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The Invisible Other

White Trash in William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Hamlet*

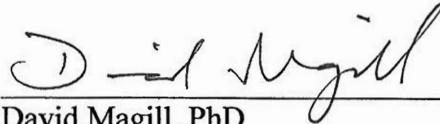
By

Bryant Edwards Trihey

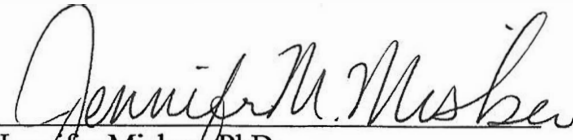
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Introduction: Whiteness in William Faulkner's Works

The idea of a “white soul” and the protection of its purity was prolific during William Faulkner’s adolescence in the late 1800s and early 1900s, which is why he feared the establishment of a hybrid mix of races, especially one that tarnished whiteness (Williamson 311). Examining *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) and *The Hamlet* (1940) simultaneously, it is evident that Faulkner first feared the dissolution of an aristocracy grounded in paternalistic values and later the influx of poor whites – those whose power lies in their skin color and not in their moral righteousness, despite their monetary holdings. Faulkner was anxious about the potential for poor whites to hold positions of power and rule with no regard for responsibility, an attribute he associated with liberalism. Because of his placement among the conflicting ideologies of paternalism and liberalism, Faulkner’s writing demonstrates his inclination towards the encouragement of earned social mobility with hesitation to allow those solely interested in monetary gains unchecked by a longstanding system of moral decency to acquire social, economic, or political power. When read chronologically, it is evident that Faulkner began to question paternalistic values in favor of liberal ones, with the exception that leaders who earn authority bring moral accountability with them. The result is a blend of what Faulkner deems the best values of both ideologies.

In *Absalom, Absalom!*, commonly heralded for its commentary on interracial and sexual relations, Faulkner is also focusing on whiteness, specifically what is called poor white trash who are ascending to power. Historically and literally, due to their invisibility, poor whites have remained virtually unnoticed, especially in the pluralistic society of America. Conversely, in Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Hamlet*, poor

whites are the focus, not an invisible, silent threat. Unlike *Absalom, Absalom!*, *The Hamlet* almost eliminates the inclusion of characters of any race other than white according to Joel Williamson, and in doing so, concentrates on the degrees of whiteness based on class, morality, and racial purity (312). Like most whites, Williamson fails to recognize whiteness as a race, instead seeing it is a colorless and invisible monolith. Williamson does, however, appropriately recognize the central theme of *The Hamlet*: “a struggle for dominance in the community between an element of poor whites and the higher orders of Southern society” (312). Though he correctly identifies the conflict within whiteness as the issue at hand, Williamson also stated that *The Hamlet* is devoid of race, thereby ignoring whiteness as a racial marker. Myra Jehlen also comments on the secondary importance of interracial relations in *Absalom, Absalom!*, focusing instead on the two classes of whites, planters and rednecks (67-68). Because the results of characters’ actions in *Absalom, Absalom!* and eventually in the conclusion of *The Snopes Trilogy* are death or depravity without paternalistic guidance, Faulkner was worried about the future of a democracy whose arbiters of integrity and evolution (white elites) have lost power. This is symbolized by Sutpen’s accession to the upper class not solely because of his wealth, but because he is, the diminishing rulers believe, white. His legacy of class poses a significant threat if not assimilated, which represents Faulkner’s anxiety regarding the ability of “impure” whites to achieve powerful positions just because they appear white yet do not exercise their power paternalistically. Faulkner also depicts his anxieties in the character of Flem Snopes, who transgresses the traditional boundaries of his class (poor white) by embracing the liberal value of equal access to capitalistic pursuits. However, his elevation in status is a dangerous one because his power remains

unconstrained by paternalistic values such as conscientiousness and consanguinity, which Faulkner believed to be characteristics of earlier white elites. It is possible that Faulkner's concerns regarding poor whites are related to the fact that his own family's ancestry is not aristocratic or that Faulkner wanted to distance himself from the class of poor whites.

Boundaries of power in Faulkner's settings were so permeable because the borders of whiteness themselves are so malleable. Matt Wray defines whiteness as a social category, not a racial one (135). Richard Dyer attests to the invisibility of whiteness, commenting that "until recently a notable absence from such work (sociological) has been the study of...white people. Indeed, to say that one is interested in race has come to mean that one is interested in any racial imagery other than that of white people".(1). He goes on to note the power of this invisibility: "As long as race is something only applied to non-white peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people. There is no more powerful position than that of being 'just' human. The claim to power is the claim to speak for the commonality of humanity" (Dyer 1-2). Dyer recognizes that whiteness is the norm when he declares that whites recognize others as colored but do not recognize the color of whites: "The sense of white as non-raced is more evident in the absence of reference to whiteness in the habitual speech and writing of white people of the West" (2). For example, if describing two passers by on a street, one white and one black, only the color of the black individual would be mentioned, and it would go something like this: "I passed two guys on the street; one was black." Therefore, "at the level of racial representation, in other words, whites are not of a certain race, they're just the human race" (Dyer 3).

Owing to this invisibility of whiteness is the lack of attention given to whites' problems and to the "problem" of whiteness. However, white and whiteness carry more weight than a mere color, as lubbers, crackers, and poor white trash have been excluded from the dominant racial category for reasons far more than that of color. As William Faulkner illustrates in *Absalom! Absalom!* and in *The Hamlet*, the first book of *The Snopes Trilogy*, whiteness is not always a ticket to power, especially when there are supposed degrees of whiteness allegedly produced by differentiation in social standing and blood heritage.

The history of whiteness merits summarizing to explain the degrees of whiteness Faulkner portrays in his novels. Historical studies by Theodore Allen, David Roediger, and Alexander Saxton suggest that the sense of being white and belonging to a white race developed in the United States as part of the process of establishing American identity. An appeal to common whiteness united European settlers over and against Africans and American Indians while simultaneously overcoming particularities of the various nations from which they hailed. Noel Ignatiev's *How the Irish Became White* and David R. Roediger's *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White* elucidate this idea of a white race formed by whites for security and protection. As the line between black and white grew more defined and whites' awareness of their race and the potential power it implied proliferated, an obsessive notion of race and white racial purity was born in America alongside the notion of its status of being the melting pot of the world. However, the idea of racial amalgamation struck fear into the hearts of the white male aristocracy who charged themselves with defending America against insurrections and dangers that followed the American Revolutionary War, including

those posed by poor whites (The Whiskey Rebellion) and non-whites (slave rebellions and Indian conflicts). Because the fear of the resulting blend of races was prominent, the interest and discourses of social scientists and genealogists merged to ascertain the limits of whiteness.

Although whiteness is again largely unnoticed, especially by those who possess it, it does entail special provisions, which is evident by glancing at American history. Racial genealogy studied by the likes of Sir Francis Galton shows how environment and tradition purportedly shaped the appearance and character of a race of people, and white genealogy focuses on Aryans or Caucasians. Aryans, which derives from a Sanskrit word meaning “of noble birth,” were considered the founding people of Europe, having emigrated from northern Indian Brahmins, who were of the highest cast in Indian society (Dyer 20-21). The term Caucasian implies that white people came to Europe by way of the Caucasus Mountains. Nineteenth century Romantics helped spread the obsession with whiteness in terms of racial purity by noting the small, virtuous, and pure communities located in cold places such as Switzerland, Northern Germany, and Scotland (Dyer 21). Early racial studies established whiteness as a universal norm beyond analysis, and instead focused on the “differences in skulls, facial features, body shape and posture, genitals, blood, and eventually genes” of other races more in need of investigation (Dyer 23). This research was an extension of imperialism and domestic control aimed at placing the non-white in a hierarchical order, rather than establishing the characteristics of whites. Houston Stewart Chamberlain, who helped expound upon the idea of German people as Aryans, commented in 1899 that “Intangibilities of character, energy and high mindedness, come to constitute the white race-soul and distinguish white people from all

others” (Dyer 23). Subscription to ideas like these helped widen the gap between whites and those of other races while at the same time broadening the hiatus between white elites and their so-called inferiors, white trash.

The concept of racial blood dominated the nineteenth century. This idea held that the blood of each race was markedly different from the blood of other races and should not be mixed. Racial blood ideology gave way to the study of genetics which came to the forefront in the twentieth, when it was believed that “all blood and genes carry mental properties, but, invisibly, white blood and genes carry more intelligence, more spirit of enterprise, more moral refinement” (Dyer 24). Nowhere was this more important than in the racially diverse South where power and its bases were racially coded. Thomas Sutpen, the protagonist of Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*, illustrates the importance of blood purity of whiteness to Faulkner himself and to America, especially the American South. Moreover, the Snopeses of *The Snopes Trilogy* illustrate the danger inherent in allowing whites who did not share the alleged values of their race to multiply and prosper.

Faulkner’s anxiety reflects the fact that whites could not be confined to one socio-economic category; they were scattered in degrees of morality and purity as well. The category of white as a skin color is innately problematic as white is difficult to define as a hue. The bottom line is that white people are who white people say are white, an idea illustrated by Thomas Jefferson in his assertion of whiteness, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1781). The idea of variability in white hues was typically rejected by whites of wealth, nobility, and aristocracy. Yet, when the lowest ranks of whites entered society through necessity during times of economic hardship and change (Cotton Crisis and

Industrial Revolution), elites were faced with the gradations of whiteness. Historically, because people want to belong to the normative race of human, they have tried to whiten themselves. For example, powder was created first from ceruse and later from rice to whiten women's skin. Additionally, there is the constant effort to avoid the sun's skin darkening rays in more recent centuries through the use of repellants, such as the umbrella carried by some of Faulkner's female characters, and sunscreen. Yet, white is still difficult to identify solely based on skin color, so white people are socially categorized as white because of what it means to be white in America (freedom), not because it is the most accurate term to describe whites' skin color. Ascription or aspiration to whiteness is, therefore, understandable, especially in examining the biracial character of Charles Bon of Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* Yet, at the same time, Faulkner is anxious about the moral fitness of certain whites for leadership positions in a society that long considered itself paternalistic because the morality required for power is natal to certain classes.

Dyer remarks that "Though the power value of whiteness resides above all in its instabilities and apparent neutrality, the colour does carry the more explicit symbolic sense of moral and also aesthetic superiority" (70). Faulkner's representation of the devastating effects to society of the rise and subsequent prevalence of unfit whites demonstrates his fears of the pitfalls created by allowing any white man to achieve power. Thus, the invisibility of whiteness is central to Faulkner's concerns. Because Faulkner was raised in a society whose fundamental structures of legal, social, and political matters were controlled by whites and still are, he was distressed about the potential for aspirational whites to become undeserving of their authority if left

unrestrained. This idea is supported by Joe Feagin and Eileen O'Brien's *White Men on Race: Power, Privilege, and the Shaping of Cultural Consciousness*, who claim that resources and privileges still fall disproportionately to whites. This dark vision of a society lead by non-paternalistic white men is depicted in *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Hamlet*.

The purpose of discussing whiteness in relation to Faulkner here is not do what whites have traditionally done – talk about themselves – but instead to decipher Faulkner's own relationship to whiteness. Because whiteness is largely invisible, whites such as Faulkner are allowed to continue in their dominance by virtue of their ability to pass into oblivion uncommented upon. Dyer comments that “Whiteness is not itself compared with anything, but other things are compared unfavorably with it, and their own comparability with one another derives from their distance from that touchstone” (Watson 3). This blank neutrality allows whiteness to fly beneath the radar, so to speak.

According to Dyer, the invisibility of whiteness must cease in order to demystify and dismantle the inconspicuous workings of its position of power, which is what I attempt to do in examining *Absalom, Absalom!* and in *The Snopes Trilogy*. Whiteness hides in plain sight and must be brought out in order to fully comprehend Faulkner's racial consciousness. But why discuss a white race in relation to Faulkner's work when it is wonderful for explaining the complexities of multiracial characters? Whiteness is indispensable to the Faulkerian world, as noted by Thadious M. Davis, and what Faulkner did that was most impressive:

... is not that he created black characters and positioned them within his fictional world of Yoknapatawpha, but rather that he envisioned what Melville represented as “the whiteness of whiteness.” Faulkner constructed characters who are consciously white, racialized as white, and

depicted the construction of whiteness within Southern and American society. As a result, he allowed outsiders to know in ways not otherwise available to them one ongoing narrative of white people in psychological nudity. His treatment of white people, with the normalizing, universalizing elision of racial identity, but with the complexity of the burden of racial subjectivity is an extraordinary achievement, unequalled in the first half of the century and unparalleled in the second. (254)

By virtue of these criteria, *The Snopes Trilogy* is ironically one of Faulkner's most racialized books as it contains no significant black presence. Likewise, this is apparent by Jay Watson's three distinguished branches of whiteness: subject formation, performance, and ideology. White subject formation, Watson declares, is about more than just being racially white. It implies a subject who is acutely unaware of his or her properties, as illustrated by Thomas Sutpen of *Absalom, Absalom!* and Flem Snopes of *The Hamlet*. Remarkably, this achievement is not duly noted because attention is more commonly given to Faulkner's construction of racial Others without mentioning that the whites created by Faulkner are white Others.

The concept of Othering, originated by Hegel and developed by Lacan, is based on the idea of self-consciousness and on one's social group's perception of them. In Faulkner, white Others are those who do not fit the mold of the typically white elite character. Amy Newitz and Matt Wray have extensively studied these "misperforming" whites and mark the group as unlike hegemonic forms of whiteness (169). They argue that white trash:

Is racially marked, it is simultaneously marked as white trash, as something that must be discarded, expelled, and disposed of in order for whiteness to achieve and maintain social dominance. Thus, white trash must be understood as both an external and an internal threat to whiteness. It is externalized by class difference but made the same through racial identification. White trash lies simultaneously inside and outside

whiteness, becoming the difference within, the white Other that inhabits the core of whiteness. (169-170)

Faulkner's construction of white Others cannot be contributed solely to the fact that he was white and Southern. Instead, it is important to recall that he came of age and wrote "during a period characterized by paradigm shifts in the theorization of race generally and the conceptualization of the white race in particular" (Watson 5).

Myra Jehlen and Matthew Frye Jacobson note that Faulkner's work was produced during a period of American history that saw many shifts in racial psychology. Jacobson argues that whiteness was a rather inclusive category during America's conception, distinguishing those who were not Native American or African American. He cites that until the 1840's, whiteness as a racial identity was unstratified. Then came the biological and anthropological racism which fractured "whiteness into a hierarchy of plural and scientifically determined white races," topped by the Anglo-Saxon northern and western European class (Jacobson 7). Jacobson further observes that later the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 solidified white as a consolidated group consisting of those formerly outcast, such as Celts, Slavs, and Hebrews (8).

This gave way to the inclusion of lower class whites in the race at the top of America's racial hegemony, which disgruntled Faulkner. His discontent is evident in his portrayal of Thomas Sutpen and Flem Snopes, who obtained power by virtue of their white skin but who were morally unfit to rule. Grace Elizabeth Hale argues that this distinction served the purpose of uniting whites in the South with a post-Confederate, cross-class regional sensibility of identity as much or more than it served to stigmatize blacks.

Faulkner wrote and came of age during this highly changeable and recently reorganized time in which whiteness was becoming more important as a signifier of access to resources and the possession of privilege. In order to truly embody whiteness and be permitted to join its highest ranks, one must adopt or display an aloof attitude towards the possession of whiteness and view it as simply standard or normal. Both Sutpen and Flem fail to do this, therefore joining with the growing class of whites who recognize and abuse the power of their whiteness. Toni Morrison asserts that whites occupying a dominant social position have simultaneously been distant socially and spiritually from all other races (8). What is more important, here, though, is the gap created between the economic, and consequentially moral, degrees of whiteness, resulting in white trash.

Because whites are the American racial norm and thereby invisible, those underprivileged whites, commonly called white trash, are also ignored. The Johnson-Reed Act proves that whiteness had become more than a skin color in America and carried with it social distinctions; it was a label reserved for only “pure” whites, those whose racial and social standing met the requirements delineated, and “impure” whites, white trash, were not welcome. In their study *White Trash: Race and Class in America*, Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz note that “a distorted image of urban poverty in America has been established and maintained, in part, through a willingness of social scientists to ignore “poor whites,” while obsessively (over) representing the conditions of blacks living in poverty” (43). Jim Goad, in his creed, *The Redneck Manifesto*, also observes that when poor whites get attention it is in the form of media’s portrayal of them as lowly and stupid, such as the characters in Will Ferrell’s popular film *Talladega Nights: The Ballad*

of *Ricky Bobby*. Goad begins his testament of poor white treatment with popular grievances:

Don't you just hate 'em? Every gap-toothed, inbred, uncivilized, violent, and hopelessly DUMB one of 'em? ... There's no class of people with less honor. Less Dignity. No one more ignorant. More gullible. They're a primitive breed with prehistoric manners, unfit for anything beyond petty crime and random bloodletting. Their stunted, subhuman minds are mesmerized by cheap alcohol, Lotto fever, and the asinine superstitions of poor-folks' religion. They stop beating their wives just long enough to let 'er squeeze out another deformed rug rat. They scatter their hand-me-down genes in a degenerative spiral of dysfunction. They breed anencephalic mouth-breathing children. Vulgarians. All of them. Bottom feeders. They really bring down their race. (15)

Still, poor whites are not acknowledged for being a low class of people who merit attention and assistance. Instead, they are recognized as a source of comic relief, much as they were in early depictions by writers of the antebellum period.

Because he foresaw this very same class of whites overtaking the American South in the early 20th century and because he shared the same stereotypes that Wray, Newitz, and Goad critique, Faulkner illustrated the decadence of “pure” whites and their power in his testimonies of the threats posed when poor white trash was allowed to permeate the once impenetrable bounds of the white elite in *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Snopes Trilogy*. John Duvall in *Faulkner's Marginal Couples* identifies the invisible, outlaw, and unspeakable communities of Faulkner's work, including white trash. Members of such communities include Thomas Sutpen and Wash Jones, neither of whom fit the model white man; and the Snopeses, who fit the family clan model (delineated by Duvall) on the forefront of eugenics studies (130). Faulkner's work indicates that he was aware that the color line was one not commonly crossed in the South, especially prior to and immediately after the Civil War. Yet, what is more pressing is the distance between white

elite and poor white and the ways in which the gap is bridged. Joel Williamson purports that the initiative to keep pure the “white soul” was popular during Faulkner’s youth, causing him to dread the establishment of a polluted white race (Williamson 311). Faulkner argued for the continuation of white homogeny in his Snopes volumes, focusing his attention on poor whites.

The white trashing in Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Snopes Trilogy* demonstrates anxieties regarding the downward mobility of whites, ethnically, morally, and economically, and reflects new racial configurations of Americans. In the novels “the power and potential of white trash figures not only to unsettle their fictional milieux...[and] to “contaminate” conventional narrative forms,” particularly those depicting the American South, is abundantly evident (Watson 18). Faulkner’s family’s status, his acute awareness of history, and events which occurred in his lifetime influenced his focus on the evolution of white trash from the swamps of Mississippi to its mansions. Through the characterization and juxtaposition of Thomas Sutpen and Wash Jones in *Absalom, Absalom!* and V. K. Ratcliffe and Flem Snopes in *The Hamlet*, Faulkner highlights human failings in Southern history, such as the inability to raise one’s moral standards to match one’s income, while examining white paternalistic and liberal values. Though Faulkner does endorse the liberal concept of social mobility for those who utilize their talents, such as Ratcliffe, he does not approve of Sutpen’s or Flem’s ruthless approach to achieving status or to the obstacles they encounter, which is evident in their respective deaths. Therefore, such ruthless acquisitiveness reaps the consequence of death as white trash consumes itself – Faulkner’s ideal (yet not realistic) solution to the threat of poor whites to white elite authority.

Faulkner is mournful over the loss of paternalistic values, because without a moral and righteous leader, capitalistic relations governing society are more affluent. *The Hamlet* reveals the result of victory by the Redeemers (non-paternalists), who were viewed as complicitous with the interests of white trash because of their hunger for wealth, represented by Will Varner. By combining social mobility with moral righteousness, Faulkner is not attempting to create a utopian world, because that is not portrayed in any work of his canon; instead, he is trying to accentuate the failure of those with upright morals to overcome those without. The conflict is illustrated in Faulkner's portrayal of the relationship between Thomas Sutpen and Wash Jones in *Absalom, Absalom!* and V. K. Ratcliff and Flem Snopes in the Snopes Trilogy. Sutpen is keenly aware of the importance of race and class in the Antebellum South. While Faulkner does endorse the liberal concept of social mobility for those who utilize their talents, he does not approve of Sutpen's entire life and unhindered liberal ideology because he does not assimilate completely into the planter class in terms of the moral leadership expected of white elites, which is immediately evident in Sutpen's demise at the hand of a poor white of whom he took advantage in the worst way, Wash Jones. Faulkner's message is essentially that money cannot buy morality in the form of traditional paternalistic values such as responsibility for family and community. This is also evident through Flem Snopes's termination at the hands of Mink Snopes and Linda Snopes-Kohl. Faulkner wishes to teach a lesson about the consequences of a society that has lost all ability to trust those who are capable of possessing power without notions of personal aggrandizement, such as the Compsons of the world.

I will briefly delineate the history of whiteness and segue into the formation of white trash as a white Other to illustrate this motif of Faulkner's racial and class anxieties in chapter one. This will demonstrate that whiteness is historically invisible and merits discussion in Faulkner's texts in order to bring it out of obscurity. Chapter two will prove that Faulkner's life and experience with what he deemed white trash influenced his focus on it in the novels. In chapter three, I argue that in writing *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Snopes Trilogy*, Faulkner reveals the degrees of whiteness and forever effaces the idea of whiteness as a normative race against which all others are compared, instead portraying it in all its "shades," white trash included. Chapter three will also demonstrate that Faulkner struggled to between the ideologies of paternalism and liberalism but settled on a combination of their values. To bring whiteness to the forefront and underline its degrees is why Faulkner wrote these accounts.

1. The History of White Trash

According to historian Theodore Allen, poor whites had nothing save their skin color to protect them from slavery. Although they had no economic security, the color of their skin was protection enough. In his two volume work entitled *The Invention of the White Race*, Allen declares that the ideology of whiteness was not a product of accidental circumstances, rather a construction by 17th century tobacco elite in order to create a barrier between themselves and their most lowly subordinates. This followed a scare that indicated that racial control was necessary for a continual supply of docile laborers. Certain formerly unspoken privileges became exclusive to whites, serving to draw the racial line: the right to move freely without a pass or permission, legal possession of wife and child, the right to vote in elections, the right of self-defense, and the right to own a gun, all once allowed to colonists at large, were given exclusively to whites. The bearers of rights in the colonies, and later, in the United States, were identified as white, and this distinction highlighted materially what whiteness was. This is the “possessive investment in whiteness” that George Lipsitz declares white Americans to be white, whether they are racist or not, and today necessitates the proclamation of all places of business that they will not discriminate based on race (because there are other races). A white complexion was a kind of promise to its wearer that he or she would have access to power and privilege (Allen 2, 154).

However, then and now, such is not usually the case for poor whites. The problem is that white as a category of skin color is unstable and has been so over time because whites have literally been hue differentiated according to class. Naturally, working class and peasant whites are “darker” than their aristocratic counterparts, with the poorest

whites being the “darkest” (Dyer 57). Richard Dyer, who studies the depiction of whites in the media, found that poor whites, not unlike indentured servants, are always depicted as darker than their employers (57). Yes, labor directly relates to hue distinction, both literally and figuratively, among whites:

To work outside the home – literally out of doors but also away from the values of domesticity – is to be exposed to the elements, especially the sun and the wind, which darken white skin. In most hierarchical social systems, however much the toiler may be lauded in some traditions, the very dreariness, and pain of their labor accords them lowly status: thus to be darker, though racially white, is to be inferior. (Dyer 57)

Thus, whiteness is not only a social construction, but one based on color as well.

The mutability of whiteness is evident when examining the history of America, from colonization into the early twentieth century. That is to say, the socio-economic and even the racial composition of the traditionally white figure, historically and literally, incurred a sort of coloring, a tinting or tainting of whiteness literally and figuratively as time passed in America. This colorization resulted in what is today termed “poor white trash.” Investigating the derivation of poor white trash will clarify Faulkner’s depiction of it as beginning in the margins of Southern society and eventually emerging to create a space for itself among the ruling class as leaders who are devoid of a moral compass.

The study of antiquity reveals that the idea of race is a relatively new phenomenon. Anthropologists hold that in ancient times, it mattered not the color of one’s skin. Rather the fertility of one’s land, the productivity of one’s crop, the profit of one’s harvest and livestock, and the ability of one to capitalize on the above were marks of merit. An investigation into such history likewise unveils that slavery was not limited to the exclusive domination of blacks by whites until the American forefathers, such as Jefferson, depicted it as such. Instead, dominant groups of whites, such as Greeks and

Vikings, captured and sold other whites, like Scythians and Celts, into slavery.

Eighteenth and nineteenth century intellectuals such as Thomas Carlyle and Madame de Stael, were later sought or self-appointed to justify the hierarchical structure of slavery or forced labor and bondage within a single race, namely the Caucasian race, assuming and insisting that there must be something within the inferior causing him to sink to the bottom. As Nell Painter explains, "In modern times, we recognize this kind of reasoning as it related to black race, but in other times the same logic applied to people who were white, especially when they were impoverished" (xi). It is from the dejected class of poor whites that attention has been purposely averted today. Many scholars, such as Theodore W. Allen, argued that it is because of 19th century apologists' focus on the treatment of African Americans and the subsequent efforts to supply them equal social, economic, and educational opportunities that destitute whites have been ignored (2). Though it may be argued that white is the normative, invisible standard by which other races are measured, the poor white is still earning the same rights or privileges conveyed upon the destitute portion of other races because they are ignored as part of the majority. Historically and literally, due to their invisibility, poor whites have remained virtually unnoticed, especially in the pluralistic society of America. It is on this usually ignored class of whites, not on blacks, that Faulkner focuses in *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Hamlet*.

The existence of a white race promises that there is also non-white, and in the case of America, non-white usually means black. Interestingly enough, slave labor in America was not always confined to blacks, nor was it lifetime indenture. Oscar and Mary Handlin argue that until 1660, or roughly the first four decades after their arrival,

African Americans were not lifetime hereditary bondmen and women. Instead, their status was equal to European-American bond-laborers, essentially limited-term bond servitude (Allen 1: 3). Furthermore, when a differentiation of treatment and consciousness regarding African American and European-American laborers did emerge, it was deliberately contrived and enforced by ruling-class interests. It was not the result of preconceived race consciousness of white laborers toward black, or vice versa. The Handlins contend that because whites and blacks had lived together in relative peace in half-bondage for at least 40 years, it was possible for them to cohabitate equally in the twentieth century as racism was not natural or inherent.

The idea of “natural racism” derived from the studies of those who deemed the oppression and ill-treatment of African Americans as the product of racism that stemmed from genetic and behavioral theories backed by scientific research conducted by the likes of Carl N. Degler and Winthrop D. Jordan. In Degler’s *Neither White nor Black*, he professed that blacks would be discriminated against wherever non-blacks have the power or incentive to do so because it is human nature to be prejudiced against those who are or appear different (287-290). Similar controversy surrounds the transformation of formerly indentured English, Scottish, Irish and other European colonists into the all-inclusive status of white. This inclusion of said immigrants into the race of whiteness was, not surprisingly, economically motivated; likewise the major force driving the separation of blacks and whites in the post-colonial period was financial, not racial difference. In order for the American South’s plantation system to continue thriving, permanent servitude in the form of black slavery was necessary. To prevent the non-aristocratic white laborers from joining with the blacks, who lived similarly, if not better

than them, to challenge elite white authority, the ruling class used skin color or race to band whites together against non-whites. Without slave labor, the plantation system would not function:

Freedom for the bond-laborers would have revolutionized colonial Virginia from a plantation monoculture to a diversified smallholder economy. The demand of the small holders for a more equitable distribution of tidewater land if fully realized would have resulted in a predominance of family-sized farms without capital to import bond-laborers, and a more diversified economy. (Allen 2: 211)

Therefore, a common bond was instituted in the form of whiteness, and it included even those whites formerly excluded from privilege because of their station in life which made work necessary. As a consequence, while the elite whites would embrace their destitute counterparts, poor whites, for the formation of a hegemonic race, whiteness was nonetheless striated due to differences (economic and moral) in working conditions.

In fact Bacon's Rebellion of 1676, led by Nathaniel Bacon, proved that poor whites and blacks in bondage could successfully unite for a common goal, making the distinction of a white race necessary to protect and uphold white elites' status and power. The participants, including six thousand white bond and lifetime laborers and two thousand black, were joined by small property holders living in poverty and disgruntled about the oppressive conditions of their lives, including high taxes, low tobacco prices, and limited land use (Allen 2: 211). Sir William Berkley, Royal Governor of Virginia, reportedly feared that, "...our servants at home, who (if God prevent not their taking hold of this Great advantage), must carry on beyond Remedy to destruction...The very being of the Collony doth consist in the Care and faithfulness, as well we in the number of our servants" (Allen 2: 212). The oligarchic rule and monocultural economy of seventeenth

century Virginia depended upon chattel servitude of both blacks and whites but included paternalistic values requiring those in power to justly treat their inferiors.

What, then, was to be done to ensure the proliferation of said rule and economy? The fighting side by side of African Americans and European-Americans for the abolition of slavery proved that the white race was not in existence or acting in consensus to protect its racial interests; therefore, it was manufactured. In fact, in the colonial period, three of every four Europeans who came to the Chesapeake region were bond-laborers, making the necessity for a buffering class urgent. According to statistics compiled and published by Kulikoff and Menard:

Of the 30,000 Europeans who came to the Chesapeake region between 1680 and 1699, we may assume that 24,000 were bond-laborers. In a roughly equivalent period, 1674-1700, around 6,000 African bond-laborers were imported. In that same period, 1674-1700, the total number of Virginia and Maryland tithables rose from about 21,000 to about 34,000, a linear average of 1,600 per year. Europeans were arriving at an average rate of 1,500 per year, 1,125 of them bond-laborers, and Africans were arriving at the rate of 240 per year, presumably as bond-laborers, making an incoming total of 1,365, equal to 85 percent of the increase of the total tithables. (Allen 2: 218)

These numbers demonstrate that white bond-laborers were increasing even more rapidly than the rate at which the black bond-laborers were, accounting for a large part of the population. With the number of white laborers on the rise, the fear of insurrection became insurmountable. Well after Bacon's revolt, the spirit of rebellion as well as the fear of it were still thriving. Governor Francis Nicholson of Maryland commented in 1698 when 394 "Negro" bond-laborers as well as 600 or 700 Europeans arrived that the two groups, if growth continued, might join forces to "make great disturbances" and perhaps a rebellion, citing that many of those in bondage "would rather be our enemies than contribute to our assistance" (Allen 2: 218). The indentured whites were not the only

portion of the population harboring resentment towards the planter elites: "...the laboring free poor in Virginia were forced to compete with unpaid chattel bond-labor...and their freedom was a common class interest of the poor and landless free population such as had joined hands with bond-laborers in 1676" (Allen 2: 220). In a 1736 letter to the Earl of Egmont, president of the Trustees of the Georgia colony, William Byrd II expressed fear of the still rising number of imported laborers and their potential to couple with the already volatile laboring class, warning that continuing the importation of convict bond-laborers "who are wicked enough to join our Slaves in any Mischief...in all Probability will bring sure and sudden Destruction on all His majesty's good subjects of this colony" (Allen 2: 245).

A buffering class was needed between the plantation elite and the bond-laborers to protect the planter's interests and to function as an intermediate social control category. The "yeoman," as this class was termed, was usually identified by how many pounds of tobacco he produced, if any; how many, if any, slaves he owned; and how much land. As he was dependent upon the gentry (that five percent of the Anglo-European population not inconvenienced by the need to work for a living) for credit or to expand his property; the yeoman reciprocated by upholding the system of rule by the gentry (Allen 2: 246). If in the lower portion of the yeoman group, a planter was a tenant whose duties obliged him to clear the land, make improvements, serve in the militia, and surrender a healthy portion of his profits to the landlord. A tenant "was not the beneficiary of the planting society...it would stretch the usual meaning of the term to call him a yeoman, particularly if he fell in the lower half of his group" (Allen 2: 247). In 1700, three-fourths of the population was comprised of yeoman, who, due to investment

and consumption, could not save any money, afford a bond-laborer, or leave any inheritance other than debt to an heir. Soon, this large portion of the population would join the lower ranks and be deemed poor whites. Jackson Turner Main, based on a study on the Virginia tax lists for 1787, concluded that the "...general tendency of social evolution in Virginia [within the white population] was towards a larger landless class and a larger class, too, of those who had almost no property" (Allen 2: 247). Main stated:

...it is evident in the first place that landowners were in a minority. Excluding the Northern Neck, about 30 percent of the adult [white] males were laborers with very little property. About one tenth of the men had no land but had a fair amount of other property and had access to land owned by relatives. About one eighth were tenants. A little over one third of the men were small farmers with less than five hundred acres. (Allen 2: 247)

In sum, less than half of the white male population were landholders. Around 60 percent of the total white male population were not employers of bond-laborers, but were instead in agricultural competition with those who employed bond-laborers, and in some cases, competed for the same jobs held by bond laborers, the yeoman and tenant both among the 60 percent.

According to Allen, once the gentry gained assent of the yeomanry it ignored the rest of white society (248). But because the yeomen were denied the ability to expand property holdings and therefore could not afford bond labor or compete with slave laborers for occupation, their social mobility was in a state of decay. Simultaneously, while the gentry trapped yeoman in a downward spiral of poverty as a result of structural limitations inherent to this model of society, a permanent underclass of whites was established, which would later become poor white trash. In order for the interracial ghost of Bacon's Rebellion to be exorcised, the growing yeoman class must be tied more closely to the gentry without, at the same time, threatening their economic supremacy.

The solution for Anglo- and all European- Americans which set them at a considerable distance from laboring-class African Americans was to establish a birthright of 'white' identity, enlisting white non-slaves as supporters of lifetime bondage of those non-white laborers.

The historian Edmund S. Morgan published a catalogue of privilege laws enjoyed by whites that was designed to enforce this separation based on skin color rather than on social or economic standing. Morgan asserts that said laws' intent was "The answer to the problem [of preventing a replay of Bacon's Rebellion]...was racism, to separate dangerous free whites from dangerous slave blacks by a screen of racial contempt" (Allen 2: 249). Simultaneously, according to Philip Alexander Bruce, author of *Social Life in Virginia in the Seventeenth Century*, "toward the end of the seventeenth century...a marked tendency to promote a pride of race among the members of every class of white people" occurred (137). Consequently, Winthrop D. Jordan in *White Over Black* affirms that there was no need to fear rebellion of low class whites and their black counterparts post-1700 due to the rising investment of the lower class whites in the idea of race. In fact, they were the principal enforcers of daily racial oppression everywhere the plantation system was established (123). T. J. Wertenbaker concurs, arguing that "Every white man, no matter how degraded, could now find pride in his race...the immediate control of the negroes fell almost entirely into the hands of white men of humble means" (212).

In *The Rise and Fall of the American Republic*, Alexander Saxton traces the continuity and modification of the major ideological construction of whiteness based on three assumptions connected to this historical moment: that a theory of white racial

superiority originated from rationalizations and justifications of the slave trade, slavery, and expropriation of land from non-whites; that this theory continued to hold a central place in various syntheses of ideas legitimizing power because it continued to meet justificatory needs of dominant groups in the changing class coalitions that have ruled the nation; and that these legitimizing syntheses, including specific constructions within them, remained in flux through ongoing process of modification and readjustment (1).

But, as Painter suggests, because the poor were as likely to be victimized by elites as non-whites, the importance of whiteness was effectually connected to financial well-being. So, as whiteness becomes racialized and thus visible with poverty, invisibility equals less economic vulnerability. Despite attempts at establishing the uniform appearance of whiteness, poor whites resisted and visibly displayed non-elite values. For example, though their white skin is not commented upon, the products of their poverty are visible on their faces and in their manner. On William Byrd II's journey to determine the boundary line between Virginia and North Carolina, he encountered that portion of the population created by the planter elite to stabilize their hegemonic hold on power – the poor whites who lived scarcely better than slaves. Byrd commented that, "The Truth of it is, the People live so much upon Swine's flesh, that it don't only incline them to the yaws, & consequently to the downfall of their Noses, but makes them likewise seem extremely hoggish in their Temper, & many of them seem to Grunt than to Speak in their ordinary conversation" (55). After remarking upon the appearance of the poor whites, Byrd continues to denigrate their behavior: "Surely there is no place in the world where the inhabitants live with less Labor...It approaches nearer to the Description of Lubberland than any other" (90-92). His characterization of poor whites as ugly, sickly,

and lazy is among the first written accounts stigmatizing low-class whites in colonial America. Such a depiction anticipates Faulkner's Wash Jones and the Snopes clan.

Others of Byrd's status had begun to notice the deplorable habits and morals of socially repugnant whites and commented on them, therefore creating the image of poor white trash. They allegedly harassed the local Indians and were a general nuisance for colonial officers. During the Republic's early years, "lubber" had transformed from just being lazy and no-count, to "crackers" who posed economic and political threats to the maintenance of social order in the British colonies (Wray 22).

The first term coined to identify this lowly group, lubber, is a result of Byrd's observation along his trek to determine the border line. On his journey he discovered a haven for alleged degenerates of all kinds, and the term he used as description was borrowed from English culture and the myth of Lubberland, an imaginary place of plenty where labor is unnecessary. This utopia resonated with those for whom hunger and want were features of daily life. This relaxed, lusty land represented the antithesis of Byrd's own strictly moral social and cultural world – that of the eighteenth century planter. The representation of lubbers as morally, culturally, and socially inferior may have been in doubt by those who perceived Byrd as no more than a caricature artist, but social historians have proven that this class did exist.

Marxist theorist Theodore Allen classifies the following sectors based on their relation to land, labor, and capital. The groups identified are: American Indians, African slaves, white servants and slaves, freedmen, yeomen, and elites, at least two of which evolved into lubbers. The freedmen, presumably without property, a growing class prior to 1700, was rendered superfluous and unable to find work when African slave labor

became increasingly relied upon (Wray 28). This class, which became nomadic herdsmen and colonial frontiersmen living off of the land, is the group which inspired Byrd's criticism.

However, the term lubber encompasses moral connotations beyond demographic qualities. It implies sexual deviance as well, and is well represented by Faulkner's white trash characters in *The Snopes Trilogy*. Alongside his testament of their lethargy, Bryd notes the voracious sexual appetite of the men and women of the lubber class. One North Carolina servant on the journey "endeavour'd to mend his Entertainment by making hot Love... While the Master was employ'd in making Love to one Sister, the man made his Passion known to the other" (91). This, in combination with the reversal of traditional gender roles, which consisted of women performing physical labor while men leisured about the house, convinced Byrd and his contemporaries that lubbers were a class to avoid. This stereotype informed Faulkner's later portrayal of the Snopes clan.

By the late 1700s, "As in Byrd's era, planter elites continued to hoard land and to rely ever more heavily on slave labor, leaving the poor and landless white freemen with few opportunities for social mobility" (Wray 34). Faced with the inability to mobilize socially, poor whites moved into the trans-Appalachia frontier. There, they carved settlements out of the tenuous frontier and multiplied. Soon, a new term replaced the lazy lubber in order to incorporate the fact that life on the frontier required work. "Cracker" was coined to represent those poor whites occupying the outer reaches of British colonization. It was first used by Gavin Cochrane, a colonial officer, in a 1766 letter to the Earl of Dartmouth to refer to the poor whites who had territorial conflicts with the Cherokee (Wray 34). According to said report, they were a boastful bunch of rascals who

plundered and drove usurious bargains. The term “cracker” added fear and anxiety to the contempt implied by “lubber.” Matt Wray explains:

As a boundary term, cracker symbolically marked out a crucial difference in identity between white colonists who were lawful and properly subordinate to colonial authority and those who were not. However, unlike Byrd’s lubbers, who did nothing to directly provoke hostilities, the guerrilla rebellions of the crackers managed to incite the repressive violence of planters and smallholders. (37)

This group of vagrants, though not feared for possibility of rebellion, did discomfort those yeoman living nearby due to their constant unrest with the Indians and because they stole from gardens and orchards and seemed to abstain, either by failure or resistance, from practicing the cultural requirements of elite white morality.

Consequently, antagonism emerged between poor and middling whites, resulting in the latter’s role as enforcers of law and propriety. As a result, that class created by the elite specifically to serve as a buffer, the yeomanry, banded together to form the first known organized group of vigilantes in America, the Regulators. When the group formed in 1767, their purpose was to rid the backcountry of all known outlaw “crackers” either by murder or intimidation (Wray 38). The violence was short-lived for in 1768 the Congress of Regulators passed a vagrancy law which demanded that non-landholding whites work six days per week or face public humiliation and flogging. This simultaneously solved the problem while creating an exploitable workforce for the yeomen. Compulsory labor was soon converted into obligatory service in the militias and armies which repelled British forces during the Revolution. However, the fact that poor whites served bravely for the new nation did not expunge the connotations of negativity surrounding their class nor did it unseat the notion that poor whites were so by virtue of their blood.

The interest in blood purity had existed since the founding of the nation, particularly among the affluent. Nearly two centuries after the term *mulatta* first appeared in the Oxford English Dictionary in 1622, Thomas Jefferson performed careful calculations to determine how many crossings of pure white blood were necessary to negate the effects of Negro blood in a mulatto; he determined it was upon the third occurrence (Erkkila x). Likewise, John Adams wrote to his wife, Abigail, in 1775 commenting upon the purity of blood in the New World. He stated that the populace had not yet been corrupted by a white Other, such as Irish, French, Scotch, or Danish (Erkkila xi). The imagery of blood – in fact lost blood, and thereby, blood mixing and blood purity – pervades American history and literature from the Revolution to the Civil War as struggles for freedom, equality, justice, rights, and citizenship abounded. At the root of the idea, real or imagined, of blood violence, is Thomas Jefferson's constant reference to blood purity in the "Declaration of Independence," which is at once an historical and literary document. The founding fathers evoke a blood right as they delineate a lengthy list of grievances against the King, Parliament, and British population to recognize their blood bond as common kindred and common blood: "Nor have we been wanting in attentions to our British brethren...and we have conjured them by the ties of our common kindred to disavow these usurpations, which would inevitably interrupt our connections and correspondence. They too have been deaf to the voice of justice and of consanguinity." Americans recognize that they have bled in the sense that they have earned the right to self-sovereignty with the blood expended through emigration and settlement.

These rights became more important than ever as later the distinction between races was highlighted. America's forefathers encouraged the protection of that blood right with their inclusion of the term "Corruption of Blood" in Article 3 of the Constitution used to describe the forfeiture of rights suffered by any person committing or convicted of treason (Erkkila 3). Here, a legal relationship is suggested as a blood bond between an individual and the state, one that is either pure or corrupt. The Constitution further outlines people, legally, as those who are propertied, relegating indentured servants and poor whites as persons, but not right holding citizens, merely a step above the chattel that blacks were considered to be and remained for years to come.

During the years preceding and following the revolt of the American colonies against the British Empire from 1776 to 1783, the American struggle to define itself as the New World was marked by an effort to achieve racial purity and concentrated efforts on preventing blood corruption. This struggle was complicated by the fact that the North American continent was already teeming with thousands of indigenous Natives with hundreds of different cultures, languages, rituals, myths, and traditions. European Americans' anxieties about mixing with these natives and with the blacks still primarily located in the South became evident in the fervent racial boundary building in America. For example, in the first U. S. census, taken in 1790, there were six categories. None of them included unfree white persons, of whom there were numerous, as the qualification "free" white person indicates that there were indeed those in servitude; i.e., "free" implies "not free" (Painter 105). This signifies that whiteness in the early Republic did not yet equate freedom. Indeed, there was a class or economic prerequisite as well as a racial one which arose naturally in the environment which indenture created. Requirements such as

holding a stake in society (paying taxes, owning property) and being politically independent (having steady income) were required to qualify as a free white; if such were met, a man could vote. Paupers, felons, and transients who were at the margins of poor whiteness were excluded from suffrage, making the cycle of disenfranchisement nearly an impossible one from which to escape. In his *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), Michel-Guillaume-Jean de Crevecoeur described the poor white Southerner unable to crack the political system which held him fettered:

For instance, poor and untamed white people, particularly southerners, continue to occupy a separate category well below the American. While the American and the poor white might both be judged according to American law, poor white poverty and apparent wildness kept him at a remove from the charmed circle...Crevecoeur conceded the existence of other Americans – other white Americans – who do “not afford a very pleasing spectacle.” He offers a hope that the march of American progress would soon displace or civilize the drunken idlers; meanwhile, white families living beyond the reach of law and order exhibit the most hideous parts of our society. (Painter 109)

Crevecoeur's early impression of low class whites was not specific to foreign travel writers; Americans wrote of poor whites' follies and helped circulate the appellations given to them. The term “cracker” was soon joined by other derogatory labels, such as “dirt-eaters,” appearing in the early nineteenth century with humorist Augustus Baldwin Longstreet's *Georgia Scenes* (1835), which depicted Ransy Sniffle, who ate clay. The “clay eater,” popularized by Longstreet, “was a grotesque comic character notable for his poor diet, his physical deformities, his laziness, apathy, and low intelligence, and his oddly colored skin,” which was tallow-hued (Wray 40). Though clay eating was and still is practiced for its medicinal properties, Longstreet's portrayal of Sniffle added a stigmatizing quality to the folk practice. The growing middle class, both in the North and South, was amused and disgusted by what it read regarding dirt eating;

the act “of incorporating what does not belong into the physical body – was for many a powerfully symbolic transgression of boundary lines, one that stigmatized the entire region” (Wray 40).

The proliferation of this dirty, low class white portrayal led in 1833 to the first recorded use of the term poor white trash, frequently penned “po’ white trash.” While hosting a dinner for English entertainer Fanny Kemble, South Carolinian May Canton reportedly commented on the contentment of the hired black help and added that the blacks held the highest contempt for white servants, whom they designated as poor white trash (Wray 41). Although it was blacks who coined the term to refer to the most detestable class of whites, it was whites themselves, those of the middle class and elite class, who:

invested its meaning with social power, granting it the powers of social stigma and prejudice and enforcing its discriminatory effects with regard to labor...In short, the leveling of social distinctions among whites that was taking place during the early decades of the nineteenth century was widely perceived by contemporary elites to have as one of its primary consequences a rise in insubordination among the lower class. (Wray 43-4)

Because lowly whites were living up to the stereotypical label of “po’ white trash,” their “superiors” searched for a cause of poor whites’ degeneracy in hope of also formulating a solution.

In the Antebellum period, the term “poor white trash” flourished throughout the South. Poor whites experienced difficulty when trying to obtain property rights due to the fact that their capital was limited to what they could earn in competition with the free labor of black slaves: “in general, poor, nonslaveholding whites were left to fend for themselves, a situation that...earned them pity and contempt from black slaves” (Wray

53). Others, such as those advocating the slave system, argued that the segregation between blacks and whites generated among poor whites a sense of privilege emanating from race which compensated for the disadvantages of belonging to their class. Still, while social observers began to wonder and debate on the causes for the ill treatment and condition of those described by the term “poor white trash,” their repudiation continued to descend to depths evidently irreparable.

There were, however, two antebellum schools of thought regarding the poor white: antislavery abolitionists and proslavery secessionists. In the decades preceding the Civil War, 8 million of the 12 million people in the South were classified as white. More than 75 percent of that population owned no slaves at all, and most owned no land (Wray 46). It can be said of the abolitionist versus secessionist argument that poor whites were a product of either biological or environmental conditions. Abolitionists such as Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote slave narratives to condemn the evils of the slave system’s dehumanization and degradation of the entire class of poor whites. In their view, poor whites were victims of the slave system which also denied them full freedom, economically speaking, and that abolition would open the market to all laborers who could in turn sell their labor to the highest bidder. In other words, abolitionists supported the notion that poor whites would profit from their labor and in turn improve their moral condition. Furthermore, abolitionists believed that poor whites’ deplorable state was redeemable through proper education and industrial capitalist labor (Wray 48).

Conversely, John Pendleton Kennedy held that the slave system reflected the natural order of beings and placed blame for the poor whites’ condition directly on the poor whites themselves. Their status was attributed to physical and moral laziness by

some and to physical or biological origin by others. The idea of “tainted blood” was supported by secessionists’ argument that poor whites could not function in a democratic society and other Americans should not be subject to their inadequacies (Wray 49). Were poor whites born predestined to live life as inferiors, or were they a product of their environment? Explanations ranged from folk concepts like dirt eating and aforementioned literary creations of stereotypes like Ransey Sniffle to the novel scientific theories of human development, sociology, and anthropology.

Around the middle of the nineteenth century, monogenists believed that all humans were descendants from Adam and Eve, and all visible differences were produced by environmental conditions. Polygenists argued that observable differences were caused by actual biological differences in subspecies. Essentially, polygenists formed the basis for the argument that some races of people are born better than others and that there were separate and not equal races of mankind, which fueled the fire for degenerationists, those who believed that some human species were in a state of decline due to poor breeding practices and environmental conditions. Thus, the existence of a low class white justified that there is an elite class of whites as well. This led elites to practice conservative paternalism to lead and protect those naturally inferior, such as women, blacks, and poor whites (Wray 55).

Furthermore, writers such as William Gilmore Simms depicted poor whites as rude in *Eutaw* and other texts, a contradiction to the Jacksonian narrative of the resilience of frontier whites such as Davey Crockett. Interestingly enough, Harriet Beecher Stowe also wrote about the devastating effects of a strictly striated class system on the poor white, commenting that there were three causes of the case of their downtrodden state:

first, the plantation system did not allow for proper public education as it was not geographically feasible; second, the locations of plantations did not allow for regular meetings at church; and finally the degradation of the idea of labor (Wray 58).

Consequently, by 1861 Bayard Taylor could say confidently in his lecture “The American People” that:

The white trash of the South represented the more depraved class of whites I have ever seen. Idle, shiftless, filthy in their habits, aggressive, with no regard for the rights of others, these barbarians seem to have united all the vices of the negro with those of their own race, and they almost shake out faith in the progressive instinct of the Anglo-Saxon. (Wray 59-60)

This attitude towards the abundance of white trash during the 19th century represents the culmination of elite white frustration toward a class of whites heretofore unnoticed except for reason of exploitation by their elite counterparts or for undesirable behavior.

Similarly, Daniel Hundley observed seven distinct classes of whites in 1860 and placed poor white trash squarely at the bottom of the hierarchy. He states that the natural cause of poor whites’ laziness and vagabond personas is attributed to bad blood; poor whites, he claimed, were directly descended from convicts or indentured servants sent from Great Britain to the colonies. Hundley expressed:

Every where they are just alike, possess pretty much the same characteristics, the same vernacular, the same boorishness, and the same habits; although in different localities, they are known by different names. Thus, in the extreme South and South-west, they are usually called Squatters; in the Carolinas and Georgia Crackers or Sandhillers; in the Old Dominion, Rag tag and Bob-Tail, in Tennessee and some other States, People in the Barrens – but every where, Poor White Trash, a name said to have originated with the slaves, who look upon themselves as much better off that all “po’white folks” wherever...they are one in the same; and have undoubtedly as one in the same origin, namely, the poor-houses and prison-cells of Great Britain. Hence we again affirm, what we asserted only a moment ago, that there is a great deal more in blood than people in the United States are generally inclined to believe. (257-258)

The proliferation of white trash in the American South was begun by those criminal peoples sent from its parent nation as indentured servants or slaves because Great Britain desired to rid itself of such vagrants. Hundley's perspective, that of a Southern abolitionist, epitomizes the impression of poor whites as well as the process of hereditary degeneracy through which they allegedly became so. He demonstrates that the stereotypes fostered by the likes of William Byrd had been accepted as gospel and are reiterated as (mis)conceptions of white trash.

Although there was much disagreement regarding the cause of poor whites' degeneracy among abolitionists and secessionists, they agreed that there was certainly a class of poor, nonslaveholding whites that were socially and culturally distinct; that the groups' degeneracy was its most distinct characteristic, and that the group was a social problem that must be addressed to save the nation and the white race from further corruption (Wray 63). Faulkner would have agreed with this observation, for ideas akin to Hundley's, not Stowe's, abounded after the Civil War, and a solution presented itself. Reconstruction's end saw the withdrawal of Northern troops from the South, and research into the problem of poor whites commenced.

Richard Dugdale, a prison reformer, studied six prisoners in a New York penitentiary who were close relatives and whose criminality and poverty he thought may be genetically linked. The research collected on the prisoners, dubbed "The Jukes," was interpreted as evidence that degeneracy was hereditary. Dugdale concluded that consanguinity – the sexual reproduction of relatives – not geographical isolation and convenience, was the cause for poor whites' degeneracy in combination with women of that class having the tendency to be infected with impudicity, immodesty or

shamelessness (13, 32). This marked the beginning of a powerful eugenics movement in the United States which served to further alienate poor whites by providing scientific evidence of their inferiority as at the same time, the nation's leaders seemed to support the idea of blood purity.

In Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address of 1863 and his Second Inaugural Address in 1865 shortly before the cessation of the Civil War, he made the following assertion: "...every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid for by another drawn with the sword...so still it must be said the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether" (Erkkila 6). Despite President Lincoln's claims about the cleansing power of blood revivals in the form of blood punishment for the nation's sin of slavery, Others who were excluded by the Constitution still fell on the borders of Americanism. Poor whites continued to be feared by white elitists for the possibility of blood pollution through blood mixing even during a time when the universal rights of man were celebrated with a post-abolitionist victory. Said focus on blood is iterated in the depiction of white race theory by predominantly literary men of the mid 1800s.

The sketches of poor whites offered by novelists, journalists, playwrights, and travel writers supported the popular myth of the clay eater for an increasingly literate audience. For example, Ralph Waldo Emerson's theory of race burgeoned in the time period preceding and immediately following the Civil War. Emerson, father of Transcendentalism and the American Renaissance, is not as widely known today for his studies in Anglo-Saxon ideology or its influence on the concept of American whiteness as for his other writing, but his theories in *English Traits*, *Genius of the Anglo Saxon Race*, and *The Anglo-American* epitomize white race purity ideals during the

Reconstruction period. He was heavily influenced by German thinkers such as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Johann Joachim Winckelmann and worked closely with Thomas Carlyle. In Emerson's opinion, to be American was to be Saxon: blonde hair, blue eyes, a tall stature, and ferocious manhood were all amiable traits to be desired and were inherited from the Saxons (Painter 165). Emerson contributed to racial theory with his fetish for tall, pale, blondes with blue eyes of Anglo-Saxon ancestry. His research into white race theory was also evident in his interest in skulls, head measurements, the drawing of racial lines, the affixing of racial stereotypes, and the ranking of races using evolution as a point of development (Painter 200). Emerson's theories concerning the necessity to prevent mixing pure white blood with blacks now free were not lost on the post-Civil War South; however, he was largely ignored after supporting abolition. Obviously the fear of racial mixing was not exclusive to miscegenation; poor whites were considered inferior and not worthy of reproducing as well. When the eugenics movement became popular, the notion of "pure" whiteness came to the forefront.

Francis Galton, Charles Darwin's cousin, is credited as founder of eugenics, and sought to prove that hereditary characteristics such as intelligence and morality were biologically transmissible. Galton determined after completing numerous cases studies, of which *The Kallik Family* (1912) is the most famous, that ancestry is of the utmost importance and environment and education matter not at all. For the good of society and safety of the public, those deemed degenerate must not procreate: "Like slavery on the black side of the color line, indenture, crime, or illegitimacy on the white side means permanent damnation. Slum clearance and other palliative remedies are equally useless, for these mentally defective people who can never be taught to live otherwise than they

have been living are promiscuously breeding squalor” (qtd. in Painter 273). This notion was rapidly adopted by those who feared the demise of the white racial purity.

David Starr Jordan, youngest college president ever at Indiana University in 1885 and later Stanford University’s first president, used his impressive scholarly credentials to boost degenerate family studies. He believed that the lineage of England’s pauper vandals was being bred and transported through Virginia to California and that generation after generation of inefficient men, sickly women, and mischievous children were thriving under the guise of their invisible whiteness or non-whiteness. Jordan argued on behalf of the value of superior blood and the menace to society of inferior blood and enlisted Francis Galton to his cause (Painter 268).

Elite white Americans of this time period adopted the notion of hereditary character/racial traits, including criminality, favoring biological predetermination rather than environmental causing the behavior of those in the lower class of their own race. Essentially, in this argument of nature versus nurture, nature prevailed. This pervaded through the late 1800s, when hoards of degenerate families were discovered living in western Virginia and North Carolina by Anthony Stokes who was researching British convicts. These “crackers” were descendants of convicts transported from Great Britain to Virginia and inherited “so much profligancy from their ancestors that they are the most abandoned set of men on earth” (Painter 264). Though he concedes that some of the degenerates were “stern, manly, and honest,” Theodore Roosevelt reflected popular opinion in 1889 when he described most poor whites as unsavory:

...people drawn from the worst immigrants that perhaps ever were brought to America – the mass of convict servants, redemptioners, and the like, who formed such an excessively undesirable substratum to the otherwise excellent population of the tidewater regions of Virginia and the

Carolinas. Many of the Southern crackers or poor whites spring from this class, which also in the backwoods gave birth to generations of violent and hardened criminals, and to an even greater number of shiftless, lazy, cowardly cumberers of the earth's surface. (Painter 264)

Many successive scientists, such as Charles Davenport, were able to advance their careers "through the detection and treatment of "mental defectives," who were, in the South at least, disproportionately found among poor rural whites" (Wray 70). Galton expanded on Jefferson's early suggestion that whites be separated from "inferiors" and believed that isolation was the answer to maintaining pure white blood: "Fearing mixture with and blood pollution by an inferior...[he] proposes that the offending member be, in effect, castrated from the social body of the American republic in much the same way that those who commit rape, sodomy, and bestiality are to be punished – in accord with "republican principle" – not by death but by dismemberment" (Erkkila 40). The lines of racial purity had been drawn in blood, further racializing and enhancing the visibility of whiteness as all impurities are to ideally be removed from society.

Eugenics researcher Elizabeth Kite studied poor whites inhabiting New Jersey's Pine Barrens and published her findings in the *Survey*, a social science journal, in 1913. Dubbing the poor whites of that area "Pine Rats," she concluded that laws written for "normal people" were not effective in application to the "Pine Rats." After observing the degenerate state of poor whites, Kite concluded that they posed a moral and social threat with their lazy, lustful, and cunning ways and that permitting them to vote, attend school, or in any way participate in civilized society would be devastating. This is a notion which Faulkner explores in his creation of the Snopes clan, who infect Frenchman's Bend, and later, larger Mississippi cities with their deplorable habits. To solve this problem, Kite advocated segregation or institutionalization. However, by the 1930's this approach

seemed timid. Other eugenicists believed that compulsory sterilization was the only means of preventing the propagation and proliferation of the unfit poor white. Those supporters of involuntary sterilization held that degenerate poor white families biologically transmitted morally unacceptable and socially and culturally inappropriate qualities to future generations. The justification for sterilization was found in Darwin's theory of evolution in 1880, which provided the framework for these ideas about the natural basis of social order and fit nicely with the prevailing ideology that those who achieved social dominance were also biologically superior. This new force of eugenicists "sought the origins of social and economic problems like poverty, unemployment, and crime in human biology and heredity. They posited the existence of 'degenerative germ plasm' – bad genes that carried unwanted social traits such as pauperism, laziness, promiscuity and licentiousness, inbreeding, restlessness, and delinquency" (Wray 71). What is the solution to this problem of degenerate poor white trash? It is one from which the Nazis would later find inspiration for their "problem" of racial impurity.

Eugenicists hit Americans where it would count with their argument – right in the wallet – arguing that the social costs of dealing with degenerate offspring through institutionalization, imprisonment, charity, poorhouses, and psychiatric wards would strain the nation's economy. Also, supporters of sterilization voiced concern regarding reproduction, public health, and social hygiene, fearing that if left intact, poor whites would spread their vice and immorality throughout the nation. The scientific methodologies of eugenics, craniometry, intelligence testing, and bodily measurements, were analyzed statistically and offered scientific, objective proof to the pure white, Anglo elite that the hegemonic nature of society was natural. According to Matt Wray, "What

united many eugenicists was a primary concern with “race betterment”; they feared the threat posed by poor rural white “degenerates” as much or more than they feared the presence of other races and ethnicities, miscegenation, or intermarriage among immigrants and “native” whites” (73). This notion resonates in Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* as Sutpen rejects his first wife, who is allegedly biracial, and their mixed-race child.

Unlike Dugdale’s study of “The Jukes” and Kite’s of “Pine Rats,” eugenics researcher Arthur Estabrook wrote in *The Mongrel Virginian* (1926) that race mixing, not consanguinity, was the cause of poor whites’ general segregation from the community (qtd in Wray 82). Eugenics began to focus on the feeble-minded as state and federal governments were concerned with the spread of idiocy. “Feeble-minded” came to represent broad categories of mental deficiencies and deviant behaviors associated with insanity or low intelligence. While Sutpen’s mixed offspring, Charles Bon, cannot be labeled as feeble-minded, Mink and Ike Snopes in *The Snopes Trilogy* certainly can. Henry H. Goddard’s work, *The Kallikak Family: A Study in the Heredity of Feeble-mindedness* (1912), piloted the way in intelligence testing, determining and differentiating those deemed mentally defective. Goddard and his colleagues contended that feeble-mindedness was not distributed evenly or randomly throughout the nation; instead it was concentrated where populations of poor whites thrived. Opinions like these, “proven” using complicated charts and graphs developed from the results of field studies, lead to a devastating decision regarding sterilization in the 1926 Supreme Court case *Buck v. Bell*, in which the sterilization of Carrie Buck was mandated due to her supposed “feeble-mindedness.” Of this groundbreaking case, Faulkner could not have been

ignorant. In fact, his inclusion of Mink Snopes' trial in *The Hamlet* suggests his knowledge of the proceedings. Though in 1907, only Indiana had passed a law requiring the sterilization of poor hereditary stock (people deemed feeble-minded), by 1926 23 other states had adopted such legislation. In the beginning, few sterilizations were performed, but from 1917 to 1927, the number rose from 1,422 to 8,515 (Wray 85-7). Diagnosis of feeble-mindedness and institutionalization led to this increase. Faulkner published *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Hamlet* less than a decade later and their inclusion of a fecund poor white trash indicates his knowledge of and agreement with laws implemented to control those poor white trash deemed feeble-minded. Sterilization was seen as an "efficient, practical, and convenient solution" to the problem of preventing the feeble-minded, like Ike and Mink Snopes, from procreating.

Faulkner's knowledge and opinion of this case are presented as Mink Snopes is tried for the murder of a neighbor whom he owed money. Not only was Mink stupid enough to kill a man to whom everyone knew he was indebted, but he was so absent-minded that he failed to procure the dead man's wallet. As a result, Mink is jailed and can create no poor white offspring in the image of himself. In the midst of the plight of the poor whites' bout with sterilization, some attempted to prove that poor whites were not simply feeble-minded, but instead suffered from a disease which caused anemia, bloat, and even the desire to cleanse the body through eating dirt. This theory found that poor whites were not hereditarily degenerate, instead they were plagued with what is today called hookworm, as seen in the character of Mink Snopes.

The Rockefeller Sanitary Commission to Eradicate Hookworm Disease was founded to irradiate the intestinal parasite. The so called "germ of laziness" infected two

million people and was not prejudiced toward the socio-economic or racial background of its victims; however, some skeptics still thought it indigenous to the poor white and the result “was the legitimization and authorization of the general view that the habits and customs of poor rural whites caused infection and disease and that diseases were the cause of poverty” (Wray 104). Ultimately, the perception that the hookworm and the Southern poor white were biologically linked prevailed, and it was thought that the eradication of one would cause the elimination or amelioration of the other. However, Walter Hines Page and his publication of *The World's Work* conveyed that “to improve the physical health of the southern poor whites was to return them to useful labor, opening the door for moral uplift, economic rebirth, and civic renewal throughout the entire region” with the elimination of the hookworm (Wray 118). As a result of the public health campaign funded by Rockefeller, the hookworm was treated and prevented, and poor whites were in some ways cured of the disease of laziness and found employment in textile mills, earning themselves the nickname *lintheads*. The hookworm crusade served to reposition the poor white in the South's economic scheme, and in the New South, they began to shed some of their poor white stigma and make advances in the workforce. However, Faulkner was inspired by these discoveries, and in his characterization of Mink Snopes, who scarcely wore shoes and ate poorly, offers his opinion of poor whites' proper position in society.

In the formation of a white race, Jay Watson claims that whites possess properties, values and morals, but more importantly a secure sense of self. This concept is represented in Faulkner as the failed white man whose sense of self is distorted and whose morals are questionable (Sutpen, Uncle Gavin) and the half-white protagonist who

cannot possess any of the above (Charles Bon). Thomas Sutpen's "fall into class consciousness leaves him white yet not-White, since the primary marker of whiteness, which is an experience of the self as unmarked by race, is no longer available to him; and this intense self-consciousness carries forward into all his subsequent performances of whiteness, which are unfailingly awkward" (Watson 17). Watson cites another category of whiteness, performance, which has not to do with how whites see themselves and others, even subconsciously, but with how whites act. In sum, whites are not to act in a way that acknowledges their whiteness, which is a rule broken time and again by Thomas Sutpen and Mink Snopes who display traits of white trash and its degeneracy.

That there are two historical extremes of whiteness, elites and white trash, is irrefutable, as is the fact that one has historically had more leverage:

If, however, the day-to-day life of a society proceeds relatively uninterrupted, and people do not vociferously question or rebel against the principles on which the society rests, a dominant class and its ideology can be said to have achieved hegemonic status. People have, in essence, accepted this ideology as their own. The bourgeois class and its ideology of equal rights and opportunities and reward based on merit have obviously enjoyed a hegemonic status in America for some time. (Railey 4)

In America, the idea that one achieves earning though worth is accepted. It is the contestable idea of what constitutes worth that must be questioned in order for poor whites to gain status. Railey points out that "At the heart of Southern ideological history during most of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the conflict between two opposing ideologies – paternalism and liberalism" (Railey 6-7). This belief of the existence of conflicting ideologies, however, was held by elites and indirectly forced upon white trash. Faulkner ascribed to neither, combining favorable aspects of both

paternalism and liberalism, such as moral righteousness and social mobility, to formulate his ideology.

2. Faulkner's White Trash Life

The economic condition in Oxford in the 1890s was a paradox; while agriculture was hit hard with cotton at only six cents a pound, the mechanisms of the industrial revolution awakened in the form of technology and commerce. This further injured tenant farmers and brought many poor whites to town. During this decade, on September 25, 1897, William Cuthbert Fa[u]lkner was born. After the turn of the century, when Faulkner was an impressionable youth: "...the numbers of white tenants swelled. More and more, they came into competition with blacks for tenancy on the best farms. Often white landlords preferred black tenants to white, and in very bad years in Mississippi and elsewhere in the South, white [tenant] farmers organized to drive black tenants off the land by violence" (Williamson 153-54). The power of poor whites to band together and effectively drive blacks into town and away from the employment they all sought is noted by Faulkner in his creation of the Snopes family who demand tenancy through blackmail. While early in Faulkner's career his writing suggested that he was concerned with the problem of blacks becoming violent as a result of their dissatisfaction, later writing suggests that Faulkner was more anxious about and sympathetic to poor whites. By the second and third decades of the twentieth century, there was little attention paid by William Faulkner to blacks as a social or physical threat or as victims of racism. Instead, the tides were turning and the social and economic aspirations of poor whites were a more severe menace as reflected in his writing. In fact, his knowledge of the history of whiteness and his own experience with white trash formed Faulkner's focus in his writing.

In 1936 Faulkner published *Absalom, Absalom!* and four years later came *The Hamlet*. According to his most renowned biographer, Joel Williamson, “Race was central, integral, and vital in the...great novels of the earlier phase of his work. Indeed...these works remain, probably, the ultimate indictment not merely of the injustice of the racial establishment in the South in and after slavery, but of its capacity for the often subtle, always brutal reduction of humanity, both black and white” (7). However, Williamson fails to recognize that later Faulkner’s foci were the rise and subsequent infestation of poor whites.

Kevin Railey correctly observes that “Faulkner was obsessed with history” (ix). In his book *Natural Aristocracy*, Railey addresses the history available to Faulkner, and the relationship between his position in history and his fiction, asserting that Faulkner’s authorial ideology resembles Thomas Jefferson’s notion of natural aristocracy in America. During Faulkner’s lifetime, the most dominant ideologies operating were paternalism, liberalism, and populism, of which the first two affect Faulkner’s canon. Investigation into these ideologies and their embodiment in his work reveal that Faulkner was more concerned with intra-class conflict than with social conditions generally. This is evident in the character of Thomas Sutpen of *Absalom, Absalom!* and Flem Snopes of *The Hamlet*, who represent what happens to society if actions are not moderated by the adoption and recognition of paternalist values. Faulkner agonized over the future of a democracy whose enforcers of ethics and empire had lost power (white elites) as is evidenced though his protagonists’ deaths due to their lack of paternalist values. It is not since Sutpen is wealthy that he can permeate the impenetrable boundaries of the upper class, but because the diminishing rulers believe that Sutpen is white and because as a

poor white he presents a considerable threat if not assimilated. The rigid Southern ideology of race permitted a vagrant like Sutpen to become a part of the aristocracy. While Flem was not born into a paternalistic society, it is because he does not adopt paternalistic habits that he is an unfit leader of Jefferson and is consequently killed by those whom he failed to support.

Paternalism is “a social order that is stable, hierarchical, consciously elitist, and therefore fundamentally antithetical to liberalism” (Railey 7). Paternalists accede that people are inherently unequal; some are born to rule, others to obey. Liberals, conversely, hold that all men are created equal and that individualism, social mobility, and economic fluidity within a society promote equality. The paternalist social arrangement in which plantocrats, who firmly believed that they were better men with wealth that resulted from their inherent qualities, morality, and sophisticated abilities, ruled over all others, including poor whites who were just above slaves on the social ladder. However tenuous their hegemonic rule may have been, they maintained that control by pitting poor whites against blacks and aligning the poor whites with themselves. Poor whites were placated by the plantocracy who offered them some social and political freedom, but never social mobility, as indicated in Wash Jones’s relationship with Thomas Sutpen. After the Civil War, planters were the first to recover and find their place in society. But, as sharecropping was now a way of life, they found themselves having to confront liberalism and its open for all economic policy in a market economy. Paternalist politicians, however, remained in power in Mississippi for some time after the War for Southern Independence because middle class and poor whites saw them as policing the newly freed blacks.

As farmers struggled, merchants earned a high profit and began buying land for which they hired tenants. This caused those merchants to become more liberal-minded as they were unifying the classes. As planters and their heirs joined the growing class of merchants, paternalism allowed them to associate themselves with a sort of Golden Age and stressed the gap between themselves and poor whites (Railey 12-13). Will Varner is an example of such a merchant who profited from the idea that money, not necessarily morality, equals power, which challenges the paternalistic criteria for authority. The merchants who became liberal-minded and the remaining plantocrats who clung to their paternalist values could have joined forces as the ruling elite and forever kept down poor whites and blacks; instead they created a struggle for power in the upper class, the Redeemers (merchants) versus the plantocrats. Redeemers sought power for the South during Reconstruction and wanted rebuilding to occur independent of the Northern investment; while they, too, believed in the inherent superiority of the upper class, they countered this belief with the idea that powerholders have a certain responsibility for their dependants and that individuals' efforts, not their birthrights brought them what they deserved. Certainly Flem Snopes, who rose from obscurity to relatively grandiose status using only his own cunning and ability to capitalize on others' weaknesses, is exemplary of the Redeemers' beliefs, like Varner and Ratcliffe.

The Redeemers' hold on political power became tenuous when in the 1880s poor whites began to realize that their own interests were not important and formed the Farmers' Alliance and the Knights of Labor. Sharecropping, tenant farming, and the convict lease system proved that the noblesse oblige of the Redeemers' version of paternalism was becoming a myth of the lost cause. So, the novels illustrate these

attitudes corresponding with their temporal settings and Faulkner's own attitude is a product of these ideas. Mink Snopes, Flem's murdering cousin and convict farmer, is representative of the Redeemers' descent, because although he was a share cropping farmer, he possessed none of the cherished values. The voters of 1890 did not seek social reform; instead they desired to protect what they considered civilization from the lower class. Thus, the upper and middle classes joined forces to ensure that the doors of opportunity were not swung open as the Populists, the Redeemer's successors, desired. The Populists party went full steam ahead when cotton prices fell in the 1890s to unite workers of all kinds and expand the powers of the government at the expense of paternal, corporate interests, combining alliances along regional, class, and racial lines. Progressivism came in on the heels of the Populists' failures due to the majority of the voting population's concern about equal rights being extended to included blacks. Progressivism still encouraged the development of the middle class and of working values, but strongly rooted itself in racism and the inability for the lower class of white to mobilize. V. K. Ratcliff, the traveling sewing machine salesman and number one advocate of the removal of Snopeses from Frenchman's Bend, is an archetypal example of those progressives who sought to join forces in combating the invasion of white trash. Similarly, Tomas Vardaman and Theodore Bilbo represented Progressive governments which ruled Mississippi during Faulkner's lifetime: "When he was born, paternalism had already become mostly a residual ideology, liberalism was well on its way to rising to dominance, and populism was in the process of being co-opted by the forces of liberalism and progressivism" (Railey 28). Though Faulkner wrote later, his writing was still influenced by the schools of thought prominent in his early years. Faulkner's writing

demonstrates his inclination towards the encouragement of earned social mobility coupled with moral decency due to his placement among dueling ideologies. Faulkner was conscious of his awareness of history and of his place in it:

You get born and you try this and you don't know why only you keep trying it and you are born at the same time with a lot of other people, all mixed up with them, like trying to, having to, move your arms and legs with strings only the same strings are hitched to all the other arms and legs and the others all trying to move and they don't know why either. (*Absalom!* 211)

By mentioning the ties which bind all people at birth and through life, Faulkner signifies his awareness of existing during a time when shifts in ideology were overwhelming and became so abundant and obtrusive that people knew not what belief to adopt, making his choice as a subscriber to the values of paternalism and liberalism, all the more difficult.

Not long after publishing *Absalom, Absalom!*, a book which contains paternalistic values yet strays from them, Faulkner published the first book in the Snopes Trilogy, *The Hamlet*, which seems to suggest that because Jody and Will Varner exist, there are Flem Snopeses in the world. The Varners, because they are powerful and white, give Snopes something to admire and to aspire to while at the same time upholding the hierarchical system which keeps poor whites poor. Kevin Railey argues that "Ultimately, Faulkner was afraid of liberalism and its effects on the direction of the South and the country, and he was afraid that the death of all of paternalism's values would allow the hordes to sweep away all that was sacred" (43). However, as his acceptance into the bourgeois world at Charlottesville implies, he seems to have adopted the liberal idea that reward is based on merit and the importance and content of personal achievement, believing that those at the top of the social hierarchy can get there using their own talents, abilities, and character. However, Faulkner eventually concedes that paternalism and liberalism must

balance themselves in order for social harmony to be achieved. Thomas Sutpen and Flem Snopes, arguably not amiable characters, represent the ability to rise above seemingly impassible obstacles to obtain objects of desire through personal tribulation. There is apparently a shift in the severity of Faulkner's distaste for amoral white trash between the two novels; first it seems that Faulkner fears the ability of poor whites to become socially mobile, and then it seems his fears are realized and a solution is immediately necessary.

In order to fully understand Faulkner and his work, one must comprehend the conditions of his surroundings. Although he was born in 1897, well after the antebellum period, attitudes of the time, especially racial ones, were reflected in his works in the perspectives of Compsons and Coldfields. Williamson writes about the complexity of the structure of the Antebellum South, which correlates with Faulkner's novels:

At the bottom of the white caste were the poor whites who were generally despised by both blacks and other whites and sometimes referred to by them as "poor white trash." The great mass of white Southerners were yeoman farmers who might, indeed, own one or more slaves, but who turned their hands to the very same tasks as their slaves. At the top stood the largest slaveholders (often identified as those owning fifty slaves or more) whose work was management and who were somehow able, usually, to enlist the support of other whites in the defense of the system, from which they derived great power and wealth. (12)

It is to this poor white trash class of whites that Sutpen and Snopes belonged. The "somehow" to which Williamson refers was the invention of the white race after Bacon's Rebellion, confirmed by historians Allen and Saxton. The potential for this viral, good-for-nothing class of poor whites to unite and rise was problematic, as Faulkner's writing echoes in the character of Wash Jones. In Shreve's efforts to understand the deplorable conditions of the South post-Civil War in *Absalom, Absalom!*, he speaks of Sutpen's demotion from owning Sutpen's Hundred to owning a store on it:

...his dream of restoring his Sutpen's Hundred was not only in vain, but that what he had left of it would never support his family and so running his little crossroads store with a stock of plowshares and hame strings and calico and kerosene and cheap beads and ribbons and a clientele of freed niggers and (what is it? The word? White what? – Yes, trash) with Jones for a clerk. (Faulkner 147)

Sutpen, a fallen man after the war, allows an inferior white male whose existence has always been dependant upon him to work in his store. This displays the joining together of the white race during Reconstruction while still demonstrating with Shreve's inclusion of the label 'white trash' that there were striations or degrees of whiteness, proving Faulkner's concern with the distance between white elite and white trash. Perhaps Faulkner's awareness of whiteness can be attributed to his own family's defilement of its racial purity.

William C. Falkner, William Faulkner's great grandfather, was a slave owner who had several bi-racial children. According to Williamson, "With amazing frequency, white men of property recognized their mulatto children as beneficiaries in their wills. Some kinspeople, scandalized and outraged, moved aggressively to break such wills – occasionally, by having the man declared incompetent or, more bluntly, insane" (25). This may have been a source of some anxiety to William Faulkner; the idea that his part-black relatives, spawned of his great-grandfather and a negro slave, could be recognized would have shamed him. After his rise to relative affluence, Faulkner tried to have those part-black relatives of his residing in Oxford moved and even attempted to bulldoze their homestead. Faulkner reveals his opinion of half-whites' proper place in society in his characterization of Clytie, Sutpen's daughter with a black slave in *Absalom, Absalom!*, and Charles Bon, his son with a part-black Haitian woman. Clytie is described as "his own get...of his wild niggers" and is designated to perform the household chores of a

typical slave (*Absalom!* 48). Bon was shown even more contempt because he posed a larger threat as the betrothed to Sutpen's white daughter, Judith. Bon is "at least an intending bigamist even if not an out and out blackguard, and on whose dead body four years later Judith was to find the photograph of the other woman and the child" (Faulkner, *Absalom!* 71). Bon is killed by his half-brother, Henry, not for Bon's intent to marry Henry's sister while at the same time being "married" to an octoroon mistress, but for Bon's attempt at miscegenation. Henry had come to terms with "the existence of the eighth part negro mistress and the sixteenth part negro son, granted even the morganic ceremony – a situation which was as much a part of a wealthy young New Orleansians's social and fashionable equipment as his dancing slippers –" (Faulkner, *Absalom!* 80). Yet this knowledge, conveyed upon Henry by his father during Christmas holiday was not enough to deter Henry from promoting or not objecting to the union between Bon and Judith. While fighting the Civil War, Sutpen again met with Henry to play his "trump card," bestowing upon Henry the fact that Bon was not only his half-brother, but also part negro (222, 235). The narrator speculates on the conversation between Henry and Bon afterward:

"You are my brother."

"No, I'm not. I'm the nigger that's going to sleep with your sister.

Unless you stop me, Henry" (Faulkner, *Absalom!* 286).

Charles Bon's ensuing death proves that Faulkner did not promote tainting of the white race through miscegenation, leading him to create characters such as Bon and Clytie whose tragic lives and deaths reflect his perspective on the obstacles inherent to bi-racial or non pure white identities. Instead, Faulkner shows a race obsessed South that

whiteness has classes within itself that merit attention, too. But what led Faulkner to create Thomas Sutpen and Flem Snopes, despicable men by all accounts, men who rose from rags to riches? Possibly, again, Faulkner's own family history.

Further evidence of his great-grandfather's potential influence upon William Faulkner's work is the fact that William C. Falkner reportedly arrived in Pontotoc in 1842, a village near Oxford, a penniless teenager (Williamson 14-5). He left the mountains in search of a better life after he cut his brother's scalp with a hoe blade. He made a name for himself as a brave soldier in the Mexican War (who sold contraband goods) and soon married the daughter of a respectable man with some inheritance. His life very nearly mirrors Thomas Sutpen's rise from scalawag to socialite. Yet, Falkner was a man on the make; he was lawyer, land jobber, businessman, railroad pioneer, war hero, and politician (Williamson 32). In short, he took advantage of every opportunity presented to him and was very vested in personal advancement, whatever the cost to those around him. Because of his status as a middle class man who rose in social and economic standing through marriage and who supported the social structure which isolated lower class individual, W. C. was considered, for the time, liberal. He was full of vainglory; Falkner thought so much of himself that he had an eight foot marble statue of his likeness carved, which now marks his grave (Williamson 57). In line with this liberalism, "Whatever family responsibilities he felt were focused on his immediate, nuclear family, not on any notion of an extended family that he could easily have claimed. His social position and even the image he had of himself were based on wealth and possessions, not on a sense of refinement, manners, wisdom, or responsible leadership" (Railey 33). He, thus, epitomized what William Faulkner feared – a leader

lacking any notion of paternalistic familial responsibility whose primary motivation is economic status. W.C. let his rise in status get the better of him and killed a(nother) man, Robert Hindman, over a local election. His death however, at the hand of a lowly businessman, was not unlike Thomas Sutpen's, who is murdered by a poor white who works for him, or Flem Snopes's, who is murdered by a cousin whom he denies refuge in a ploy concocted by his daughter.

Like W.C., Thomas Sutpen of *Absalom, Absalom!* earns his wealth and notoriety the old fashioned way – he works for it. Grandfather Compson, whose knowledge of Sutpen is conveyed through his grandson, tells of Sutpen's analogous awakening to the harsh realities of a poor man's life:

All of a sudden he discovered, not what he wanted to do but what he had to do, had to do it whether he wanted to or not, because if he did not do it he knew that he could never live with himself for the rest of his life, never live with what all the men and women that had died to make him had left inside of him for him to pass on, with all the dead ones waiting and watching to see if he was going to do it right, fix things right so that he would be able to look in the face not only the old dead ones but all the living ones...And that at the very moment when he discovered what it was, he found out that this was the last thing in the world he was equipped to do because he not only had not known that he would have to do this, he did not even know that it existed to be wanted, to need to be done.
(Faulkner, *Absalom!* 178-9)

The thing that has to be done is to break free of poverty, and young Sutpen, naturally, did not know that his living conditions and those of his ancestors and unborn children were deficient and devoid of prosperity until he encountered otherwise at the age of fourteen. Before his family descended from the mountains of Virginia, Sutpen was unaccustomed to a traditionally hierarchical social structure, race, and economic status. Previously:

what few other people he knew lived in log cabins boiling with children like the one he was born in – men and grown boys who hunted or lay before the fire on the floor while the women and older girls stepped back

and forth across them to reach the fire to cook, where the only colored people were Indians and you only looked down at them over your rifle sights, were he has never even heard of, never imagined, a place, a land divided neatly up and actually owned by men who did nothing but ride over it on fine horses or sit in fine clothes on the galleries of big houses while other people worked for them. (Faulkner, *Absalom!* 179)

Like W. C. Falkner, who traveled to Mississippi with nothing and from nowhere, Supten is determined to leave his past behind him. But before arriving in Tidewater, a region rich in Virginia plantations, young Sutpen is naive to the hegemonic aspects of wealth represented by plantation life:

...he did not even imagine then that there was any such way to live or to want to live, or that there existed all the objects to be wanted which there were, or that the ones who owned the objects could not only look down on the ones that didn't, but could be supported in the down-looking not only by the other who owned objects too but by the very ones that were looked down on that didn't own objects and knew they never would. (Faulkner, *Absalom!* 179)

Supten's ascension into reality from innocence is marked by the recognition of race and of subsequent classes within race. Grandfather Compson, the narrator, notes that Supten observes those who have power by virtue of their possessions and those who want power and know they would never have it, yet still support those keeping them from achieving their desires, much like Wash Jones. This is the privilege of whiteness witnessed by Dyer, Wray, and Hill, and historians Allen, Saxton, and Painter, which holds that in order to completely assimilate into the traditional role of white elite male, one must not acknowledge or be aware of one's whiteness. Once Supten, and presumably W. C. Falkner, realized that "there was a country all divided and fixed and neat with a people living on it all divided and fixed and neat because of what color their skins happened to be and what they happened to own, and where a certain few men not only has the power

of life and death and barter and sale” they decided to become one of the men of power (Faulkner, *Absalom!* 179). William Faulkner, too, desired to be a man of power.

Faulkner was, in his opinion, a modern day patriarch when he scribed *Absalom, Absalom!*, something he always longed to be. He had married his high school sweetheart, bought an antebellum mansion, cared for his mother, his step-children, and his brother’s widow and children. Yet he was participating in capitalist pursuits as a Hollywood film writer and an author of critically renowned novels and stories. The ability for these conflicting ideologies, paternalism and liberalism, at their best to coexist is exemplified in the character of Thomas Sutpen. Sutpen’s family’s origins as poor whites living in what would become West Virginia represent the traditional liberal view point that all are created equal and can have what they earn:

Because where he lived the land belonged to anybody and everybody and so the man who would go to the trouble and work to fence off a piece of it and say ‘This is mine’ was crazy; and as for objects, nobody had any more of them than you did because everybody had just what he was strong enough or energetic enough to take and keep, and only that crazy man would go to the trouble to take or even want more than he could want or swap for powder and whiskey. (Faulkner, *Absalom!* 179)

In this world, all men were white, and all men had the right to achieve what they could.

On the way down the mountain, Sutpen descends upon the social structure of the paternalists, which separates blacks from whites and whites from other whites. Sutpen largely rejects this social order as he sees his father placed among the lowly poor whites whose only privilege is to beat blacks; yet, those blacks’ social and economic situations mirror poor whites’.

Sutpen’s encounter with a slave at the Tidewater plantation also represents the conflict that exists between liberalism and paternalism; paternalism provides the setting

in which a poor white is informed by a black slave that he is not permitted to enter the front door of an elite white's mansion while liberalism allows the rejected poor white to want and be able to obtain his own mansion with a door that he can police similarly. Sutpen, the discarded boy at the door, decided to make his own way and to seek equal rights through opportunities he creates for himself. Sutpen is liberalism embodied. Faulkner is strongly sympathetic as the young Sutpen learns of his worth in the plantocracy's society at the plantation door. He also acknowledges Sutpen's efforts to better himself through learning and making his own way. Faulkner depicts Sutpen's rebellion as justified as he has the right to reject a society which positions him based on his family's standing, but this becomes undesirable when Sutpen fails to use the power he gained for greater good. Sutpen observes the effects of paternalist plantocracy as he watches the plantation owner in the hammock:

...and the man who owned all the land and the niggers and apparently the white man who superintended the work, lived in the biggest house he had ever seen and spent most of the afternoon...in a barrel stave hammock between two trees, with his shoes off and a nigger who wore every day better clothes than he or his father and sisters had ever owned and ever expected to, who did nothing else but fan him and bring him drinks.
(Faulkner, *Absalom!* 184)

Here Faulkner's narrator and the class he represents posit the laziness and utter neglect of responsibility that total ownership of humans has created in the upper class. Then, those who have everything do nothing, and those with nothing do everything. The lassitude of the plantation owner is contrasted with the menial yet strenuous labor young Sutpen observes his sister performing:

...his sister pumping rhythmically up and down in the yard, her back toward him, shapeless in a calico dress and a pair of the old man's shoes unlaced and flapping about her bare ankles and broad in the beam as a cow, the very labor she was doing brutish and stupidly out of all

proportion to its reward: the very primary essence of labor, toil, reduced to its crude absolute which only a beast could and would endure. (Faulkner, *Absalom!* 190-1)

Because Faulkner recognized that the traditional order of society was problematic and created disproportionate strife for the poor white, he desired a remedy. It is from the destitute, poor white background that Supten rose to carve a life out of seemingly virgin ground with an equally minimal amount of experience with riches.

It is possible that Faulkner's wariness about the behavior of white trash was inspired by another grandparent, Charlie Butler, who was a town marshal. Butler shot and killed a local drunkard. His job caused him to encounter much that was considered morally repugnant, especially where poor whites were concerned: "A desire to punish bizarre or perverse sex also continued into the twentieth century. In Ripley, Jeffrey Long was secretly indicted by a grand jury that concluded that...he did commit that detestable and abominable crime against nature by then and there having sexual intercourse with a certain beast, to wit, a cow" (Williamson 99). In *The Hamlet*, Charlie's experience with arrests for bestiality committed by poor whites is mirrored in the character of Ike Snopes. When attempting to comfort a favorite cow that defecated on him, Ike:

following her again, speaking to her, trying to tell her how this violent violation of her maiden's delicacy is no shame, since such is the very iron imperishable warp of the fabric of love. But she would not hear. She continued to scrabble at the shifting rise, until at last he set his shoulder to her hams and heaved forward. Striving together, they mounted for a yard or so up the slope, the sand shifting and fleeing beneath their feet, before momentum and strength were spent together and motionless, they descended once more to the floor. (Faulkner, *The Hamlet* 192)

Despite being discouraged to continue this disgusting act by the cow's owner, Ike seemed unable to comprehend that such action was criminal and was helpless to stop himself from continuing to do it. In an effort to remove the spectacle from his property, the cow's

owner gifted her to Ike. Ike lives at Ms. Littlejohn's, who allows him to keep the cow in her stable. Lump, another of the unethical yet enterprising Snopeses, in turn sells tickets to a sort of peep show in the stable – one during which Ike copulates with the cow, serving to highlight the poor white trash characteristics of cunning and immorality in the forms of voyeurism and bestiality.

William Faulkner's familiarity with white trash is due to his family's encounters and problems with it. In addition to arresting those most lowly poor white criminals who committed bestiality, Charlie was a criminal himself. What led Charlie to kill a local drunkard, Sam Thompson, was Sam's accusation of Charlie as a "house-burning son-of-a-bitch" (Williamson 108). This insult, though ungrounded, was severe as "Arson – house burning, and barn burning too – was particularly the crime of the powerless, of slaves, "niggers," and poor whites, of sneaks and cowards. Arson was, indeed, a "mean advantage" that "a brave man" would not take" (Williamson 108). An insult of this kind would have merited retaliation, but death may have been a severe punishment. His inclusion of references to barn burning demonstrates that Faulkner knew of his family's somewhat shameful past and wanted to distance himself from association with the scruples of lower class whites:

The Snopes were people who had begun somewhere in the middling range of the Southern social order before the Civil War. By the turn of the century, however, they were being ground down from farm owning to farm tenantry for a share of the crop, heading toward farm laboring, working sporadically for whatever they could get, drifting, and wintering on sufferance in outbuildings. In the case of Ab Snopes, Flem's father, it was a powerlessness that he countered with a tactic that slaves had favored – the threat to burn master's barn under the cover of darkness. Arson, it seems, has always been a favored form of retaliation by the powerless of the world. One might begin with the master's barn, and end with the master's house – in extreme cases, at night with the master and his family sleeping in the house. (Williamson 329)

Barn burning is a crime purportedly committed by Ab Snopes and his family when their wishes were not met. When Will Varner, owner of most of Frenchman's Bend, learned that his son contracted with a Snopes, he commented, "Then you can point out to him which house to burn, too. Or are you going to leave that to him?" (Faulkner, *The Hamlet* 12). Jody Varner reasons that he cannot break the contract with assurance that his barn will not be burnt given the circumstances: "And here comes a man and rents it on shares that the last place he rented a barn got burnt up. It don't matter whether he actually burnt that barn or not, though it will simplify matters if I can find out for sho he did. The main thing is, it burnt while he was there and the evidence was such that he felt called on to leave the country" (Faulkner, *The Hamlet* 13). Though he plans to force Snopes off the property peacefully, Varner soon learns that Snopes is connected with the burning of another barn, which deters him and leads him to accommodate Snopes in every way possible in order to prevent his barns or houses from suffering the same fate. Tenant farming and barn burning are further proof that Snopeses are white trash as is the fact that the fear of them enables their rise to power.

While Charlie, Faulkner's grandfather, was acquitted in the murder of Sam Thompson and resumed his duties as town manager, he absconded with his octoroon mistress later in life, which brought insurmountable shame to his family (Williamson 123). After his departure, Oxford, Mississippi, flailed economically. In 1890, during which *The Hamlet* was set:

...it was especially hard on tenants who rented their farms for a share of the crop. Sharecropping might be fair enough when the price paid for the crop exceeded the cost. The assumption was that roughly a third of the cotton crop would pay the landlord for the use of the land, a third for the supplies required to raise the crop (seed, fertilizer, mules), and another

third would go to the tenant for his labor....Others came into the towns and villages seeking work of any kind, and still others – the poorest of the poor – simply existed on the land as best they could, usually as exceedingly poor paid farm laborers. It was from this element that William Faulkner would draw the Snopes clan. (Williamson 132-33)

This farming phenomenon, which preceded the Great Depression, was not lost on Faulkner. His writing, especially the prominence of the Snopeses as characters or others like them, shows that he was keenly aware of the devastating effects of a downturn in the economy on the poorest of whites and further indicates that he feared the onslaught of the poorest whites who could not find employment as tenants or as mill workers and who consequently wandered into the town to steal as the Snopes do from any and all. Not only did they filch small goods from Varner's store, but they quite literally stole jobs from some townspeople. Similarly, Varner fears the arrival of more Snopeses as he inveighs Flem: "I want to make one pure simple demand of you and I want a pure and simple Yes or No for a answer. How many more is there? How much longer is this going on? Just what is it going to cost me to protect one goddamn barn full of hay?" (Faulkner, *The Hamlet* 74).

Faulkner recognized that much attention was given to the welfare of blacks in society, albeit they were segregated from the white population during his lifetime. Consequently, he was more frequently exposed the lower class whites and their antics and became familiar with the need to bring their behavior into accordance with the rest of the white population. According to Williamson, the idea of white racial purity and the preservation of it was popular during Faulkner's adolescence, causing him, like Emerson, to fear a blending of races (311). Because Faulkner was exposed at an early age to anxieties regarding race mixing, he was vested in the preservation of racial integrity. So,

Faulkner argued for the continuation of white homogeneity in his Snopes volumes, focusing his attention on poor whites as Sutpen and Snopes threatened the continuation of white elite authority when Sutpen married Ellen Coldfield and Snopes married Eula Varner. While *The Hamlet* was published in 1940, before Faulkner became what those opposed to his moderate liberal view called a “nigger lover,” a disastrous interview with Russell Howe in 1956 lead Faulkner to begin the Snopes tale anew. *The Hamlet* follows the demise of the peasant-run aristocracy as Flem marries into Will Varner’s family, and *The Town* (1957) is a continuation of the infiltration of white trash into once-sacred families and occupations traditionally reserved for paternalistic white elites. In particular Eula, Flem’s wife, has an affair with the town’s mayor and bank president, showing her moral laxity and the ability of her kind, and Flem himself, to be ruinous. Finally, in *The Mansion* (1959), white elites are shown to be powerless to defend themselves against white trash as Linda uses her sexual deviancy to take advantage of and abuse Gavin and V. K. Ratcliffe for protection and romantic fulfillment. If “In *The Hamlet*, the Snopeses represent a class of poor whites rising to usurp the positions of the peasantry and the old aristocracy and dominate the community,” then:

In *The Town* and *The Mansion*, Gavin and V. K....were forced to conclude that Snopesism was a set of values, an idea. Being a Snopes was neither a matter of nature or nurture. A Snopes by name might well possess genteel values, and an aristocrat by birth, like Jason Compson, could be a Snopes in essence. Indeed, in an early version of the Snopes story written in the 1920s, Faulkner had made Flem Snopes the son of an aristocrat and a poor white. At the end of the trilogy, completed in 1959, Flem was met and defeated, not by the peasant V. K. Ratcliff and the aristocrat Gavin Stevens, but rather by characters who were Snopeses themselves by name or blood. (Williamson 313-14)

This indicates that though white trash can grow and multiply, spreading their degeneracy rapidly, they are also prone to self destruction.

Consider the pace at which Flem overcomes his lowly status as a poor white and succeeds in a self-led mutiny of Frenchman's Bend's idea of normalcy with the assistance of a few family members. Snopes does this using the threat of barn burning to stake his claim in society:

And the next morning he who had never been seen in the village between Saturday night and Monday morning appeared at the church, and those who saw him looked at him for an instant in incredulous astonishment. In addition to the gray cloth cap and the gray trousers, he wore not only a clean white shirt but a necktie...and with the exception of the one which Will Varner himself wore to church it was the only tie in the while Frenchman's Bend. (*The Hamlet* 64)

Thereafter, Flem wears the necktie everyday, placing himself above Varner who only donned his tie on Sunday. Soon after Flem secures a position as Varner's store clerk, he also surpasses Jody, Varner's son, as the mill operator (*The Hamlet* 66). The problem with permitting poor white trash to infest civilization is that they were depicted as possessing, like all Snopeses, "that weasel-like quality of existing independent of his clothes so that although you could grasp and hold that you could not retrain the body itself from doing what it was doing until the damage had been done – a furious already dissipating concentration of energy vanishing the instant after the intention took shape" (*The Hamlet* 71). Based on his portrayal of the power of poor white once they become aware of the privileges accompanying white skin, Faulkner did not advocate their advance unless assuaged with the adoption of elite white morals.

Despite his dim portrayal of the majority of poor whites, Faulkner did have an affinity for the layman and the downtrodden. He bought a farm in Beat Two in Lafayette County and spoke of his appreciation for the "hard-working, common-sensical, usually poor, and sometimes violent people who frequently came into conflict with the town-

dwelling authorities” (Williamson 329). He sympathized with these plain folk who were very much on his mind as he wrote the Snopes volumes; but he only advocated their ascension from poverty to power if they also elevated their level of moral responsibility.

Without obtaining this requirement, the Snopeses are depicted as town invaders driven in by the fact that the Great Depression caused agriculture to be virtually non-profitable and the lower class whites had to seek hourly employment and shelter. Though Faulkner supported those who were able to rise above unfavorable economic circumstances and to make a better life for themselves, he did not sympathize with those who remained economically and morally stagnant and continued to create generations of poor folk who were unwilling or unable to work. This support is not offered to Flem Snopes because although he does better his economic situation, he does not improve his morality simultaneously. In his depiction of Ike Snopes is the epitome of the worthlessness and potential danger of poor white propagation: “The hulking shape – the backlooking face with its hanging mouth and pointed faun’s ears, the bursting overalls drawn across the incredible female thigh –” (*The Hamlet* 95). White trash is characterized here as physically unappealing and different because Faulkner did not have faith in the ability of poor whites to improve all aspects of themselves – not just their bank accounts. Faulkner’s response to race relations was reflective of the history of the South, which shows that whites, especially apologists, paternalistically preached that it was their responsibility to right the wrong done to blacks during slavery. When that failed, many, especially secessionists, turned towards violence and argued that only the blacks could solve the problems of their situation. They, too, felt that “the lower elements of the white world – the rednecks, crackers, and grits – would simply have to suffer from their own

ignorance until sheer pain caused them to gain a measure of wisdom” (Williamson 337). Anxiety regarding the power of this portion of the population caused Faulkner to write novels which underscored poor whites’ potential danger.

Some critics believe that it was Faulkner’s paternal grandfather, not his great-grandfather, who influenced his ideas about class and race the most, John Wesley Thompson Falkner. W.C. Falkner, John’s biological father, gave John to his brother, after whom he was named, when John’s mother died. John Wesley Thompson is the very relative who supplied W. C. with employment when he came empty-handed to Mississippi. Known for dressing in white suits and entertaining Confederate veterans and for not permitting his business acquaintances to enter his home due to his belief in the natural inequality of men, John identified with a different set of values than his liberal biological father, W.C.; he was a paternalist. John took his familial and social responsibilities seriously, caring for extended family and displaying concern for social stability and community improvement. Clearly, Faulkner had been exposed to both the liberal and paternalist traditions and adopted parts of each belief system. However, he had not experienced the plight of the Populists; there was no history of middle-class farmers in his family though he examines them in *The Hamlet* because of their historical significance. It is evident upon examining his writing that Faulkner was heavily influenced by his grandfather, who was “Steeped in the romantic heroism of the Old South, capitalist in his economic pursuits but paternalist in his social and family values” (Railey 36). As a young, conflicted, aspiring paternalist, Faulkner found himself an outsider in most social situations, frequently having to create exorbitant stories to attempt to belong. He believed that he should not have to participate in capitalist pursuits and

placed heavy emphasis on a sense of honor. This personal attribute likely influenced his writing and caused him to highlight poor whites' mistakes and misperformances in order to divert attention from his own.

This is typical of Miss Rosa Coldfield's characterization; she, as the person from whom a majority of the information in *Absalom, Absalom!* comes, upholds paternalist values as she rejects Sutpen's proposition of sex before marriage and exists on the gifts of others, refusing to seek gainful employment or to depend upon Sutpen. Quinten's father, Mr. Compson, also upholds paternalistic values when he encourages Quinten to go see Miss Rosa upon her request. Faulkner relished in the chivalric ideals of paternalism and wanted to be viewed in such a light. Therefore, he created Sutpen to establish the fact that chivalry includes the virtues of ethics and honor, two that poor whites seem to be lacking.

Yet, the way Faulkner saw himself was not reflected in others' eyes. While he believed himself to be the ultimate provider, faithful husband, and loving father, the treatment of his family members indicates that they believed differently. In order to bridge this gap, writing allowed indirect participation in capitalism and his topics permitted him to fully explain and eventually call into question his paternalistic fundamentals, which were shifting. One of *Absalom, Absalom!*'s narrators, Quinten Compson, proves that Faulkner began to lose faith in paternalism. Quinten, who represents the nostalgic Old South, clings to his antiquated beliefs and consequently cannot survive in the modern world. It is clear that Faulkner was torn between two mutually exclusive value systems upon examining his fiction, particularly the portrayal of poor white characters and their ability to transcend their economic class boundaries. Ultimately, Faulkner feared both liberalism and paternalism; while he worried about what

would become of a society unrestricted by paternalistic morality, he was also anxious about continuing to allow the poor white trash to grow larger and more lowly.

Faulkner's shift in simply lamenting the decadence of aristocracy to fearing the rise to power of poor whites is evidenced in his work on *The Snopes Trilogy*. In 1920, John Wesley Thompson Falkner, William's grandfather, was forced out of control of the bank he founded in Oxford. Joe Parks, who lead the movement to expel Falkner, was the first to throw a shovel full of dirt on his casket when the former bank-founder was buried. According to Williamson, in William Faulkner's eyes "this man represented the avaricious "redneck" who had come to town to displace his betters" (194). The character of Flem Snopes is based upon this man. Flem, whose family burnt barns and use this tactic as blackmail in order to be hired as tenants, eventually rose to what he interpreted as respectability in the town. However, those around him, like those around Sutpen, knew that they were safer accepting him than forcing him to remain stagnant, attempting to enforce boundaries of whiteness and power.

Faulkner's own familial history, to include his great grandfather and grandfather, shaped his portrayal of white trash in *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Hamlet*. Particularly, the characters Thomas Sutpen and Flem Snopes, who rise from the bottom of the social hierarchy to the top of the economic ladder, represent Faulkner's fears for the South if paternalism completely gave way to liberalism. His juxtapositions of these men with the likes of Grandfather Compson and V. K. Radcliffe show that Faulkner instead advocated a combination of the values of both ideologies. In Faulkner's opinion, a man should be able to seek and obtain monetary success if he executed his subsequent power with traditional morality and responsibility.

3. Power and Powerlessness of Poor Whites in Faulkner

Because the concept of maintaining the purity of the white race was promulgated during Faulkner's lifetime, his writing reflects concern regarding the tainting of whiteness (Williamson 311). Faulkner's concerns regarding poor whites and their aspirations to power are immediately evident in his portrayal of Thomas Sutpen's rise and fall in *Absalom, Absalom!*, in which the white race is tainted with blood of Others and white Others are victorious. The progression of his fear of a white race diaspora is unquestionable as his later publication, *The Hamlet*, which contains no significant non-white characters and shows the alleged destruction and danger that accompany the rise to power of a white Other because of their lack of paternalistic values. Unlike *Absalom, Absalom!*, *The Hamlet* in Williamson's words, "very nearly omits race and instead develops the lives of individual characters in an almost all-white world" (312). Consequently, Faulkner argues for the continuation of a society lead by paternalistic morals in his Snopes volumes, focusing his attention on the elimination or at least mitigation of the "problem" of poor whites. Faulkner's awareness of poor whites was made possible due to his family's history. Also, the fact that Faulkner tried to distance himself from poor whites is key in understanding his disdain for the class.

By combining the key values of paternalism and liberalism, namely responsibility and entrepreneurship, Faulkner is not attempting to create a utopian world, because that is not portrayed in any of his work; instead, he is trying to underscore the failure of Southerners to maintain racial purity and to implement righteous values. This conflict is illustrated in Faulkner's representation of the relationship between Thomas Sutpen and Wash Jones in *Absalom, Absalom!*, an entrepreneurial poor white with poor morals and a

poor white with some values but few redeeming qualities, respectively. In *The Hamlet*, V. K. Ratcliff and Flem Snopes, a man guided by moral righteousness and one whose vision is limited to monetary gain, represent this class struggle.

Sutpen is keenly aware of the importance of race and class in the Antebellum South. While Faulkner does endorse the liberal concept of social mobility for those who utilize their talents, he does not approve of Sutpen's entire life and unbridled liberal ideology because he does not assimilate completely into the planter class whose values include morality. This is evidenced in Sutpen's demise at the hand of a poor white of whom he took advantage in the worst way, Wash Jones; his treatment of his sister-in-law, Rosa; and his wrestling with slaves. Similarly, though Flem Snopes of *The Hamlet* does ascend from poverty to lead an economically respectable life, he fails to be accepted by the established power who only coexist with him because of a fear of his capability for destruction, making him another example of why those who have money but do not use it for the greater good should not hold power.

Sutpen and Snopes both overcame poverty to undertake capitalist pursuits in Mississippi as a plantation owner and banker; they are white trash evolved from squalor to wealth. Scholarship in critical whiteness identifies the material grounds of whiteness based on a wealth of cultural resources: naturalization and immigration laws (Jacobson), governmental policy (Allen), science (Jacobson), history (Hale), or mass media (Hale, Dyer, Saxton). A number of these scholars identify the decades of 1830 and 1840 as an era of notable rooting or propagation of the idea of American whiteness, when the ideology noted by Saxton and Allen experienced contestation and consolidation. This is when Yoknapatawpha County was established. In *Natural Aristocracy* Kevin Railey

recounts the story of Thomas Sutpen allegorically tracing the emergence of American racial ideology as told by Theodore Allen.

Although Sutpen was faced with the limits of his whiteness as poor white trash on the front porch of the Pettibone plantation in tidewater Virginia, he learns that there is a set of privileges accompanying whiteness as compensation for his current squalor. Those rights of mobility and ownership are solidified as Sutpen watches his father abuse slaves and exercise control over his women. This was a common behavior for poor whites because they had no other means of exercising power. As Sutpen busily invents his identity based on the aforementioned experience, he finds his way to Mississippi, much to the dismay of its inhabitants:

Certainly he poses a symbolic threat to the morals of Jefferson, and the mob outside Coldfield's store is buttressed by its belief that moral law supports them. But, imagine the literal threat to Jefferson society – and specifically the profit-making enterprises of Compson, his ilk, and Coldfield – that Sutpen and his “tribe” represented. They could burn fields, crops, stores, houses; they could steal goods, money; they could kill. And it would not be difficult to imagine Sutpen engaging in these activities. In fact, Sutpen represents the ruling class's biggest nightmare. (Palmer 135)

The elite whites, like Compson, and middling whites, like Coldfield, had more to lose by not accepting the poor whites, such as Sutpen, whose relationship with his slaves, as much a peer as a master, threatened the sensibilities of the elite. The creation of this social dynamic was no brilliant stroke of the imagination on Faulkner's behalf; instead, it is a direct reflection of the very event that solidified America's white ideology: Bacon's Rebellion, the insurrection headed by a frontier planter, not unlike Sutpen, who lead a volatile coalition of bond laborers, similar to Sutpen's wild savages. According to Allen, Bacon's Rebellion was the catalyst leading Virginia's elite planters to invent the white

race through legal entitlement and inclusion. Sutpen's character also represents the danger posed by "crackers" identified by Matt Wray and targeted by eugenicists in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Later, writers would draw inspiration from the phenomenon that is an invented race and invent a genre of literature which occasionally illustrates the white race's interrelations. The term Southern Gothic, coined by Ellen Glasgow in a 1935 article, refers to the excess sex and violence typical of a Faulkner novel. Louis Palmer further defines the genre in his article *Bourgeois Blues: Class, Whiteness, and Southern Gothic in Early Faulkner and Caldwell* stating that "the emergence of Southern Gothic reflects a cultural shift to a positive, pejorative whiteness – positive in the sense of visible and obvious rather than invisible, and pejorative in the sense of taking on some of the negative characteristics of the raced Other" (120). The white trashing of Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Hamlet* demonstrates late 19th and early 20th century anxieties regarding the downward mobility of whites, ethnically, morally, and economically, and reflects the new configurations of Americans in which low class white are more visible than before. The novels also demonstrate that whiteness in the Southern Gothic style would be visible and Othered. In them, Faulkner displays "the power and potential of white trash figures not only to unsettle their fictional milieux...[but] to "contaminate" conventional narrative forms" is evident (Watson 18).

Like Sutpen, Flem Snopes is spurred to action by an unfavorable vision of his own future. His family is renowned as barn burners, and it is their only source of notoriety. Like poor white tenant farmers abounding in Mississippi, Snopes's future was destined to be a replica of his father's, who moved from place to place on borrowed land,

transportation, and even time – what Matt Wray calls a “cracker.” Flem manages to escape the confines of the tenant lifestyle’s promise, but he exemplifies what happens when those who have even less regard for propriety and paternalistic morality than Sutpen come into power. When this happens, entire towns full of people are adversely affected by white trash’s supposed lack of moral character. When examined side by side, the story of Sutpen’s and Snopes’s rise to notoriety decry the ability of those with such low moral standards to achieve power.

Although as much background is not given about the Snopes clan as about Sutpen, it is sure that the Snopes family was not a prosperous one. When asked from whence he hailed, Ab simply replies “West” (Faulkner, *The Hamlet* 9). He intends to keep his criminal past secret until he secures a tenant position and extorts Jody Varner, whose land and house Snopes rents. From this nomadic and unstable way of living, Flem advantageously climbs the Mississippi socioeconomic ladder. He does so by approaching an unexpected and vulnerable Varner in the woods: “One moment the road had been empty, the next moment the man stood there beside it, at the edge of a small copse – the same cloth cap, the same rhythmically chewing jaw materialized apparently out of nothing” (Faulkner, *The Hamlet* 24). Flem swindles Varner into hiring him to work at his store with the understanding that if he does not give him the job, Flem will destroy Varner’s property. This qualifies Snopes as white trash according to William Gilmore Simms’s description of them as “Rude, irregular, untrained and lawless, the swarthy outlaws [were] a fearless gang of blackguards” (qtd. in Wray 56). Poor white trash was violent and fecund, as depicted in earlier literature, and the Snopeses are no exception: “So Will Varner has caught that bear at last. Flem has grazed up the store and he has

grazed up the blacksmith shop and now he is starting in on the school” (Faulkner, *The Hamlet* 77). Flem Snopes demonstrates the power of poor whites to people a province quite quickly, and it is that ability that Frenchman’s Bend feared. Because poor white trash represented by Flem Snopes is fruitful yet produced nothing helpful to society, Faulkner lamented its influx.

While Sutpen’s recognition of whiteness is critical in his usurpation of power and proves that the invisibility of whiteness must be overcome in order to achieve status, Faulkner seems to say in the characterization of Snopes that race must be recognized and scrutinized by those other than the individual possessing it as well. The fact that the entire hamlet of Frenchman’s Bend cringes while Flem exercises his whiteness as he climbs the socioeconomic ladder proves that they knew he was white and could do nothing to stop him from rising, but because he was white they expected him to learn to act morally. In Sutpen’s and Snopes’s societies, whites are the arbiters of morality, so if poor whites rise to power through economic gain, they also need to elevate their morals.

When Sutpen appears in Mississippi, “his fellow citizens believed...that there was a nigger in the woodpile” (Faulkner, *Absalom!* 56). This can be interpreted literally, meaning that Sutpen’s white racial purity was questioned and there were suspicions of his having black ancestors or that something about his character was amuck based on his heritage. To be sure, “He was not liked, but feared, which seemed to amuse, if not actually please, him. But he was accepted; he obviously had too much money now to be rejected” (Faulkner, *Absalom!* 57). The unknown factors surrounding Sutpen’s ancestry and his questionable acquisition of property and money which lead to power make him an outsider and a threat to the established ruling class of Jefferson, Mississippi, which

Hundley grants in his study of the degenerate origins of poor white trash. Hundley claims that poor whites were descendants of early criminals sent as laborers to the new world who later fled to the mountains, the very area from which Sutpen hails.

Likewise, the influx of Snopeses to Frenchman's Bend and later to Oxford in *The Hamlet* is unwelcomed by the likes of Varner and Ratcliffe as Hundley denotes. Varner and Ratcliff's discussion reveals a fear of more Snopeses invading the hamlet:

"That boy of I.O.'s," Varner said. "By God, I've done everything but put out poison for him."

"What?" Ratcliff said. He glanced quickly around at the faces; for an instant there was in his own not only bewilderment but something almost like terror. "I thought – the other day you fellows told me – You said it was a woman, a young woman with a baby – Here now," he said. "Wait."

"This here's another one," Varner said. "I wish to hell he couldn't walk." (Faulkner, *The Hamlet* 352-3)

Ratcliff and Varner, the most powerful because received men in the community, fear the arrival of more Snopeses not only because it threatens their own positions, but also because Snopeses represent a new kind of man – one that obtains power mercilessly and uses it not for the greater good of society but for personal aggrandizement. As would have pleased Ratcliff and Varner, at the time, sociologists and biologists were teaming with eugenicists to prove the unworthiness of poor whites to participate in society. Consequently, they deemed the sterilization of "feebleminded" poor whites acceptable. It is evident in Faulkner's portrayal of physically and mentally handicapped destructive and

counterproductive Snopeses that he may have advocated the eugenicists' theories of hereditary imbecility.

Aside from being uncontrollable and uncontainably dangerous, poor whites are portrayed as lazy, just like the lubbers of Byrd's time who seemed infected with lethargy. This is captured as Huston, a formidable man in Frenchman's Bend, attempts to have his horse shod by a poor white Snopes who appears to be "working steadily but in a dreamlike state in which what actually lived inside him apparently functioned somewhere else, paying heed to and having no interest in, not even in the money he would earn, what his hands were doing" (Faulkner, *The Hamlet* 72). This proves that not all Snopeses were enterprising like Flem. Instead, some were satisfied to do the very minimum amount of work required to survive. This kind of white trash, which suffers from lassitude perhaps owing to a physical malady such as hookworms or perhaps because of a moral defect, is as dangerous as the kind who, like Flem, overtake a business. Both are spreading their potent seed of moral repugnancy.

A few poor whites in a settlement is not the issue at hand in Frenchman's Bend; rather, the number of interlopers of the poor white milieu whose moral compass is broken is on the rise. Ratcliff notes, "How many kinfolks has Flem Snopes brought in to date...because Will might be a little hard to dislodge outen the actual house...He might even draw the line there altogether. So maybe Flem will have to start in on you folks sooner than you had figured on" (Faulkner, *The Hamlet* 76-8). Here, Ratcliff seems to believe that because he travels through numerous hamlets, he is immune to the Snopeses' disease of degeneracy. However, when he is finally duped by Flem into purchasing worthless land, Ratcliff realizes that no one is safe from the dangers presented by white

trash. Although the fear of rising numbers of Snopeses is present after Flem began riding in the surrey with Varner, it is before Flem married Varner's daughter, Eula, and virtually becomes a Varner himself that the townspeople recognize poor white trash as a threat. Faulkner here illustrates his fears of blood mixing among many different classes of whites. A new class of whites emerged from the union of Flem and Eula, one that represents the direction in which the white race is heading when yeoman marries poor white trash – down.

Wash Jones, Thomas Sutpen's resident poor white trash tenant, is certainly destined to plummet to the lowest of low socioeconomic positions, but he does gain a measure of dignity when the abuse he incurs surpasses his tolerance. Jones watches in silent acknowledgement as Sutpen seduces and assaulted his granddaughter, Milly. But when Sutpen rejects her and the baby because it is not a boy and can not pass his family name, Wash is overcome and kills his longtime master with a rusty scythe. Their final words are overheard by a former slave:

‘Well, Milly; too bad you're not a mare, too. Then I could give you a decent stall in the stable’ and turned and went out. Only she could not move yet, and she didn't even know that Wash was outside there; she just heard Sutpen say, ‘Stand back, Wash. Don't you touch me’: and then Wash, his voice soft and hardly loud enough to reach her: ‘I'm going to teach you, Kernel.’ (Faulkner, *Absalom!* 229)

Wash's victory is short lived; he kills his entire family soon thereafter, eliminating one small sect of white trash permanently. This attests to the tendency of white trash to eventually self-destruct, a tidy solution to a seemingly unsolvable problem. Faulkner's keen interest in and knowledge of history as portrayed in his work indicates that he would have been interested in solving the problem of white trash before it became insoluble.

This is especially evident in his inclusion of politics in *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Hamlet*, namely the conflicting ideologies of paternalism and liberalism.

Faulkner does not endorse Sutpen's unhindered liberal ideology and does not allow Sutpen to assimilate wholly into the planter class though he does support the idea of social mobility for the industrious. This is proven when Sutpen meets his death at the business end of a scythe wielded by poor white Wash Jones. Not long after Wash finished confessing to Sutpen that he would not have let his granddaughter, Milly, accept a dress given to her by another other man save Sutpen because he knew Sutpen would not do harm to her or to Wash himself, Milly gave birth:

So that Sunday came, a year after that day and three years after he had suggested to Miss Rosa that they try it first and if it was a boy and lived, they would be married. It was before daylight and he was expecting his mare to foal to the black stallion, so when he left the house before day that morning Judith thought he was going to the stable, who knew what or how much about her father and Wash's granddaughter nobody knew, how much she could have helped but know from that Clytie must have known since everybody in the neighborhood knew who had ever seen the girl pass in the ribbons and beads which they all recognized, how much she may have refused to discover during the fitting and sewing of that dress.
(Faulkner, *Absalom!* 228)

Displaying complete and utter disregard for his reputation and that of his family and for the purity of his potential future heir, Sutpen courts Wash's granddaughter right before his eyes, all the while daring him with his shamelessness to question his motives.

Because Sutpen was never supposed to be a man of power due to his questionable background and status as a poor white, he does not properly execute the role of an elite white male. Though he should be protecting Milly from possible predators, he is a predator himself. It is ironic that he who rose from white trash is willing to procreate with white trash just to procure an heir, especially considering that Charles Bon would have

been a very fitting successor despite his racial impurity. Less conspicuous is the fact that Sutpen is driven solely by his desire for material objects and does not care properly for those in his care, much like Pettibone:

You see, I had a design in mind...To accomplish it I should require money, a house, a plantation, slaves, a family – incidentally of course, a wife. I set out to acquire these, asking no favor of any man. I even risked my life at one time, as I told you, thought as I also told you I did not undertake this risk purely and simply to gain a wife, though it did have that result. But that is beside the point also: suffice that I had the wife, accepted her in good faith, with no reservations about myself, and I expected as much from them. (Faulkner, *Absalom!* 212)

Sutpen admits that all he seeks is in name only. He does not want a wife to love and protect, or children for which to care. Instead, he desires to have that which makes him very nearly like the image of a man from whom he escaped when fleeing Tidewater. Sutpen, a poor white of virtually unknown heritage, laments the situation in which he found himself married to a woman of mixed blood who bore him a child. He admits that he made his past known and expected the same in return. Because his intent was to rise in status, Sutpen abandoned the family of non-pure white blood, fleeing Haiti to realize the dream born on the front porch of a Tidewater mansion. Unlike the paternalists Faulkner admired, Sutpen provides nothing for the care of the castaway family: “The novel makes clear that this design is limited, for Sutpen’s downfall and death are caused by aspects of his liberal orientation and his inability to adopt certain paternalist attitudes that place men within a social hierarchy” (Railey 117). Instead he continued in quest to obtain a wife who would solidify his position at the top of the social structure.

As Thomas Sutpen drove his band of “wild negroes” through Jefferson, he was as likely to be mistaken for one of them as not. A man of no notable heritage, Sutpen ascended into ownership of 100 square miles of land and all the trimmings to accompany

it. While at the top, Sutpen did not adopt any of the attributes of the traditionally chivalric southern man; instead, he seemed to delight in retaining his uncivilized habits: "He matched two of his wild negroes against one another as men match game cocks or perhaps even entered the ring himself" (Faulkner, *Absalom!* 44-5). Sutpen is feared because as a man elevating his socioeconomic status, the state of his moral suitability is questionable.

Similarly, when he first arrives in Frenchman's Bend, Flem:

...rode up on a gaunt mule, on a saddle which was recognized at once as belonging to the Varners, with a tin pail tied to it...a thick squat soft man of no establishable age between twenty and thirty, with a broad still face containing a tight seam of a mouth stained slightly at the corners with tobacco, and eyes the color of stagnant water, and projecting from among the other features in startling and sudden paradox, a tiny predatory nose like the beak of a small hawk. (Faulkner, *The Hamlet* 57)

Yet this unappealing stranger, aesthetically and otherwise, managed to rise through the ranks of the hierarchical system at a rate unmatched in its quickness by any other to become, eventually, the president of Oxford's bank and of the former mayor's house. However, because he possessed no sense of decency nor empathy and did not have the truly essential characteristics of an elite white, Flem cannot completely assimilate into society. This is illustrated in Flem's sterility; he cannot procreate with Eula, whose father is of the ruling class. Faulkner highlights Flem's inadequacies when Flem meets his fate at the business end of a gun pointed by his own cousin, Mink, who went to prison because Flem did not care enough about him to prevent it. This is the kind of man Faulkner feared would rise to power, symbolizing the over running of paternalistic values by liberal ones.

In this system which allows both values to exist, blood, family, and refinement do not weigh heavily, which is why Sutpen and Snopes can succeed, but their rise to a position of power is one that Faulkner laments and wants the reader to regret as well. Therefore, what emerges as the central value of Faulkner's criteria for selection to positions of power is not unlike the Jeffersonian theory of natural aristocracy, which joins the ideas of equal opportunities and rights with a belief in one's ability to earn respect and admiration through merit and determined achievement (as a natural aristocrat). Like a liberal, Faulkner had sympathy for the poor and powerless, such as Mink Snopes, but did not support their efforts to overstep their proper places in society, like Thomas Sutpen and Flem Snopes. Depending upon one's own position, "Faulkner's authorial ideology can be deeply criticized as being reactionary and chauvinistic, even racist, or it can be valorized as an attempt to maintain the best values from directly contradictory ideologies" (Railey 45).

By combining these values, Faulkner is attempting to illustrate the disparity between the classes of whites. This conflict is illustrated in Faulkner's portrayal of the relationship between Thomas Sutpen and Wash Jones in *Absalom, Absalom!* and V. K. Ratcliff and Flem Snopes in the Snopes Trilogy. The white trash characters on the rise are aware of their power: "In the earlier slave society, 'racial purity' was a defining characteristic of the master class, and the planter class could not be assured of absolute authority without the total control of all women, white and black" (Railey 56). Sutpen forbids his daughter to marry Charles Bon not because he was her half brother, but because he was part, though a very small part, black. Also, he will not permit his hired help, poor white Wash Jones, to enter his house though they would drink liquor from the

same jug and Sutpen would eventually impregnate Wash's poor white granddaughter. So, because he is an implant into the aristocracy and not of original aristocratic stock, Sutpen lacks the ability to fully ensure that he and his women are surrounded by that which is racially pure – purity to exclude white trash. Faulkner here is not suggesting that all classes live together in harmony, but instead seems to say that accord can be reached if each class keeps to its own which Sutpen refuses to do. Similarly, Faulkner's paternalist hero who outshines the failed Gavin Stevens, V. K. Ratcliff, is duped by Flem Snopes. When this occurs, it is a tragedy that the incredibly well-informed and shrewd Ratcliff is one-upped by the formerly poor white trash Snopes. This is Faulkner's literary realization of his real-life fear; the usurpation of paternalists by white trash allowed to transgress the boundaries of class based only on income.

Kevin Railey asserts that this system which awards power to the elite undeservingly also creates autocratic power, idleness of character in both those in power and those who have no hope of obtaining it, and corruption of labor (116). The situation of those in young Sutpen's position who recognize evil but are powerless to conquer it is the crux of paternalistic values: "Although placing poor whites on a higher level than black slaves, the static social order of the Tidewater offered neither a venue for the aspirations of lower class whites nor much respect for them as individuals" (Railey 116). Although Faulkner's inclusion of the upper crust of paternalistic plantocracy is limited in *Absalom, Absalom!*, there is enough evidence to conclude that he did not believe that the claims of protecting those in the care of the ruling class, namely the poor whites, were being upheld, especially by Sutpen himself. Faulkner includes the juxtaposition of poor whites and elite whites to prove that the current social system is only serving those

enjoying a view from the top. This is clear when Sutpen notices something seemingly miniscule: shoes. He notes:

...lying there all afternoon while the sisters would come from time to time to the door of the cabin two miles away and scream at him for wood or water, watching that man who not only had shoes in the summertime too, but didn't even have to wear them...how in the world could a man fight another man with dressed-up niggers and the fact that he could line in a hammock all afternoon with his shoes off? (Faulkner, *Absalom!* 184-5)

Sutpen notices the not-so-subtle differences in his own clothing, that of a poor white, and the clothes of a slave and his owner, which are nicer than his own. Not only is the poor white restricted to outer appearances which bespeak his socio-economic status, but housing as well:

...living in a cabin that was almost a replica of the mountain one except that it didn't sit up in the bright wind but sat instead beside a big flat river that sometimes showed no current at all and even sometimes ran backward, which his sisters and brothers seemed to take sick after supper and die before the next meal...other whites like them, who lived in cabins not quite as well built and not quite as well kept and preserved as the ones the nigger slaves lived in. (Faulkner, *Absalom!* 184-5)

Faulkner's illustration of the discrepancies between poor whites and their counterparts, upper class whites and even slaves, leads one to infer that he disapproves of the stagnant social order of paternalism and favors the fluidity allowed by liberalism. He even hints towards the most severe issues the deep-rooted hegemony precipitated – the rebellion of the lower class – as Sutpen weighs his options:

Because he had not only lost the innocence yet, he had not yet discovered he possessed it. He no more envied the man than he would have envied a mountain man who happened to own a rifle. He would have coveted the rifle, but he would have himself have supported and confirmed the owner's pride and pleasure in its ownership because he could not have conceived of the owner taking such crass advantage of the luck which gave the rifle to him rather than to another as to say other men: *Because I own this rifle, my arms and legs are blood and bones are superior to yours* except as the victorious outcome with rifles. (Faulkner, *Absalom!* 185)

Faulkner suggests that when poor whites realize that they are capable of defeating the aristocrat who has been keeping them poor rebellion may occur.

Once Sutpen becomes powerful he begins to appreciate the advantages of a stable social order in which mobility was not easily accomplished or not realized at all, and he develops an attitude not unlike that of Pettibone, the owner of the Tidewater plantation where Sutpen learned of the degrees of whiteness. In essence, he does the opposite of rebel. Faulkner's own opinion about permitting those who are inherently unfit to rule into the upper class is seen in the townspeople's reactions to Sutpen: "So they sat there on their horses and waited for him. I suppose they knew that he would have to come out sometime: I suppose they sat there and thought about those two pistols...He just descended the steps and walked on across the square, the committee moving too, following him across the square. They say he didn't even look back. He just walked on, erect...the final gratuitous bafflement and even insult" (Faulkner, *Absalom!* 35). Indeed, a man of such repugnant behavior from nowhere who knew no one is not welcome in Jefferson. Sutpen is focused on purely individual pursuits and displayed a nonchalance towards the townspeople who acted within a set of values that expected and accepted cooperation and respect among a collective and cohesive group of citizens:

...he was in a sense a public enemy. Perhaps this was because of what he brought back...as compared to the simple wagon load of wild niggers which he had brought back before....I think it was a little more involved than the sheer value of his chandeliers and mahogany and rugs. I think that the affront was born of the town's realization that he was getting it involved with himself; that whatever felony which produced the mahogany and crystal, he was forcing the town to compound it...it was known that Mr. Coldfield was the man who hired and dispatched them. They were big wagons, drawn by oxen, and when they returned the town looked at them and knew...Mr. Coldfield could not have mortgaged everything that he owned for enough to fill them; doubtless this time there

were more men than women who pictured him during this absence with a handkerchief over his face and the two pistol barrels glinting beneath the candelabra of a steamboat's saloon, even if not worse: if not something performed in the lurking dark of a muddy landing and with a knife from behind. (Faulkner, *Absalom!* 33)

In joining the aristocratic class without previous claim generally provided by birthright, the people of Jefferson look fearfully at Sutpen and his acquisitions. Because they fear that he has stolen what goods he pulls through town down the long lane to Sutpen's Hundred, the townspeople believe that they and their possessions are at risk. Sutpen shows no remorse or humility in his efforts to carve a life out of the wilderness, and his brazen actions infuriate and offend the skittish townspeople.

Sutpen violates a code of morality existing among them with his underhanded methods of furnishing his home and obtaining his land by bartering and bargaining with the likes of Indians and thieves. The occupants of the town worry that his evil doings will adversely affect them. Like Faulkner himself, the fact that he rose from obscurity to rule Sutpen's Hundred cast doubt in the hearts of those who had formerly participated in Sutpen's wild hunts. It was not the way in Mississippi for unknown and underbred men to rule. Though eventually accepted, probably more out of necessity than democracy, by the likes of General Compson, Sutpen never manages "to beat down the beast lurking within himself, potentially within all members of the lower class, and remains, in essence, a white savage" (Railey 121), upholding the theories of eugenicists Galton, Dugdale, and Estabrook that white trash characteristics are hereditary and caused by blood mixing and consanguinity. By participating in fights with his slaves and consciously allowing his daughter to watch, treating Rosa disrespectfully regarding the proposal of marriage, denying responsibility for the situation between Judith and Bon, and showing little regard

for all of those around him, including family and closest acquaintances, Sutpen remains white trash. This confirms that although Sutpen has earned a place in upper class society through his wealth and determination, his original status as a poor white causes him to be unable to adopt the responsible attitude of a paternalist and he remains largely concerned with himself as an individual. What Faulkner is relating is that Sutpen should not have attempted to elevate his social status because he does not possess the moral character to merit the responsibilities of a higher position, much as W. C. Falkner may have allowed his acquiescence into the upper class to take precedence over his familial obligations and moral compass.

This discarding of morality in order to achieve power is nowhere more evident than in the juxtaposition of Sutpen with Wash Jones, a man who as a poor white not only recognizes his place in society as the lowest of low, but who also rightfully does not attempt to change it. Wash accepts his status as a poor white:

...he would say, 'Git outen my road, niggers!' and then it would be the outright laughing, asking one another (except it was not one another but him): 'who him, calling us niggers?' and he would rush at them with a stick and them avoiding him just enough, not mad at all, just laughing. And he was still carrying fish and animals he killed (or maybe stole) and vegetables up to the house when that was about all Mrs Sutpen and Judith (and Clytie too) had to live on, and Clytie would not let him come into the kitchen with the basket ever, saying, 'Stop right there, white man. Stop right where you is. You aint never crossed this door while Colonel was here and you aint going to cross it now.' (Faulkner, *Absalom!* 226)

Wash is acutely aware of his lowliness as is demonstrated by his understanding that he had no power over the 'niggers' just as they themselves understood that he had no power over them. In an ironic turn of events, Wash is not permitted to cross the threshold of Sutpen's mansion by Clytie, which is reminiscent of Sutpen himself being turned away

from the door at Pettibone's by one of the house slaves. However, Wash is not appalled by this tradition. In fact, he admires the upper class from afar:

But they would drink together under the scuppernong arbor on the Sunday afternoons, and on the week days he would see Sutpen (the fine figure of the man as he called it) on the black stallion, galloping about the plantation, and Father said how for that moment Wash's heart would be quiet and proud both and that maybe it would seem to him that this world where niggers, that the Bible said had been created and cursed by God to be brute and vassal to all men of white skin, were better found and housed and even clothed than he and his granddaughter – that this world where he walked always in mocking and jeering echoes of nigger laughter, was just a dream and an illusion and that the actual world was the one where his own lonely apotheosis galloped on the black thoroughbred, thinking maybe...how the Book said that all men were created in the image of God and so all men were the same in God's eyes anyway. (Faulkner, *Absalom!* 226)

The fact that Wash knows that he is dependant upon Sutpen for companionship and for an ideal figure of manhood to emulate, yet does not scorn Sutpen's superiority, makes it evident that Wash is not seditious and has accepted the virtues of paternalism. He seems to understand that on earth men must occupy different stations in life, but that eternal life will be one in which all men who have properly performed their earthly duties will rejoice. Additionally, Wash is disgruntled by the fact that his station in life is equal to or lesser than that of black slaves, but he realizes that he is powerless to change that and looks forward to the day when a man is judged not by what he owns but by how he performed his tasks on earth.

For all his admiration of Sutpen and acceptance of his poor white status, Wash is nevertheless able to recognize when Sutpen abuses his power as previous plantation owner and as Wash's superior. Wanting a male heir, Sutpen courted Wash's fifteen-year-old granddaughter, giving her beads, ribbons, and a dress, in order to get what Rosa

denied him. Wash watches calmly and quietly as during the next year his granddaughter, Milly, begins to show signs of pregnancy. Not until Sutpen denies Milly, making her daughter a bastard, does Wash become angry. He sees Sutpen, whom he knows as a man among men, discard Milly as trash, and he warned Sutpen, ““I’m going to tech you, Kernel”” as he, recovering from two lashes of Sutpen’s whip to the face, raised Sutpen’s rusting scythe and killed him (Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* 231). In murdering Sutpen, Wash brings to the forefront the desires of all downtrodden poor whites who have been kept that way by the ruling white elites and rekindles the flame of Bacon’s Rebellion.

Sutpen wrongly attempts to attain the material possession he desires through unmitigated strength, yet his ambition is no match for Wash’s rebuttal due to recognition of moral righteousness. Wash is affronted by Sutpen’s attitude of owning and deserving all that he has the strength to obtain and kills Sutpen, retorting: “Better if his kind and mine too had never drawn the breath of life on this earth” (Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* 233). Jones here acknowledges that he and Sutpen are different kinds of men and that he has been affected by paternalism: “How different...Because you are brave...And I know that whatever your hands tech, whether hit’s a regiment of men or a ignorant gal or just a hound dog, that you will make it right” (Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* 228). Sutpen, in Jones’s opinion, is a better man than himself because he has earned and holds status in society. As a man who is superior, Sutpen is supposed to serve as a moral exemplar, yet in refusing to marry Milly after courting her and engaging in intercourse with her, Sutpen disappoints Wash’s notion that he is a better man and fails to uphold a code of honor in denying responsibility towards those in his care. Indeed Faulkner was an advocate of Sutpen’s initial rebellion and supported his ambition to earn his elevation in social status,

but in refusing to acknowledge that Wash and Milly's concerns are those of Sutpen's own sister and his entire former class, in disregarding moral responsibilities and an interdependence among people of all classes and his obligation to his status and moral character, Sutpen fails to acquiesce with paternalist values and demonstrates that possessions can not change a man for the better. Essentially, Sutpen is still the same poor white trash that was turned away from Pettibone's door, only he had acquired property and materials; he is the embodiment of Faulkner's fear of unimpeded social mobility. The fact that Sutpen remains rotten at the core indicates that poor white trash's roots cannot be cleansed or killed even when planted in an upper class garden without the associated moral improvement, an idea promulgated by writers such as Byrd and Simms and eugenicists the likes of Galton.

In *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner posits the question of "When does someone know they are white?" and the answer seems to be "When society says so" based on their behavior. Considering this, it is not surprising that Faulkner writes of people whose skin color is white as if they are a different race, which highlights the fact that race is socially constructed and that within race are Othering social differences. Through the explanation of the psychocultural and socioeconomic schools of historians concerning racial relations represented by Degler and Jordan, Theodore Allen explains in *The Invention of the White Race* (1994) that white identity was created through the adoption of a ruling class policy designed to establish small privileges for poor whites in order to align the two groups and serve as a solution to the Ordeal of Virginia (18).

It is the awareness of whiteness, well rooted by the early 1800s, that Sutpen observes and which makes him dangerous:

...a certain flat level silent way his older sisters and the other white women of their kind had of looking at niggers, not with fear or dread but with a kind of speculative antagonism not because of any known fact or reason but inherited...not quite explainable by the fact that the niggers had better clothes...you knew that you could hit them...and they would not hit back or even resist. But you did not want to, because they (niggers) were not it, not what you wanted to hit. (Faulkner, *Absalom!* 186)

The realization that the only difference between himself and black slaves, the difference between the deliverer of painful blows and the recipient, and in some cases between life and death, was his white skin, make Sutpen value his color. Sutpen becomes aware of his skin color and his poverty while interacting with blacks, but he also learns the potential that wearing white skin harbored while on the Pettibone plantation and observing its owner. It is on him that Sutpen focuses and desires to emulate; however, he sees only the outward, material portion of the man and knows not of his moral composition. Although Sutpen had the money and power necessary to rise through the ranks of society, Faulkner makes it clear that a poor white does not belong at the top of the social echelon.

Faulkner also underlines the unsuitability of poor whites for positions of power when he uses the terms 'Ogre' and 'djinn' to describe Sutpen (Faulkner, *Absalom!* 16) whose "face [looked] exactly like the negro's" (Faulkner, *Absalom!* 16) and who fought "not like white men fight, with rules and weapons, but like negroes fight...a white one and a black one...as if their skins should not only have been the same color but should have been covered with fur too" (Faulkner, *Absalom!* 20-1). Finally, Sutpen is described as having "eyes like pieces of coal pressed into soft dough and prim hair of that peculiar mouselike shade of hair on which the sun does not often shine" (Faulkner, *Absalom!* 51). This likens Sutpen with the poor whites described as having the "disease of laziness," later termed 'hookworm.' Those infected were said to have a tallow complexion, luster-

less eyes, a peculiar pallor of hair, and a swollen stomach (Wray 113-15). Many of the Snopes, including Flem, fit this description.

Although Flem is not lazy, he does participate in physical labor. Instead, he is enterprising enough to pawn undesirable chores on his more feeble-minded relatives, like Mink Snopes. However, when those upon whom he depended for aggrandizement are in need, Flem does not come to their aid. Instead, he ignores their needs completely. When Mink is facing a long prison term for the murder of a neighboring farmer, he clings to hope that Flem will provide an alibi and bail. However, "his own kin will be the last man in the world to find out anything about Flem Snopes' business...Flem would trick Eck or any other of his kind quick as he would us" (Faulkner, *The Hamlet* 309). Because of his failure to care for those in his family who could be classified as dependants, Flem is not capable of being at the top of Faulkner's ideal social hierarchy; Faulkner ascribed to ideals which required caring for one's dependants.

While Faulkner criticizes the South, he attempts to prove that everyone is not suited for the highest ranking: "This ideology made people believe that the upper class could be debased through sexual or marital connections between upper-class people and...lower-class whites and that this debasement would threaten their elite status" (Railey 137). Nowhere is this more evident than in *The Hamlet*, where Faulkner addresses what has happened to the class of men deserving of leadership and what can happen when poor whites ascend on a population or area. If *Absalom, Absalom!* is a work in which Faulkner responded to historical conflicts over white trash, then *The Hamlet* is an articulation of values, such as responsibility and morality, and ideologies,

such as identification of feeble-mindedness, with which to confront white trash in his contemporary world.

The dichotomous relationship between blacks and whites once portrayed in Faulkner's work became a dichotomy within whiteness. Concern for a society in which money is power and equal access to the opportunity to earn money is prevalent is addressed as society falls victim to Snopesism as those who, like Sutpen, rise to affluence on the wings of individualism and materialism without any sense of moral values. As explained by Faulkner's early mentor, Phil Stone, in his first writing about the Snopes: "The core of the Snopes legend...was that the real revolution in the South was not the race situation but the rise of the redneck, who did not have any of the scruples of the old aristocracy, to places of power and wealth" (*Father Abraham* ii). Faulkner comments early in the work that: "The Snopes spring untarnished from a long line of shiftless tenant farmers – a race that is of the land and yet rootless" (*Father Abraham* 19). In opening *The Hamlet*, Faulkner immediately picks up where he left off with *Absalom, Absalom!* lamenting the fall of a class of upright and morally driven men. He describes Frenchman's Bend, a settlement southeast of Jefferson, Mississippi: "Hill-cradled and remote, definite yet without boundaries, straddling into two counties and owning allegiance to neither, it had been the original ground and site of a tremendous pre-Civil War plantation" (*The Hamlet* 3). This part of the description is significant because the area is depicted as somewhat out of control and ruthless: the result of liberal values overpowering paternal. The ruins of Old Frenchman place are in meager shape: "– the gutted shell of an enormous house with its fallen stables and slave quarters and overgrown gardens...and even some of the once-fertile fields had long since reverted to

the cane-and-cypress jungle from which their first master had hewed them” (*The Hamlet* 3). The fact that a once glorious home and fruitful land have returned to a jungle-like state connotes that in its current condition only the strong survive, those who can overpower the weak, which is indicative of liberal values and refutes the paternal cornerstone of responsibility for others. The original owner of Old Frenchman place and the surrounding land is gone, symbolized by the decaying plantation, and Faulkner conveys this as tragic:

His dream, his broad acres, were parceled out now into small shiftless mortgaged farms for the directors of Jefferson banks to squabble over before selling finally to Will Varner...even his name was forgotten, his pride but a legend about the land he had wrestled from the jungles and tamed as a monument to that appellation which those who came after him in battered wagons and on mule-back and even on foot, with flint-lock rifles and dogs and children and home-made whisky stills and Protestant psalm-books, could not even read, let alone pronounce. (*The Hamlet*, 4)

Here, the comparison between what was and what is is blatant; the new order is ignorant and poor and has no appreciation for what was. The savage land belongs to Will Varner, who shepherds the people with his own brand of capitalism, linking him to the materialistic and equally crass Thomas Sutpen. All that is left of a once fertile and thriving way of life is an empty shell that serves now only the purpose of assuring poor travelers that they have arrived. These poor whites are the tenant farmers who will never accomplish recovering the land from its jungle-like state and are described as being:

people who...came from the...mountains...[and] what they did bring most of them could (and did) carry in their hands. They took up land and build one- and two-room cabins and never painted them, and married one another and produced children and added other rooms one by one to the original cabins and did not paint them either, but that was all. Their descendants still planted cotton in the bottom land and corn along the edge of the hills and in the secret coves in the hills made of whiskey of the corn

and sold what they did not drink. Federal officers went into the country and vanished. (*The Hamlet* 5)

The white trash occupying Frenchman's Bend is as hostile as the untamed land itself; even officers who came to control the illegal production on whiskey were no match for the ruthlessness of the poor whites and "Strange negroes would absolutely refuse to pass through it [Frenchman's Bend] after dark" (*The Hamlet* 5). Such a depiction of the white trash in Faulkner's Mississippi is directly reflective of the squatters discovered by Anthony Stokes in the Virginia and Carolina mountains and described by Mike Hill and Matt Wray as the epitome of poor white trash. The contrasting portrayal of Will Varner and his poor white tenants to the former Old Frenchman indicate that not only was the upper class changing, but the lower class was as well.

In *Absalom, Absalom!* a group of men come to arrest Wash Jones for killing Sutpen, demonstrating that the values of paternalism which cause and justify Jones killing Sutpen were overlooked in favor of wealth. In other words, despite the fact that Jones is behaving completely morally and even displaying chivalric characteristics when he kills Sutpen to avenge his family's name, because Sutpen is considered as belonging to a higher class, Wash is perceived to be a murderer. Faulkner criticizes "an aristocracy of wealth that engenders a repressive and exploitative system concerned with business and profit" (Railey 151) and examines the effects of a system concerned primarily with capital gain, namely the ability of those with no moral compass, poor white trash, to infiltrate and proliferate. Faulkner highlights the responsibility of those in power, such as Varner, for the actions and characters of those over whom they exercise control, like the Snopeses. Varner has lost any semblance of paternalism and, like others in power who

“established the foundations of their existence on the currency of coin” (*The Hamlet* 220) wishes only to turn a profit, disregarding the condition of those who make it possible (like the Snopeses). In so doing, a monster is created in the form of poor white trash who must also concentrate on capital (versus morals) in order to survive under such conditions. Flem, like Supten, is justified in his initial actions: he must blackmail Varner in order to rise just as Supten had to remove himself from the Tidewater region in order to thrive because their current social status would not have permitted them to enter the working world – they needed a break. Both seemingly earn their new positions at least indirectly through merit, yet both fail to uphold the principals of paternalism, namely responsibility to others and morally upstanding decision making. However, analogous to Sutpen, Flem is corrupt in his resulting leadership, which indicates that Faulkner feared not only the aristocracy of wealth, but also the consequential invasion of poor white trash similar to the Snopeses penetration of Frenchman’s Bend.

Although Faulkner was a proponent for permitting the legitimate ambitions of the lower class for social mobility, he implies that it is biologically less likely for poor white trash the likes of the Snopeses to possess this. This is evident in his portrayal of Flem after he achieves status and in most of those characters bearing the name Snopes. I. O. Snopes is described as a lethargic worker “paying no heed to and having no interest in, not even in the money would earn, what his hands were doing, busy, think-moving, getting nowhere seemingly though at last the job was finished” (Faulkner, *The Hamlet* 72) about whom existed “a definite limitation of physical co-ordination beyond which design and plan and pattern all vanished” (73). When Flem becomes manager of Varner’s store, his first step in accession, he is seen by its customers as a “squat reticent figure in

the steadily-soiling white shirts and the minute invulnerable bow, which in the abeyant days lurked among the ultimate shadows of the deserted and rich-odored interior with a good deal of the quality of a spider of that bulbous blond omnivorous...species" (*The Hamlet* 64-5). Similarly, Ab Snopes, Flem's father, is described as displaying utter disregard for others and their property. When walking to de Spain's house, he reportedly purposely stepped in a fresh pile of horse manure: "And tracked it across the front porch and knocked and when the nigger told him to wipe it off his feet, Ab shoved right past the nigger and the nigger said he wiped the rest of it off right on that ere hundred-dollar rug" (*The Hamlet* 16). Thus, Flem inherited his carelessness for others and his brazen outlook from his father who was known as a barn burner. The power the poor white possess in the ability to instill fear in their superiors is evident as Varner contemplates his relationship with Ab Snopes: "Hell fire. Hell fire. Hell fire. I don't dare say leave here, and I aint got anywhere to say go there. I don't even dare to have him arrested for barn-burning for fear he'll set my barn a-fire" (*The Hamlet* 23). Varner, who owns most of the land in Frenchman's Bend, is forced to be very accommodating to the Snopeses because he realizes that they and their kind have the ability to upset his way of living, although he is not aware of the extent of that ability or the degree to which it will be realized upon first meeting Snopes. His desire to maintain the status quo is obvious: "We can discuss the house. Because we'll get along all right. We'll get along. Anything that comes up, all you got to do is come down to the store. No, you don't even need to do that: just send me word and I'll ride up here as quick as I can get here. You understand? Anything, just anything you don't like" (*The Hamlet* 23). Varner comprehends the full threat of the Snopeses when he is accosted by Flem on an inconspicuous stretch of road and there

blackmailed for a job in his store, shifting the power to the potentially dangerous poor white. Henceforth, Flem is a part of society and removed from the mountain-dwelling past of his poor white ancestors. Faulkner was indeed worried about the power of poor whites who ascended from ambiguity to continue on their upward path to power.

Faulkner's characterization of whiteness in *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Hamlet* demonstrates, as Watson declared, that whiteness is about more than just being racially white. Indeed, when a character is aware of his whiteness, such as Thomas Sutpen and Flem Snopes, such knowledge can be used for advantageous purposes. If whiteness remains invisible, as in the case of Snopes, one can infiltrate the boundaries of whiteness and damage an entire society. Because he feared the emergence of a society in which all paternalistic values have been replaced with liberal ones creating a new kind of leader whose status was achieved through capitalist toils and is unregulated by a sense of moral decency, Faulkner wrote to increase awareness of such. In his writing, Faulkner's knowledge of the history of whiteness is visible through his white trash characters who rekindle the memories of Bacon's Rebellion to those who remind the reader of mandated sterilization. Although the attention he gives to white trash is not often understood, it is important to his fictional milieu.

Conclusion: The End of White Trash

William Faulkner, who was the outcast of his family, wrote to redeem himself:

“...every family had a black sheep and Billy was the Fall~~l~~ners” (Williamson 195).

Perhaps Faulkner chose the subject of white trash and their shenanigans in order to highlight his positive traits and distance himself from the lowest class of whites. When read in succession, it is clear that:

Absalom, Absalom! had been about the decline of the aristocracy; the Snopes tale would be about the rise of the dirt farmers, the “poor whites,” centering in the person of Flem Snopes. Initially called *The Peasants*, it would become *The Hamlet*. In addition to Flem Snopes and Eula Varner (the superbly ripe young daughter of the shrewdest peasant of them all, Will Varner), he had discovered a man “he fell in love with” in V.K. Ratcliffe...as V.K. began to perceive the soulless acquisitiveness of Flem and the threat he posed, he commenced a prolonged crusade to save society from this quintessential from of redneck rapacity. (Williamson 263)

Unfortunately, it is not Ratcliffe who is successful in defeating the white trash epidemic; instead, inevitably it is Flem’s own [step] daughter and cousin. This indicates that only white trash can fix the problem that is white trash, which means that white trash is not even safe from itself.

While Faulkner finished *Absalom, Absalom!* with further avowal of his fear of the tainting of the white race, he ended *The Hamlet* with the statement that white trash, that tainted portion of the white race developing and coming into prominence in *Absalom, Absalom!*, was here to stay. Shreve observes: “I think that in time the Jim Bonds are going to conquer the western hemisphere. Of course it won’t quite be in our time and of course as they spread towards the poles they will bleach out again like the rabbits and the

birds do, so they wont show up so sharp against the snow,” proving that Faulkner’s apprehension regarding the fall of the aristocracy at the hand of an impure white the likes of Sutpen, Bon, or even Wash was relevant (*Absalom!* 302). The fall of the aristocracy aside, Varner, a liberal, elevated yeoman, meets his demise rather early in *The Snopes Trilogy*, but V. K. Ratcliff, a peasant merchant who represents the value of paternalism, is duped by Snopes at the conclusion of *The Hamlet*, thus realizing Faulkner’s fears of the susceptibility of the white race to white trash’s power of usurpation.

Perhaps the most notable achievement of *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Hamlet* is that they raise issues about whites and whiteness which force the audience to recognize it not only as a race, but as Matt Wray urges, a social category; essentially, they bring whiteness, particularly poor white trash, out of hiding and invisibility and to the forefront. Clearly, Faulkner wanted his audience to realize that white trash, if allowed to flourish, would ruin the principles upon which the South was founded as delineated by Thomas Jefferson and represented by Ratcliffe and Compson, to include responsibility of those in one’s care. Rather than highlighting the plight of blacks as was commonly done in Faulkner’s time, he wanted to underscore the importance of the fact that blacks were not the only victims of slavery – poor whites were, too. In fact, according to historians like Allen and Saxton, poor whites were created, used, and abused by the same system that required black slaves.

Perhaps influenced by his grandfathers and perhaps fearful of history repeating, Faulkner warns of the devastation possible if poor whites come into power through his characterization of Thomas Sutpen and Flem Snopes. For Faulkner, the question was not when white trash would achieve power, and not even what they would do with their

power, rather who would mitigate their damage and slow their advancement. The settled upon answer seems to be that white trash would self destruct. Those naturally inferior whites described as degenerates with defective blood and characterized as violent, contemptuous, filthy, and ruthless were certainly destined to harm one another as is clear in Sutpen's and Flem's death (Wray 22). But the havoc that white trash would wreak upon society during their lifetime is of utmost concern for Faulkner. As Sutpen disturbs the quaint town of Jefferson with his wild slaves, unconventional child rearing habits, suspected piracy, and violent tendencies, it is evident that Faulkner does not advocate the possibility of those who can transcend their class to so if they do not also possess the values inherent in those who are born into the class, like General Compson. Flem Snopes is further proof that when the liberal value of social mobility is embraced without attention to the paternal notion of responsibility, the results are disastrous. Faulkner understood white trash as a threat to civilization at a time when most attention was bestowed upon blacks' social condition and status.

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