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WILLIAM FAULKNER: GOING DOWN SOUTH TO THE ROOT OF HIERARCHY

William Faulkner is an artist whose critique and commentary on the human condition extends far beyond its original audience. In his novel and collection of stories, *Go Down, Moses*, published in 1942, Faulkner develops his character Ike McCaslin's narrative to critique the religious justification and maintenance of social hierarchy. Through the stories "The Old People" and "The Bear," Faulkner demonstrates how the ideology of social and racial hierarchy permeates throughout Southern culture and is used to justify ownership of people and nature. Further, Faulkner critiques formalized religion as a means to protect and perpetuate said hierarchy by limiting the experience of the spiritual to the church and biblical teachings. In addition to utilizing the curiosity of youth through Ike McCaslin, Faulkner makes use of narratives that his Southern audience will relate to in order to illustrate these societal conditions so that his readers see their implications for themselves rather than being told directly. This rhetorical mode complicates readers' reflections on their culture and allows them to grapple with their personal experiences of this ideology. That ideology, in turn, affects modern societal constructs, and we, along with other citizen activists, must grapple with this ideology as Southern people choosing how to identify with our home and as world citizens.

Through the biblical establishment of hierarchy, Southern culture has attempted to justify the ownership of nature and people. Commonly, Genesis IX, 22-27 and Apostle Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians VI, 5-7 were used as biblical justifications for slavery. In Genesis, there is the story of Noah and his son Ham, who Noah deems "a servant of servants shall he be unto his

brethren" after Ham sees Noah compromised (*King James Version,* Gen. 9.22-27). Ephesians states "Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ" (Eph. 6.5). For many white, Southern Christians, these verses were used to justify the practice of slavery in their everyday lives. For readers of *Go Down, Moses*, Faulkner provides examples of the experience of this hierarchy through the relationships Ike McCaslin cultivates with Cass Edmonds and Sam Fathers. Cass Edmonds, Ike's older cousin, acts as a brotherly, sometimes fatherly figure for him throughout the novel, sharing his insight and life philosophies with Ike. In "The Old People," Cass and Ike discuss Sam Father's appearance in conjunction with the biblical archetypal slave, Ham:

> …something not in [the eyes'] shape nor pigment but in their expression, and the boy's [Ike] cousin McCaslin [Cass] told him what that was: not the heritage of Ham, 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 had been in it all his life; he knows nothing else…" (Faulkner 158-159).

This 'cage' that Sam lives in according to Cass is not the McCaslin family themselves (Faulkner 160), but rather the ideology of the South, which is an irrevocable component of their daily experience and the lives of their past and future families. Sam's heritage is a mixture of Native American, African American, and white family members, three groups that exist in opposition within Southern hierarchical culture. Because of Sam's heritage, Cass believes that Sam is inescapably marked by this "bondage" and this carries into the way he was raised and how he will interact within the world forever (Faulkner 159). This hierarchical ideology is a component

of the lens through which all of the characters in *Go Down, Moses* experience the world, and this lens extends far beyond Faulkner's characters to his readers, Southern people, and the nation as a whole.

Ike views Cass's insights with a critical perspective, one of the questioning and curiosity of an adolescent. Faulkner deliberately establishes the 16-year age difference between Cass and Ike in order to preserve the innocence of Ike's critique and show it through the lens of discovery and hermeneutics rather than aggressive opposition. Ike's tone allows Faulkner to present alternative viewpoints to societal norms in a way that his audience, particularly Southerners, can connect to and are willing to engage with. Ike questions the sense of racial superiority of his white counterparts (namely because of his close relationship with Sam Fathers), viewing Sam as a spiritual guide and wise surveyor of the natural world: "Sam led him into the wilderness and showed him and he ceased to be a child" (Faulkner 313-314). Faulkner presents his critique of Southern racial hierarchy through Ike, Sam, and Cass's narrative interactions. Through these means, Faulkner's readers witness Cass's static understanding of this ideology and Ike's dynamic questioning guided by Sam in contrast, using the modernist technique of enacting rather than describing that Faulkner readily employs throughout his works.

With age, Ike comes to actively challenge the racial hierarchy that he felt dissonance with in his youth. In "The Bear," Ike has had a few more years' worth of grappling with and understanding the societal structures of the South since he first voiced his confusion in "The Old People." Faulkner extends his spiritual inquiry through the voice of Ike as Ike questions God's role in the actions, ideologies, and makeup of the world he is experiencing: "[God] must accept responsibility for what He Himself had done in order to live with Himself in His lonely and paramount heaven" (269). Seeing the injustices of the South and the hierarchy that he is

critiquing, Ike calls into question the responsibility of God for these ideological structures and, in questioning God's role, draws attention to the idea that society is also responsible for the disastrous state the world is in. Ike understands that the ideology of racial hierarchy continues to perpetuate itself and recognizes the injustice in this practice: "…the boy [Ike] himself had inherited it as Noah's grandchildren had inherited the Flood although they had not been there to see the deluge: that dark corrupt and bloody time while three separate peoples had tried to adjust not only to one another but to the new land which they had created and inherited too" (Faulkner 275). Comparing Ike's inheritance of this unjust system of racial inequity to an inheritance of Noah's Flood creates a tension for Christian readers who recognize the devastating consequences of the Flood and also its transformative effects when individuals create a way to save themselves from it.

Unfortunately, the hierarchy of wealthy (or land-owning), white Southerners extended beyond their relationship to people of other races. In Faulkner's illustration, he shows that this sense of superiority in white Southerners made them feel warranted to treat people *and* nature as property. The ownership of land and of people are not separate entities, but are connected by the social and cultural hierarchy that was developed through the practice of Christianity. Many of the central characters see few flaws in their way of life – owning large plantations, inheriting land and slaves as these plantations are passing down family lines. But Ike begins to question and challenge these societal norms with which he is presented. In "The Bear," Faulkner explains the exploitation of nature through Ike's 21-year-old eyes:

> …himself [Ike] and his cousin [Cass] juxtaposed not against the wilderness but against the tamed land which was to have been his heritage, the land which old Carothers McCaslin his grandfather had bought with white man's money from the wild men whose

> grandfathers without guns hunted it, and tamed and ordered or believed he had tamed and ordered it for the reason that the human beings he held in bondage and in the power of life and death had removed the forest from it (241).

In this instance, readers can see that to Ike, his relatives' hold on the land feels trivial, only taking advantage of what they could personally gain from it and falsely *believing* that they had "tamed and ordered it" through their exploitation of it (Faulkner 241). Ike continues to challenge the cultural norms of inheritance and ownership in his conversations with Cass about why Ike will not accept his inheritance of the 'family land.' Cass believes that Ike is being disrespectful through his refusal to accept the land, because, by extension, Ike is refusing the "legacy and monument" of his ancestors (Faulkner 243).

However, Ike, because of his spiritual reverence for the earth, rejects the concept that land can be owned and argues that "[The land] was never mine to repudiate. It was never Father's and Uncle Buddy's to bequeath to me to repudiate… Because He told in the Book how He created the earth, made it and looked at it and said it was all right, and then He made man" (Faulkner 243). Here, Ike connects his refusal of the family lands back to the same religious text through which the ownership in Cass's mind was initially justified. Within this hierarchy of Southern culture that perpetuates ownership, Cass feels warranted in his objection to Ike's refusal of inheritance, but Faulkner voices opposition to this hierarchical ideology through Ike and through a reference back to the Bible. Southern Christian readers would see the validity in the social structure that they were familiar with through Cass while also having to consider Ike's alternative point because Faulkner roots it in biblical teachings. Faulkner employs again his rhetorical method of contrast through Ike's spiritual connection to and experience of nature and Cass's presentation of the mainstream hierarchical view of land. Faulkner adeptly ties this

spiritual reverence for nature not only to Ike's personal experience but also to the spiritual realm that Christian readers accept readily through this scene.

Faulkner uses Ike to critique the use of Christianity as a justification for social stratification while also presenting alternative views of spirituality that subvert the commonplace beliefs of spirituality that maintain hierarchical ideology. By enacting through Ike a spiritual experience of nature, Faulkner shows his audience directly that their experience of the spiritual is not limited to the church. This draws power away from institutionalized religion's monopoly on spirituality and in turn the force that hierarchical biblical interpretations exert over the social framework of the South. Faulkner enacts Ike's development of his spiritual connection to nature through folkloric rhetorical moments and Sam Fathers's teachings. In readers' introduction to "The Old People," Faulkner introduces a description of a deer as a mythic creature – one that clearly warrants spiritual inquiry: "looking not like a ghost but as if all light were condensed in him and he were the source of it, not only moving in it but disseminating it … seen first as you always see the deer, in that split second after he has already seen you" (155). The deer in this description seems less like the animal that people typically picture and more like a mythic being, omniscient and perplexing. This particular deer transcends the natural laws of time and space, looking ghost-like and luminous, noticing Ike before Ike notices it. Even if readers have not yet experienced a moment of reverence to nature as Ike experiences with this deer, Faulkner provides readers with this vivid visual to draw upon to understand Ike's spiritual experience in this encounter.

Faulkner also illustrates value and spirituality in nature through the concept of transformational lostness (i.e., the loss of social constructions and conventions, the loss of institution to find the spiritual experience of nature). After Ike's third unfruitful day of

attempting to spot Old Ben, the storied bear in "The Bear," Sam remarks that Ike must "choose" between experiencing the majesty of this bear, and through extension, nature itself, and the tools that he is carrying with him each day to explore (Faulkner 195). In essence, Ike in this moment must choose between experiencing nature or exploiting it. Ike chooses to leave his gun behind, but "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" (Faulkner 197). With the watch as a symbol for time and the compass as a symbol of place, in this transformational moment, readers see that Ike is choosing to leave behind the mundane conventions of time and place in order to venture into the sacred (i.e., nature). Faulkner argues through Ike's spiritual transformation that one's experience of nature can be spiritual as long as they do not enter into the experience asking what they can gain from it, but rather with a willingness to abandon their conventional containers of spiritual ideology.

Faulkner proceeds through the narrative of "The Old People" having laid the foundation for Ike's reverence for nature so that when readers encounter the narrative of Ike hunting and killing the deer, they understand the weight that that moment holds for both Ike and Sam. After Ike kills the deer, Sam:

> dipped his hands in the hot smoking blood and wiped them back and forth across the boy's face… They [Ike and Sam] were the white boy, marked forever, and the old dark man sired on both sides by savage kings, who had marked him, whose bloody hands had merely formally consecrated him to that which, under the man's tutelage, [Ike] had already accepted, humbly and joyfully, with abnegation and with pride too (Faulkner 156-157).

This moment of ritual, a type of baptism seen through the words "abnegation" and "consecrated" further connects Ike's experience of nature to the spiritual in the form of hunting – a cultural practice that Faulkner's Southern audience will recognize and relate to but which they might not actively think of as spiritual (Faulkner 157). Establishing the spiritual in nature through a familiar experience for Southern audiences allows Faulkner's proposal of alternative spirituality to reach his readers in an accessible way, thus effectively enacting the spiritual curiosity of Ike in his readers.

The scene of this ritual in "The Old People" also establishes Sam as a spiritual guide for Ike and a man who, because of his Native American and African American lineage, is "sired" within the system of social hierarchy that exists in the South (Faulkner 157). These positions contrast each other: as a spiritual guide, Sam is, in Ike's mind at least, a figure to be held in high standing and respect, while their cultural norms state that Sam is irrevocably 'lesser' because of his heritage. Through Faulkner's narration, the audience sees the inner turmoil that this dissonance creates in Ike's life and experiences it with him through his relationship to Cass McCaslin. Ike observes the generational difference between himself and Cass in understanding the injustice of the racial hierarchy in which they live: "—[Ike's] kinsman, his father almost [Cass], who had been born too late into the old time and too soon for the new, the two of them juxtaposed and alien now to each other against their ravaged patrimony, the dark and ravaged fatherland still prone and panting from its etherless operation" (Faulkner 283). This "etherless operation" that Faulkner speaks of refers to the Civil War and its effect on the United States (283). Faulkner shows through Ike's observation that although Ike and Cass hold opposing views of the racial hierarchy of the South, they are both exist at the same time and are now charged with the task of repairing the "ravaged" state of their "fatherland" post-Civil-War (283). This

state not only includes the unjust racial hierarchy, but the concept of dominion over nature and its exploitation, as well. In his spiritual connection to nature through Sam, Ike challenges both that land and people are pieces of property to be traded and inherited and the assumption that the experience of the spiritual is limited to formal religious teachings. Through the establishment of nature as spiritual for Ike and creating spiritual inquiry within his readers, Faulkner evaluates the power of the very tool that maintains the hierarchical ideology of ownership for many white, Christian Southerners and advocates for change through his rhetorical narrative.

The ideas of dominion and racial hierarchy established by Christian biblical interpretations that Faulkner presents in *Go Down, Moses* continue to be explored today. Faulkner's narratives resonate with modern readers because the issues that he presents in books like *Go Down, Moses* are not just issues of the time in which he wrote these novels, but they are human issues, extending far beyond the post-Civil-War American South. Though there have been major societal changes since the end of the Civil War and since 1942 when *Go Down, Moses* was published, an underlying unjust dominion and hierarchy still exists that perpetuates the diminishment of people of color and the environment, and modern artists like Anis Mojgani and Richard Powers explore this concept in their work. Anis Mojgani presented spoken word titled "The music of growing up down South" at a TEDx conference at Emory University in 2015. In his musing, he recalls:

> every one of our houses has a neighbor with a Japanese plum tree. The branches hang over the walls and me and Sam [his brother] we steal the fruit until our bellies hurt, our fingers coated in their sticky skin and our shirts stained with their blood. Proof that even we skinny brown boys from down South can be gods of something. There is a music – growing up down here (Mojgani).

Mojgani pulls together the ideology of racial hierarchy present in his life as well as humans' assumed dominion over land in his recollection of a childhood memory. Mojgani exemplifies that the exploitation of nature and people are connected in a modern context, just as they are in the context of *Go Down, Moses*.

In his 2018 novel, *The Overstory,* Richard Powers relays a sense of mythic reality through his characters' spiritual connection to nature. One example comes from a character who is a scientific researcher passionate about the Earth, which echoes Ike's revelation of creation in "The Bear" (Faulkner 243): "*This is not our world with trees in it. It's a world of trees, where humans have just arrived*" (Powers 424). Powers' character questions the dominion that people assume over nature and relates that to the climate crisis through this character and others throughout the work. Faulkner, seemingly in conversation with modern artists even refers to Ike noticing early logging practices in a foreboding tone: "It had been harmless then. They would hear the passing log-train sometimes from the camp; sometimes, because nobody bothered to listen for it or not" (305). Clearly, the issues of exploitation of nature and racial discrimination remain highly prevalent today, seen in examples such as the climate crisis and mass incarceration. Because they still exist, we know that it is essential for artists, activists, and citizens to continue critiquing these unjustified hierarchies. They haven't gone away since Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*, and they are detrimental to the outlook and experience of the world we live in. Mojgani and Powers serve as just two of the many examples of modern artists continuing to explore the themes of spirituality in nature, racial hierarchy, and dominion that are present in Southern culture and the United States as a whole.

As young Southerners and engaged citizens, modern readers can look to these artists' examples of public critique and reflection to combat injustices through our own work and

ideation. William Faulkner, through works such as *Go Down, Moses*, teaches readers to grapple with our identities within the physical and ideological constructs of the places we call home. Faulkner realizes and uses his prowess as a writer to speak out against the unjust hierarchies of the American South through *Go Down, Moses* in a way that develops a persuasive argument through common ground, through stories people of all beliefs can connect to. Faulkner also adeptly draws upon Ike McCaslin's youthful curiosity when offering alternative views to commonly accepted societal constructs so that his audience will more readily place themselves in a position to understand his exploration of his identity, place, and belief in the hierarchical ideology of the South. Within the context of *Go Down, Moses*, Faulkner critiques the use of Christianity to justify a hierarchical relationship between humans and nature and humans and other humans, which creates a culture of unwarranted dominion. Faulkner published *Go Down, Moses* in 1942 about the American South post-Civil-War, yet clearly the racial and social hierarchy he spoke of remain topical issues. In 1942 and today, many view Southern and, globally, American culture as inaccessible to them because of imbedded hierarchies and religiously charged disdain for some ways of life in our culture. As modern audiences, we can take note of Faulkner's effective rhetorical modes to be good stewards and representatives of Southern and American culture. If we are conscious of the ways in which we enact and critique our culture, we can help move toward positive progress as individuals and inspire and encourage others to do the same.

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