"I will have to look at him"| An ecocritique of Faulkner's "The Bear"

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"I will have to look at him":
An ecocritique of Faulkner's "The Bear"

By

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William Faulkner’s 1935 novella, “The Bear,” emerged as a dissenting voice in the clamor cheering the contemporary American development. “The Bear,” tells the story of Isaac McCaslin, a young member of an affluent family who moves between his home in Yoknapatawpha County and the wilderness surrounding the Tallahatchie River, where he and several others hunt Old Ben, one of the last living grizzly bears in the American Southeast. Old Ben serves as a metaphor for the wilderness invaded by the people who must bring wildness under control as they seek to prepare the land for agriculture, roads, railroads, and other elements of the burgeoning economic infrastructure. As he learns the traits of a skilled woodsman from his Chickasaw guide, Sam Fathers, Isaac begins to question the toll his family’s activity has taken on the land and the disenfranchised individuals alienated by the loss of their connections to each other and the landscape.

This essay examines the desire for control EuroAmericans depicted in “The Bear” brought to the once wild American wilderness. I’ll attempt to trace this desire to some of its theological and intellectual origins, and continue through Faulkner’s Southeast where Old Ben once roamed to the 21st century Northwest where the last of the bear’s distant progeny remain. “The Bear” is a prophetic work begging an examination of domineering social and economic practices, questioning the reliance on history as legitimation and guarantor of present philosophy, and depicting the harsh ecological and psychological consequences resulting from such practices.
Table of Contents

1. Introduction 1
2. The Story 8
3. The Wisdom and Sanctity... 17
4. Sanctity Diminished 32
5. From A History of Knowledge... 42
6. A Fragmented Nature 60
7. Wildness Today 70
“I will have to look at him”:
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Introduction

The American brown bear, *Ursus Arctos*, has occupied a special place in American minds, both today and long before Europeans knew and named either the beast or its habitat. The bear’s tendency to stand on its hind legs, nurture its young, and its omnivorous diet grant it close physiological proximity to humanity. For many cultures, the bear is a mediator between physical and spiritual worlds, often a messenger from the gods. Its ability to climb trees provides for its entrance to the heavens while its vernal hibernation illustrates its ability to dive into the underworld, the land of the dead, only to reemerge, renewed each spring (Sanders and Shepard 104). The bear once held sacred properties linking it to a greater metaphysical whole beyond human observation. These powers have long been the envy of humans from divers cultures in what we now know as North America.

Today the bear is a symbol of wildness. Its appearance in modern literature and contemporary popular culture usually coincides with violence, fear, the uncontrollable.
In William Faulkner's prophetic novella, "The Bear," the animal symbolizes all of these properties. In it, characters pursue and ultimately lament the death of one of the last grizzly bears in the American Southeast. In Faulkner's story, the eponymous character, Old Ben, symbolizes wilderness itself, and his death is an ominous indicator that something has been lost in industrializing America.

Paul Shepard and Barry Sanders trace human treatment of bears in their book *The Sacred Paw: The Bear in Nature, Myth and Literature*. According to their study, in ancient, European pagan culture the bear was a central figure in tribal celebrations and rituals. "The festival was centered on the religious nesting of the divine animal. Offerings of tobacco and sharing of the hearth and table with the spirit of the bear itself were inherent in it" (200). As humans moved from hunting and gathering, whence they lived largely at the mercy of the elements, to agriculture, we began to bring natural processes under human control. Shepard and Sanders explain how these new agricultural systems not only regulated the growth of crops and livestock but also the existence of insects and other pests, the movements of non-domesticated animals, and even the flow of waterways. With these developments, the sanctity of the natural world diminished and wildness was seen as an unpredictable chaos, an adversary to human wellbeing. As with other inimical bodies, this
enemy had to be brought under control. The treatment of bears mirrored this approach to the rest of nature until eventually, “the aforementioned shift in mentality came to prevail. The bear was reared in captivity; its life and the time of its death came under human regulation” (200).

In millennia before the dawn of modern civilization, pagan cultures worshipped the natural elements. As technological development throughout the Middle Ages, and especially during the Enlightenment enabled greater manipulation of the landscape, the sanctity of nature was removed and the earth began to be viewed as an imperfect garden to be carved up and molded to suit human desires. In the seventeenth century, French philosopher Rene Descartes advocated a novel human omnipotence with his assertion that, with the help of science, humans might become “the masters and possessors of nature” (45).

I have spent four summers guiding rafting and backpacking trips in and around Glacier National Park. In that time I have seen more bears than I can count and come close enough to exchange nervous gazes with two of them. These tenuous moments represent my greatest fear on the job. They are also the reason I do it. Learning to live so close to something vastly more powerful than ourselves,
something beyond our control, fosters a humility that is essential to my, and I believe all human existence.

The belief that we are more powerful than the processes that have shaped the world inhibits the full understanding of the effectiveness of those processes. The observance of the land begs the immediate question, how can we improve upon nature and make it work for us? This approach seems to skip a step. First, it does not acknowledge the efficient workings of nature prior to human intervention. According to Michael Branch, philosophers such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and others note that "it is the epistemological assumption that we can know absolutely which often underwrites relationships of domination and exploitation" (46). Witnessing an entity merely in terms of its capability to serve ourselves inhibits a full appreciation for that entity's own intrinsic value. Second, focusing on how mere portions of nature can be manipulated to do humanity's bidding fails to account for the inevitable impact such change will have on the greater ecosystem. In each case, nature is seen solely in the anthropocentric terms of its relations to humans.

The emerging school of literary theory, ecocriticism, provides a clear distinction between these egocentric tendencies, and viewing
nature, in and out of literature, with a healthier, ecologically informed approach. Michael Branch writes,

As a simple illustration, consider a tree. In addition to [...] providing paper [...], a tree is also a termite’s way of feeding itself, a bird’s way of securing shelter, the soil’s way of preventing its being washed to the sea. If we interpret the tree to mean only dollars or furniture or firewood, we have misread the tree by ignoring the variety of other contexts which define its meaning and value. (45)

The typical practice of observing nature with the narrow focus of how it might better suit humans fails to account for the importance of the land to nonhuman life, life that is in turn essential to humans. Branch specifically describes the importance of physical geography in Faulkner’s and others’ work. Rather than serve simply as a stage upon which the human characters enact their adventures, “Frost’s New England and Faulkner’s Mississippi are the subjects rather than simply the settings of their work” (43). While setting can be an arbitrary location where a story takes place, Faulkner acknowledges the role the land plays in reshaping the beliefs and actions of the characters walking within it. This is uncommon in Western conceptions of history where the impact of the physical geography is often subjugated in literature to a secondary consideration in the activities of humans.

Aldo Leopold, one of the earliest American ecologists emerging around the same time Faulkner published Go Down, Moses, questions
the alienation humanity experiences when casting our gaze upon modern accoutrements rather than on the land itself when attempting to achieve understanding of nature. “Your true modern is separated from the land by many middlemen, by innumerable physical gadgets. He has no vital relation to it; to him it is the space between cities on which crops grow” (261). Isaac McCaslin, the main character in Faulkner’s “The Bear,” poses similar questions regarding the American treatment of the land from this isolated perspective. In a key passage in “The Bear,” Isaac realizes the barrier posed by the tools he uses to order and dominate nature, and his relinquishment of those tools becomes a pivotal revelation in his education. This alienation and the focus on manipulating specific portions of the natural world, usually for economic reasons, has failed to notice the complex relationships that compose the web of life.

The end of the twentieth century was marked by an increasing awareness of the planet’s failing health. Over the last few decades, science has begun to notice patterns of ecological degradation and even the collapse of entire ecosystems. Human hands have been spotted clumsily fumbling through the fragile threads of the web of life. The same technology employed in hopes of improving our lives has had disastrous effects in places we probably never thought possible. In Mark Reisner’s book, Cadillac Desert, an in depth examination of the
effort to manipulate the water resources of the West to support prolific human growth in an otherwise hostile environment, we find a frightening quantification of the impact of our efforts: Hoover Dam holds back a quantity of water so massive its weight actually bent the earth's crust. No one would argue that the development of the Colorado River was not essential to the economic prosperity that allowed the American West to flourish. But many question whether or not such a development can legitimately be called “progress.” The American drive to create more jobs in more communities in places that do not immediately support such activity has had profound and unforeseen implications that we are just now beginning to comprehend.

Skeptical examinations of these largely economic motivations have not been limited to the pens of scientists. Faulkner's “The Bear” discusses not only the deleterious impact of human activity on the environment, but also the alienating effects such an approach has on the human psyche. From the opening pages of the story, human existence is dwarfed by the wilderness symbolized by Old Ben.
The Story

It loomed and towered in his dreams before he even saw the unaxed woods where it left its crooked print, shaggy, tremendous, red-eyed, not malevolent but just big, too big for the dogs which tried to bay it, for the horses which tried to ride it down, for the men and the bullets they fired into it; too big for the very country which was its constricting scope. It was as if the boy had already divined what his senses and intellect had not encompassed yet: that doomed wilderness whose edges were being constantly and punily gnawed at by men with plows and axes who feared it because it was wilderness. (193)

Faulkner’s novella, later a chapter in the novel, *Go Down, Moses*, describes a group of characters leaving behind their urban homes and literally entering the wilderness to hunt one of the last grizzly bears of the Tallahatchie River bottom. The group is composed of several members of postbellum Mississippi gentility, namely, Major de Spain, the owner of the plot of land; and his friends, General Compson; Walter Ewell; McCaslin “Cass” Edmonds; and his cousin, the main character, young Isaac “Ike” McCaslin. Isaac is heir to a substantial inheritance composed of land as well as cash, left by his grandfather, Carothers McCaslin, but that inheritance is eventually repudiated as Isaac rethinks the human relationship to the landscape. Also in the group is Sam Fathers, “the son of a negro slave and a Chickasaw chief,” who acts as mentor to Isaac, teaching him the humility and skill to endure in the great woods. Among a group of
freed slaves and other servants accompanying the men is Boon Hogganbeck, the mostly white, one quarter Chickasaw man who will miraculously and brutally slay Old Ben, despite his terrible hunting skills. Boon’s murdering of Old Ben is an allegorical comparison to the desecration of the wilderness Faulkner observes in 20th century America.

From the opening pages of “The Old People,” the story immediately preceding “The Bear,” Isaac hears of traits embodied in the wilderness and the wild people and animals who live there worthy of his loftiest aspirations. McCaslin describes Sam to his awestruck cousin: “All his blood on both sides, except the little white part, knew things that had been tamed out of our blood so long ago that we have not only forgotten them, we have to live together in herds to protect ourselves from our own sources” (167). This passage also provides Isaac with one of the first warnings that industrializing society does not provide its citizens with the security they ascribe to it.

As the novel progresses, Isaac distances himself from the others, and from the typical American ideology urging domination of the wilderness. As Judith Bryant Wittenberg points out, “The Bear” “should be read not merely as a story of the South but as a comment on the course of an entire nation’s pastoral impulse” (51). Written in 1935 about a time of rapid, almost frightening forest clearing, road building
and urban expansion, “The Bear” emerged as a dissenting voice in the clamor cheering America’s development. Lawrence Buell points out that *Go Down, Moses* “elegiacally anticipates the death of nature” (5). Under Sam’s tutelage, Ike displays a growing awareness that the wilderness is being invaded by the spread of industrialization as pioneers and all that come with them push deeper into the seemingly endless forest, attempting to tame their wild forces, coaxing the land to better serve the goals of the burgeoning American economy.

The passage that began this chapter equates the objective of hunting the bear with the greater goal of preparing the land for civilization. As the passage indicates, the characters described here feared the land “because it was wilderness,” because it was not yet controlled. The wilderness, symbolized by Old Ben, is “not even a mortal beast but an anachronism indomitable and invincible out of an old dead time, a phantom, epitome and apotheosis of the old wild life which the little puny humans swarmed and hacked at in a fury of abhorrence and fear” (193).

This fear of the wild is a recurrent theme in the novella. During one autumn’s search for Old Ben, Sam Fathers counsels Isaac with the warning, “don’t be afraid. Ain’t nothing in the woods going to hurt you if you don’t corner it or it don’t smell that you are afraid” (207). Sam encourages Isaac to find comfort in the apparent uncertainty
generations of his ancestors enjoyed before the institution of industrial agricultural systems. Rather than subsist largely at the mercy of the untamed world, the pioneers must clear the trees and till the soil, enacting systems they perceive as more predictable and stable than reaping what the land would naturally produce. Not only do they seek to remove the bear from “their land,” they wish to remove their tract from the still wild land that borders it. With this removal, they hope to exert greater control of the processes of life and death occurring there.

“The Bear” was initially published in part as a short story in magazines in 1935, and again in 1942, the same year it was collected with six other chapters/stories as Go Down, Moses. Though I will incorporate portions of the other chapters in my analysis, I will focus on “The Bear” as I discuss the questions it poses regarding the human treatment of the natural environment.

The yearly hunts occur on a portion of land originally inhabited, historically as well as in the novel, by the Chickasaw Indians. In Faulkner’s story, one hundred square miles of that territory was purchased by one Thomas Sutpen, a prominent character in other works about mythical Yoknapatawpha County. He bought it from Ikkemotubbe, the father of Sam Fathers and a chief in the Chickasaw tribe. Upon falling into financial difficulties, Sutpen sold some of the
land to Major de Spain, the land the men walk in their quest for Old Ben.

The transference of the land from Ikkemotubbe to Sutpen marks not merely the first possession of the land by whites, but the first possession by anyone. According to Faulkner’s narrative, prior to its sale the land was not seen as a possession, even by the people who called it home for centuries before Sutpen’s arrival. In this transaction, the land no longer is, it is owned. In the conversation in the cryptic fourth section of “The Bear,” Isaac tells his cousin McCaslin why he will not accept the land as his inheritance. He explains, “because on the instant when Ikkemotubbe discovered, realised, that he could sell it for money, on that instant it ceased to ever have been his forever, father to father to father, and the man who bought it bought nothing” (257). Reaching back as far as Ikkemotubbe’s people walked the land, and as far forward as history manages to keep records of their existence, Isaac illustrates the fallacy in their perceived rights of ownership.

While simply living in a given space implies a loose form of ownership, the attempt to remove it theoretically from its surroundings, apprehending possession on a slip of paper, and transferring that ownership to another, in Isaac’s view, renders the owner incapable or unworthy of calling the land his. “It was of the
wilderness, the big woods, bigger and older than any recorded
document:--of white man fatuous enough to believe he had bought any
fragment of it, of Indian ruthless enough to pretend that any fragment
of it had been his to convey" (191). The wilderness dwarfs the
characters themselves, as well as their attempts to take possession of
it upon an ephemeral title deed. From this time forward, the
wilderness will not be recognized as an entity in and of itself, but will
be gnawed at and subdued in the attempt to make it serve human
purposes.

On this land, witnessing the process of diminishment wrought
by the attempt to control, Ike begins his apprenticeship as a woodsman
under the tutelage of Sam Fathers. It is this tutelage that will lead
him to repudiate the land he is supposed to inherit on his twenty-first
birthday, and, further, attempt to rectify the misogyny and racism of
his heritage.

Our first direct encounter with Sam and Ike occurs in “The Old
People,” the story immediately preceding “The Bear.” The opening
pages describe Ike’s first killed deer, with “Sam Fathers standing just
behind the boy as he had been standing when the boy shot his first
running rabbit” (163). Sam is positioned physically and
metaphorically behind Ike, close, supportive, but less prominent than
the young white boy.
Next, the story establishes Sam’s heritage and its relation to the other characters. After the kill, the other members of the group ride up to the man and the boy still standing over the deer, fresh from the quasi-ceremonial striping of the boy’s face with his prey’s blood.

Walter Ewell whose rifle never missed, and Major de Spain and old General Compson and the boy’s cousin, McCaslin Edmonds, [...] sitting their horses and looking down at them: at the old man of seventy who had been a negro for two generations now but whose face and bearing were still those of the Chickasaw chief who had been his father. (164)

This passage first places the white, land-owning characters, perched upon their horses, above, and “looking down” at the other two. The older whites are in power, purchasing and possessing the land, removing from it things wild, be they the bear, the “savages,” or the chaos of the untamed land itself. Sam is a mix, “son of a negro slave and a Chickasaw chief,” composed of half those who were possessed before they were even brought to this land and half the vanishing Indian, vanquished because they would not conform. But Sam is also royalty, son of a chief, imbued with his own regency in the past and in his dignified presence.

With this authority, Sam initiates Isaac into manhood, and also into a transcendental relationship with the wilderness. Sam is already initiated into this wild life since, “there was something running in Sam Fathers’ veins which ran in the veins of the buck too” (350). With the killing of his first deer, and the aforementioned striping of the boy’s
face with his prey’s blood, “Sam had marked him forever one with the wilderness which had accepted him since Sam said that he had done all right” (178). But rather than continue to walk the woods to seek the exhilaration of domination, he learns even greater respect for and identification with his prey.

In numerous passages throughout “The Old People” and “The Bear,” Sam, and eventually Isaac, evince an innate connection to the land and its nonhuman inhabitants. In “The Old People,” during one of Isaac’s first deer hunts, Sam and Isaac have split from Major de Spain and the others, literally and figuratively, as Isaac begins his initiation into the wilderness. As the two wait quietly in the brush, Isaac enjoys a transcendental oneness as “his own breathing, his heart, his blood,” become “something, all things” (182). This moment is broken by “the flat single clap of Walter Ewell’s rifle which never missed. Then the mellow sound of the horn came down the ridge” (183). Believing the large buck they had been stalking was shot, Sam and Ike move to rejoin the others.

Just as they start off, Sam sagaciously tells Ike to wait, and the buck miraculously appears before the pair. “Then it saw them. And still it did not begin to run [...] its head high and the eye not proud and not haughty but just full and wild and unafraid, and Sam standing beside the boy now, his right arm raised at full length, palm outward
‘Oleh. Chief.’ Sam said. ‘Grandfather’ (184). Unlike the other hunters who see the buck only as their prey, Sam recognizes his connection to the animal, showing it the respect due an elder, allowing it to pass rather than shooting.

The buck moves away with the horn still sounding a kill in the distance. The two return to the others where Walter Ewell is standing above a little spike buck which had still been a fawn last spring. ‘He was so little I pretty near let him go,’ Walter said. ‘But just look at the track he was making. [...] If there were any more tracks here besides the ones he is laying in, I would swear there was another buck here that I never even saw. (184-5)

But only Sam and Ike are initiated, and they are subsequently the only ones privileged with witnessing the deer, another symbol of wildness. Through this initiation, “Sam had marked him [Isaac] indeed, not as a mere hunter, but with something Sam had had in his turn of his vanished and forgotten people” (182). With this first step into the wilderness, Isaac, “who was the guest here,” moves closer to fulfilling the role played by Sam Fathers as “the mouthpiece of the host” (171), able to teach, to speak for Old Ben, the buck, and all the others unable to protest their enslavement.
3.

The Wisdom and Sanctity of the Land

*God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind.*

And God saw that it was good.

*Genesis 1.25*

Keith Basso describes another example of the landscape speaking wisdom to its inhabitants. His book, *Wisdom Sits in Places*, is the product of several years he spent on an Apache reservation in Cibique, Arizona, during the late 1970's and early 80's. As one tribal member, Annie Peaches, told Basso, “The land is always stalking the people. The land makes people live right. The land looks after us” (38). According to Basso’s study, tribal members refer to specific locations, giving them a voice that provides the people with lessons on how to “live right.”

While the Western Apache culture may be far different from Sam’s Chickasaw ancestry, the use of physical geography as a mentor to the people in Cibique is analogous to its function in “The Bear.” The wilderness, embodied in Sam, Old Ben, and Lion, the mongrel dog, speaks to Isaac, reminding him of the importance of landscape and his place within it. For the Apache, each place name is a brief physical
description referring to both a place and a story that occurred there involving kin who lived and learned long ago. The ancestors described in these stories usually transgressed cultural norms and eventually achieved resolution for both the individuals involved and the rest of the tribe. These stories are so much a part of this Western Apache culture that simply mentioning a place name brings the story, the people, and the resolution to the minds of the hearers.

The centerpiece of Basso’s book is a conversation between several tribal members. Louise, one of the speakers, has a younger brother who has fallen ill and been taken to the hospital. She is tacitly afraid this might stem from his own foolish behavior and is uncertain how to respond. The others in the conversation must delicately guide her as it would be inappropriate to preach, or to insult her brother in his absence. By referring to places where their ancestors have encountered similar problems, Louise’s friends can tactfully aid in her dilemma without condescension.

Upon Louise’s telling the others of her problem, one friend, Lola, responds, “It happened at Line Of White Rocks Extends Up And Out, at this very place!” (79) Long ago, Lola later told Basso, a young girl on a search for firewood, disobeyed her grandmother, walking where she was told not to go, and was subsequently bitten by a snake. The resolution comes when the girl reaffirms her own independence, but
only after acknowledging that she should have listened to her elder (94).

Here, as with other place names, the speakers defer to a greater source of wisdom, “A Line of White Rocks Extends Up and Out.” Basso explains,

Specifically, [such an] expression is used when ancestral knowledge seems applicable to difficulties arising from serious errors in someone else’s judgment, but when voicing one’s thoughts on the matter might be taken as evidence of arrogance, critical disapproval, or lack of sympathetic understanding. (91)

The practice is comparable to the contemporary tendency to quote philosophers, scientists, or poets, anyone able to offer a more authoritative voice in teaching, counseling, or general conversation. While it would be rude for one of Louise’s friends to pontificate about her brother’s misbehavior, deferring to a greater source of wisdom allows the participants to help, yet maintain humility. But the distinction between referring to people of history and to places the Apaches see every day is an important one.

Though each technique skillfully accomplishes its reformative objectives, the difference between these referents is indicative of deeper cultural priorities. Vine Deloria Jr. explains in God is Red: “American Indians hold their lands—places—as having the highest possible meaning, and all their statements are made with this reference point in mind” (62). Paul Shepard asserts the probability of
the human attachment to the land as a biological, and not merely a cultural phenomenon. "It is not unlikely that some form of dynamic integration of the individual with features of the terrain is part of human biology" (Nature and Madness 24).

The human necessity to integrate features of our natural, or perhaps even synthetic world into identity formation is not surprising. The familiarity of a given location, a favorite camping spot or our childhood home, brings most an immediate feeling of comfort. According to Shepard, "Juvenile imprinting on terrain (that is, indelible fixation on specific sites, giving them lifetime supersignificance) continues among modern urban people as well" (24). But with the transitory nature of the modern American landscape, one must question the feasibility of establishing such connections today. In the 21st century metropolis, old buildings are demolished to make way for new skyscrapers; in suburbia, once vacant lots are constantly giving way to new strip malls and housing developments. Indeed, even the constancy of the contemporary American home is sacrificed to the tendency toward perpetual newness. More fashionable furniture, a fresh coat of paint in that trendy new color, or the desire to destroy and reconstruct in more contemporary architectural forms makes for ephemeral landmarks. Americans searching for the enduring source of place available to the Apache around Cibique, or the feeling of home
Isaac finds in the Tallahatchie wilderness, are left awash in a constantly changing environment. It is this sort of power, as a constant and unchanging reference point, held by the woods, "bigger and older than any recorded document," that Sam Fathers attempts to voice to young Isaac (191).

The prominence of Sam's heritage throughout the novel merits discussion. Again and again in "The Old People" and "The Bear," Sam is described as "the son of a Chickasaw chief." The question is why? What of Faulkner's knowledge of the Chickasaw tribe did he want to convey to the reader? He apparently knew little of this culture. We find nothing in Joseph Blotner's nearly 2000 page biography that leads us to believe Sam is based on any actual, once living person. Indeed, Lewis Dabney tells us definitively, "There were no self-proclaimed Indians on Faulkner's hunts" (120). We also find little evidence that Faulkner studied, with any diligence, Chickasaw history or philosophy.

Rather than ground Sam Fathers in known individuals or recreate him from historical fact, Faulkner based this character on other American Indians from *Moby Dick* and *The Last of the Mohicans*. He took a stab in the mythologized darkness. In an essay about Sam Fathers and his historical roots, Dabney tells us how Faulkner created "an Indian legend out of mythology and American romance. Faulkner goes back to Cooper and Melville for the themes of manhood in nature
under the tutelage of the darkskinned savage, of the great hunt in the
dying wilderness” (118).

First and foremost, we must accept Sam as a fictional character. He does not represent the Chickasaw Indians of history, but is a member of a culture existing solely in literature. Faulkner was searching for a new approach that might avoid the devastated future he saw unfolding before him. Observing fictional characters such as Melville’s Queequeg and Cooper’s Mohicans, Faulkner believed he saw a people in whom the desire to apprehend control of the physical environment was largely absent. He was reaching, but in the naïve minds of white America, he was correct, and in those minds the notion of the noble savage who avoided the mistakes they had made, and continued to make, found fertile soil.

As Vine Deloria, Jr., laments in *Custer Died for your Sins*, “to be an Indian in modern American society is in a very real sense to be unreal and ahistorical” (10). In the instance of the romanticized Indian, contemporary white Americans beg these people to be the stewards of the land we could not be. Such uses of the American Indian as a role model for whites are widespread in contemporary and historical American culture. Unfortunately, the inaccuracy of most of these conceptions provides little insight into the ethnographic history of North America’s precontact citizenry. Interestingly enough, it does
give us thought provoking clues into EuroAmerican culture. Robert Berkhoffer explains: “the Indian of imagination and ideology continued to be derived as much from the polemical and creative needs of Whites as from what they heard and read of actual Native Americans” (71). Specifically, he refers to Faulkner’s and others’ use of Indians “to represent a sentient, spiritually rich life compared to the desiccated, intellectualized life of White men in Western civilization” (108). When we apply this assertion to a comparison between the intellectually dominated world envisioned by Descartes, and Isaac’s woods, “sentient, gigantic and brooding” (175), we are presented with a clearer picture of what Isaac, and perhaps Faulkner himself, were hoping Sam Fathers would rescue from the dying American wilderness.

Yet, I believe it is safe to say that beneath these dusty generalizations there remains a kernel of truth. In the introduction to God is Red, Deloria makes similar assertions. “As long as Indians exist there will be conflict between the tribes and any group that carelessly despoils the land and the life it supports” (1). There must be some validity to the notion that Indian culture places greater importance on the health of the environment than does present day EuroAmerican culture.

Though, as a white man baptized into the Catholic faith before I was able to protest, I experience some offense at the assertion that the
Bible describes a worldview perpetuating the exploitation and subsequent destruction of the natural environment, I must agree that misinterpretation of the scriptures has too often led to irresponsible treatment of the landscape. Deloria continues,

Finally the ecologists arrived with predictions so chilling as to frighten the strongest heart. At the present rate of deterioration, they told us, mankind could expect only a generation before the species would finally be extinguished. How had this situation come about? Some ecologists told us that it was the old Christian idea of nature: the rejection of creation as a living ecosystem and the concept of nature as depraved, an object for exploitation and nothing more. (52)

Although some may say that he is overstating the case, Deloria is correct in the observation that the natural environment has been looted and pillaged, largely by people who adhere to religions stemming from the Christian tradition.

While I do not believe a denial of nature’s sanctity is inherent in the Bible, a comparison of Christian and Chickasaw creation mythologies reveals provocative answers to each respective culture’s existential and epistemological questions. From these philosophical foundations, cultures build a system of ethics regarding treatment of nature.

Arrell Gibson of the University of Oklahoma provides a concise explanation of Chickasaw cosmogony. According to Gibson’s account of Chickasaw creation, “The crawfish brought up earth from the ‘universal watery waste’ and formed the earth. Other creatures
produced light, darkness, mountains, and forest” (103). The crux of this origination, a type of creation myth commonly referred to as the Earthdiver pattern, is far different from the verses in the Old Testament. Most readers are familiar with the six days of creation and the final day before His rest when God created humankind and said, “let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth” (Gen 1.26). These words have provided volatile fuel for environmentalists who charge Christianity with maintaining an inherently anthropocentric account of the world’s origins and purpose.

As Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim state in the forward to a collection of essays, *Christianity and Ecology*, “Religions provide basic interpretive stories of who we are, what nature is, where we have come from, and where we are going” (xvi). When one focuses on a few verses in Genesis alone, it seems that humans have been placed here by an absent God, are endowed with the right to manipulate this planet and its inhabitants as we see fit, and will one day be rescued, removed upon our deaths to the ethereal utopia of a more sanctified world.

In “The Bear,” Isaac and his cousin, McCaslin, debate contradictory interpretations of Genesis as Isaac explains why he will not accept his Grandfather’s legacy. McCaslin represents the ideology
that humans are indeed dispossessed of the sacred ground and must endure an existence in opposition to a hostile environment. He claims that Isaac’s Grandfather “bought the land, took the land [...], when it was a wilderness of wild beasts and wilder men, and cleared it, translated it into something to bequeath to his children, worthy of bequeathment for his descendants’ ease and security and pride” (256).

For McCaslin, the untamed wilderness had little value until it was made to serve its new human inhabitants. Carothers McCaslin carved a home out of the inhospitable terrain, much to the detriment of its previous citizens. But Isaac responds with the aforementioned contention that as soon as Ikkemotubbe sold the land for money, “it ceased ever to have been his forever.”

Next, Isaac delivers his own interpretation of Genesis:

He told in the Book how He created the earth, made it and looked at it and said it was all right, then He made man. [...] He created man to be His overseer on the earth and to hold suzerainty over the earth and the animals on it in His name, not to hold inviolable title forever, generation after generation, to the oblongs and squares of the earth, but to hold the earth mutual and intact in the communal anonymity of brotherhood. (257)

Isaac recasts the mold of history with this reading, assuming a prophetic role by reinterpreting the word of God, basing the alteration largely on a single word: “suzerainty.” The difference between the definitions of “dominion,” denoting domination and control, and “suzerainty,” which alludes to the internal autonomy of the governed,
in this case nature, is essential in interpreting Isaac’s conception of humanity’s role in its stewardship of the earth. The root word, "suzerain," has its origins in the early nineteenth century French word, "souverain," which translates to “sovereign.” In this passage Isaac echoes Aldo Leopold’s thoughts regarding Biblical description of the land: “Individual thinkers since the days of Ezekiel and Isaiah have asserted that the despoliation of land is not only inexpedient but wrong” (239). Both Isaac and Leopold recognize nature’s independence from selfish human control and the demand, theologically as well as practically, to maintain the integrity of the environment.

Rather than viewing nature as did Enlightenment thinkers such as Bacon and Descartes, Ike holds to the humility and preservation of a world that has not been passed down to be manipulated and pillaged. It was created, and in that unadulterated form it was “all right,” and was to be held “intact.” The notion of humans having dominion is further undermined by the ideas of “anonymity of brotherhood.” According to Isaac, the interests of humans cannot be placed above the interests of our nonhuman brethren as the earth is our mutual residence. Humans are to be the mouthpiece of the animals that cannot speak for their own benefit, rather than an exploiter of those species unable to protest their treatment. Sam fills the role of
mouthpiece early in the story and passes this understanding along to Ike.

According to typical readings of Genesis, those in opposition to Ike's interpretation, the world was created by a single divine being, and it is humanity alone that is created in His image and therefore has authority over the world's flora and fauna. Chickasaws, in contrast, observe the Earth Diver pattern of creation mythology, and view the creation of the world as a cooperative process in which the existence and efforts of nonhuman animals are essential. Contrasting these distinct accounts of creation mythology in such simplistic terms gives clear voice to environmentalists who would like to place much of the blame for today's ecological crisis squarely on the shoulders of Christian religions. It also leads to the naive idealization of American Indians so commonplace in popular American culture. Any culture that allows its philosophical foundations to be constructed on such cursory interpretation of the Old Testament would feel adequately justified in using the earth's biota as furnishings in its very own homes. But deeper examination of the Old Testament does not support such selfish use of nature.

It cannot be denied that the peculiar phraseology of Genesis lends itself to the notion that our natural surroundings were created for human use. Susan Power Bratton admits that "some common
criticisms of Judeo-Christian thinking—that it desacredizes nature and that it sets humankind in a special position—are basically correct interpretations of Old Testament theology” (207). But she goes on to point out, in her article “Christian Ecology and the Old Testament,” that these are oversimplified interpretations of the scriptures. A comprehensive exegesis of the Bible reveals the sacredness of physical geography more closely aligned with the one Isaac describes quoted above.

Elizabeth Johnson explains in an article in Christianity and Ecology: “If the earth is indeed creation, a sacrament of the glory of God with its own intrinsic value, then, for those of the Christian persuasion, on-going destruction of earth bears the mark of great sinfulness” (15). It is important to keep in mind the clause, “with its own intrinsic value,” as the Old Testament focuses on the value of the earth aside from the benefits derived by humans. The continued subreption of these facts enables human control at the expense of nonhuman life without allowing unwanted weight to be felt by our cultural conscience. Other books of the Bible depict creation as a continuing process in which God is constantly a part, not a single act where the earth was passed from God to humanity.

Many prophets of the Old Testament warn the Israelites that transgressing their covenant with God will result in His wrath being
exerted upon them as well as the rest of the physical environment.
The prophecies in Hosea, Jeremiah, and other books of The Bible
parallel the warning described in “The Bear.” As part of the Israelites’
punishment, “the land mourns, and all who live in it languish; together
with the wild animals, and the birds of the air, even the fish of the sea
are perishing” (Hosea 4.3). Here the experience of the Israelites
parallels that of the earth’s wildlife as they exist together in a single
community, but environmental degradation is not merely the tool of a
vengeful God. God tells Jeremiah that the Israelites’ mistreatment of
the land was among the initial crimes: “but when you entered you
defiled my land and made my heritage an abomination” (2.7). Here
God clearly describes the land as His, not as the property of humans.
According to these and other passages of the Bible, selfish or careless
mistreatment of the land disobeys the covenant that Israelites, as well
as contemporary followers of Christian religions alike, have made with
God. Such disobedience displays a lack of compassion for God’s
creation and becomes a punishment compounded by the reactions of
both the injured earth and the irritated deity.

These and other examples show God’s desire for humans to
maintain the earth, as Isaac claims, in “anonymity of brotherhood”
(257) with our nonhuman neighbors. Rosemary Ruether explains:
“God, finally, is the one who possesses the earth as his creation.
Humans are given usufruct of it. Their rule is the secondary one of care for it as a royal steward, not as an owner who can do with it what he wills" (21). The precise definition of her word, “usufruct,” is central in this interpretation. From Roman law, it denotes the use of another’s property short of its destruction. Ruether echoes Isaac’s contention that man may hold the earth “mutual and intact” (257). This closer reading of the Bible casts a different light upon the word “dominion” as it is used in Genesis, and shows once again how Isaac conforms to a truer conception of the scripture when he substitutes “suzerainty.”

Dieter T. Hessel summarizes a broad ecotheological approach to the Bible: “Covenant theology statutes expect ecojustice to be done. Exodus 23, Leviticus 19 and 25, and Deuteronomy 15 emphasize the religious obligation of faithful people to give animals sabbath rest and to let the land lie fallow at least once every seven years” (11). In the Bible, care for the earth’s biota takes precedence over economic inducements to extract the greatest possible benefit to humans from the land.
Sanctity Diminished

*I am glad I shall never be young without wild country to be young in. Of what avail are forty freedoms without a blank spot on the map?*

*Aldo Leopold
Sand County Almanac*

The above interpretations of the Bible, with their emphasis on the community of life including human and nonhuman biota, represent very different approaches to the natural world than the one described by Rene Descartes during the Enlightenment. Descartes devoted the last chapter of his *Discourse on Method* to “the Study of Nature.”

Instead of the speculative philosophy now taught in the schools we can find a practical one, by which, knowing the nature and behavior of fire, water, air, stars, the heavens, and all the other bodies which surround us, as well as we now understand the different skills of our own workers, we can employ these entities for all the purposes for which they are suited, and so make ourselves masters and possessors of nature. (45)

Several distinct and profound assertions are present in this declaration. First, of course, it sets forth the notion that the forces of nature can be absolutely controlled. Descartes relies upon knowledge as the tool that will enable human manipulation of all the elements of the earth. Second, and perhaps most vexing, is the belief that nature’s forces need to be manipulated; that they are insufficient for, or adversarial to the needs of humans. Finally, there is a teleological progression from speculation to certainty: once we conjectured and
observed, now we know and control. Descartes does not consider the possibility that we do not know what we think we know.

One question is whether the origins of Cartesian philosophy are in keeping with the words in Genesis? Perhaps the utilitarian conception of our natural surroundings is not based on spiritual foundations, but on the emergence of modern science in the seventeenth century. While Descartes' objectives in *Discourse on Method* are grounded in religion with his references to “the Creator,” it is the scientific understanding of the world as a subject to be studied, a living rubics cube we think we can figure out and solve, that fosters an anthropocentric, utilitarian view of nature.

Lynn White, Jr., blames Christian dogma for continuing environmental decay. In his widely cited article, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” White identifies the development of Western technology throughout the first two millennia marked by an increasingly hegemonic relationship of humans over nature. Citing developments in European agriculture, White describes a shift from techniques employed because they satisfied basic human needs, to new practices adopted to keep up with technological innovations. “Thus, distribution of land was based no longer on the needs of a family, but rather, on the capacity of a power machine to till the earth.” Such developments constituted definitive steps in the divorce between
humans and our home. These advances meant that we were subject less and less to the mercy of the earth's forces. "Formerly man had been part of nature: now he was the exploiter of nature" (1205).

White places the source of this separation within a departure from pagan religions better suited to recognize the sanctity of nature. He continues: "In Antiquity every tree, every spring, every stream, every hill had its own genius loci, its guardian spirit." But as the technology available to Christians progressed, the notion of humans as the controllers of nature replaced the human position within a sacred world: "The spirits in natural objects, which formerly had protected nature from man, evaporated" (1205). But we have already seen that Biblical texts affirm that these spirits will always exist in nature, and that it is their God's will to protect the entire community of life as one sacred creation. We must acknowledge, however, that the environment has been devastated by human activity, largely at the hands of Christians.

I do not believe we can firmly locate the source of the continuing environmental dilemma in Christianity. White and I are partially in agreement that the emergence of science as a means of forging the tractability of nature truly holds the root of the problem. Where White contends that "Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt" (1206), it seems that varying interpretations of Christian doctrine merely
provide a convenient justification for modern humans’ desire to order the natural world so as to bring it completely under our control.

Isaac’s exegesis of Genesis, however, his notion of man’s suzerainty over nature, and God’s directive “to hold the earth mutual and intact in the communal anonymity of brotherhood,” maintain a more ecologically informed interpretation of the Bible. Indeed, Paul Shepard agrees that it could very well be the departure from Christianity that has enabled the human separation from the natural world. He mentions C.S. Lewis’ *The Discarded Image* as a prime example of Medieval Christians’ “at-homeness in the world” (81). Shepard goes on to defend Medieval Christianity as “full of ‘sympathies’ and ‘striving’ rather than manipulation or regulation of natural laws,” which conveys “the idea that it is the loss of Christian feeling that is at the root of modern anomie and estrangement” (82).

As humanity continued along a path tending towards the separation of humanity from nature, and towards the domination of the landscape, the significance of place diminished and modernizing humans relied increasingly on their perceived progression through history. Modern humans appear to know more about the world, and have greater power over it, than did our ancestors. But this knowledge is not based on an accurate understanding of our earthly home. On the
contrary, the understanding we achieved is a fragmented nature from which humans are separated.

Those followers of Christian teachings who subscribe to the human dominion over nature have put their faith in a set of assumptions: that the earth is not our ultimate home but merely a way-station, and that technology will enable greater and greater domination of nature. These assumptions have allowed them to disregard some Biblical teachings in favor of a belief that we might finally overcome the obstacles that still occasionally arise. The stories of drought and famine in the desert at the hand of an inhospitable environment, or even a vengeful God, no longer hold sway. Present day Christians are spatially and temporally removed from the origins of such beliefs, while the deserts of the American West are now the new, fertile Edens thanks to dams and irrigation. Assertions that the environment is crumbling under the weight of these innovations can be easily dismissed so long as Americans hold tight to the notion that our knowledge will ultimately deliver us from the proposed consequences. We must reexamine the development of human knowledge, and ask ourselves if science has achieved a greater understanding of the world.

Michel Foucault locates a profound shift in the organization of human knowledge occurring during the Enlightenment. Though his discussion does not involve ecology, it is applicable here as he
examines the division between language and the world it is supposed
to represent, followed by the fragmentation of the human
understanding of nature. In The Order of Things, Foucault begins
with Hebrew, a language in which, “The names of things were lodged
in the things they designated, just as strength is written in the body of
the lion, regality in the eye of the eagle” (36). He traces this origin
through the centuries in Europe until finally, “given the fact itself,
language was never to be anything more than a particular case of
representation (for the Classics) or of signification (for us). The
profound kinship of language with the world was thus dissolved” (43).
Foucault describes the organization of European language as a system
where “Words group syllables together, syllables letters [...] It is a
fragmented nature, divided against itself” (35). For the European,
language is a system of disjointed portions etymologically removed
from the things they describe, brought into unity and control through
the workings of the human mind.

This separation of the signifier from the signified is akin to the
isolation in which modern humanity places the various entities of the
natural environment. It was initially the desire to bring order to a
previously chaotic world that wrought this removal. The attempt to
impose mechanistic rationality to the universe, especially as it related
to humans, brought about the rigid taxonomy still employed today.
Robert Berkhofer explains, “What was new in the Enlightenment was the belief in the power of human understanding unaided by divine revelation—even the authority of the ancients—to comprehend the universe and the effort to substitute natural for supernatural explanation of the workings of that universe” (39). In Berkhofer’s view, God’s wisdom was removed from the equation supposed to aid humans in understanding nature, and this alienated approach to scientific understanding of nature must be held suspect. So the Bible is not the source of the thinking displayed in Descartes’ objective; rather it is the divorce from theological foundations that truly enabled the new scientific hubris.

Foucault suggests that if some philosophers held that nature “is too rich and various to be fitted within so rigid a framework,” philosophers such as Descartes, Linneaus, and Francis Bacon were confident in the ability of the human mind to bring cognitive order to the workings of the universe (Order 126). As Enlightenment thinkers began to forge this new understanding, the entities of the natural world, especially the humans perceiving it, were separated, much like the language used to describe them, from the rest of the world to which they had hitherto been bound.

Just as he notes this segmentation in the realm of language, Foucault illuminates a peculiar categorization, or fragmentation, in
our treatment of natural history around the middle of the seventeenth century. He cites the establishment of botanical gardens and zoological collections as a curious revelation in the human practice of observing nature: “What had changed was the space in which it was possible to see them [exotic plants and animals] and from which it was possible to describe them” (131). This is a significant development in the human relationship to nature. As with language, it was no longer important for these species, these symbols, to be embedded in the ecosystems they represent. Exotic species of plants and animals were removed from their natural environments and arbitrarily placed in oblongs and squares where one species’ relation to another has nothing to do with the geographical location of their native environments. They were placed in these contexts so that the viewer could become familiar with them in a more convenient, though geographically and biologically inaccurate layout.

Perhaps it is Sam Fathers’ intention to restore the connections largely lost during the Enlightenment, to instill in Isaac the knowledge that such segmented attempts at objective understanding of the natural world are futile. In these atavistic endeavors Sam seeks to replace the arbitrary segmentation of nature Foucault observes in the mid-seventeenth century with the Christian theology adhered to by Diderot, Bonnet, and others, who, Foucault claims, “already have a
presentiment of life's creative powers, of its inexhaustible power of
transformation, of its plasticity, and of that movement by means of
which it envelops all its productions, ourselves included, in a time of
which no one is master” (127). Although science has achieved
understanding of phenomena previously deemed incomprehensible,
relying on such static knowledge of nature through time
underestimates nature. Isaac echoes these concerns when he describes
the wilderness as “bigger and older than any recorded document” (191).
Nature cannot be put down to the objective record of past knowledge,
but must be continually observed as a dynamic force.

The impact of this mechanistically ordered understanding of
nature continues to have a tangible effect on wildlife today. For
example, the kokanee salmon was introduced into Flathead Lake in
Northwest Montana in 1916. They took hold quickly and eventually
became “the dominant sport fish” (Spencer et al 15). Though this
introduction certainly must have affected the greater environment, it
eventually regained its equilibrium to support a thriving ecosystem.
Upon reaching maturity after three or four years in Flathead Lake, the
salmon would move upstream to McDonald Creek in Glacier National
Park, where, during the 1970's and 80's, anywhere from 25,000 to
100,000 salmon would spawn each fall (Spencer et al 16). Eagles and
Old Ben’s distant progeny, grizzly bears, would feed on the abundant salmon as they prepared for winter migration or hibernation.

In the late 60’s and early 70’s, in an effort to bolster the already stable kokanee population, the Montana Department of Fish and Wildlife stocked mysis shrimp in “three lakes in the upper portion of the Flathead catchment” (Spencer et al 14). Although kokanee were known to feed on mysis shrimp in other riparian systems, the introduction proved disastrous in the Flathead. Due to an opposite daily movement cycle in the deep waters of the lake, the salmon had limited opportunity to partake in their intended meal. Instead, the shrimp and salmon battled for another food source, zooplankton, ending in decreasing numbers of kokanee (Spencer et al 15). To make matters worse, the lake trout, a predator to the kokanee whose daily movements paralleled the shrimp, could feed on the shrimp early in life, and the dwindling kokanee later. As a result of these new obstacles arising before the salmon, not a single kokanee was seen in McDonald Creek after 1990 (McClelland et al 5). Additional losers in this clumsy human attempt to manipulate the fragile web of life were the eagles and bears already struggling in the rapidly developing American West. Even attempts to bolster the food supply for Old Ben’s progeny can lead to disaster when the desire for control narrows the focus and fails to account for nature’s diverse interrelations.
5.

From A History of Knowledge to the Knowledge of History

It was Grandfather’s [watch] and when Father gave it to me he said I give you the mausoleum of all hope and desire; it’s rather excruciating-ly apt that you will use it to gain the reducto absurdum of all human experience which can fit your individual needs no better than it fitted his or his father’s. I give it to you not that you may remember time, but that you might forget it now and then for a moment and not spend all your breath trying to conquer it. [...] The field only reveals to man his own folly and despair, and victory is an illusion of philosophers and fools.

William Faulkner
The Sound and the Fury

Viewing European geographical dispersion and technological innovation as progression, as evidence that we are on the right track, seems to grant justification to continue in our behavior. But the gaze fixed on temporal progression fails to accurately observe physical reality. The land the colonists moved over is secondary, if regarded at all, to notions of progress through time. Albert Camus critiques the Occidental tendency to focus on time and its impact on place:

when the Church dissipated its Mediterranean heritage, it placed the emphasis on history to the detriment of nature, caused the Gothic to triumph over the romance, and destroying a limit in itself, has made increasing claims to temporal power and historical dynamism. When nature ceases to be an object of contemplation and admiration, it can be nothing more than materials for an action that aims at transforming it. (299)
In this passage from *The Rebel*, Camus posits the European removal from its geographical origins as a source of nature's diminished importance in the modern mind. He also provides an oblique critique of Descartes' objective similar to the one stated in the introduction to this paper, that observing the land with the primary intention of reforming it skips the initial step of acknowledging nature's importance and already efficient workings. Indeed, as Aldo Leopold points out, students of history often disregard the role the natural environment plays in America's past. The main reason Mississippi and surrounding areas appealed to the settlers depicted in “The Bear” was the land's ability to foster plant life suitable for crops and livestock. “In short, the plant succession steered the course of history; the pioneer simply demonstrated, for good or ill, what successions inhered in the land” (243). Environmental details are largely overlooked when space is subjugated to humans' perceived progression through time.

Paul Shepard concurs that reliance on temporal history creates an abstract understanding of our present setting. “To understand this aridity of culture we must stand apart from the conventions of history, even while using the record of the past, for the idea of history is itself a Western invention whose central theme is the rejection of habitat. It formulates experience outside of nature and tends to reduce place to
location" (Nature and Madness 47). The separation of humanity from nature taints human understanding of it, and is compounded by the human movement over the globe, increasingly removed from the landscapes within which any initial understanding may have been formulated. The notion of habitat as temporary while time is permanent isolates inhabitants from our home and bars us from the wisdom ancestors might have gained about the immediate environment. In the case of the Western Apaches discussed earlier in this paper, the people are constantly reminded of the lives and lessons learned by their ancestors in the very place where they still reside.

Deloria elaborates on the choice to define our knowledge either by spatial conceptions of the world, or by temporal ones: “Immigrants review the movement of their ancestors across the continent as a steady progression of basically good events and experiences, thereby placing history—time—in the best possible light” (62). Modernizing Western thinkers see no spatial barrier between the culture that was born in the Fertile Crescent and the one they perpetuate today. They do, however, see a vast difference between the times of antiquity, and the far more enlightened outlook held today. Isaac rejects the progressive removal from the landscape over time as he recalls Sam’s ancestors to the space he inhabits:

And as he talked about those old times and those dead and vanished men of another race from either that the boy knew,
gradually to the boy those old times would cease to be old times and would become a part of the boy’s present, not only as if they had happened yesterday but as if they were still happening, the men who walked through them actually walking in breath and air and casting an actual shadow on the earth they had not quitted. (171)

Firmly rooted in the spatial source of his learning, Isaac adopts a synchronic notion of time whereby his time becomes all time, and he examines the knowledge of the past in the wisdom of the present, all of which is bound to where he stands in the Tallahatchie woods. Blanch Gelfant explains this perspicacious understanding of events and people with which Isaac ostensibly had no direct contact: “Everything that happens to Ike in the wilderness happens now and simultaneously. Everything new and strange is familiar” (50-51). The transcendence Isaac experiences in the wilderness allows him to access the knowledge held by those who lived and learned there long before his arrival. “The boy would just wait and then listen and Sam would begin, talking about the old days and the People whom he had not had time ever to know” (171). In refocusing his attention to this new orientation, Ike must appraise the value of the history that has brought him to this point, the history that is supposed to justify the present condition of the wilderness.

The McCaslin patriarchy, beginning with Isaac’s grandfather, Carothers McCaslin, and continuing with his father and uncle, Buck and Buddy, kept record of their history in Yoknapatawpha County in
ledgers Ike examines at the age of sixteen. He had thought to review
the “comprehensive though doubtless tedious record” earlier, but
deemed it futile, “since what the old books contained would be after all
these years fixed, immutably, finished, unalterable, harmless” (268).
But Isaac is beginning to understand that acceptance of his inheritance
is also an acceptance and validation of this less than “harmless”
history. According to David Evans, “His repudiation of his inheritance
is an act which terminates the cycle of generations, and which makes
him the climactic end of the providential history of redemption” (192).
Isaac becomes a new savior by bringing an end to generations of
impropriety, compounded by the tacit approval of those benefiting from
the legacy.

He learns from the ledgers that his grandfather had an affair
with one of his slaves, Eunice, who gave birth to an illegitimate
daughter, Tomy. The ledger lists Tomy’s parents as Eunice and her
husband, Thucy dus, but Isaac sees through the falsity. The sin was
compounded years later when Carothers fathers another child, this
time with his own daughter. Here, Isaac makes the discovery that
Eunice committed suicide when she realized her daughter was
pregnant, “six months before her daughter’s and her lover’s (Her first
lover’s he thought. Her first) child was born” (271). Tomy dies in
childbirth and the secret might have been safe in the ledgers. But
Carothers apparently wanted to care, at least financially, for his illegitimate son/grandson, and left him $1000 inheritance, providing Isaac with an essential clue to the mystery. Ike’s grandfather “made no effort either to explain or obfuscate the thousand-dollar legacy to the son of an unmarried slave-girl, [...] bearing the consequence of the act of which there was still no definite incontrovertible proof that he acknowledged” (269).

In Isaac’s view, the sins of misogyny, adultery, and incest are too great to bear and he finally realizes the role he might take in mending this sordid history. He locates the rightful recipients of the inheritance, and, perhaps more importantly, he realizes the inequities and inaccuracies in his family history, “founded upon injustice and created by ruthless rapacity,” and summarily rejects it (Go Down, Moses 298). Isaac sees a profound and unsettling difference between the land his grandfather first purchased and that same yet irreversibly altered land which he stands to gain. The looted wilderness has been “scratched [...] to a depth of perhaps fourteen inches in order to grow something out of it which had not been there before and which could be translated back into money” (254). But the costs incurred in this process, the lives of two young women, his family integrity, and the wildness of the local landscape were too great to justify the
perpetuation of such a legacy. Faulkner commented on the inevitable tradeoff of the economic process Isaac contemplates:

"Change if it is not controlled by wise people destroys something more than it brings. That unless some wise person comes along in the middle of the change and takes charge of it, change can destroy what is irreplaceable. If the reason for the change is base in motive—that is, to clear the wilderness just to make cotton land, to raise cotton on an agrarian economy of peonage, slavery, is base because it is not as good as the wilderness which it replaces."

(Faulkner in the University 277)

Isaac reviews the documents holding the history of his microcosm and, “juxtaposed not against the wilderness but against the tamed land which was to have been his heritage” (254), repudiates it, or more accurately, realizes he “can’t repudiate it. It was never [his] to repudiate” (256). Firmly bound to this place, he can objectively weigh the benefits and consequences of this history and conclude that the possible comforts he might enjoy do not outweigh the slavery, degradation and loss of the wilderness that has been integral to constructing the position he stands to gain.

When, on his twenty-first birthday, Isaac and McCaslin finally open the burlap sack presumably containing Ike’s inheritance, he finds it too has been looted. Rather than the gold that was initially left for him, Isaac unfolds “a collection of minutely folded scraps of paper sufficient almost for a rat’s nest” (306). The scraps are a series of IOU’s left by his uncle and godfather, Hubert, who initially set aside the inheritance, then slowly and steadily removed the monetary value
of the cash inheritance just as the rest of the pioneers removed the value of the land itself. Each left only worthless paper supposed to hold the value and the interest, “redeemable at twenty (20) percentum compounded annually,” unredeemable by anyone (307).

Isaac’s repudiation of that which he believed never could have been his, or anyone’s, assumes a duality of heroism and senility in various critical interpretations. Long after refusing what is left of his inheritance, Isaac takes up carpentry in emulation of Christ, “because if the Nazarene had found carpentering good for the life and ends He had assumed and elected to serve, it would be all right too for Isaac McCaslin” (309). But for some, such as Charles Aiken, Isaac does not succeed in deifying himself, but is merely a defeated old man. “The view Isaac gives of the changes is that of a disillusioned man who is a detached observer” (457). Ike’s disillusionment, according to Aiken, stems from his apathetic dismissal of his responsibility to the land he supposedly loves.

Leonard Gilley claims Isaac’s instability is a product of his hypocritical treatment of the land. Gilley attempts “to show convincingly and factually that Isaac all his life flouted the right use of the Wilderness—the right use which employs the woods, but does not destroy” (380). But as I have attempted to show throughout this paper, it is the very notion of employment, use of the woods solely for human
purposes, that Isaac continually fights against. Gilley sites a character from another Faulkner story, “Race at Morning,” who “pursues the buck, but does not shoot it” (380), juxtaposed against an aged Isaac who “no longer knows how many deer had fallen before his gun” (381). With the implicit assertion that hunting does not fall within “the right use” of the woods, Gilley contends that “The Bear will not support a romantic-Wilderness reading” (379). But he seems to capture the essence of such a reading by viewing nature as an untouchable realm to be admired, yet not participated in. To accept this paradigm one would have to indict nature itself, fraught with predators and scavengers killing their neighbors day after day in selfish pursuit of survival. Certainly anyone participating in the hunt for egotistical purposes or shallow sport can be justifiably condemned, but Isaac is not guilty of such immorality. The humility and respect Isaac pays his prey is represented throughout the novel. In “Delta Autumn,” Isaac remembers that first killed buck and the vow he took to honor his prey: “I slew you; my bearing must not shame your quitting life. My conduct forever onward must become your death” (351).

Isaac does display some characteristics of senility late in “The Bear” and into “Delta Autumn.” His moral turpitude, by some accounts a symptom of his senility, is evinced in his insensitive attempt to rid the family of the last vestiges of miscegenation. During
one of his last hunting trips to the Tallahatchie wilderness, depicted in “Delta Autumn,” Uncle Ike, who “no longer told anyone how near eighty he actually was” (336), discovers that his nephew, Roth, has repeated the miscegenation Isaac discovered his own grandfather was guilty of. On the first morning of the hunt, Roth returns to the tent where Uncle Ike rests, asking him to hand an envelope holding a large stack of bills over to someone unknown to Ike who will be coming for it. Uncle Ike is enraged by Roth’s cowardly inability to confront the consequences of his misbehavior, “What did you promise her that you haven’t the courage to face her and retract?” (356). Roth flees the tent before Ike can admonish him further and his frustration falls upon the woman with whom Roth had an affair.

She has followed Roth this far into the woods and is understandably disappointed with Roth’s attempt to buy her off. In a vexing acquiescence to Roth’s behavior, Isaac reluctantly dispels the woman with the empty economic compensation, “It was as if he had to fumble somehow to co-ordinate physically his heretofore obedient hand with what his brain was commanding of it” (Go Down, Moses 357). Wittenberg elaborates on this behavior unbefitting the once righteous old man: “Ike McCaslin displays in these passages a haunting failure of moral imagination and a revelation of racist attitudes” (69). Rather than stand up to defend the victim of Roth’s now ashamed passion,
Isaac perpetuates the empty legacy he fought against so ardently when he discovered it in the old ledgers. But I cannot agree that these issues stem from the improper use of the wilderness, as Gilley proclaims. No, it must be somewhere closer to Aiken's contention that it was a turning away from saving what he loved that caused him to forge a new reality in the later years of his life.

Isaac becomes disillusioned by the loss of his connection to the land. In his lifetime, Ike was to have been the beneficiary of two different legacies, each essential to the conception he has of himself, and both maintaining his connections to the land in Mississippi. Since before the time of his birth, Ike's family had owned land in Yoknapatawpha County, land that was one day supposed to be his. As was discussed earlier, he realizes the impropriety involved in the maintenance of that land and refuses to perpetuate the legacy, thus severing the first connection. Through his tutelage under Sam Fathers, Isaac becomes an initiate in the academy of the wilderness, “If Sam Fathers had been his mentor [...] then the wilderness the old bear ran was his college and the old male bear itself [...] was his alma mater” (Go Down, Moses 210). But this connection too is severed, first by the loss of those who embodied the wild, Sam, Old Ben, and Lion, the mongrel dog, and later by the clear-cutting of the wilderness itself. Upon returning to the Tallahatchie to visit “his college,” Ike finds that
the timber company to which Major de Spain sold the land had taken over. He “looked about in shocked and grieved amazement” at the “new planing mill already half completed which would cover two or three acres and what looked like miles and miles of stacked steel rails” (318). The land that spoke to him, taught him how it ought to be treated, was about to be destroyed.

Ike’s failure is not simply the failure of a mortal to stop the inevitable, Isaac sees it as his inability to fulfill his destiny. In addition to his self-depiction as the Nazarene mentioned a few pages back, when he explains to his cousin why he must not take ownership of the land, Isaac again describes himself as living in the same light as other prophets. “If He could see Father and Uncle Buddy in Grandfather He must have seen me too. —an Isaac born into a later life than Abraham’s” (sic) (283). Isaac believed that God had chosen him to be the one to end the illegitimate legacy of human dominion over the land. Though he does not exactly turn his back on the land, as Gilley would have us believe, Isaac’s inability to save the woods, the loss of his connection to them, drives him into the senility we find traces of towards the end of “The Bear” and continuing in “Delta Autumn.” Perhaps Isaac’s feelings of inadequacy begin years earlier with his failure to hunt Old Ben with the respect he shows his first killed buck.
Despite his efforts and advancements, Ike will not kill the bear. Years after he first sees it, the men run Old Ben down and use Lion, the dog, to corner him. After missing all five shots with his rifle, Boon jumps on Ben's back and violently murders him with his knife. In addition to the bear's, the battle eventually costs the lives of Lion and Sam. In the hours after Old Ben's death, the anticlimax is palpable. As a doctor futilely sews Lion back together and pronounces nothing can be done for Sam save letting him rest, the men weigh the benefits of their achievement against the costs. The first step in their quest to tame the land does not seem to bring them any closer to their goal. "It was as if the old bear, even dead there in the yard, was a more potent terror still than they could face without Lion between them" (247).

A psychological examination of Boon Hogganbeck reveals a man who simultaneously loves and fears the wilderness, and his demented relationship to it finally destroys them both. The man who is "mostly just happy and violent out of doors" (228) brutally slays Old Ben, and subsequently his beloved dog, Lion, and Sam Fathers meet their end as well. In the moments after Ben falls, the bleeding Boon caries Sam into his hut, then tends to Lion. Despite his own injuries and the futility of the effort spent on the dying dog, "Boon would not let the doctor touch him until he had seen to Lion" (245). Boon maintains the closest relationship to Lion, the dog Sam initially brought into the
group of hunters. Isaac watches “Boon take over Lion’s feeding from Sam,” and the dog and his new caretaker are coupled in an almost romantic entanglement: “It was as if Lion were a woman, or perhaps Boon was the woman” (220). It seems we can add Boon to the wild kings the text establishes as mediators between the divergent worlds of man and nature, “only Sam and Old Ben and the mongrel Lion were taintless and incorruptible” (191). But in the tenderness of these moments, we risk forgetting the brutality with which Boon killed Old Ben, the hated symbol of wilderness ironically similar to Boon himself.

Indeed, the descriptions of Old Ben, “shaggy, tremendous, red-eyed, not malevolent but just big” (193), closely parallel Boon’s, who has eyes “without depth or meanness or viciousness” (227). Their similarity is established in their paradoxically bland expressions and brutal tendencies.

Then Boon was running. The boy saw the gleam of the blade in his hand and watched him leap among the hounds, hurdling them, kicking them aside as he ran, and fling himself astride the bear as he had hurled himself onto the mule, his legs locked around the bear’s belly, his left arm under the bear’s throat where Lion clung, and the glint of the knife as it rose and fell. (241).

Old Ben is not killed by a skilled hunter with a precise shot from a rifle. He is cut to shreds, held by Lion, an almost wild beast controlled sufficiently enough to be directed at his handler’s prey, yet remaining wild enough to face and hold Old Ben. Boon leaps upon the bear,
“working and probing the buried blade” (241). The dying bear is again described in terms of nature itself, as the identifying mark of the wilderness, “it fell of a piece, as a tree falls” (241). The imagery and significance of the bear's death is not lost on Sam. As Boon carries him into his hut, “Sam’s eyes were probably open again on that profound look which saw further than them or the hut, further than the death of a bear and the dying of a dog” (245). Boon's recklessly violent behavior has not only cost the lives of the bear, the dog, and eventually Sam, Sam can see that the very heart of the wilderness has been struck a blow from which it will not recover. The demise of these symbols of wildness at Boon's hands represents an important eruption in the psyche of a man who both loves and fears the wilderness.

We might invoke Paul Shepard's assertion that “a kind of madness arises from the prevailing nature-conquering, nature-hating and self- and world-denial” (Subversive Science 8), as a starting point from which we can begin to understand Boon's neurosis. This self-denial is evident in Boon's inability to firmly connect with his own heritage,

the quarter Indian grandson of a Chickasaw squaw, who on occasion resented with his hard and furious fists the intimation of one single drop of alien blood and on others, usually after whiskey, affirmed with the same fists and the same fury that his father had been full-blood Chickasaw and even a chief and that even his mother had been only half white. (227)
Such contradictory proclamations are typical of a man who evinces profound love for what he eventually destroys. These contradictions also cause Boon, “who has the mind almost of a child” (220), to fall victim to the warnings Shepard describes in *Nature and Madness*, “In this dark shadow of adult youthfulness is an enduring grief, a tentative feeling about the universe as though it were an incompetent parent, and a thin love of nature over deep fears” (116). Shepard establishes a clear parallel between the need for a strong, healthy relationship with the mother, and with Mother Earth. The failure to nurture these primary relationships stints emotional growth, resulting in individuals, and perhaps an entire society, which “celebrates childhood, admires youth and despises age, and equates childhood with innocence, wisdom, and spiritual power. Its members cling to childhood, for their own did not serve its purpose” (122). Boon cannot move to more mature relationships because these first two connections, with family and with the earth, have not been fully realized.

As Shepard explains, the love-hate relationship with the wilderness resulting from this failure is common in America: “For years I puzzled over this ambiguity in American life: one society—the world’s most ferocious destroyers and yet the most fanatic preservers of wilderness parks and endangered species” (89). This tendency is illustrated throughout 20th century America, where lush green parks
are nestled within the most industrialized and otherwise denuded urban landscapes. Even in the relatively rural portions of the American West, the desire to preserve what we continue to destroy is prevalent: The nation’s largest superfund site, the Clark Fork River, stretches a few hours drive from both Yellowstone and Glacier National Parks. Although Boon’s contradictory tendencies may seem suited solely for fiction, his behavior is not atypical of the American treatment of nature.

In the final passage of the novel, we find a haunting prophecy, even more definitive than the one involving Isaac’s psyche. Boon, symbolic of those who continue to maintain the desire to master and possess nature, is possessed by the tools employed to take control of the natural environment.

At first glance the tree seemed to be alive with frantic squirrels. There appeared to be forty or fifty of them leaping and darting from branch to branch until the whole tree had become one green maelstrom of mad leaves, [...] Then he [Ike] saw Boon, sitting, his back against the trunk, his head bent, hammering furiously at something on his lap. What he hammered with was the barrel of his dismembered gun, what he hammered at was the breech of it. The rest of the gun lay scattered about him in a half-dozen pieces while he bent over the piece on his lap his scarlet and streaming walnut face, hammering the disjointed barrel against the gun-breech with the frantic abandon of a madman. He didn’t even look up to see who it was. Still hammering, he merely shouted back at the boy in a hoarse and strangled voice:

‘Get out of here! Don’t touch them! Don’t touch a one of them! They’re mine!’ (331).
Here is Faulkner's final condemnation of the effort to possess the untamable world. Upon dismantling his gun, Boon focuses on a single segment of it. He incessantly bangs on the piece he holds, foolishly believing his puny force might enable him to take hold of the colossal process occurring around him. One of the tools employed in the battle to take control becomes, in this moment, Boon's obsession. In the end, rather than acknowledge the unapprehendable force of the process he sought to control, he focuses on the power his rifle is supposed to provide, and its failure to achieve his ends. Boon is shattered, and so too is the wilderness he both loved and railed against.

Yet the prophecy Faulkner describes should not end with this depressing finality. Our take on the story cannot be limited to such resignation. Before we come to the point in the tale listing these results, the groundwork is laid for an observance of nature's power and potential, and how we might avoid the results foreseen if we continue along a misguided path.
6.

A Fragmented Nature

There are some who frankly and boldly advocate the eradication of the last remnants of wilderness and the complete subjugation of nature to the requirements of—not man—but industry. This is a courageous view, admirable in its simplicity and power, and with the weight of all modern history behind it. It is also quite insane. I cannot attempt to deal with it here.

Edward Abbey
Desert Solitaire

It is significant that Sam, “one generation from the woods, childless, kinless, peopleless” (246), is passing his philosophy on to Ike, a member of the white aristocracy who, though he never relinquishes his Christian faith, repudiates the possession of land passed to him through the patriarchal system of his lineage. “They were the white boy, marked forever, and the old dark man sired on both sides by savage kings” (165). In the less than sensitive terms of the early twentieth century, the vanishing Indian passes his knowledge along to the future of America.

Sam Fathers too is marked. His blend of African and Chickasaw is evinced in his eyes,

which you noticed because it was not always there [...] and the boy’s cousin McCaslin told him what that was: [...] not the mark of servitude but of bondage; the knowledge that for a while that part of his blood had been the blood of slaves. “Like an old lion or a bear in a cage,” McCaslin said. “He was born in the cage and has been in it all his life; he knows nothing else,” [...] “Then let him go!” the boy cried. “Let him go!” (167)
This bondage refers to Sam's sale, along with his mother, into slavery by Ikkemotubbe, his own father. Though he was eventually freed, his enslavement certainly affected him throughout his lifetime. This subjugation gives him an intrinsic identification with other entities held in bondage in the novel. Through this identification, Sam becomes “the mouthpiece” for the land, the bear, and the other figures enslaved, each refusing to passively succumb to the servitude sought by their possessors.

In the above passage, young Isaac begs the men in power to let go of Sam, here, in a single sentence, equated with the two main nonhuman characters symbolizing wilderness itself. Of course there is the bear, “a bear in a cage,” “the old bear, solitary, indomitable and alone; widowered childless” (193-4), trapped by the ever approaching roads, railroads, and all they deliver, as well as a first allusion to Lion, the mongrel dog tamed just enough to stand up to Old Ben. By comparing descriptions of the three, “only Sam and Old Ben and the mongrel Lion were taintless and incorruptible” (191), it is clear that Faulkner involves the three in a triumvirate of wild kings, quickly disappearing from the Mississippi woods. Each of the three is caged in “that doomed wilderness whose edges were constantly and punily gnawed at,” and none has an heir capable of carrying on their untamed
heritage (193). But Sam sees hope in Isaac and adopts him as a possible bearer of the torch.

In order for Isaac to become a full member of this royalty, he must first acknowledge its members without the typical hunter’s ambition of dominating his quarry. Seeing the bear without the immediate desire to kill it is an originary experience; it marks Ike’s initiation to life within the wilderness. “He believed that only after he had served his apprenticeship in the woods which would prove him worthy to be a hunter, would he even be permitted to distinguish the crooked print” (194). This initiation can only occur with the humility Ike employs, “the humility was there, he had learned that” (196).

Though his objective in regard to the bear is ostensibly the same as that sought by Major de Spain and the others in that they all actively participate in the hunt, the mindset Ike adopts distinguishes him and enables a more faithful observance of the processes he seeks to comprehend. In order to even see the bear, Ike must relinquish the desire to accomplish Descartes’ objective, “to become masters and possessors of nature.”

A good example of his humility is displayed in a later conversation between Ike and his cousin, McCaslin. The two reflect on Ike’s reluctance to shoot Old Ben when he had the chance. McCaslin asks the boy why, but before he receives an answer, he strolls across
the room, conspicuously past the skins of bears each had killed on other hunts, and reaches for a book on a shelf just below a buck mounted on the wall. He reads a poem that offers both consolation and explanation. The only lines from the poem that appear in the novel are these:

She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,  
For ever wilt thou love and she be fair.

"He was talking about a girl," Isaac bristles. But McCaslin corrects him, "he had to talk about something [...] He was talking about truth. Truth is one" (297). Though the poem, Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn," was specifically describing the unfulfilled love between a woman and a man, McCaslin is right to point out that this is merely metaphor.

Typical interpretations of Faulkner's involvement of Keats' poem in "The Bear" assert Faulkner's intention to equate "that doomed wilderness" with the moment captured on Keats' urn; though both may be now long gone, they are forever captured and enjoyed through art. By describing the events occurring in the Big Bottom, "Isaac becomes a medium for the eternality of the wilderness" argues Larry Sams (635). But acceptance of this theory seems to be a fairly pathetic resignation. While I still enjoy the thrill felt while reading "The Bear," it does not measure up to firsthand experience of its setting; reading the story pales in comparison to actually coming teeth to teeth with the beast. Larry Sams' contention runs contrary to what we know of Faulkner's
mission. In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech Faulkner fights against the idea of an artistic battlefield ending in "defeats in which nobody loses anything of value," or "victories without hope." By reading the poem, Cass, "rather his [Ike's] brother than his cousin and rather his father than either" (Go Down, Moses 4), provides Isaac with paternal consolation for his unsuccessful attempt to hunt Old Ben. Though Cass disagrees with some of Ike's interpretations of the human relationship to the land, he recognizes Isaac's desire to preserve the wilderness and the emotions that may have caused him to hesitate. As David Canfield points out, "Cass is not a total skeptic or cynic. He understands and sympathizes with Ike" (365). While Isaac observes Boon murdering Old Ben as his own failure, Cass reassures Ike that it was a consistent adherence to his philosophy, that God "created man to be His overseer on the earth and to hold suzerainty over the earth and the animals on it [...] to hold the earth mutual and intact in the communal anonymity of brotherhood" (257). Just as we did when we reexamined Biblical text, we can observe the words in "The Bear" not as fixed in that time, removed from where Faulkner wrote. We can see the appreciation for the moment the pair on Keats' urn enjoy before their presence is pressed upon the object of appreciation, and apply it to our present surroundings.
When the poem is seen in this light, it reminds us of a famous letter Keats wrote to his brothers, George and Thomas. In it, he describes an attempt to appreciate the sensation felt in anticipation of resolution. “I mean Negative Capability—that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties. Mysteries, doubts, without any reaching after fact and reason” (Keats 336). The mysteries Keats begs his brothers to enjoy are the same fearful emotions Isaac’s kin might have felt when they first encountered Old Ben. While Descartes urges his readers to observe nature solely in terms of how they might bring it to do their bidding, Keats begs his readers to place our objectives after the initial recognition of the moment as it exists before we begin to enact our desires.

Sam Fathers advocates a new conception of Negative Capability when he relinquishes the desire to finally prove human dominance. After stalking and seeing a buck at which Isaac does not even fire a shot, Sam tells him, “I want you to learn how to do when you didn’t shoot” (197). Sam and Ike both strive to exercise Keats’ Negative Capability. When he knows he could have killed Old Ben Isaac hesitates, preferring instead to persist in the moment Keats captured in his ode.

As the final lines of the poem contend, “'Beauty is truth, truth beauty,'—that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.” For
a Romantic such as Keats, awash in a sea of frightening technological development, there was a desire to recapture a simpler time, before the objectivity of science began to diminish the subjective emotional beauty seen in nature.

On his first visit to the wilderness, Isaac, with Sam’s help, realizes the first step, “So I will have to see him, he thought, without dread or even hope. I will have to look at him” (204). He must observe without dread of the wild, and without the hope to possess it, reveling in Keats’ Negative Capability, if he wishes to develop an accurate perception of the world, if he wishes to see the bear. But, after several failed attempts to see Old Ben, Sam tells him, “You ain’t looked right yet” (206). Despite coming close on previous days, he cannot yet see the beast because he has not watched with proper humility. His desire to dominate is perpetuated and symbolized by the weapon he carries.

“’It’s the gun,’ Sam said. [...] the old man, son of a negro slave and a Chickasaw chief, [...] The gun. ‘You will have to choose’” (206). The gun is the first of three tools, central symbols in the novel, which Ike must relinquish before he is allowed to see the bear. He will have to choose between the two philosophies before him. The gun is perhaps the most obvious of the tools employed by men to remove undesirable elements of the natural world. With it, hunters walk the wilderness not with humility, but with fear and the desire to dominate the feared,
feared “because it was wilderness” (193). But Sam cautions against the dangers of fear, “don’t be afraid. Ain’t nothing in the woods going to hurt you if you dont corner it or it don’t smell that you are afraid. A bear or a deer has got to be scared of a coward the same as a brave man has got to be” (sic) (207). Using the gun, the hunters not only hope to assert dominion over Old Ben, but also to tighten their grip on the land. Isaac sees the flaw in this desire however, and questions other, previously innocent tools of industrialized society.

He had already relinquished, of his will, because of his need, in humility and peace and without regret, yet apparently that had not been enough, the leaving of the gun was not enough. He stood for a moment—a child, alien and lost in the green and soaring gloom of the markless wilderness. Then he relinquished completely to it. It was the watch and the compass. He was still tainted. (208)

In realizing the taint the gun, watch, and compass leave on Ike, he acknowledges the problem Leopold described in a passage quoted earlier in this paper: “Your true modern is separated from the land by many middlemen, and by innumerable physical gadgets” (261). The watch and the compass enable the ordering of the otherwise chaotic entities of time and landscape by removing them from their greater settings and taking them into possession upon human creations.

As we look out over any stretch of land, especially wilderness, there does not seem to be an order by which we might easily place what we observe in objective relation from one portion to the next.
Initially, humans used the sun and moon and stars to orient themselves in relation to the rest of the world. If the sun is on the left, and it is morning, then we know home is in one direction, sources of food and water in another, and so on. But over time, as Foucault and White each explained, with the help of technology, we were able to develop a more specific ordering of geographical space. Starting with the four cardinal directions, we broke space down into 360 degrees, removing it from chaos and placing this order, possessing it, upon the compass.

Our efforts with time followed a similar pattern. Early humans again used the sun, moon, and other elements of the natural world to define time. While modern, Western units of time are still grounded in the movements of celestial bodies, the delineation of time has been removed from the natural world. Years are divided into months, divided into days, into hours, minutes and seconds. A stretch of time is marked by the sweep of metal stripes rotating over a flat face. Each moment is broken up into its subdivisions, ordered and defined in a manner typical of industrialized society. The mastery of these movements within our minds has profound implications on our view of the universe. Not only does this predictability bring the movements of the heavens under our cognitive control, the mimicking of celestial
movements on our own technological creations begs the question, which came first?

Finally, after relinquishing the gun, the compass, and the watch, and making his way through the wilderness without these tools, Ike is able to see the bear. “It rushed, soundless, and solidified—the tree, the bush, the compass and the watch glinting where a ray of sunlight touched them. Then he saw the bear” (209). Wittenberg elaborates on Isaac’s revelation: “The moment in which Ike discards the items which are the last vestiges and ‘taints’ of ‘civilization’ and ‘relinqueshe[s]’ to the wilderness is the one in which he fully discovers the profundity of his connection to his natural surroundings and is rewarded by the sight, first of a fresh paw print, and, next, of the bear itself” (63). Only after he is lost and finds his way using only his own skill, “in humility and peace and without regret” (208), can Isaac truly observe the world he hopes to understand.
7.

Wildness Today

*Accuse not nature, she hath done her part; do thou but thine*

*John Milton*

*Paradise Lost*

Because I have, I hope, established *The Bear* as a prophetic work, it is appropriate to take a brief look around today’s world to see if the novella’s warnings hold any truth, if they still warrant examination sixty years after their publication. As I attempt to perform this task, I’ll widen the scope, focusing on a greater range of the United States. The battle to apprehend control of the environment has moved beyond the turn-of-the-century frontier bordering the Mississippi River.

Though grizzly bears once roamed most of the lower forty-eight states, they are now limited to only four. A small number of griz occasionally drop down into Northwest Washington; a larger, though isolated population resides in and around Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming; and the largest group of Old Ben’s kin remain in the somewhat still wild lands of western Montana and the Idaho chimney. If the grizzly bear is an indicator of environmental health, the American wilderness is in desperate need of geriatric care.

At the start of the story following “The Bear,” “Delta Autumn,” we find Isaac, almost eighty years old, whisked along in an automobile
to renew his engagement with the wilderness. He remembers when
game was still plentiful and he and the rest of the hunting party had
only to ride a few miles by horseback to find themselves in the still
wild and intact wilderness. He laments, “that time was gone now.
Now they went in cars, driving faster and faster each year because the
roads were better and they had farther and farther to drive, the
territory in which game sill existed drawing yearly inward as his life
was drawing inward” (335). As the population expanded, so too did the
effort to tame the once wild lands of Mississippi. The culture that saw
no limits to the amount of force it could, or should exert on the
landscape to get it to conform, also sets no boundaries upon the scope
of that force. Little by little, year by year, the forest vanished, leaving
a path of roads and railroads, fields and factories.

Perhaps the proper place to begin an investigation of
contemporary ecology is with David Quammen’s 1996 book, The Song
of the Dodo: Island Biogeography in An Age of Extinction. This 600-
page inventory of our planet’s current biological status states as its
ultimate subject, “the extinction of species in a world that has been
hacked to pieces” (117). It begins with an interesting question. If we
take a Persian carpet measuring, for example, twelve feet by eighteen
feet, and cut it into thirty-six equal parts, what are we left with?
“Have we got thirty-six nice Persian throw rugs?” he asks. “No. All
we're left with is three dozen ragged fragments, each one worthless and commencing to come apart” (11). Similarly, he says, “An ecosystem is a tapestry of species and relationships. Chop away a section, isolate that section, and there arises the problem of unraveling” (11). Here, Quammen quantifies my contention that, slowly, we are beginning to realize that the theoretical or intellectual segmentation that has been occurring in our minds since about the time of the Enlightenment has tangibly profound implications on the physical world. The new trend, occurring around the seventeenth century, of bringing species of plants and animals from around the world and placing them in boxes and cages for convenient review by curious Europeans has expanded to tremendous and dangerous proportions.

An analogous tendency, beginning benevolently enough with Teddy Roosevelt’s presidency, to isolate sections of American wildlands as national parks and monuments, seems to be doing as much harm as it has ever done good. Though establishing these preserves showed great foresight at a time when their inception seemed wholly unnecessary, the practice has become self-defeating. When Roosevelt commissioned the National Park Service in 1916, it was inconceivable to most Americans that we could ever denude the environment of our great nation with its seemingly endless natural resources. Many
Americans must have questioned the need to spend their tax dollars on setting aside vast chunks of land when there seemed to be so much untouched wilderness still in existence. Once those reserves were established however, they seem to have given industry license to run roughshod over any inch of land that was not federally protected. Inevitably, industrializing forces, with the expansion of our population, will push to the limits of those boundaries. Quammen explains: “As humanity chops the world’s landscape into pieces, those pieces become islands too. A nature reserve, by definition, is an island of protection and relative stability in an ocean of jeopardy and change” (445). Those preserves, some believe, are better than nothing, but even their benefit is questionable.

The problem with our reliance on these relatively small oblongs and squares is that they become islands; and islands are, as Quammen tells us, hotbeds of extinction. Drawing on the data provided by other ecologists, Quammen states that nature reserves “represent bounded areas of natural landscape, formerly connected to much larger areas, that have become (or are in the process of becoming) insularized within an ocean of human impacts” (488). Glacier National Park is actually two islands, bisected by the Going to the Sun Road, often a barrier for the bears, traversed by a million curious tourists each year. That
bisection does not help the large land mammals move freely about one of their final playgrounds.

But Glacier National Park is but one example in a large world. Quammen makes a final assessment of the planet's ecological health in an investigation of what ecologist call "background levels of extinction." "That background level is the routine average rate at which species disappear" (605). Five times during our planet's distant past, that background level has jumped to ecologically cataclysmic numbers. During those periods of increased extinction, "the extinction rate far exceeds the rate of speciation, and the richness of the biosphere plummets" (605). According to Quammen's analysis, we are enduring one of those catastrophic extinction rates right now.

During recent centuries, the rate of extinction has increased further and the range of jeopardy has widened—from birds to animals and plants of all kinds, and from islands to continents—as humanity's impact has grown in direct correlation with the growth of human population, technological efficaciousness, and hubris. [...] Nowadays we're losing a little of everything. (607).

While researching for this paper I have read dozens of articles and books focusing on or relating to the subject of ecology. Human ecology, ecotheology, ecofeminism, the ecology of waterways, rainforests, islands, ecology from every human angle and from the perspective of each portion of the physical geography that has been altered and threatened by irresponsible or misguided human actions.
The very fact that so many of these works have been published, books with titles like *Last Hours of Ancient Sunlight, After Nature’s Revolt,* and *The End of Nature,* displays a prevalent belief in an ominous future foreseen by many ecologists if our behavior is not amended. Most of those observations, other than Quammen’s, have been intentionally left out of my discussion, but not because they are inaccurate or unimportant. On the contrary, they appear to most scientists to be both ubiquitously accurate and frighteningly important. I have left them out because they are obvious to too many, and consequently that much more depressing.

I hope to have analyzed the way modern Americans, especially those depicted in “The Bear,” view nature; to locate the foundations of those views; to briefly discuss their implications; then to use “The Bear” as an instructor. The text of Faulkner’s novel serves as a reminder of how we might look at nature so that we can learn what it has to teach, rather than how we can control it to do our bidding. Rather than add my voice to the cacophony proclaiming the approaching doomsday, perhaps we could posit a means by which we might avoid such an end. One of Faulkner's contemporaries, Aldo Leopold, did just that around the same time Faulkner published *Go Down, Moses.*
Leopold begins his essay, "A Land Ethic," by reminding the reader of heroic Odysseus' return home, whereupon "he hanged all on one rope a dozen slave-girls of his household whom he suspected of misbehavior during his absence" (237). The ethics of ancient Greece, Leopold explains, though well defined and usually faithfully practiced, excluded the rights of women and slaves. He cites the expansion of those narrow ethics to eventually include all humans. Leopold reorients his focus on the early 20th century and laments that, despite all our advancements and modern scientific understanding, "Land, like Odysseus' slave-girls, is still property" (238). Unfortunately, land is seen as a possession to be cared for or despoiled in those methods the owner sees fit. His land ethic asserts the rights of nonhuman life as worthy of inclusion in modern ethics. "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise" (262). Too often however, the deciding factor in determining treatment of the land assumes an economic basis. "Land-use ethics are still governed wholly by economic self-interest, just as social ethics were a century ago" (245). Judith Bryant Wittenberg notes the shift from solely economic to healthier ecological outlooks in both Faulkner's and Leopold's works: "The gradual tipping of the conceptual scales from nature-as-commodity to nature-as-community was an important development in the
environmental thinking of the era” (56-7). Such contemporary economic theory readily asserted the importance of the individual within a network of interrelated parts, each contributing to the health of the nationwide economy. But contemporary America has been slow in adopting this conception of complex environmental relationships from its economic antecedents.

Leopold, and I think Faulkner as well, are clear in their placement of the individual within a network of environmental components; the health of each depends on that of the others. Isaac puts much of his education in the hands of Sam Fathers, who perishes, without physical injury, shortly after the death of Old Ben. Isaac learns well from Sam, but his educational growth is stunted by the collapse of Sam, Old Ben, Lion, and the wilderness they inhabit. More specifically, Isaac learns that his connections to the land must transcend the economic associations ephemerally held by his family, “still looking backward across the Atlantic and attached to the continent only by their counting houses” (Go Down, Moses 287). He relinquishes his connection to the various aspects of the environment, and watches as he and the wilderness he loved crumbles. In a parallel appraisal of Isaac’s discovery, Leopold summarizes, “All ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts. His instincts prompt him to
compete for his place in the community, but his ethics prompt him also to cooperate” (239). Isaac's psychological health, as did Boon's, depended upon their care for the land they inhabit.

During the early part of the 20th century, it seemed impossible to fathom a time when our tiny fingers would be able to affect the vast workings of the natural world, but somehow, Faulkner and Leopold managed to imagine it. They foresaw the transgressions and Faulkner wrote a story about them and their effects, both on the land and the people who attempted to control it. Three wild kings embodied the wilderness; all are dead by the end of “The Bear,” murdered, directly or not by men with childlike minds who could not temper the force they exerted.

Decades later Edward Abbey wrote about the commercialization and degradation of even the desolate and ostensibly useless Utah desert. Gen. Wesley Powell surely spins in his military grave at the thought that those beloved canyons have been destroyed by a huge, eponymous pond that, with the help of Glen Canyon and other dams, forbids the Colorado River to reach its natural destination at the Sea of Cortez.

As soon as industrializing culture ceased to see the importance of the world as a portion of a greater whole, we were sent down a path
of isolation of which we have yet to see the end. The world was first removed from a greater metaphysical whole. The sacredness was removed from the earth’s physical entities, their connection to the metaphysical portions of the universe was dissolved. Next, language was removed from the world it represented. Finally, the portions of the world could be removed from their immediate surroundings without thought to the consequences. That is, industrial culture failed to recognize how each portion functions in its native physical environment. Flowers from Borneo could be planted in England next to flowers from the Galapagos. The object was the focus, there was no recognition of each as a portion of the ecological process.

Isaac McCaslin confronts this reality and attempts to reposition himself as a humble participant in a process too large for human comprehension, let alone domination. Isaac recognizes the importance of wilderness as a mentor, reminding readers of our place within it, rather than over it.
Bibliography


"To George and Thomas Keats." 21, 27 (?) December, 1817. Ibid.


