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Dave Schieber, junior from Bucyrus, Ohio, makes a new comparison for American litterateurs . . .

## Concerning Flem Snopes and Benjamin Franklin

BY DAVID SCHIEBER

With slight exception, William Faulkner's major novels and short-stories have centered in a legendary Yoknapatawpha County in Mississippi. Faulkner has peopled his county with a great many characters, amongst whom the most fascinating are the Snopeses, a tribe of parasitic liars and idiots, thieves, platitudinarians, morons and sodomites, who recognize few of the moral rules governing their Yoknapatawpha neighbors. The bellwether of this nefarious group is Flem Snopes, whose very name is disagreeable, "Flem" suggesting "phlegm" and "phlegmatic," "Snopes" suggesting Anglo-Saxon monosyllabic unpleasantness. Flem is cold, shrewd, without sentiment or visible emotion, an incarnation of personal aggrandisement.

The whole of *The Hamlet*, published in 1940, is devoted to the invasion of society by this vicious family, during which Flem is able to progress from his initial position as a clerk in Varner's store in Frenchman's Bend to the presidency of a bank in Jefferson, the county-seat, riding rough-shod over everyone in the process. The novel, except

for a few passages—notably the cow-idiot scene—is overflowing with a robust, hyperbolic, humor. Even Flem at first is humorous, only later becoming alarmingly evil and unscrupulous. The Snopes clan is at the same time warmly absurd and coldly realistic.

*The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, certainly one of the best and more famous autobiographies in the English language, was begun at Twyford, in England, in 1771, when Franklin was sixty-five; it was not until 1788 that the final section was written. Franklin was a remarkable man in many ways; he realized this and was proud of it. He admitted that he was vain, "being persuaded that it is often productive of good to the possessor and to others who are within his sphere of action." His life had been one huge success. From poverty he had risen to become one of the world's great figures. His original purpose in writing these memoirs was to inform his son—and through his son the world—of those qualities and facets, concerning himself, generally unknown; he also wished

to hold himself up as an exemplum to future talent struggling in the dust of poverty.

The memoirs (as he called them) cover his life until approximately 1757. The first half of the memoirs is delightful reading: it has a youthful, light charm. In the later sections Franklin's moralizing becomes more noticeable, and consequently these sections lack the charm of the earlier ones. In reading these memoirs one will be reminded strangely of Flem Snopes in several of the good doctor's habits and thought-patterns. Although extensive analogy is fruitless, a few similarities can be examined.

Amongst Franklin's characteristics evident in the memoirs one finds what has been termed his leading intellectual quality: his ability to take a detached, impersonal, dispassionate point of view. This dispassion, this impersonality, is precisely what distinguishes Flem from the ordinary caitiff. Flem is a humorless, cold, person; this is apparent in his early days as a clerk. He is detached from life, viewing it from somewhere outside. Franklin is somewhat similar in behavior: he impresses one as a debonnaire, intellectually superior man, yet, contrarily, lacking in humor. He is, in D. H. Lawrence's delightful phrase, "middle-aged, sturdy, snuff-coloured Doctor Franklin."

There is something disturbing in the cold, factual, unemotional, reporting of his son's death with smallpox in 1737. Doubtless he felt a great sorrow, but Franklin forced himself to diminish the grief, since the wise man he was striving to become could not allow personal sorrow to triumph over the perfecting of the soul and character. This smothering of his grief may draw him nearer to a god's stature, but it decreases his stature as a man. Especially in a memorable does one not expect to find such frigidity of emotion. Immediately the figure of Mink Snopes arises, and that of his cousin Flem, disinterested in the murder which had brought Mink to prison. Flem here quite well displays his phlegmatic character, his want of feeling even to a cousin.

Quite an amusing passage in *The Hamlet* is the imagined encounter between Flem and the Prince of Darkness, in which the soulless Flem cozens the Adversary into giving up Hell to him. One might imagine what would have happened were Franklin to make the same journey. He would be, of course, not soulless, not with his thirteen moral virtues. By the time he was to leave, he probably would have established a newspaper, provided for street-lighting, got up public libraries and "moralizing clubs," and even had

Lucifer himself sweeping his Plutonic streets.

One of the better-known sections of the memoirs is concerned with Franklin's notorious thirteen moral virtues, which he sought to inculcate upon himself in his attempt to realize the stature of the wise man. D. H. Lawrence, in his mordant essay on Franklin, leaps into a frenzy over these virtues. They are quite sombre, humorless, heavy, practical. In that frightening sub-division, Chastity, Franklin speaks of "using venery;" an execrable phrase, this, which frightened Lawrence badly. Only a dispassionate, objective, sombre person could conceive of such a phrase.

Here is the most striking similarity, then, between Flem Snopes and Benjamin Franklin: their moral views. What would be the result were one to attempt to set up a similar list for Flem? He is temperate, neither drinking nor smoking; he is usually silent; he is frugal and industrious. He is quite sincere in his determination to progress, sincere in his demonic glee over the stupidity of his unfortunate neighbors. Regarding the "use of venery," one cannot say, although Flem gives the impression that, it not sterile, he is at least impotent, incapable of reproducing in the lush Eula his "froglike" type of creature.

An ironic situation is there here, which doubtless would

have bothered Franklin exceedingly: his noble moral virtues can be applied, not only to god-like person, towards whom he was struggling, but also to a despicable person, a dehumanized man, a personified principle of exploitation, like Flem Snopes. Were Flem to keep a little progress-book, such as Franklin used, it probably would have been as free from check-marks as was Franklin's. This type of conjecture is damning for Franklin, since it destroys the single-valuedness which he thought he saw in the virtues.

It must be admitted that Franklin was one of the great men of his century. A prolific inventor and an original scholar, he was a disciple of Pythagorous, a Mason, a bon vivant, a wit, and a sage. Flem Snopes, on the other hand, is in the end a revolting, disgusting, fulsome, animal seemingly regarded by Faulkner with a mixture of incredibility and nausea, a bloodless, soulless wraith.

Obviously Franklin can not be compared with the odious Flem in every way. It is only in the less noxious qualities that the two men rencontre. Nevertheless, therein lies an inconsistency of Franklin's moral character. It is Janus-faced: it can face towards good, or, without changing terminology, it can obvert itself and stare into Hell. Flem stares into—and out of—Hell. Franklin grasps at Heaven.