Poverty and indecency, naturally, were two of the chief concerns of middle-class reformers, and—as Isenberg states—“the twin evils of poverty and vagrancy were a permanent fixture among the white population” living below the Mason-Dixon Line (Isenberg 178). The reformers looked upon poor white Southerners with their abject poverty, vagrancy, “degeneracy,” and ignorance and saw “repositories of the worst of the white race’s germplasm” (Cohen 58). Moved by either pity or disgust, they funded the construction of institutions for the “defectives” and “imbeciles” within the poor white trash population in order to segregate them from the “purer” whites, and, later, they pushed for their sterilization.³

In 1924, legislators in the Southern state of Virginia adopted a statute which declared that state institutions had the right to sterilize people “found to be afflicted with a hereditary form of insanity or imbecility” (*Buck v. Bell*). As soon as the statute went into effect, Albert Priddy, the superintendent of the Virginia Colony for Epileptics and Feeble-minded, chose to sterilize a

³ It is important to note that middle-class Southern reformers liberally applied labels such as “defective,” “moron,” and “imbecile” to a large number of poor whites, many of which were actually able and neurotypical, simply because they lacked the education necessary to do well on the reformers’ IQ tests (Isenberg 198). The term “feble-minded” was also popularized during this time and applied to poor whites who exhibited signs of “shiftlessness, lack of industriousness...promiscuity, prostitution, illegitimacy, or other signs of sexual immorality” (J. Watson 23).

young “feeble-minded” white trash woman named Carrie Buck, who was guilty of “having recently borne a daughter out of wedlock” and being the daughter of another “feeble-minded” woman (J. Watson 23). Priddy died soon after his decision and left John Hendren Bell to test the legality of the Buck’s sterilization, and the case—*Buck v. Bell*— went all the way to the Supreme Court, where eight out of the nine justices ruled that the sterilization of “feeble-minded” individuals was perfectly legal and did not break the Fourteenth Amendment. In addition to ruling in favor of a poor young woman’s sterilization, the famed justice Oliver Wendell Holmes ended his final argument with the notorious phrase “three generations of imbeciles are enough” (*Buck v. Bell*).

The proceedings and final outcome of *Buck v. Bell* captured the nation’s attention, and multiple Southern states (Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia) rushed to pass draconian legislation similar to Virginia’s sterilization statute (Isenberg 203). Jay Watson notes that Mississippi—Faulkner’s home state—pushed for a sterilization bill that was almost verbatim to the Virginia statute. It was approved on April 10, 1928, “only two days, that is, after a severely retarded man who has undergone a crude and historically before-the-fact version of compulsory sterilization sits howling in a horse-drawn buggy on a Mississippi town square, in the closing sequence of Faulkner’s [*The Sound and the Fury*]” (J. Watson 25). Given the scene portrayed in *The Sound and the Fury* and the time period in which it occurs, it is impossible to say that Faulkner knew nothing of the sterilization laws passed in the South during the 1920s; on the contrary, it appears as though Faulkner was well aware of such legislation and the discourse which allowed it as he peppered his work with vague allusions to the Southern eugenic movement (which comes as no surprise given the popularity of the *Buck v. Bell* case and his lifelong scrutiny of his home state). In fact, one could argue that eugenics and anxieties

regarding heredity and race are major reoccurring themes in Faulkner's work. As Jay Watson notes, the majority of Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha novels feature "genealogical tropes and structures" (i.e. heavy emphases on families and pedigrees), which—according to Watson—points towards Faulkner very likely having read family studies such as Dugdale's (J. Watson 20). Furthermore, Faulkner's second most acclaimed novel—*Absalom, Absalom!*—tackles the subject of miscegenation and race hygiene rather explicitly by ending with a musing on the potential of people like Jim Bond, the "hulking, slackmouthed" biracial grandson of wealthy Thomas Sutpen, "conquer[ing] the western hemisphere" and "tainting" white able-bodied bloodlines (*Absalom, Absalom* 113, 195). Without question, Faulkner must have had some consciousness of eugenic discourse or else these tropes and themes would not continuously appear across the span of the fourteen novels set in Yoknapatawpha County.

Faulkner critics tend to focus on Faulkner's complicated sentiments regarding the tension between African-Americans and whites in the South and in turn disregard his relationship with eugenics, the ideology which often informs the theme of racism in his work. Jay Watson—in addition to Barbara Ladner—writes on the subject,⁴ and he clearly states that Faulkner "created a significant cohort of characters, and indeed entire family lines, that exhibit nearly the entire range of social traits identified by the eugenics movement as hereditary defects, and he created other characters who speak and/or think in the conceptual language of eugenics" (J. Watson 53). Without question, Faulkner does both of these things almost immaculately in the Snopes trilogy, but he is only able to do so because he is at least somewhat aware of the lengthy, abhorrent history of eugenics.

⁴ Ladner only scratches the surface of *The Hamlet*, and Watson does not delve into the actual Snopes trilogy at all. Instead, he briefly focuses on *Father Abraham*, an unpublished Snopes novel that features some of the same characters as the trilogy.

BORN CRIMINALS, DEGENERATES, AND “SONS OF BITCHES”: QUESTIONING HEREDITARY CRIMINALITY AND DEGENERACY AND MOCKING EUGENIC CLASSIFICATIONS

As stated in the previous chapter, Robert L. Dugdale fastidiously sought to answer the heredity-versus-environment question in his Jukes family study. He eventually concluded that upbringing and poverty are the most prominent triggers for propensities towards crime and degeneracy, but he still left the door slightly ajar for eugenic arguments when he said that “environment tends to produce habits which may become hereditary...if it should be sufficiently constant to produce modification of cerebral tissue” (Dugdale 66). By stating that environmental factors can change biological structures and turn criminality and immorality into an inheritable trait, Dugdale falls into a similar line of thinking as Lombroso, and the Jukes are therefore made “born criminals” and wretched degenerates by nature according to his logic. Eugenists in the early twentieth century who adored the work of Lombroso latched onto Dugdale’s study with the same zeal, feeling as though the credibility of their pseudoscience was further vitalized by Dugdale’s suggestion that criminality (and “degenerate” behavior in general) could be made genetic. This nineteenth-century suggestion proved to be a beloved talking point for the monstrous pro-eugenics reformers in the early twentieth century who believed that there was, unquestionably, “a connection between crime and defective mental states” and who sought to eradicate crime and supposed degeneracy from the streets of their cities by sterilizing those deemed to be “degenerate” perpetrators (Jenkins 65).

Faulkner alludes to and plays on Dugdale’s and Lombroso’s ideas regarding hereditary criminality and “degeneracy” all throughout the Snopes trilogy by characterizing the Snopes

family as the ultimate clan of delinquents and wastrels while calling into question eugenic/hereditarian rhetoric and suggesting that the criminality and supposed degeneracy displayed by the Snopes is not genetic but instead the products of class warfare and what, in the case of Flem and Wallstreet Snopes, they have been taught. At first glance, it is hard to see how the Snopeses can possibly be anything other than born criminals and degenerates. The list of criminals in the family is almost comically lengthy and consists of Abner “Ab” Snopes (a barn burner), Flem Snopes (an unscrupulous businessman), Byron Snopes (a bank robber), Montgomery Ward Snopes (a pornographer), I. O. Snopes (a bigamist as well as an insurance defrauder), and Mink Snopes (a murderer). Crime aside, the family is plagued by a general sense of degeneracy and amorality that—according to James Gray Watson—renders them (particularly Flem Snopes) “literally inhuman” (James Gray Watson 12).

The Snopeses, then, are set apart from Faulkner’s other characters, and they are treated by those around them as heartless ne’er-do-wells at best and subhuman specimens at worst. In the eyes of Gavin, Ratliff, and even themselves, they are, as Montgomery Ward Snopes states, “a family, a clan, a race, maybe even a species, of pure sons of bitches,” and their behaviors—on the surface—seem almost hereditary (*The Mansion* 96). Faulkner, however, does not seem to believe that criminality and that which gets labeled as “degeneracy” can be passed down from generation to generation (not genetically at least) as the eugenicists do. While he does depict a majority of the Snopeses (Flem especially) as archetypal degenerate criminals, he introduces characters like Abner, Mink, Eck, and Wallstreet Panic in order to reopen Dugdale’s original inquiry regarding nature versus nurture and suggest that nurture is the deciding factor in criminality and other behaviors which are deemed unacceptable by middle-class whites.⁵

⁵ It is also probably worth noting that most of the negative, pejorative characterization that appears in the trilogy is delivered through Ratliff’s and Gavin’s narrations. With this in mind, one could also easily argue that Faulkner is

Furthermore, Faulkner uses two of the “good Snopeses” (Eck and Wallstreet) for a second purpose: making Gavin and Ratliff (and eugenicists in general) look like buffoons for believing that Snopeses can be scientifically categorized as evil degenerates. In short, Faulkner utilizes the Snopes trilogy as a vehicle to raise questions regarding heredity and mock the eugenicists whose irrationality led to condemnable atrocities.

The trilogy begins with the wretched Snopeses materializing in Frenchman’s Bend and frightening the villagers (the Varners especially) almost immediately. At first, the villagers’ fears stem from the fact that this white trash family is completely alien to the region. The people of Frenchman’s Bend are characterized as having lived in the area for generations with their ancestors originally coming from “the Atlantic seaboard and before that, from England and the Scottish and Welsh Marches” (*The Hamlet* 5). The Snopeses’ origin, on the other hand, is never revealed, which sets them apart from the people of Frenchman’s Bend (and Yoknapatawpha County in general) and makes them almost as foreign as the immigrants who were targeted during the eugenics era. When Jody asks Ab Snopes where his family comes from, Ab cryptically asserts that the family previously farmed somewhere in the west and says nothing further (9). Ab’s refusal to reveal where exactly the family is from firmly establishes the family’s mysterious, unfamiliar quality, but this is the only the first mystery involving the family.

Soon after meeting Ab Snopes, Jody discovers that he is rumored to have burnt down the barns of two of his past landowners: “a fellow named Harris over in Grenier County” and Major de Spain, the father of the man Flem later displaces in *The Town* (10). Jody and his fellow villagers are never certain that the rumors surrounding Ab are true, and Ratliff—the county

simply presenting the characters through the eyes of would-be eugenicists and that the vision of the Snopeses in these novels is subjective and skewed rather than objective and accurate. This, in conjunction with the fact that the narrators are revealed to be illogical and unreliable, would also prove that Faulkner is working actively working with eugenic discourse in a critical fashion.

gossip—only goes as far as to state that “[both barns] taken fire while [Abner] more or less associated with them,” which suggests that Ab may not have been directly involved (14). The question of whether or not Ab burnt down these barns is left unanswered in *The Hamlet* but not in Faulkner’s earlier short story “Barn Burning,” which asserts that he did, indeed, destroy the barns of both Harris and de Spain. Therefore, Faulkner canonically establishes Ab as an arsonist and the first criminal figure in the Snopes family though he commits his crimes in another work. Still, Ab’s criminality marks him in the Snopes trilogy despite the fact that it is only treated as alleged criminality since the rumors surrounding Ab are enough to drive an apprehensive Jody to negotiate an insurance policy with Flem.

In addition to his criminality, Ab displays another personality trait which is deemed “degenerate” by middle-class whites and, according to Dugdale, often found in the Juke family: idleness. Whereas Flem, Eck, and Wallstreet have strong work ethics, Ab does not properly apply himself to his duty as a sharecropper. In Ratliff’s account of the incident where Ab allegedly set Major de Spain’s barn on fire (an account which is essentially a condensed version of the short story “Barn Burning”), a lounging Ab tells Miss de Spain, “I figger I’ll start tomorrow. I don’t never move and start work the same day” (17). After moving to Frenchman’s Bend, Ab continues to display his unindustrious tendencies in his refusal to “even set the gate up” after living on the Varner property for three days (21). His shiftlessness resembles that of the first born male in the Jukes family, Max, whom Dugdale describes as being “averse to steady toil” (Dugdale 14). Dugdale presents Max as the family’s founding patriarch whose idleness may have been passed down to his descendants (many of which Dugdale labels as “lazy”), and Faulkner seems to have created a similar propagator of indolence in Ab. Indeed, Ab is not the only lazy individual featured in Ratliff’s version of “Barn Burning”; Ab’s twin daughters (whom

are often described as “bovine”) also demonstrate similar characteristics. According to Ratliff, “Them two girls aint moved yet, just setting there in them two chairs, in their Sunday clothes, chewing sweet gum, till Ab turned around and cussed them outen the wagon to where Miz Snopes and the widow was wrastling with the stove” (*The Hamlet* 15). Like their father, the twins refuse to assist the others in their work and prefer to sit in chairs just as Ab does when he is visited by Mrs. de Spain. The twins can only be coaxed into industry after being subjected to domestic violence from their father,⁶ who ironically may be the fount from which their inactivity springs. Faulkner may not have read *The Jukes*, but he definitely seems to be aware of the discourse surrounding laziness being considered a degenerate hereditary trait and bestows the quality on Ab, the idle Juke-like patriarch of an idle Juke-like family.

Ab does not simply commit arson and engage in supposedly degenerate behaviors, however; he also possesses some of the physical features which—according to Lombroso and Dugdale—are common in those whom they claim to be born criminals and degenerates. As previously stated, Lombroso believes that a criminal and/or “degenerate” can be spotted by their non-normative physical attributes, and Dugdale notes that over half of the Jukes are plagued by “diseases, malformations, and injuries” (Dugdale 30-1). Ab is described as being “smaller than common” and having a limp which—according to Ratliff—he earned while stealing horses in the Civil War (*The Hamlet* 8, 32). His short stature falls in line with Lombroso’s assertion that criminals have “when an adult a lower stature than normal,” and his limp is an injury that puts him in the same category as the many Jukes who sustained their injuries and diseases due to

⁶ Often linked with criminality, violence of all sorts typically falls under the category of “degenerate”, anti-social behavior. Therefore, Faulkner’s depictions of Ab verbally abusing the twins--in addition to the depictions of his shiftlessness and arsonist tendencies—establish Ab as a brilliant case study in what eugenicists would consider to be white trash degeneracy.

poverty (Lombroso 119; Dugdale 31).⁷ He is not the only deformed, supposedly degenerate criminal in the Snopes family tree, but he is the oldest and the first to appear, which makes him significant. He is the Abraham figure in a family that appears to be designed as eugenic poster children, and therefore Faulkner makes a point of emphasizing his delinquency, dissolution, and non-normative physicality early in *The Hamlet* in order to set a precedent for the trilogy's eugenic themes and the Snopeses who follow. John Gray Watson states that Flem is the "archetypal Snopes" due to his sinister qualities, but that title should actually be held by Ab seeing as he is the original Lombrosian/Dugdalian Snopes and he, in a sense, creates the archetype in question (J. G. Watson 23).

Yet while Ab appears as the archetypal Lombrosian born criminal and Juke analogue, Faulkner is clear in asserting that Ab's criminality and appearance are not inherited. Faulkner, unconvinced by hereditarianism and eugenics, presents Ab's condition as simply the result of existing within a traumatic environment. Firstly, Faulkner reveals nothing regarding Ab's forefathers in *The Hamlet*, which makes it impossible to truly know whether or not he is preceded by others like him. Secondly, Ratliff—who later comes to believe that all Snopes are evil by nature—initially states that Ab "aint naturally mean...he's just soured" (*The Hamlet* 31). Like Ratliff, Faulkner appears to express a sort of sympathy towards Ab and for good reason. Taylor Hagood asserts that Faulkner designed Ab to serve as a visible symbol of "poor-white oppression" more than anything else and that Ab's behaviors only arise because—like many poor white Southerners—he has been hurt by Southern aristocrats like the de Spain family throughout the course of his life. In essence, Major de Spain, Harris, and other wealthy landowners have forced him into a near feudalistic existence where he serves as a lowly

⁷ According to Taylor Hagood, Ab engages in thievery because he is "a poor man simply trying to get by" (Hagood 79). For this reason, I count his injury as being the result of actions brought on by poverty.

sharecropper while these landowner exploit what little labor he does and consistently remind him of his place in the class hierarchy. Furthermore, his limp—as stated previously—is an acquired wound rather than a hereditary birth defect, and it “came from a lone act, possibly one of disobedience or even self-destruction, that may well be read as being prompted by class anxiety and the desire for upward mobility” (Hagood 81). In short, he certainly resembles Lombroso’s born criminal on the surface, but he is a product of a bad environment and a deplorable socioeconomic situation like the Jukes rather than a degenerate criminal by nature.

The question, then, is whether or not Faulkner uses Ab and his progeny to play with Dugdale’s theory that learned antisocial habits can eventually become genetic. In a previous paragraph, I discussed how Faulkner questions whether or not laziness may be inherited through his characterization of the twins, but laziness is not necessarily antisocial. The question of whether learned criminality and amorality can be passed on to offspring is far more pressing. Certainly, Faulkner seems to suggest that it might be a possibility in the case of Flem, who is arguably the vilest of the Snopeses due to what—on the surface—appears to be a complete lack of any sympathy or moral code on his part. At first glance, Flem is—as stated by T. Allen Hillman—“Faulkner’s villain par excellence” (Hillman A265). He coldly manipulates those around him in order to move towards the ultimate goal that is respectability, and—thanks to “the will, the need and the ruthlessness and the industry and what talent he had been born with”—he is capable of grasping it and ruining his rivals’ lives in the same stroke without a single iota of remorse (*The Town* 276). Without question, one can come to the conclusion that the mild “sourness” found in the downtrodden Ab genetically passes over to Flem and reaches a fever pitch within him. At the same time, however, Faulkner counters this conclusion by supplying the reader with alternative readings, one which considers environmental factors.

As shown in the introduction, Faulkner marks Flem with eugenic language as soon as he appears in *The Hamlet*, which indubitably proves that Faulkner intends for Flem to serve as yet another possible born criminal and “degenerate” at first glance. Flem is the mysterious, silent son of an alleged barn burner who may also be a barn burner as far as the villagers know, and he possesses eyes that are “the color of stagnant water” (*The Hamlet* 24). This bizarre physical trait is brought up as a motif repeatedly throughout the trilogy, especially in moments when Flem engages in a cryptic yet cunning acts of underhanded manipulation.⁸ It is interesting that Faulkner chooses to compare Flem’s eyes to stagnant water since stagnant water serves as a breeding ground for certain types of diseases. Thus, Flem immediately becomes an unhealthy figure associated with disease and danger, which would make him part of the demographic that is judged to be “unfit” and “degenerate.” However, the stagnant water comparison works on another level besides this. The word “stagnant” calls to mind stasis or paralysis, and the Snopeses are certainly characterized by middle class whites such as Ratliff and Gavin as being poor white trash degenerates who are stuck in a perpetual state of backwardness and who fall far behind middle-class whites in terms of humanity and evolutionary progress. Flem’s very eyes reveal the supposed stagnation of his bloodline, a stagnation which fits with Lombroso’s theories regarding the atavistic criminal “who reproduces in civilised times characteristics, not only of primitive savages, but of still lower types as far back as the carnivora” (Lombroso-Ferrero 7).

The question of whether or not Flem inherits his father’s criminal tendencies dominates the first chapters of *The Hamlet*. It first emerges in the scene where Jody and Flem negotiate the

⁸ One of the best examples of this correlation appears in a scene in *The Town* where Flem tries to pressure Gavin into taking on Montgomery Ward’s case, thereby making Gavin an unwitting pawn in his elaborate plan to put Montgomery Ward in Parchman Penitentiary with Mink and foil Mink’s chance of being released on time. Chick Mallison, the narrator of this chapter of the novel, states that Gavin struggles to grasp Flem’s motive for approaching him since “[one] couldn’t see behind Mr Snopes’s eyes because they weren’t really looking at you at all, like a pond of stagnant water is not looking at you” (*The Town* 175).

fire insurance policy and the cigar mentioned in the introduction is offered. Flem states that he “chew[s] up a nickle now and then and then until the suption is out of it...but [he] aint never lit a match to one yet” (*The Hamlet* 26). On the surface, it appears as though Flem is simply admitting that he has never had the money and status that is needed to buy and smoke cigars, but within this admission lies a sinister innuendo. Flem does not specifically say “I aint never lit a match to a *cigar* yet”; instead, he states that he “aint never lit a match to *one* yet.” The word “one” is vague, and thus there is the possibility that “one” may also refer to a barn as well as a cigar. Flem obviously recognizes Jody’s fear of him, and perhaps he is trying to distill Jody’s anxieties by hinting that he has never been a barn burner like his father, but he may also be subtly threatening him by saying that he simply has not committed arson yet but may do it in the future if Jody does not give in to his demands.

Additionally, his statement about chewing the “suction” out of “a nickel” functions as yet another threat. As the plot progresses, Flem transforms into a money-hungry capitalist like Jody’s father, Will, and takes control of the entire county, so the “nickel” that appears in his statement refers not only to a nickel of tobacco but to the actual currency he will one day acquire in unethical ways. However, Flem does more than metaphorically chew and devour money; he metaphorically chews the “suction” out of people’s souls as well. As he grows richer, he stops chewing tobacco and begins to simply mime the action of chewing continuously. In *The Mansion*, Ratliff repeatedly states that what Flem actually chews at that stage is a “little chunk of Frenchman’s Bend air,” and this “Frenchman’s Bend air” might as well refer to the many unfortunate people in Frenchman’s Bend (people such as Jody, Mrs. Armistid, and even Ratliff himself) who fall victim to his cruel, money-making schemes (*The Mansion* 243). Certainly, Flem’s innocuous statement serves as a subtle warning that he is, indeed, a dangerous character

like his father though he is dangerous in a different fashion. If one subscribes to eugenic ideology, it definitely appears as though Flem has inherited his father's supposed criminal gene and that it has mutated since Flem's crimes are more calculated, nuanced, and widespread than his father's crimes.

However, one could make the argument that Flem's behavior is not the result of biological deviation but instead the product of the "education" he acquires as Will Varner's second-in-command. After all, when Will Varner rhetorically asks Flem if he himself is at fault for Flem's lack of a soul, Flem can only reply that "[if Varner did not create him] then who did?" (*The Hamlet* 169). Eugenicists like Gavin and Ratliff would dismiss the material reality of the environmental factors that went into Flem's disposition and claim that Flem is the natural result of a pedigree that becomes more and more "degenerate" and inhuman with each generation, but Faulkner himself—as shown by his decision to include the previously quoted line regarding the "creation" of Flem—disagrees with this line of thinking.

While Flem is arguably the most significant Snopes in the trilogy and therefore a perfect specimen for Faulkner's engagement in the nature vs. nurture debate, Faulkner grants almost equivalent attention to Flem's most pathetic victim: poor, wretched Mink Snopes, who eventually exacts his revenge on Flem by murdering him. While Flem serves as an abstract symbol of greed and inhumanity for Gavin and Ratliff, Ratliff claims that Mink is "the only out-and-out mean Snopes [the community has] ever experienced" (*The Town* 83). Ratliff sets him apart from the other Snopeses and labels him as almost too evil to be a Snopes, but Mink could not be anything other than a Snopes by Ratliff's standards since he fits the born criminal/degenerate archetype quite well. Mink is an undeniable criminal who possesses some of the physical traits that Lombroso associates with that classification (namely his "handicap of

physical size”), and he displays signs of Juke-like “degeneracy” in his domestic abuse (*The Hamlet* 246). In short, he certainly embodies all of the qualities Gavin and Ratliff associate with the Snopeses. Yet while this fact seems to validate the theory that the Snopeses’ criminality and immorality are hereditary, Mink’s criminal and supposedly degenerate tendencies—like Ab’s and Flem’s— seem to be the result of his circumstances.

Like the Jukes, Mink is the epitome of what eugenicists deemed “poor white trash.” He appears to be, by far, the most impoverished member of the Snopes family since he lives in “paintless two-room cabin” bordered by “meagre and sorry corn” (a far cry from Flem’s “solid aristocratic ancestral symbol”), and he must “[scratch] dirt to keep alive” (*The Hamlet* 243, *The Town* 172). While Snopeses like Flem, Wallstreet, and Clarence are able to escape the typical Snopes cycle of poverty, Mink is tragically fixed and unable to make his own exit. Mink—like many poor whites in the South during the early twentieth century—suffers because he is oppressed by people higher up in his village’s socioeconomic hierarchy. Faulkner may take interest in painting Mink in a deterministic light as an individual pitted against cosmic forces that “harassed and harried him into the constant and unflagging necessity of defending his own simple rights,” but he makes it clear that Mink’s miserable existence and subsequent criminality is not the product of bad luck or heredity. Instead, it is the result of his mistreatment by the middle-class white landowners who repeatedly push him into poverty and deny him access to a better quality of life (*The Mansion* 7).

Mink only murders Jack/Zack Houston because Houston, “a man with a lot full of paper bulls and heifers,” charges him more money than he possesses for a cow that he already owns that just so happens to be on Houston’s land (*The Mansion* 27). Houston knows that Mink does not have enough money to pay for the cow, but he insists on sapping Mink of both his wages and

his labor⁹ not only out of greed but out of his blatant disregard for impoverished people. The acts of forced labor and wage stealing by themselves are cruel, but by hoarding the cow (which he does not need), Houston commits a further act of oppression because he denies Mink the opportunity to sell his cow (which is now “worth money as grade beef”) and earn enough money to slightly alleviate his financial crisis (*The Mansion* 11). Indifferent to Mink’s suffering, Houston strips him of his humanity, forces him into a form of wage slavery, and has the gall to lie to him in order to exact more capital from him. To make matters far worse, Houston is allowed to do so as Will Varner, who acts as the Law in Frenchman’s Bend due to his own abundant wealth, condones Houston’s exploitation of Mink. Varner, who is stationed at the highest rung in the local hierarchy of power, declares Houston to be in the right since—as Mink states—“all...rich folks has got to stick together,” and thus Mink’s own rights are completely disregarded since he is impoverished (43). Mink naturally feels cheated by Houston, and thus his decision to murder Houston is almost justified and has nothing to do with hereditary criminality. In other words, Mink does not kill because he’s biologically evil; he kills because—as Debra MacCord points out—he exists within “a system that maintains the sanctity of private property over that of human dignity and in which the rights of the landed enfranchise take precedence over all” (MacCord 348).

Faulkner spends a great deal of time focusing on the plight of Mink and demonstrating how his violence is derived from class conflict rather than heredity, but sometimes he diverts his attention to two other Snopeses, Eck and his son Wallstreet, whom Gavin and Ratliff regard as “good Snopeses” unmarred by the taint of negative “Snopesism” (*The Mansion* 152). These two characters are so distinct from the other Snopeses that their pedigree comes to be questioned by

⁹ In order to earn enough money to pay off his debt, Mink spends thirty-seven days working for Houston at a rate of “fifty cents a day” (*The Mansion* 19).

Gavin and Ratliff in a blatantly positivistic fashion. Gavin and Ratliff believe that all Snopeses possess an observable hereditary trait that pushes them towards “cold rapacity as instinctive as breathing,” and any deviation from this “cold rapacity” points towards undeniable illegitimacy (*The Town* 37). There are many problems with this line of thinking. Mainly, it dehumanizes the entire family and sets the name “Snopes” up as a monstrous abstract category rather than simply the surname of a group of actual human beings with set characteristics that are cruelly applied to others. Secondly, it denies Eck’s and Wallstreet’s identities; both men see no problem in the name Snopes and consider themselves Snopeses, but other parties seek to remove them from the family for the sake of (ir)rationality and peace of mind.

Without question, the theme of irrationality parading as rationality comes to the forefront in the two narrators’ dealings with the “good Snopeses.” For example, as Gavin and Ratliff ponder over the hereditary of both Eck and Wallstreet and expound on their theory that all Snopeses must be reprehensible by nature, they seem unaware that Wallstreet should be a Snopes by their definition since he shares a lot of the same traits as Flem but displays these traits in a more pleasant, socially acceptable way. In short, Faulkner sets Gavin and Ratliff up to appear foolish as they attempt to pigeonhole the Snopeses with theories regarding heredity that either lack no substance or fall apart completely, and Faulkner does so in order to demonstrate the foolishness of the eugenic movement while simultaneously touching upon the theme of nature versus nurture.

Gavin states that Eck is “never in this world a Snopes”—a statement that becomes a common refrain—due to his good-natured, well-liked personality (*The Town* 34). This personality is established early in *The Hamlet* when the narrator labels Eck as “a man...whose intentions were good and who was accommodating and unfailingly pleasant and even generous,”

a description which sets Eck up as the only Snopes in that particular novel who possesses desirable qualities (*The Hamlet* 73). The positive otherization of Eck continues in *The Town*, where Chick Mallison states that Eck becomes an outstanding member of the local Freemason's lodge and a citizen that "everybody liked" (*The Town* 116). Eck's goodness and popularity, for both Gavin and Ratliff, cannot be reconciled with the antisocial tendencies of Snopeses like Ab, Flem, I. O., Byron, Montgomery Ward, and Mink, and thus both Gavin and Ratliff can only come to the conclusion that Eck must be an illegitimate Snopes from outside the supposedly tainted bloodline.

Interestingly, Faulkner himself seems to—at certain junctures—entertain this notion or, at the very least, he creates another character besides Gavin and Ratliff who expresses similar skepticism. As mentioned previously, Montgomery Ward labels all Snopeses as "pure sons of bitches," but he nonetheless declares:

I don't even mention Eck and Wallstreet and Admiral Dewey because they dont belong to us. I have always believed that Eck's mother took some extracurricular nightwork nine months before he was born. So the one true bitch we had was not a bitch at all but a saint and a martyr, the one technically true pristine immaculate unchallengeable son of a bitch we ever produced wasn't even a Snopes (*The Mansion* 96-97).

Montgomery Ward's doubts regarding Eck's legitimacy are enough raise suspicion in the reader, who is inclined to believe one Snopes' words regarding another Snopes (after all, it stands to reason that if anyone knows the truth regarding Eck's lineage, it would be someone within the Snopes family). However, Montgomery Ward seems to genuinely dislike Eck and his children since he also refers to them as "[the family's] only shame" due to their goodness, and thus his

general distaste for those particular relatives may color his judgement (93). Furthermore, all he is able to state is that he simply *believes* that Eck's mother was unfaithful; there is no reliable evidence within the text to prove that Montgomery Ward is correct in his assumption. The reader is left without any answers and must rely entirely on either Eck's insistence that he is a Snopes or the hearsay of characters who are neither omniscient nor infallible. As Stacy Burton points out, Faulkner has a tendency to "repeatedly, dialogically [undermine] truth claims, orderly histories, monologic narratives, and notions of certainty" in order to disorient the reader, who must then become their own authority in the act of reading his work (Burton 610). The uncertainty surrounding Eck's heritage is a perfect example of Burton's claim; furthermore it piques the reader's interest and places them in a mindset similar to that of Gavin and Ratliff, making the reader a somewhat eugenicist for a moment.

Faulkner may try to seduce the reader into thinking in terms of pedigree for a brief moment, but—overall—he condemns such thinking. He takes pleasure in undermining truth and textual authority, but he also takes pleasure in revealing logical fallacies in the thought processes of his characters. Thus, he continuously reveals the irrationality and baselessness of Gavin's and Ratliff's hereditarian classifications in order to help the reader come to the conclusion that eugenics is a foolish, undesirable ideology. For example, he shows Ratliff err while generating a list of different types of Snopeses in *The Town*; Ratliff states, "There was the mild innocent ones like Eck that not only wasn't no Snopes, no matter what his maw said, he never had no more business being born into a Snopes nest than a sparrow would have in a hawk's nest" (*The Town* 83). In this statement, Ratliff lists Eck as both a Snopes and a non-Snopes simultaneously. On the one hand, Eck—for Ratliff—is a "mild innocent" Snopes, but on the other, he cannot be a Snopes at all due to that "mild innocent" nature. The paradox in Ratliff's logic comes across as

faulty unlike Faulkner's other paradoxes, which are typically astute and poignant in their jarring nature. It appears as though a part of Ratliff believes or knows that Eck is truly a Snopes but is making a conscious choice to deny this fact and accuse Eck's mother of lying (much in the same way Montgomery Ward does) simply because Eck does not fit in what Ratliff refers to as the "pure and simple mutual federation" of Snopeses (114). Like the eugenicists of his time, a terrified Ratliff spots certain tendencies in a few people within a sample group, frantically draws a conclusion, and refuses to budge from it. His refusal to accept facts that challenge his ideology is, by definition, irrational and ignorant, and this causes the reader to reconsider the validity of eugenic ideologies, which claim to be based entirely in scientific reason and intellectualism.

Irrationality appears again when Ratliff and Gavin agree that Wallstreet is also a "non-Snopes." This classification is ironic since they associate Snopeses with "cold rapacity" and completely ignore the fact that Wallstreet does—as Gavin once feared—display "the habit of courage and honor compounded by rapacity" (37). Wallstreet grows up to be the owner of a wholesale grocery store franchise "like the big ones in St Louis," and—on the surface—he engages in "the outrageous unSnopeish method of jest selling ever body exactly what they thought they was buying, for exactly what they thought they was going to pay for it" (*The Town* 157; *The Mansion* 170). Under the surface, however, Wallstreet is engaging in what Gail Mortimer describes as "a variation on the adaptability of more typical Snopeses, who exploit situations in order to gain money and power" (Mortimer 192). Wallstreet, like Flem, has an uncompromising sense of ambition and a knack for business that allows him to spread across the region and profit. Bestowed with the same cleverness as his cousin, Wallstreet recognizes that the people of Yoknapatawpha County require food, and he is able to exploit that biological need though he does so with a sense of humanity and generosity that is absent in Flem and the other

Snopeses. However, no matter how generous and friendly Wallstreet is, he—like all entrepreneurs—leverages a basic necessity over the heads of consumers (many of whom are impoverished), and the ethical nature of this action must be questioned. In this way, Wallstreet is no different from Flem, and if incorrigible Gavin and Ratliff condemn Flem and classify him as a born criminal, they should—in theory—condemn Wallstreet and classify him in a similar fashion. Blinded by Wallstreet’s demonstration of societal norms and pleasantries, the two narrators are incapable of recognizing Snopesism in Wallstreet, and thus they fail as eugenicists. Furthermore, they are incapable of envisioning a form of “Snopesism” that is gentle and relatively healthy because they are too accustomed to Flem’s iteration of “Snopesism”, which they have deemed to be evil.

That said, Wallstreet’s business acumen—or “Snopesism” for that matter—is very unlikely to be hereditary. If anything, his acumen is the product of having gone to school and “[received] his diploma” (unlike many of the other Snopes), and his “innocent rewardless generosity” is likely the product of having been raised by the good-natured Eck (*The Town* 153, 152). Eck himself proves that Snopeses are not necessarily bad by nature; he is born a Snopes and raised as a Snopes, and yet he does not exhibit the same traits as the Snopeses who come to be treated as though they are degenerate criminals. He simply learns to be well-mannered either through his interactions with others or by nature. If it is by nature, then it proves that the Snopeses are as complicated and diverse as any family and therefore it is impossible to say that hereditary family temperaments exist. Gavin and Ratliff do the family an injustice by trying to look at Snopeses with a black-and-white mentality that disregards the material reality of poverty in the case of Ab and Mink and education in the case of Flem, Eck, and Wallstreet, and the reader comes to see Gavin and Ratliff as willfully blind, ignorant individuals. Their attempts to

cast the Snopes family as an evil monolithic entity are irrational, and Faulkner intends this to be the case since it exposes how atrocities such as prejudice, dehumanization, and sterilization are committed by illogical, foolish people.

By reading the Snopes trilogy and recognizing the ways in which Ratliff and Gavin err, the reader comes to question the validity of Lombroso's and Dugdale's theories and the rationality of "progressive" reformers who turned to eugenics in order to vanquish crime and indecency. Faulkner sees the folly in the eugenic rhetoric, and he launches a full-fledged attack on it. Faulkner may present the Snopeses as antisocial, but he reveals the external causes of the family's antisocial and dissolute tendencies, and in this way, he debunks the idea that some men are born criminals and natural degenerates.

“THE REASON I AINT GOING TO LEAVE HIM HAVE WHAT HE DOES HAVE IS
SIMPLY BECAUSE I AM STRONG ENOUGH TO KEEP HIM FROM IT”: POLICING OF
DISABLED SEXUALITY IN *THE HAMLET*

In the previous chapter, I primarily used the word “degenerate” to describe actions or behaviors found to be abject or morally debased in some sense by eugenicists, but the eugenicists in question also used the term “degenerate” to refer to people who displayed physical or mental traits that did not fall in line with normalized ablebodied standards. As stated in the introduction, the term “degenerate” was popularized by Bénédict Morel in his work dealing with mental illness and neurological disabilities, and it eventually became synonymous with the word “disabled”. Eugenics at its very core concerns itself with the reproduction and sexuality of people who are considered “unhealthy” and “degenerate”, and thus disabled people and people with non-normative bodies were the most popular targets for eugenic practices. Eugenicists believed that people with hereditary disabilities and/or deformities could potentially produce offspring who would “taint” the body politic, and—in addition—they “warned the public that the one ‘talent’ bequeathed to feeble-minded individuals was a prolific sexuality” that would result in the defilement of “fit” women (Snyder and Mitchell 86). Thanks to eugenic alarmism, neurotypical, normative Americans began to genuinely fear disabled people and treat them as sexual deviants who would continuously reproduce, rape “normal people,” engage in other perverse sexual acts, and tear the fabric of society to shreds. In short, the sexualities of disabled and other physically or mentally non-normative people became a public crisis that gripped

normative, ablebodied white America, and they were brutally policed through institutionalization and sterilization.

Having lived in a state that was utterly obsessed with racial purity and notorious for its sterilization law, Faulkner was well aware of how ablebodied society fears the sexual desires of those with divergent bodies and/or minds and seeks to curb them. His most critically acclaimed novel, *The Sound and the Fury*, features an “idiot” named Benjy Compson, who is “gelded” in 1913 after his attempt to communicate with a group of schoolgirls is misconstrued as an attempt at sexual assault (*The Sound and the Fury* 33, 19). Yet while Benjy’s sterilization is the most stark, blatant example of disabled sexuality being policed in Faulkner’s work, Benjy is by no means the only Faulknerian idiot to fall victim to cruel eugenic practices. According to Hagood, Faulkner is fond of including “idiots” who are “cognitively disabled in ways that affect [their]...speech, [their] movements, [their] emotions, and the look in [their] eyes” in his work, and his interest in “idiots” goes beyond simply casting them as grotesques meant to solidify a Southern gothic aesthetic (Hagood 88). Faulkner’s treatment of these characters is—for the most part—sympathetic, and the fact that he often places these likable characters in situations where they face appalling acts of ableism demonstrates that he wishes to make a statement on their welfare and the ethicality of their treatment by ablebodied society. In other words, his inclusion of intellectually disabled people in his novels often serves as a commentary on the hardships faced by disabled people, and one of those hardships is the policing of disabled sexuality.

His sympathy for disabled people and his rejection of the eugenic practices that police their sexualities are fully on display in the third section of *The Hamlet* (“The Long Summer”) as he centers the beginning of the section around Ike Snopes and his community’s sadistic eugenics-motivated plot to put an end to his love affair with one of Jack/Zack Houston’s cows.

Ike— whom Ladner calls “the strongest proof of defect in the Snopes line”— is precisely the kind of person the eugenicists and their supporters feared most since he is an intellectually disabled man who demonstrates sexual desire by engaging in acts of bestiality in a peepshow set up by his cousin Lump (Ladner 172). Ratliff—who takes up the dual role of village moralist and eugenicist—learns of Ike’s sexual activities and decides to police it because he views Ike as a degenerate whose perverse sexuality must be controlled due to its taboo nature. However, the taboo for Ratliff does not simply lie in the fact that Ike seeks sexual gratification from a cow; it lies in the fact that he is sexually active in the first place.

The Hamlet takes place in the first decade of the twentieth century, at a time when disabled people were seen as lewd, defective perverts whose sexuality was naturally taboo due to the fact that they were considered “defective” and therefore undesirable and disgusting. Furthermore, their sexuality posed a problem to those invested in racial hygiene since sexual activity with ablebodied white women could possibly lead to reproduction and the birth of “unfit” offspring. Returning to the text, if Ike can feel sexual attraction towards a cow, then there is the possibility that he can transfer his attraction over to ablebodied human women and impregnate them, a scenario which terrifies the citizens of Frenchman’s Bend. Disgusted at the idea of a sexually active disabled person and frightened of his potential to procreate, Ratliff sees it as his duty to band together with other citizens of Frenchman’s Bend (including even a few of the Snopeses) to devise a cruel, traumatizing plan to “cure” Ike of his promiscuity.

This chapter argues that Ike’s punishment by his own community is much like Benjy’s: it is, in a sense, a metaphorical form of sterilization though it does not involve the removal of

sexual organs, and it is driven by ableism and the eugenic belief that disabled people are degenerate, weak, “unfit” subhumans who should not be allowed to engage in sexual activity.¹⁰ Furthermore, Faulkner makes it clear that policing disabled people in this fashion, even though it is not as invasive as sterilization, is always an act of eugenics and never moral. Not satisfied to end his commentary on the policing of disabled sexuality in *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner creates Ike to serve as another victim of eugenics movement as he once again attacks its rhetoric and practices and exposes its cruelty.

It is important to note that the sexualities of the Snopeses in general pose a problem for the citizens of Yoknapatawpha County, but Ike’s sexuality is regarded as the ultimate threat though he is not the first sexual menace to appear in Frenchman’s Bend. The first would be I. O., the bigamist who possesses a “weasel-like quality of existing independently of his clothing so that although you could grasp and hold that you could not restrain the body itself from doing what it was doing until the damage had been done” (*The Hamlet* 71). In this description, I. O.’s body becomes a perilous thing because although one may try to cloak it and restrain it with the trappings of polite society (which are represented by clothing), it is still a wild, unstoppable force that is capable of doing damage through the sexual appetites which are necessitated and fed by the physical form. Both I. O. and Ike are Snopeses who engage in taboo sexualities (bigamy in one case and bestiality in the other), but I. O. is mostly treated as a lascivious con man while Ike is labeled a subhuman idiot by not just the people of Frenchman’s Bend but by the narrator as well.

¹⁰ S. A. Larson briefly mentions eugenics and the policing of disabled sexuality in connection to Ike’s “cure” in her article “‘I be Dawg!’: Intellectual Disability and the Animal Other in the works of William Faulkner”, but she never equates the cure with sterilization nor does she suggest that Faulkner intends for Ike’s story to be a critical social commentary. All she says on the matter is that, given the fact that Benjy is castrated in *The Sound and the Fury*, Ike would mostly likely also be “destined” to undergo sterilization should he pursue women (S. A. Larson).

The narrator—who at times seems to channel Ratliff through free indirect discourse—describes Ike as having been “blasted empty and clean forever of any thought” and suggests that he has an intellectual capacity that is inferior to that of “a three-year-old child” (95). In addition to being described as idiotic, Ike is repeatedly referred to as “the creature,” which dehumanizes him and foreshadows his relationship with Houston’s cow, his literal animal other. Ike’s status as an animalistic, hardly-human entity is further solidified when the narrator mentions Ike’s “pointed faun’s ears” (*The Hamlet* 95). S. A. Larson notes, “In faun anatomy, the sex organs are located in the lower animal half of the creature. It is the animal part of the creature, not the human that engages in sexual behavior. By comparing Ike to a faun, the text seems to be attributing Ike’s lust for Houston’s cow to his animal, rather than human nature” (S. A. Larson). Ike, being actually disabled and labeled as a “degenerate” moved by animalistic passion, is seen as less human than I. O., and therefore he becomes the Snopes whose sexuality is actively targeted by the community.

One could argue that Ike’s sexuality is only targeted because it entails bestiality or because his cousin Lump is exploiting it to make money, but Ratliff’s decision to target Ike is also heavily motivated by the fact that Ike is disabled. As mentioned previously, intellectually disabled people were thought to be mindlessly libidinous, and Ratliff perceives Ike’s obsession with Houston’s cow as an example of the degenerate nature that all intellectually disabled people allegedly share. However, reducing Ike’s interest in the cow to simple carnal desires and “stock-diddling” erases Ike’s human capacity for love and empathy, which is an ableist act (*The Hamlet* 222). Hagood believes that the “affair” between Ike and the cow is meant to be “a tender exploration of love to be lauded and embraced over the money-and-position-driven romancing of Flem” and that Ike is no sexual deviant but instead the victim of societal norms that are usually

set by able-bodied people (Hagood 113). To expand upon this idea of Ike being a victim, it is important to note that the love that Ike feels for the cow is born not out of lewd deviancy but out of the alienation and desperation that comes with being a disabled person in an unloving, unforgiving environment. S. A. Larson, for one, suggests that Ike turns to the cow because his disability does not grant him the ability to communicate with potential human mates. According to Larson, both Ike and the cow are able to communicate through bellowing, and “Ike’s discourse with cow further fuels his love” (S. A. Larson). That is not to say that disability leads to bestiality, but it appears as though Ike lives in an ableist, romantically inaccessible environment where a cow is the only outlet he has for a remotely loving relationship. Ratliff may admit that he knows “[Ike] aint got nothing else” aside from the cow, but he is unable to let Ike keep the cow because he is unable to see Ike’s humanity and quiet desperation and recognize that disabled sexuality, even when it is performed with animals, is not necessarily degenerate (*The Hamlet* 219).

Ratliff’s inability to sympathize with disabled people (especially disabled Snopeses) is coupled with a belief that he is physically superior to disabled people he views as degenerate, which in turn fuels a power fantasy that involves overpowering the “weak”, “unhealthy” Ike. He tells Mrs. Littlejohn, Ike’s *de facto* guardian, that he must stop Ike from continuing his love affair with the cow “simply because [he is] strong enough to keep him from it” (219). He admits that he is not “righter” than Ike and that there is a possibility he may not even be “better” than him in terms of morality, but he feels confident that his being able-bodied and neurotypical makes him somehow stronger than Ike and that it grants him the right and power to control Ike (219). His conversation with Mrs. Littlejohn is important because it reveals that one of the key reasons Ratliff wants to stop Ike is because he desires to show off his strength as a non-disabled person

who can easily overpower disabled people and keep them from doing things that displease able-bodied society. However, as Ratliff seeks to assert his dominance over Ike (who—in Ratliff’s mind—must necessarily be weaker than him given his disability), he ignores the fact that Ike’s disability is only intellectual, which means that his body is not weakened. On the contrary, Ike is at one point described as “the hulking figure in bursting overalls,” which would indicate that he has a body that is much larger than that of “thin” Ratliff, who—upon meeting Ike—“had been sick and showed it” (94, 75, 76). Ike’s size would give him an advantage over Ratliff, but arrogant Ratliff cannot acknowledge this fact because it would absolve his sense of physical superiority, the very thing that allows him to indulge in ableist, eugenic power fantasies that lead to Ike’s metaphorical sterilization.

However, Ratliff’s desire for power and his moralist disgust at degenerate habits he associates with the disabled are not the only things which drive him to police Ike’s sexuality. He is also driven by a sense of “duty” to the ableist, normative white populace residing in Frenchman’s Bend, which is distraught by Ike’s actions. Ike’s sexual activity with the cow is a major concern for them, because it proves that Ike is capable of sexual behavior of any kind. They realize that Ike’s sexual desire poses a massive threat to their community because its existence suggests that Ike is capable of turning away from the cow and pursuing able-bodied white women, which may result in him impregnating them and spreading his “unfit” genes. This concern is somewhat valid since Frenchman’s Bend is home to two women who vaguely resemble or are likened to cows: Ab’s daughters. Ratliff refers to them as bovine-like creatures when he states that Ab “druv them out like heifers just a little too valuable to be hit with a stick”, and the characterization continues as Jody “[has] a fleeting vision of them as the two cows, heifers” (15, 52). If Ike is attracted to both cows and women, it follows that he would prefer to

have affairs with cow-like women. This, of course, poses a problem for the would-be eugenicists of Frenchman's Bend since the women Ike would chase in this hypothetical are his relatives, and therefore the likelihood of the offspring being unfit increases since consanguineous reproduction can result in deformities such as "hydrocephalus, postaxial polydactyly, and bilateral cleft lip" (Saggar and Bittles 248). However, the fear of congenital "defects" would still be present even if Ike chose to seek an affair with someone outside his family, since if Ike's intellectual disability is congenital, he is capable of passing it on. Completely aware of the villagers' fear of the "danger" Ike poses as a sexual being, Ratliff—always Yoknapatawpha's eugenic savior—vows to stop him and bring an end to the community's state of unrest.

With that being said, it is important to note that the villagers' fear lurks beneath the surface of the text. There is, however, one moment in which it comes to the forefront, and the moment in question occurs while Ratliff, I. O., Eck, and Brother Whitfield devise a plan to "cure" Ike. I. O., having listened to an idea from Whitfield, relays the idea to Ratliff and asserts that by eating his precious cow, Ike "wont want to chase nothing but human women. Only—". After uttering this, I. O.'s face becomes "speculative and annoyed," and he finishes his sentence: "—only Mrs Littlejohn wont let us have the cow" (223). The fact that I. O. pauses after the first "only" and becomes "speculative and annoyed" is quite puzzling because it almost seems as though he originally intends on saying something besides "only Mrs Littlejohn wont let us have the cow." I believe that, in this moment, he purposely stops himself from commenting further on Ike chasing human women. This, of course, is a bit speculative, but the fact that I. O. himself becomes speculative suggests that he is envisioning the possibility at that particular moment, and his annoyed expression suggests that he is disgusted by it. His disgust, along with the disgust of others, motivates him to police Ike by forcing him to eat his beloved in order to cleanse his mind

and body, “the seat of passion and sin” (224). However, there is another reason why I. O. wants to police Ike: Ike’s sexuality will tarnish “the Snopes name” (226). The villagers of Frenchman’s Bend already fear the Snopeses and see them as menaces, and to have a disabled member of the family run amok, committing sexual acts and possibly impregnating a woman, would disgrace the Snopeses further. Not wanting to be associated with a disabled “degenerate” who disgusts him and who is considered a threat to the body politic, I. O. happily agrees to assist in Ike’s metaphorical sterilization, even though the refusal to protect other Snopeses goes against the Snopes family’s moral creed.

Policing Ike’s sexuality and “curing” him of sexual urges break not just the Snopeses’ moral code but all moral codes. One may argue that, at first glance, Whitfield’s proposed “cure” seems somewhat humane and beneficial since it does not involve sterilization or segregation and it is intended to stop bestiality, which is a “sin”, but the truth of the matter is that non-invasive eugenic practices are still eugenic practices, and they are always immoral since they entail some form of violation against the person subjected to them. Whitfield’s plan involves several instances of violation, the first of which is unlawful seizure of the subject of eugenics’ property. Houston bequeaths the cow unto Ike after Mrs. Littlejohn hands him Ike’s money, which would make the cow Ike’s property. In buying the cow off Mrs. Littlejohn, who is selling property that does not belong to her without consulting the property’s rightful owner, Ratliff and the other villagers involved in policing Ike are committing an illegal, unethical act since they are taking property away from Ike without his consent. Furthermore, the property in question is an animal that Ike cherishes as it is the being he loves most and his only true possession, and the villagers callously choose not to “leave him have at least this much” even though they know that engaging in this act will traumatize Ike (219). To take away Ike’s beloved pet/lover and destroy it is

absolutely cruel on its own, but to deceitfully force Ike to devour the flesh of his prized possession “[knowing the cow] is what he is eating” makes the action utterly unconscionable (223). To make matters worse, the people who play the biggest role in Ike’s traumatic violation are “the fellow’s own blood kin” (224). Since all Snopeses are taught to trust one another at an early age, Ike very likely shares the tribalism of his relatives, and thus I. O. and Eck’s participation in the cruel, eugenic act Ike is subjected to is a complete betrayal, which adds to traumatic nature of the act.

The “cure” leaves Ike a completely changed man who no longer expresses sexual desire, but the change in him cannot be considered beneficial. Nearly a year after Ike is subjected to his “cure”, Ratliff is “impelled and moved” to visit Mrs. Littlejohn’s lot,¹¹ where he finds a mourning Ike in an “ammoniac tunnel.” The text states that Ratliff “saw the thick, female, sitting buttocks, the shapeless figure quiet in the gloom, the blasted face turning and looking up at him, and for a fading instant there was something almost like recognition even if there could have been no remembering, in the devastated eyes, and the drooling mouth slacking and emitting a sound, hoarse, abject, not loud” (294-5). While narrator demonstrates its own narrative cruelty by refusing to name Ike ¹² and therefore recognize him as human, it clearly depicts Ike as having suffered and suggests that he recognizes Ratliff, an agent in his trauma, and is overcome with some unidentifiable, negative feeling towards Ratliff. Ratliff never shows any sign of remorse for his involvement, but Eck, who bought the cow from Mrs. Littlejohn and also aided in the “curing” process, feels some iota of sympathy for Ike and buys him a “wooden effigy of a cow such as children receive on Christmas” (295). While Eck acts compassionately towards Ike and

¹¹ It is very likely that he is “impelled and moved” by malicious curiosity. In other words, he wants to know if the plan to curb Ike’s sexuality was successful.

¹² Interestingly, Ike is seldom named in the text.

bestows upon him something similar to what he has lost, Ike's sorrow does not dissipate, even as time marches onward. Without question, Ike's "cure" is extremely traumatic for him, and the pain which follows it erases the feeling of joy he derives from the cow.

"The Long Summer" closes with this scene depicting Ike's dejection, and Ike never appears again in any of the Snopes novels. Having served his purpose as an example, he fades into obscurity and—in a sense—dies since Faulkner no longer feels the need to depict eugenic practices though he does continue to depict other kinds of eugenic situations. In penning the tragic story of Ike Snopes, Faulkner demonstrates how the sexual policing that occurred throughout the age of eugenics violated and traumatized disabled people. In addition to this, he exposes the true motivations behind eugenic practices such as sexual policing. The eugenicists and their fearful supporters (whom are represented in the text by Ratliff and the villagers) were not simply motivated by a desire to maintain a morally decent society; they were motivated by ableism, the desire to control, and anxieties regarding racial hygiene and reputation. Faulkner wishes to condemn such people for the senseless, draconian cruelty they inflicted upon thousands of disabled people, and—being a writer—his best weapon was the written word, which favors and champions Ike though it often refers to him in eugenic language.

“TO SAVE JEFFERSON FROM A SNOPE IS A DUTY; TO SAVE A SNOPE FROM A SNOPE IS A PRIVILEGE”: ADDRESSING THE DARK SIDE OF GAVIN’S OBSESSIONS WITH EULA AND LINDA

The American eugenic movement targeted a myriad of different minority groups, but its leaders were almost always members of one particular group: the white middle class. As stated previously, middle-class white eugenicists and their supporters wholeheartedly subscribed to eugenics because they viewed disabled people, racial minorities, immigrants, and impoverished whites as threats to whiteness and decorum, and they put their faith in the “science” of eugenics since it promised to improve racial hygiene. Without question, the “degradation” of the white race was the chief concern of these middle-class whites, but many of them subscribed to eugenics because of the second benefit it offered: domination. Male middle-class whites were enamored with eugenics because it gave them an ideology and set of practices that could be used to control women’s bodies and maintain the paternalistic, patriarchal hegemony. According to Wendy Kline, eugenics is inherently misogynistic because it seeks to regulate female fertility by “encouraging the ‘fit’ (primarily [white middle-class women]) to have more children while restricting the ‘unfit’ from doing so” (Cline 2). Middle-class white women were encouraged to produce children with “fit” middle-class white men at prolific rates in order to “lead the advancement of civilization” while a large number of working-class women were labeled “morons” and sterilized (19). In this regard, eugenics was fine-tailored to appeal to the middle-class whites’ misogyny as well as their racism, classism, ableism, and xenophobia. Regardless of why eugenics crusaders chose to follow the pseudoscience, one thing was clear: it was made to

serve the white middle class, and middle-class whites used it to subjugate and oppress people under the pretext that they were bringing order to society.

Though the Snopes trilogy revolves around the rise of Flem Snopes and his family, Gavin and Ratliff,¹³ the two middle-class white narrators, are arguably the main protagonists of the trilogy since they are they are granted interiority and narration privileges, and they engage in an active quest to eliminate the Snopeses' influence in their community. Since they are generally well-meaning individuals, Gavin and Ratliff genuinely believe that their quest is a noble undertaking that will restore order in Jefferson and vanquish "Snopesism", "a force and power that stout and evil as to jeopardise" the soul of anyone who comes into contact with it (*The Mansion* 152). They posture themselves as the guardians of Jefferson and seek to recruit other middle-class whites to take up arms against what they perceive to be human embodiments of evil and destruction. This constructed reality is made evident when Chick's claims, "[Ratliff] put into my mind too...that idea of the Snopeses covering Jefferson like an influx of snakes or varmints from the woods and he and Uncle Gavin were the only ones to recognise the danger and the threat" (*The Town* 118). However, while Ratliff is heavily invested in stopping the Snopeses, whom he sees as "defective," subhuman abominations, his investment in the "Snopes condition or dilemma" is far different from Gavin's (354). Both men see the Snopeses through a eugenic lens, but Ratliff is a merely a salesman and does not have the same authority or status as Gavin, who is an attorney and a proud member of one of the oldest families in Jefferson. Ratliff's animosity towards the Snopeses pales in comparison to Gavin's because Gavin—being

¹³ One might argue that Ratliff cannot be considered middle-class due to the fact that he does not earn as much as or hold the same local prestige as Gavin, but Richard Godden asserts that Ratliff falls under this classification since he "quit rented fields for [a version] of the store" (Godden 87). Ratliff is a traveling merchant rather than a sharecropper, and his ability to travel and sell products to people across different class ranges instead of being paid for stationary labor means that he very likely earns more money than the sharecroppers who populate the working class.

undeniably upper-middle-class with “a Harvard M. A. and a Ph. D. from Heidelberg”—possesses what Justin Millette refers to as an aristocratic, “old-fashioned mindset,” and he perceives the Snopeses’ white trash debasement and economic mobility as more of an affront than Ratliff ever will (*The Town* 189; Millette 52). In short, his “Snopes-fear” is far more personal and vicious than Ratliff’s, which makes him more of a sinister eugenicist and a potential threat to people who are not wealthy or white enough for his taste (*The Mansion* 324).

Gavin’s classist and racist dehumanization of poor whites is repugnant, but the most sinister element in his campaign against the Snopeses is his cavalier misogyny towards the two women in Flem’s life: his wife Eula and her daughter Linda. Endowed with white upper-middle-class values, Gavin champions concepts such as good-breeding, honor, and chastity, and the racial, moral, and sexual purities of both Eula and Linda concern him more than any other Snopes-related issue since he is enamored with both women and sees them as being endangered by the Snopeses who are—by Gavin’s estimation—degenerate and not completely white. From Gavin’s perspective, Eula and Linda are beautiful, delicate middle-class white women who have either fallen or could fall away from middle-class respectability and whiteness due to their association with the Snopes. Just as he believes he is the only one, aside from Ratliff, that can stop Flem, he believes that he is the only one who can “save a Snopes from a Snopes,” an act he relishes and considers a “privilege” or a “joy” rather than a “duty” (*The Town* 193).

However, as Gavin embarks on his paternalistic mission, his joy quickly turns to despair. He mythologizes Eula as a sort of twentieth-century “Messalina or Helen” who *should* serve as a paragon among respectable, “fit”, middle-class white women due to her physical beauty, wealth, and pure whiteness, and he is distraught by the fact that she fails to live up to his positive eugenic vision (*The Town* 215). As Sharon Desmond Paradiso states, “[Eula] is white but she behaves

sexually in a manner unbecoming white female honor”, and thus she cannot be fully white by Gavin’s standards and definition of whiteness (Paradiso 81). Unwilling to watch as Eula strays from the ideal of middle-class whiteness, Gavin vows to remold Eula to fit his vision by trying to woo her and “save” her from committing adultery with Manfred de Spain and giving into the will of her husband. Eula, however, has no romantic interest in Gavin, and she boldly accepts her sensuality and refuses to leave Flem though he is impotent and indifferent to her. Because of this, she cannot be transformed. After failing to “save” Eula, Gavin turns his attention to Linda, who—at first—shows promise in breaking free from the Snopeses (to whom she is biologically unrelated) but who then begins to take on archetypal Snopes characteristics such as disability and malicious cunning despite Gavin’s efforts. The trilogy comes to a close with a devastated Gavin reflecting on Linda’s character after she orchestrates Flem’s murder and coming to the realization that women cannot be made pure because “there aren’t any morals” (*The Mansion* 471). Without question, Gavin fails totally and utterly in his endeavor to keep both Eula and Linda from being corrupted, and the Snopeses score yet another victory over their white middle-class rival, who has spent decades of his life tirelessly trying to foil what he perceives to be schemes to no avail (or, at the very least, this is how it seems to Gavin).

Brittany R. Powell believes that Faulkner intends Gavin to serve as a Don Quixote-esque “pastoral man of letters and chivalric man of arms” on a quest to “restore a Golden Age,” and thus Gavin’s failure is to be treated as a moving tragedy that is often comic (Powell 485).

Contrary to her belief, there is nothing humorous or tragic about Gavin’s efforts and subsequent failure, and his inability to “save” Eula and Linda should relieve the reader rather than amuse and instill sympathy within them. This is because Gavin’s desires resemble the misogynistic, classist, and racist desires of eugenicists who wanted nothing more than to control women in

order to preserve middle-class whiteness. Faulkner refuses to let Gavin succeed because he knows that if Gavin succeeds, the eugenicists that Gavin represents succeed as well. This chapter argues that Gavin is not a noble, romantic figure but a domineering chauvinist whose subscription to eugenics pushes him towards the sort of extreme misogyny, classism, and racism that has the potential to harm not just poor whites but middle-class white women who do not fall in line with what Kline refers to as the “image of womanhood invested with a duty to her race” (Kline 19). In performing a thorough examination of Gavin’s relationships with Eula and Linda, I hope to bring to attention the ways in which Gavin patronizes, dehumanizes, and attempts to control both women under the guise of “saving” them from becoming like his vision of the Snopeses. From there, the reader will be able to recognize yet another instance in which Faulkner uses eugenic themes and situations in order to critique the American eugenics movement and expose its diabolical, oppressive nature.

Gavin, more so than Ratliff, is heavily invested in the concept of whiteness and pedigree, and it is no surprise that he becomes obsessed with Eula and Linda’s whiteness and seeks to keep it from being tarnished. In narrating one chapter of *The Mansion*, Ratliff reveals that Gavin has a significant appreciation for “the modern virile northern Aryan” (in other words, the eugenicists’ ideal white man) and suggests that Gavin believes the “modern virile northern Aryan” to be superior to other men because Aryans have produced “mystical ideas” and “glorious music” that, in his opinion, no other ethnic group is capable of producing (*The Mansion* 147, 146). In another chapter of the novel, Chick claims that Eula “had had blue eyes [like Linda’s] but pale blue to go with her hair” and that “she always looked like she had just been raided out of a brothel in the Scandinavian Valhalla” (220). It is no wonder, then, that Gavin finds himself drawn to Eula, whose Valkyrie-like eyes and hair resemble those of the ideal Aryan woman. To him, her beauty

is so exquisite and fundamentally white that it genuinely pains and enrages him to know that she is married to a man with eyes “the color of stagnant pond water” and hair that “didn’t have any color at all,” characteristics that point to “unfitness” and consequently unwhiteness (220).

Flem initially only irritates Gavin, who sees him as nothing more than a subhuman monster who would benefit from eugenic practices, but Gavin eventually grows to genuinely detest him because Eula—the “perfect” upper-middle class white woman and his primary obsession—marries Flem instead of another middle class white man like himself or an aristocratic white man like Manfred de Spain. Gavin declares that he would rather “let [Eula] accept the whole earth’s Manfred de Spains and refuse Gavin Stevens, than to accept one Flem Snopes and still refuse him” (*The Town* 143). This statement comes as a surprise to the reader, who remembers the rivalry between de Spain and Gavin earlier in the novel, but it ultimately makes sense since, at the very least, de Spain is a member of the white Southern gentry, which makes him a suitable mate by Gavin’s metric though he is as lascivious and morally debased. While Gavin is jealous of de Spain, he recognizes that if he himself cannot have Eula, de Spain should because by eloping with him, Eula will still remain a possession located within the wealthy, white demographic and therefore the likelihood of Eula producing “unfit” children will be diminished.

Yet Eula does not elope with Manfred and instead chooses to stay with Flem and remain his wife up until her death, a fact which exacerbates Gavin’s hatred and jealousy towards Flem. In his final encounter with Eula, Gavin learns that Linda has signed away the money she will receive from Eula upon her death and that she intends to give all of it to Flem. Distraught that Linda may have “sunk” herself and given in to Flem’s influence, Gavin makes one last attempt at “saving” Eula from being sullied by Flem as well: “But you will save something! To get away

yourself at least, out of here, never again to...never again Flem Snopes, never again, never—". Gavin's vitriol towards Flem can scarcely be contained, and Eula quickly realizes that Gavin's exclamation is based on his fear that she and Flem are sexually active and that he might impregnate her. She interrupts Gavin's vaguely eugenic statement by telling Gavin, "Oh, that...you mean that. That doesn't matter. That's never been any trouble. He...cant. He's— what's the word? impotent. He's always been. Maybe that's why, one of the reasons. You see? You've got to be careful or you'll have to pity him. You'll have to" (347). In her statement, Eula attempts to conciliate Gavin and also bring awareness to the fact that Flem is no monster but rather a human with weaknesses to be pitied.

It is likely that Eula's sympathy for Flem (and perhaps Southern traditions surrounding matrimony) keeps her from leaving Flem. She does not hold Gavin's eugenic beliefs; there are no "superior" and "inferior" types of people. There is equity among all humans in the sense that all humans, including Flem, deserve some form of sympathy. Yet while this profound revelation may have an impact on the reader, Gavin the eugenicist cannot absorb it. He continues to see Flem as an emblem of evil and not-whiteness and Eula as an emblem of female virtue and whiteness and, ultimately, a possession.

The word "possession" certainly applies to the Eula that exists within Gavin's mindscape since that iteration is certainly not a person. Always an intellectual, Gavin applies his love of classicism and eugenic ideology in order to intellectualize and reduce Eula to an ideal as well as a pristine, romanticized object that must be possessed by a worthy middle-class white man. Eula, however, has no intention of existing simply as the ideal middle-class white woman or the inanimate object of desire for middle-class white men; she wants to be regarded as a normal person above all else. In order to achieve this, she must dispel Gavin's myths, as she attempts to

do multiple times throughout *The Town*. She makes sexual advances on Gavin in order to remind him that she is a living being with flesh and carnal desires instead of a bodiless Platonic ideal, and she tells him, “Women aren’t interested in poets’ dreams. They are interested in facts” (*The Town* 237). For Eula, “poets’ dreams” (much like eugenicists’ dreams) are based around an uncomplicated, unrealistic ideal that rejects or erases those who do not fit. Therefore, what Eula desires most is not an intellectualized, romantic, eugenic fantasy but a material reality with a variety of diverse, complicated individuals like who she is outside of Gavin’s myth. By stating that a woman’s true desire is “facts” rather than “poets’ dreams,” Eula instructs Gavin to regard her as something real, tangible, alive, and complex instead of an divine object or a symbol for eugenic ideas of perfection.

Unfortunately, Eula’s attempts to extricate herself from Gavin’s eugenic mythologizing are doomed to fail as she eventually capitulates and commits suicide because she is “bored” of being treated as a myth (377). Once dead, she becomes more of a eugenic ideal than ever since she is no longer there to challenge Gavin’s idealization. Completely unrestrained and free to glorify Eula’s mythical whiteness, Gavin orders a monument for Eula’s gravesite from Italy with marble that is “whiter than white itself” (372). According to Paradiso, the extreme whiteness of the marble “reifies whiteness by becoming, quite literally, a monument to it” (Paradiso 82). Even in death, Eula cannot exist as an individual to be remembered; instead, she must continue to serve as an example of a mythical sort of middle-class Southern whiteness that is considered “fit”, “un-defective”, and ultimately desirable since it is associated with purity and decency. While it is true that Eula—for the most part—does not fit the archetype of the pure and decent Southern middle-class woman that was relentlessly championed by Southern eugenicists like Gavin, Paradiso points out that Eula accidentally falls into that category once she commits

suicide since in doing so she “fulfilled her wifely duty by allowing Flem to be a widower instead of a (confirmed) cuckold” and “kept Linda from a child of what Faulkner called a ‘broken home’” (81). The actions she takes to be an ethical person and not simply a myth work against her as they make her more noble and fantastic in Gavin’s eyes. Without trying to, Eula adds fodder to Gavin’s eugenic idealization of selfless, middle-class whiteness and loses her claim to her own narrative, which is now controlled by the patriarchal Gavin, who in a sense—manages to turn the ideal into a physicality after all. With this in mind, Dawn Trouard is correct in stating that “Eula’s grave marks the triumph of the patriarchy, for she has been repossessed—forever—as solid: narrative and monument” (Trouard 282).

The patriarch in question (Gavin), however, cannot be satisfied by simply controlling the narrative of a deceased person whom he determines to be excellent stock and, in a fashion, bringing the ideal to life. He unquestionably continues to possess Eula in the form of an ideal which is then represented physically in the form of a monument, but he longs for the beautiful white body that is destroyed in the act of dying and which cannot be resuscitated. For him, the destroyed body—the actual physicality since it is the site of “too much of white, too much of female, too much of maybe just glory”—is truly the property of a certain class of men and therefore Eula’s death is an affront to eugenicists like him who believe that all middle-class white men are entitled to the bodies of “fit” women capable of producing desirable offspring (*The Town* 6). This is made perfectly clear in two different accounts of the events following Eula’s funeral (one appearing in *The Town* and the other appearing in *The Mansion*). In the first account, Gavin laments, “Why? Why did she have to? Why did she? The waste. The terrible waste. To waste all that, when it was not hers to waste, not hers to destroy because it is too valuable, belonged to too many, too little of it to waste, destroy, throw away, and be no more”

(377). In the second account, Gavin asks, “Why did she do it, V. K.? That—all that—that she walked in, lived in, breathed in—it was only loaned to her; it wasn’t hers to destroy and throw away. It belonged to too many. It belonged to all of us” (*The Mansion* 167). In both of these quotes, Gavin expresses his belief that Eula’s body does not belong to her and that she has no right to do anything with it. Instead of existing as the physical site of her psyche, Eula’s body—which is “only loaned to her” and not “hers to destroy”—serves as the site of eugenic perfection as well as insentient property belonging to her middle-class white admirers.

In his entitled statements, Gavin once more reduces Eula to a tool for eugenics as he denies Eula the right to her own body, a body that—in Gavin’s opinion—must be dedicated to domestic activities such as reproduction and acting as the physical sign for his positive eugenic ideal. The sorrow he feels upon her death is not the sorrow of a man grieving the woman he loves;¹⁴ the tears he sheds in front of Ratliff and Chick after the funeral are the tears of a misogynistic eugenicist who has lost the “perfect” specimen he meant to control.

Eula’s suicide is certainly tragic since it is partially the result of decades spent existing only as a myth and as a body claimed by the entitled middle-class whites who lust after her. At the same time, however, the act of committing suicide exposes Eula’s subversive power. While living, she does not have the ability to assert herself as a human being and she still lacks the ability to control her narrative after death, but in killing herself, she is still capable of at least taking back control over the body that was claimed by her oppressors. Tired of the mythologization and objectification she has experienced since childhood, she takes a pistol and blasts away the body that “wasn’t hers to destroy and throw away.” She is well aware of the fact

¹⁴ It is important to note that Gavin never once tries to gain a substantial understanding of Eula as a person. In other words, his feelings for her do not rise above the level of obsessive idealization, a level far below that of romantic love.

that the men of Jefferson (Gavin especially) see her body as something she must not act upon or against since it must upheld for the sake of whiteness, and—refusing to obey their wishes—she commits the ultimate act of retaliation. Eula may be remembered by those gazing upon the monument to whiteness as a paragon, but her very last act is an act meant to defy the misogynistic oppression that informed the eugenics movement.

Eula succeeds in the reclamation of her body (and perhaps she should be lauded for this triumph), but she makes a horrible mistake prior to her suicide: she asks Gavin to watch over Linda and possibly “marry her” (*The Town* 348). In doing so, Eula abandons Linda and leaves her to be yet another woman for Gavin to patronize and control as he plots to erase all trace of “Snopesism” within her. While it is true that Eula’s request significantly drives Gavin to invest his time in “saving” Linda from Flem and eugenic imperfection, his campaign to extricate Linda from the Snopes family begins earlier in the text, shortly after he first takes notice of Linda. Upon seeing her for the first time since he left to fight in WWI, Gavin immediately becomes enraptured by her though she is not “an exact replica” of Eula (141). His captivation is sparked primarily by the fact that she is, indeed, Eula’s daughter despite her looks, but he is also drawn to her because he perceives her as an even better emblem of purity. In his narration, he remarks:

She went past us still walking, striding like the young pointer bitch, the maiden bitch of course, the virgin bitch, immune now in virginity, not scorning the earth, spurning the earth, because she needed it to walk on in that immunity: just intent from earth and us too, not proud and not really oblivious: just immune in intensity and ignorance and innocence as the sleepwalker is for the moment immune from the anguishes and agonies of breath (140).

In this passage, Gavin makes multiple references to the fact that Linda is—at the age of “thirteen, maybe fourteen”—still a virgin unlike her mother, whom he now comes to view as shamelessly promiscuous though his idealization of her middle-class whiteness never ceases. Being an untouched maiden who walks in the immunity granted by “ignorance and innocence,” Linda has the potential to be a more suitable “fit” middle-class white woman than her predecessor, and Gavin finds this appealing (140).

His feelings of awe and delight in this particular moment are temporary; his musings on Linda’s purity fade away and are replaced by his concerns regarding Linda’s paternity. He begins to wonder if Flem is truly Linda’s father, and the possibility aggravates him since he wants her to serve the same purpose he assigns to her mother. Eula, having married into the Snopes family, is not a biological Snopes, and that (in addition to her background as a member of the upper-middle-class Varner family) redeems her in the eyes of Gavin, who is only interested in middle-class white women. Linda, on the other hand, poses a problem if she is, indeed, a biological Snopes, since that would mean that she belongs to the negative category Gavin constructs, a category whose members can never fulfill Gavin’s vision. Ultimately, Gavin decides to reject the notion that Flem is Linda’s father in order to ease his mind and preserve the classification system he has devised, a system which states that all Snopes are despicable, degenerate, and not fully white. According to Gavin, Linda—his second symbol of white middle-class womanhood—cannot possibly fall under the category of Snopes because the system also decrees that “all Snopeses are male, as if the mere and simple incident of a woman’s divinity precluded Snopesishness and made it paradox” (144). If Gavin is to be correct in his eugenic ideology, Linda must have a different biological father, so he determines that “that girl-child was not Flem Snopes’s at all, but [his own]” since “if [Gavin] was to never have [Eula], then Flem

Snopes shall never have [Linda]” (143, 142). Still jealous of Flem and disgusted by his background, Gavin vows to become a foster father for Linda and claim her in the same way Flem is able to claim Eula. However, in doing so, Gavin starts yet another crusade in the name of misogyny and eugenics since part of his duty or—as he later says—“privilege” as Linda’s “father” is to keep her from falling into the mire that is “Snopesishness” through indoctrination into the cult of middle-class white womanhood (193).

Gavin idles for two or three years after his encounter with Linda and then becomes an active part of her life as an indoctrinator. He purposely enters into a mentor/father-student/daughter relationship at a juncture following a period of hiatus because he knows that, at the age of sixteen, Linda is developed and mature enough to understand lessons given by a “thirty-five-year-old bachelor” but young and naïve enough to be easily molded by them (189). He begins to meet her at Christian’s drugstore and help her study books of poetry, one of which includes poems by John Donne (199). Gavin specifically uses centuries-old romantic poems to “[form] her mind” by introducing her to the gender roles and feminine ideals championed by not only seventeenth-century poets like Donne but by middle-class Southerners in the early-twentieth century as well (188). In short, his poetry lessons are meant to encourage her to perform a brand of “fit,” “healthy” middle-class whiteness that runs counter to her father’s “unfit,” “undesirable” not-quite-whiteness.

In a way, the education Linda receives from Gavin foreshadows the education she later receives at the Academy, which Gavin describes as “one of the last of those gentle and stubbornly fading anachronisms called Miss So-and-So’s or The So-and-So Female Academy or Institute whose curriculum included deportment and china-painting” (300). While Gavin shows disdain for the Academy, his education program is quite similar in the sense that he is intent on

molding Linda in the same misogynistic and classist fashion. Since the Academy's and Gavin's curriculums have the same goal in mind, it is unlikely that the school's curriculum is where Gavin finds fault. Gavin expresses early on that he wishes for Linda to attend an out-of-state college because he believes that "she's got to get away from [Jefferson]...away for good from all the very air that ever heard or felt breathed the name of Snopes—" (229). The Academy, even with its purpose of molding young middle-class white women into the ideal he champions, still exists within the realm of Flem's influence, and therefore it is not good enough for Gavin. Gavin is so insistent on sending Linda away to "save" her from becoming like his negative image of Flem that he is willing to defy wise advice from a far shrewder Ratliff and command Eula to send Linda elsewhere for her education. He professes to hold a respect for Eula's status as Linda's mother (he tells Ratliff, "I'm not that brave—offering to tell anybody, let alone a woman, how to raise her child"), but he ultimately acts with disrespect when he does approach Eula and threatens her by saying, "Ask your father for the money, or take it from me, and get her away from Jefferson, or I'll tell her myself who she is—or is not" (229, 236). In this act, Gavin displays a desire to control both Linda and Eula; he intends on making decisions regarding Linda's life, and he believes that he can only be granted his wish by exerting his force onto her mother through blackmail, which is an act of controlling manipulation. The two women Gavin claims to love become targets for his self-righteous misogyny as he continues his crusade against the "defilement" of middle-class white womanhood by those he esteems to be evil and not-quite-white. Once more, Faulkner exposes Gavin as what he truly is: not a virtuous Southern knight but a despicable oppressor of women within his own caste.

However, Eula has no objections to sending Linda away; the obstacle Gavin must face is actually Flem. Flem, taking a page from Gavin, also feels the need to dominate Linda, but his

domination comes in the form of keeping her close to him in order to preserve his new image of respectability and prevent her from learning from the mouths of “people none of which whose fathers owe him money” that Flem is not her biological father. Flem, once more acting in the same vein as Gavin, is able to maintain this vise-like grip on Linda because he, too, threatens to blackmail Eula and tell Linda “of her mother’s shame and her own illegitimacy” (236).¹⁵ While Flem unquestionably only sees the truth of Linda’s paternity as a bargaining chip to manipulate Eula and Linda and is comfortable in the knowledge of this fact, Gavin is incapable of recognizing the viciousness of his own act of blackmail against Eula and insists that telling Linda the truth would be doing her a favor since, as he says, “What more could she ask than the right to love the mother who by means of love saved her from being a Snopes?” (236). Gavin again exposes his classist, eugenic hatred of the Snopes family and his desire to keep Linda from being a Snopes, but he is met with a suggestion from Eula that Linda is perfectly satisfied in believing she is a biological Snopes:

“...She wouldn’t even believe you. She wouldn’t even believe him if he were to tell her. She would just hate you both—you most of all because you started it.”

“You mean she will take...this—him—in preference to nothing? will throw away the chance for school and everything else? I don’t believe you.”

“To her, this isn’t nothing. She will take it before a lot of things. Before most things” (237).

In this moment, it becomes clear that just as Gavin does not know Eula’s desires, he does not know Linda’s desires and instead projects his desires onto her. His obsession with whiteness

¹⁵ With this revealed, it becomes clear that Gavin and Flem are foils for one another, one being an upstanding upper-middle class gentleman who values upper-middle class Southern virtues and the other a previously-impooverished businessman without scruples of any kind, yet both exist with one goal in mind: domination of the women in their lives for the sake of narcissistic fantasies.

and middle-class values is so incorrigibly intense that he is willing to destroy the narrative that keeps Linda content in order to uphold it. He does not care that Linda might not share his view on Flem and that divulging the truth would cause her immense pain. The truth of the matter is that Linda, having “hated [Eula] and Manfred both” for their act of adultery, finds comfort in the idea that Flem might be her father since it would mean she does have at least one present parental figure (363). The two often quarrel, but once Flem is finally in the position to oust Manfred from his position as bank president, he agrees to send Linda (no longer useful as a bargaining chip) away for college as she requests (this request, of course, being motivated by Gavin’s indoctrination), and Flem’s permission to leave endears him to Linda. In fact, it motivates her to bequeath her inheritance onto him since, by her record, “[her] father has been good to [her] and [she] love[s] and admire[s] and respect[s] him” (343). Before Eula plants the thought into Gavin’s mind, the idea that Linda might actually be at peace with being the daughter of Flem Snopes never occurs to him because he is blinded by his own narcissism and eugenic ideology. Yet that narcissism and subscription to eugenics do not stand in the way when he does, for the sake of Linda’s wellbeing and in honor of Eula, tell Linda, “Flem Snopes is your father” after Eula dies (362).

As previously stated, Gavin promises Eula in one of her last moments that he will watch over Linda, and he keeps this promise for decades and is once more presented with the opportunity or “privilege” to patronize and control Linda. After Eula’s death, Linda leaves Jefferson and relocates in Greenwich Village in New York, far from the domain of her draconian “white trash” father,¹⁶ and it is there that she meets the communist Barton Kohl, who later

¹⁶ While Flem is still considered white trash by Gavin and Ratliff’s classifications, Flem—by this point in the trilogy—has actually broken free from what most readers would consider as white trash. Towards the beginning of the second section of *The Mansion* (“Linda”), Ratliff reports that Flem is finally “satisfied: setting now at last in the same chair of the presidents of the Merchants and Farmers Bank...and actively living in the very house [Manfred]

becomes her husband. Both Linda and Barton volunteer in the Spanish Civil War, where—according to Chick—the “best [Linda] got out of it was to lose her husband and have both eardrums busted by a [bombshell]” (*The Mansion* 122). Linda, who Gavin once considered to be “saved” from being a Snopes due to her separation from Flem, returns to Jefferson disabled like several of the biological Snopeses. With her handicap and the “dry harsh quacking voice” that results from it, Linda has fallen from the feminine able-bodied middle-class white ideal and is once more in danger of being the Snopes woman Gavin envisions and cannot allow (221). As a preventative measure, Gavin begins another indoctrination process with Linda, this time spending hours where they simply “practise talking” so that Linda may once again speak in a somewhat “dulcet” tone befitting a woman of her class (230, 232).

It is quite obvious that Gavin’s distaste for Linda’s voice and his intent on remedying it betrays his ableism, misogyny, and classism, but what makes the situation more horrifying is the fact that the Linda’s voice is constantly likened to the quack of a duck as though her disability has not only reduced her in terms of class but in terms of species as well. According to Hagood, “disability produces animalization” in the case of Linda as it does for Ike in *The Hamlet* (Hagood 84). Both disabled characters fall victim to the dehumanizing classification that stood as the basis of twentieth century eugenic ideology, Gavin’s beloved dogma. Gavin never encounters the pitiful Ike Snopes and, therefore, he cannot engage in his dehumanization, but he constantly

was born in” (*The Mansion* 169). In addition to being one of the wealthiest and most prosperous individuals in Yoknapatawpha County, he ousts his relatives from Jefferson so that they may no longer tarnish his name and gives up “degenerate” habits such as chewing tobacco and drinking alcohol (243). Flem, in essence, now resembles Yoknapatawpha’s upper-middle class and aristocracy, and—according to Frances Louisa Nichols—he is finally capable of winning over Jefferson by posing his perverse sense of “civil virtue” as a verisimilitudinous form of the actual “virtue” displayed by the aristocratic Sartorises (Nichols 504). Despite this reality, the two middle-class would-be eugenicist narrators continue to treat him as “white trash since”, as Justin Mellette states, they recognize the verisimilitude present within Flem’s attempts to “shed his white trash identity” and believe that his appearance and “perceived inferior bloodline” bar him from being a legitimate heir to the long-faded Yoknapatawpha gentry (Mellette 55).

likens all Snopeses to animals regardless of this fact.¹⁷ By being reduced from the level of middle-class white woman to the level of duck in Gavin's eyes, Linda has fallen away from being a Varner and has become a fitting member of the Snopes family (in Gavin's opinion at least), all of whom are treated as animals for being disabled or otherwise "defective" in some fashion due to poverty.

By retraining Linda in speech, Gavin is, in essence, trying to imprint his ideal onto her and maintain control over her once more. The words which come out of her mouth during their lessons are very likely words that Gavin commands her to speak, which then places Gavin in a position of power similar to the one he occupied in Linda's youth. Like a true patriarch, Gavin seeks to mold her language so that it not only raises her status but grants him the potential to influence her thoughts since thought cannot exist without language. If he can influence her thoughts, he can mold her entire being into which ever eugenic ideal he pleases. However, despite his efforts, Gavin once more fails in his quest to perfect a Snopes woman seeing as he cannot "fix" Linda's voice, which remains duck-like until the very end. Gavin's failure to perfect Linda reverses the power dynamic between the two since her raucous new voice—as Diane Roberts asserts—"insists on being heard, even though she cannot hear what is said in reply, an inversion, maybe a parody, of the quiet woman whose real voice is ignored by the world of men as they make her a fantasy figure" (qtd. in Hagood 84). Gavin spends much of his life making a fantasy figure out of Linda's mother, whom he constantly likens to Helen of Troy. Gavin admits to Ratliff that he believes that Helen's greatest virtue aside from her beauty is her silence; he states that other mythological women "are fading into the obscurity of their own vocality," but

¹⁷ A perfect example of Gavin's tendency towards animalizing the Snopeses appears when he likens the Snopes family to "a herd of tigers" that must be "shut up in a mule-pen where [he and Ratliff] could at least watch them" (*The Town* 108).

Helen remains constant due to the fact that “there is not one recorded word of hers anywhere in existence” (*The Mansion* 148). Eula mirrors Helen in her silence as well as her beauty and mythological status since she, too, is silenced by the men who control her narrative. Linda, with her loud, abrasive voice, is able to avoid her mother’s fate and successfully combat Gavin, who cannot construct a similar eugenics-based narrative around her due to her caustic outspokenness.

Having failed at indoctrination through speech therapy, Gavin tries one last tactic; he bestows upon Linda “a little pad of thin ivory leaves, with gold corners, on little gold rings to turn the pages, with a little gold stylus thing to match” (240). Linda makes use of the notepad and stylus by allowing others to use them to jot down what they wish to say to her, which helps her immensely since she has less difficulty reading written words than reading lips. Overall, Gavin’s presents are utilitarian and highly beneficial to Linda, but their physical properties reflect Gavin’s classist and racist desires. The pages of the notepad are not simply white but “ivory,” which calls to mind an image of an extreme whiteness that is highly valued and sought after, and the notepad is trimmed with excessive gold. In essence, the notepad’s color scheme symbolizes the ideal Gavin has set for Linda; like the notebook, Linda must exist, for Gavin, as a commodity made valuable in its whiteness and semblance of wealth. To make matters darker, the writing utensil which accompanies the notepad and is used to mark the “ivory” pages is also golden. If the notepad acts as an emblem for Linda, the stylus must be an emblem for Gavin, whose upper-middle-class status, reflected in the stylus’s material, grants him the power to write a narrative upon Linda. Through his gift-giving, Gavin subtly communicates to Linda that she must stand as an upper-middle-class white woman although she is disabled and allow him, an upper-class white man, to “write” and “rewrite” her so that she may maintain her status and avoid being a Snopes.

Linda may frequently utilize Gavin's symbols for patriarchal upper-middle-class white power structures as a means to communicate, but she challenges the message relayed by these symbols. For decades, she allows Gavin the comfort of feeling as though he is secure in his control of her and able to mold her to be the poster child for positive eugenics only to subtly reverse the roles without his knowledge. The switch occurs when Linda becomes aware of the fact that Mink Snopes' prison sentence is coming to a close and begins to indulge in a Snopes-like scheme to have Mink released at an earlier date so that he will be in a position to murder Flem, whom she has now come to detest due to his role in her mother's suicide. In order to execute her plan, she manipulates Gavin into using his power as an attorney to draft a petition for his release. Gavin immediately recognizes the risk involved in having Mink released, but he concedes to Linda's request because his patronizing veneration of her blinds him and allows him to believe that she is—like his ideal middle-class white woman—too pure and innocent to know that “she just finished murdering her father” in signing the petition (415). When Mink finally exacts his lethal revenge on Flem, Gavin expects Linda to mourn her father's death and show remorse for her indirect role in it. Instead, he finds her preparing to depart from Jefferson in a Jaguar that she “had ordered...from New York or London or wherever it came from, the moment she knew for sure [Gavin] could get Mink the pardon” (467). Upon learning the date on which the car was ordered, Gavin finally realizes that Linda orchestrated the entire affair and used him for her revenge fantasy as he used her for his cavalier eugenic fantasy. He falls into a state of despair as he realizes that he had no chance at instilling eugenicist-approved middle-class white morality in Linda, not simply because she was corrupted by Flem (whose amorality is a reflection of his education and whose “evilness” is largely exaggerated by Gavin) but because the world they inhabit is one where no objective morality exists and “people just do the best they

can” (471). It is in this moment that Gavin finally comes to the conclusion that the values and ideals set by middle-class whites in favor of eugenics truly are the “poets’ dreams” Eula once mentioned and that the “evil” within Snopeses exists in all persons (*The Town* 237). In all reality, the conflation of the word “evil” with the word “Snopes” is revealed to be foolish since evil is a universal phenomenon that is not exclusive to any particular group of people.

Gavin spends approximately thirty years of his life engaged in a war he invents in his own head. Like a eugenicist, he has unwavering faith in a philosophy which states that there are “fit” and “unfit” human beings and that those who are not like him—an enlightened middle-class white man—must constitute the “unfit.” This philosophy further states that the “fit” and “unfit” are never to mingle and thus “fit” women must be kept away from the “unfit” lest they produce “unfit” children or become “unfit” themselves. For Gavin, there can be no individual more “fit” than a middle-class white woman (or his romanticized idea of one), and thus he gravitates towards Eula and Linda and vows to stop them from becoming “unfit.” Like all eugenicists, he believes his supposed rescue attempts to be virtuous and necessary for maintaining societal order. Yet, as shown, his attempts are merely misogynistic exercises in control, and they are partially to blame for Eula’s death. Instead of freeing Eula and Linda from Flem, he brings them under his misogynistic, racist, and classist thumb, a place of oppression and pain as he reduces them from people to ideas. Through his depiction of Gavin’s quest, Faulkner demonstrates how eugenic ideology harms not just the “unfit” but the “fit” as well. All subjects scrutinized under the eugenicists’ lenses are subjected to oppression of some form, even the subjects who belong to the same caste as the eugenicists. Yet while Faulkner characterizes Gavin as a domineering classist patriarch who exerts his will onto both Eula and Linda, he does not let him be the hero. Gavin does not succeed in his quest to “reform” the two women. If a hero exists, then the

hero(ine) is Linda, who fights against Gavin's dictation and creates a life for herself although the life she chooses is one steeped in blood. Gavin is a reactionary knight fighting to uphold a white middle-class status quo and return to an era where the "fit" and "unfit" are kept separate from one another; Linda literally fights fascists in Spain for the sake of moving western civilization onto a more progressive, tolerant path. Her manipulation of Gavin is far from ethical, but it is ultimately a revolutionary act that marks the victory of women over white middle-class male eugenicists. In the end, Gavin believes his status as a middle-class white man gives him the "privilege" of being able to "save a Snopes from a Snopes," but through Linda's cunning, he comes to find that all he has been granted is "the privilege of being obsessed, bewitched, and besotted" (*The Town* 193; *The Mansion* 466).

CONCLUSION

Faulkner's Snopes trilogy depicts a robust eugenic conflict which lasts nearly half a century; it begins with the arrival of an impoverished family that is immediately branded as "degenerate" and "unfit" by middle-class whites and ends neatly with the death of that family's figurehead, who by that point holds the entire county in his hand. The plot is peopled with characters who—at first glance—resemble archetypal born criminals and "degenerates" and conveyed by an assortment of narrators, two of which espouse language that is nearly identical to that of the eugenicists. Hundreds of different actions occur over the course of three lengthy novels, and a considerable number of those actions are informed by eugenic desires such as the desire to keep disabled people from engaging in sexual activity and the desire to patronizingly push women into upholding values associated with white middle-class womanhood. In short, eugenics—both the ideology and the practices it supposedly necessitates—is a theme which lurks in the margins of each page though neither the word nor any derivations of it appear. No one explicitly claims to follow the pseudoscience and no one is literally sterilized, but subtle allusions or references to twentieth-century American eugenics abound. It is the ultimate understated, overarching theme.

All discussions of class warfare in the Snopes trilogy must make reference to the fact that Yoknapatawpha County classism intersects with eugenic ideology. The middle-class whites in the Snopes trilogy undoubtedly detest the Snopeses for their low socioeconomic status, but they also fear them for their presentation of the "undesirable" traits they associate with "feeble-minded

poor white trash”. According to Gavin and Ratliff (and anyone else who subscribes to American eugenics), criminality, degeneracy, and disability are inextricably linked to poverty, and expressions of criminal and “degenerate” tendencies as well as disability across multiple generations of impoverished whites suggests that antisocial behaviors and disability must be hereditary within the poor white population. Since impoverished white Southerners like the Snopeses appear to possess what eugenicists would categorize as bad genes, they become a threat to the white middle class, which wants to preserve its definition of whiteness (a definition which is informed by class hierarchies just as much as it is informed by skin color) and morality as well as keep its members from being replaced either through miscegenation between poor white men and middle-class white women or the social mobility of the former. One makes no error in saying that Gavin and Ratliff find fault in the Snopeses because they are poor whites who social climb without developing and displaying the idealized virtues attributed to middle-class whites, but to overlook the ways in which the eugenic question regarding hereditary criminality and “degeneracy” among poor whites enters the novel’s discourse would be a massive folly. Faulkner seems to recognize the ways in which classism feeds into racism and ableism and the ways in which all three play off each other in the formation of eugenic ideology, and he builds the Snopes trilogy around this complex intersectionality partly to capture the zeitgeist of the trilogy’s time period but mostly as a means of engaging in social commentary.

According to Jay Watson, “the discourse of eugenics represented a complex, ambivalent cultural legacy for Faulkner as he wrote his way into Yoknapatawpha and the genealogical structures at its imaginative core” (J. Watson 53). However, in reading the Snopes trilogy, it becomes clear that Faulkner recognized eugenic discourse as complex but did not find its legacy to be something to regard in ambivalence as Watson suggests. In truth, Faulkner found eugenic

discourse to be senseless and dangerous due to its logical fallacies and draconian applications, and he expresses his distaste for the language and practices made popular by American eugenics movement all throughout the Snopes trilogy. *The Hamlet*, *The Town*, and *The Mansion* provide Faulkner with outlets to criticize the eugenics movement; in these novels, he speaks in the language of eugenics, presents characters who either follow the same logic as eugenicists or physically and behaviorally resemble the eugenicists' targets, and depicts incidents where able-bodied middle-class whites lose all sight of morality and reason as they are overtaken by their eugenic desire to "abolish" the Snopeses. He may position would-be eugenicists Gavin and Ratliff up as the protagonists and "heroes" of the trilogy by allowing their voices to drown out all other voices, but he allows the reader to find holes in their logic and ultimately recognize them for what they are: foolish, inhumane bigots. In short, Faulkner indulges in eugenic discourse and then destroys it from within by exposing the idiocy and hatred on which the American eugenics movement was built.

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