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William Faulkner's Southern Landscape

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for Honors Studies in
English

By:

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English

J. William Fulbright College of Arts and Sciences
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Introduction

I was seventeen years old and a senior in high school when I was first introduced to the twisted mind of William Faulkner and frankly, I was horrified. I was assigned to read *As I Lay Dying* for an English class and felt as though I had been thrown to the wolves. Struggling for weeks reading and re-reading the book, I toiled to sort through the different narrators and themes. I was transfixed by the work and shocked at the audacity of it all. *Who does this William Faulkner think he is?* I angrily thought as I journeyed across Mississippi with the bumbling Bundrens. Though still confident that I was the only student in the class that actually finished the novel in its entirety, I vowed to never read Faulkner again. He was a towering giant of southern writing and I never wanted to relive the experience of reading one of his works again. But as the years went by, the warmth of the southern sun as hot as Jewel's quick temper, the searing pain of Cash's twice broken leg, the stench of Addie's decomposing body, and the deep-rooted restlessness and fear silenced behind Dewey Dell's lips stayed with me. I couldn't rid myself of the world in which Faulkner had dropped me.

The American South has long been a topic of fascination and study to the rest of the world. It is a region and a people of rich, yet tumultuous history, devastated by war, poverty, natural disaster, political corruption, and violent racism. Regardless of its glory or brokenness, it is a region worth studying. The South rose to power in the nineteenth century as a region of economic prosperity built upon the wildly successful plantation system, which used mass slave labor to grow and produce cotton: the ultimate cash crop that put the region on the global market. The plantation system defined the region's social hierarchy. Wealthy white planters controlled the politics, economy, and strict social order. While the rest of the country was advancing quickly towards urbanization and industrialization, the South chose to stay firmly agrarian. But

the southern planters were fighting a losing battle with the federal government for control over their slaves, and thus, their livelihoods. After eleven southern states seceded from the Union in 1861 and the American Civil War began, many white southerners went to fight not only for the protection of slavery, but also for a way of life they had always known. What would life be like for southerners with no mass labor system, no social order, and no effective politics?

When the war ended in 1865, the defeated South lay in ruin. After a failed Reconstruction, southerners struggled to pick up the pieces. Devastated by war, natural disaster, political anarchy, racial brutality, disease, and poverty, southerners were left with an exhausted land, a lost cause, a broken ideology, and rampant violence. And thus is the environment in which the famous William Faulkner lived.

William Cuthbert Faulkner was born in New Albany, Mississippi in 1897, just a couple of generations after the war to a well-known, deeply southern family. A celebrated writer in his time, Faulkner wrote boldly about issues in the South and his writing went against the grain of traditional southern writers. His works challenge the white southern beliefs that clung tightly to remembering the pre-Civil War South. Instead of reminiscing the past, Faulkner unashamedly illuminates issues within the region caused by the South's bloody history. His works went on to be made into screenplays and even won him the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1949. Historian Don Doyle points out, "Faulkner's view of history was more tragic than nostalgic. He saw the southern past as a burden on his people, carrying with it sins so profound that the past constituted a curse that hung over the land, inherited by one generation after another" (Doyle 18). Faulkner shatters many traditional southern ideals of white supremacy, the Lost Cause, and the belief that the region must be restored to its former glory. To him, it is a land running with blood.

This land Faulkner describes is what makes his writings so impactful. Faulkner was born and died in Mississippi, and he wrote specifically about that region. Understanding Mississippi is essential to understanding Faulkner's works. American political scientist V.O. Key, Jr., in his influential work, *Southern Politics in State and Nation*, discusses Mississippi's distinction in the South: "Northerners, provincials that they are, regard the South as one large Mississippi," he writes. "Southerners, with their eye for distinction, place Mississippi in a class by itself" (Key 229). It would seem that the absurdity of the region is magnified in Mississippi at this time. It is a region all of its own yet it also strangely can encompass the entirety of the South's history.

I was fascinated with Faulkner's Mississippi, so I travelled there to gain a true sense of the area that he wrote about. I went to Oxford, home to Rowan Oak, Faulkner's house, and the inspiration for his fictional county and setting for many of his works, Yoknapatawpha County. I was shocked at how deeply southern the town is. Confederate flags fly proudly around the Oxford Square, lined with buildings still holding on to original architecture. Large houses full of old inheritance fortunes loom over the quaint streets and tall Confederate memorial statues loom over the Lafayette County Courthouse and the University of Mississippi campus as a constant reminder of what was lost so long ago. Though a fellow southerner, I felt like an outsider, stepping back in time and watching the proud locals live as if nothing had changed. It was a South I had never seen so closely, a South that lives in the shadow of what was just out of reach, a South that provided the setting for Faulkner's novels that he wrote in his study at his home in Oxford. "Once part of a frontier full of promise, following the Civil War and Reconstruction, Lafayette County, along with much of the rural Deep South became a backward region burdened by conditions of poverty, poor health, illiteracy, and misery that bore heavily on both races," explains Doyle (Doyle 2).

Many brave critics have tackled Faulkner and examined the multiple dimensions of his work. His writing is so packed with issues and commentary that it's difficult to choose an angle in which to read him. No matter how much criticism and analysis I read on Faulkner's treatment of politics, history, gender, race, economics, or character and plot development, I couldn't get past the overshadowing setting. The harsh Mississippi landscape—a land full of humidity, vermin, disease, poverty, violence, flooding, and destruction—captivated my senses. Faulkner is a southerner deeply in touch with his roots. Faulkner's vivid descriptions transport the reader into his physical landscape: a very real Mississippi struggling with race, pride, and environmental devastation. On deeper inspection, this setting not only provides the backdrop to his stories, but also plays such a heavy role in the plot that it forces the characters to interact with the natural world and call into question issues tied to the physical land and southern society and ideology.

This thesis discusses how Faulkner's southerners interact with their physical environment. My approach is two-fold: first, I discuss the history of the area and explore ecocriticism on the land. Second, I close read and theorize about these texts to find what Faulkner had to say about these issues. In examining his works, I explore how the southern landscape reflects greater issues occurring in the South in the twentieth century. To illustrate this, I chose three of Faulkner's novels: *As I Lay Dying*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, and *Go Down, Moses*. These stories chronicle the experiences of different types of Mississippians and their experiences in the South.

My first chapter discusses Faulkner's mirroring of natural disasters and their effect on poverty and social class in the South during the mid-twentieth century in *As I Lay Dying*. The devastating Flood of 1927 destroyed the Mississippi Delta, the Great Depression of 1929 further

isolated the poor, and the chaotic social shifts confined poor farmers. Through looking at different elements of the story and perspectives of the different narrators, I explore how the members of the Bundren family suffer from poverty, gender and class restrictions, and environmental dangers.

The next chapter tackles Faulkner's perhaps most famous work, *Absalom, Absalom!* This work takes on a historic panorama of the South, chronicling the rise and fall of the region through the character of Thomas Sutpen. Faulkner ties the history of the region to the land both in regional, national, and international soil. This chapter explains how Sutpen's interaction with Haitian slaves and Creole people reveals the South's exploitation of Haitian and American land, labor, and black bodies for personal gain.

Lastly, the final chapter explores one of his later works, *Go Down, Moses*. Written in pieces with broken narration, this novel reflects the fragmentation of the South. This illustration is two-fold. First, the region has been devastated by flood, infestation, and deforestation, physically destroying any southern idealist hopes of restoring the Old South. Second, the emergence of black modernity out of the brutal Jim Crow society shattered the white supremacy efforts, widening the gap between the races.

My goals in this study are to explore what scholars have said about Faulkner's works, forge a deeper relationship with the works themselves, and discuss prominent issues plaguing the southern landscape in the past, present, and future. By examining these issues and the way Faulkner writes them into his landscape, we can draw larger implications about what it means to be a southerner.

Floods, Fire, Fish, and Femininity: Ecology and Class in *As I Lay Dying*

“Place,” argues Patricia Yeager, “is never simply ‘place’ in southern writing, but always a site where trauma has been absorbed into the landscape” (Yeager 13). Southern writing is defined by its strong sense of place. It describes a region that has undergone various traumas and holds history deep within its exhausted soil. Wrecked by poverty, natural disaster, and chaotic re-working of the political and social powers, the South lay in ruin coming into the twentieth century. With a background of economic devastation, the depletion of natural resources, and a flood-soaked landscape, enter William Faulkner’s 1930 “tour-de-force” work, *As I Lay Dying*.

Written over a frenzied period of six weeks, Faulkner’s fifth novel exposes the different layers of social, political and religious issues in the American South. The story is written in 59 different sections and told by 15 different narrators to relay the story of the dysfunctional Bundren family and their journey to Jefferson, Mississippi to bury their dead mother. Faulkner uses the Mississippi landscape to further develop his characters, mirroring the early 20th century southerner’s relationship to the environment. In this chapter, I will discuss how the members of the Bundren family relate with the natural world through natural disaster, animal symbolism, and the personification of the female body through nature.

One of the most devastating events in American history was the Great Depression. In October of 1929, the American stock market crashed, plunging the United States into the largest and longest-lasting economic depression in the history of the Western world. The depression forced the already economically instable South into deeper poverty. In her book on social science and poverty in the twentieth century, Alice O’Connor describes the federal government’s limited knowledge and concern about poverty at the time of the Great Depression. She claims that

poverty was not specifically defined or systematically combated until after World War II. She writes, “Not until the two decades following World War II, however, did social scientists begin to engage in debate about the existence of an independent culture of poverty that could persist even without the immediate deprivations caused by modernization, class, and race. The distinction was more than semantic, reflecting important and interrelated postwar changes that profoundly affected social scientific thinking about the poor” (O’Connor 99). This idea of “thinking about the poor” is examined in Faulkner’s novel. Poverty is extremely restrictive in the South and it taints the lens in which the Bundrens see the world and themselves. Those in poverty were affected by disease, violence, and lack of education. In the South, the poor stayed poor. The Bundrens, and many others living in poverty in Mississippi during the mid-twentieth century, had little to no aid and were therefore doomed to remain in their socioeconomic status for the remainder of their lives. This created a sort of caste system for the South in which people like the Bundrens were to forever remain on the lower end, creating a complicated, tension-filled relationship between the individual and the southern environment.

Identifying the physical setting to which these people are confined is essential to understanding the role it plays in the novel. Place is a key characteristic of southern writing. In his analysis of Faulkner’s creation space, William Ruzicka notes, “Expressive space comprises any free construction or natural formation of space which signifies, represents or symbolizes some part or act of existence. It is a shaping of space to be an image of truth” (Ruzicka 1). Central to Faulkner’s works is his fictive county of Yoknapatawpha, located in Mississippi, which is modeled after Lafayette County. By creating his own space, Faulkner is able to shape and use it at will, which he does. Though Faulkner has created a fictive space, he still discusses true issues in the real South. The landscape setting becomes a mirror and a symbolizer of the

larger southern environment and culture of 1930. Faulkner's created place has purpose in its name. The name Yoknapatawpha derives from the name of those who first lived in Mississippi. In his book, *Faulkner's County*, Don Doyle explains the meaning behind the name Faulkner chose for his created place: "A modern Chickasaw dictionary tells us it also translates 'to be ripped; to be cut open for disemboweling.' Faulkner may not have been aware of these various levels of meaning, but, wittingly or not, he chose a word full of implications, many of them ominous, for the land and the people whose story he would tell" (Doyle 25). The natural environment in this novel does the work of its name: it opens up the characters, sometimes rather violently, as they explore existence and self. The natural world plays an essential role in the story because it develops the characters through trauma and tragedy, ripping them open and calling to question southern ideology and life at this time. Faulkner uses the brutal landscape of recent ecological devastation through flood, mining, and timber in the South to mirror the turmoil of the early to mid-twentieth century

With the knowledge of the odds against poor southerners in mind, Faulkner's use of natural disasters both mirrors true events and also represent the inevitable larger forces against his characters. Christopher Rieger argues, "the idea of nature is an important tool in the construction of the idea of the South and in the construction of the actual, physical conditions of Southern society" (Rieger 1). The southern landscape is not merely a backdrop for Faulkner's stories, but plays a real, moving, interactive character as the characters relate and react to it, mirroring the southern environment at the time. The Bundrens face two major forces of nature—flood and fire—that hinder them in their mission to fulfill their mother's dying wish and bury her in Jefferson. His representations of natural forces such as the flooding river and fire in the barn mimic real disasters that had previously destroyed the land just three years before the book's

publication. Therefore, these forces are not randomly placed by Faulkner, however, but represent larger social issues brought forth by environmental destruction.

Early on in their journey, the Bundrens must cross the river. What should have been an easy task is suddenly turned into a difficult and dangerous endeavor. The heavy rain has washed away the bridge over the river and so the family is forced to wade into the water to cross, all while attempting to stabilize the wagon holding Addie's coffin. It leaves the characters at the unrelenting mercy of the environment as they are forced to work against rushing river to save their mother's body and thus complete their mission to honor her last "wish to lie among her own people" (Faulkner 18) in Jefferson. A parallel can be drawn from the river-crossing scene in the book and the actual Flood of 1927 that occurred just before. In the winter of 1926, extremely heavy rains filled the Mississippi River Valley and in spring of 1927, the levees on the Mississippi burst and the water flooded over 27,000 square miles of land, mostly in the Mississippi Delta region. William Alexander Percy, a Mississippi lawyer and poet, describes the flood in his memoir, *Lanterns on the Levee*: "We stood on the gallery and watched and waited. Then up the gutter of Percy Street we saw it gliding, like a wavering brown snake. It was swift and it made toward the river. Father looked somberly over the drowning town. I think he was realizing it was the last fight he would make for his people" (Percy 229). Percy, in charge of Flood Relief Committee at the local Red Cross, chronicles the rising racial tensions and floodwaters that engulfed the region. With the flood came increased disease, poverty, and destruction of land. Southerners knew and understood the implications of the flood. It further isolated the poverty by destroying their entire homes, farms, and lives, leaving them at the mercy of the wealthy whites of the land and the federal government.

The Bundrens, as poor Mississippians, would have been deeply affected by the devastation. The South was still rebuilding after the Civil War and the early twentieth century marked the beginning of progress and industrialization. But the floodwaters suddenly covered almost the entire area, stretching across the entire Delta region and displacing thousands of people, destroying livelihoods, and halting any industrial or technological advancement in the region. In Faulkner's novel, Darl personifies the water as more than an inanimate force. It is alive and moving. He observes the river before the family crosses it, describing how "just beneath the surface something huge and alive waked for a moment of lazy alertness out of and into light slumber again" (128). The rising floodwaters brought rising political, social, economic, and racial tensions between poor southerners and the larger federal government. The beginning of this section foreshadows what is to come: a battle with a living, moving, powerful force the family will have to fight against. The land in this section does not merely provide a setting to the characters, but becomes a dangerous, active character that, true to its name, breaks them open. Darl gives the water personality and purpose, foreseeing its threat to the family's mission.

The forces that are against the Bundrens are angry and powerful. Recounting the story to his wife, Tull describes how "[w]e could hear the water hissing on it like it was red hot" (143). Immediately, the imagery used to describe the water gives it anger and determination against the characters, as it hisses at them, red hot like rage. Tull continues, saying, "Like it was a straight iron bar stuck into the bottom and us holding the end of it, and the wagon lazing up and down, kind of pushing and prodding at us like it had come around and got behind us, lazy like, like it just as soon as not when it made up its mind" (143). Tull personifies the water, and readers can feel its unrelenting anger against the characters. The Bundrens, though they are human and often times seen as powerful over nature, are not in control of their environment or even their own

fates. Tull's description of the scene demonstrates how overpowering the rushing river is. The river the Bundrens crossed reflects not only the physical devastation of the land brought on by the 1927 Flood, but also the unseen factors against southerners in the 1930s that were, as Darl describes the waters, brewing "just beneath the surface" like poverty, lack of education, disease, racial tensions, and political chaos. The Flood of 1927's devastation was one of biblical proportions and Southerners would have been familiar with the story of Noah, living in the "Bible Belt" of the region, where evangelical Christianity had a powerful presence over daily life. The allusion to the biblical story only further solidified the struggle southerners faced with immobility in society and politics. Those in poverty were doomed to remain there as it seems that the land and any higher power such as government, industrialization, global trade market demands, and perhaps even God Himself was against their advancement. The echoing of this infamous biblical story demonstrates the inevitable and overpowering forces against the Bundrens as they struggle to bury Addie and against southerners trying to prosper in a region flooded with poverty.

Fire provides another obstacle for the Bundren family's mission. Faulkner plays with elements of fire and water, employing them both (though opposites) to not only to wreak havoc on the Bundrens, but also to demonstrate the total devastation in the South at this time brought on by flooding, poverty, and racial tensions. Darl learns from the river and, later on in the story, uses nature to do what it seems to want to do all along: end the family's mission to bury Addie. Angry over the burden of carrying his mother's coffin, Darl sets the barn on fire one night, hoping to burn up the coffin and be done with the ridiculous journey. Watching Jewel run into the flames, release the animals and eventually save the coffin, Darl contemplates, "The sound of it has become quite peaceful now, like the sound of the river did" (207). Immediately, the reader

is drawn back to the chaos of the river crossing. The river is a turbulent, angry, controlling force, as Tull describes it, poking and prodding the characters, overturning the coffin, and vomiting Darl out onto the banks, all with a hissing, red hot rage. The anger of the water demonstrates the natural world pitted against the characters. The language Tull uses to describe the water ironically describes its opposite: fire. Both fire and water in the story are destroyers. Faulkner does not use one element to relive the other but rather joins them together to bring further destruction. Darl describes Jewel in the barn: "For an instant he looks up and out at us through the rain of burning hay like a portière of flaming beads" (208). Darl, comparing the burning hay to a portière, and drawing the reader's mind to wealthier Victorian Age décor, only magnifies the family's low social status because Darl would have never seen a portière in real life. It is something just out of reach, something that keeps the Bundrens deep in their low socioeconomic status.

While at the river, Darl falls subject to nature's powerful destruction of the rushing current, struggling to retrieve his mother's casket. But at the barn, Darl makes the choice to use nature's power to advance his own cause. At the river, Darl jumped in after the casket, saving it from destruction. But at the barn, in a desperate attempt to eradicate not only the existence of his mother, but her the entire burden of duty to bury her, Darl secretly and deliberately sets fire to the barn, hoping to destroy the body. Instead of going against the environment, Darl gives up the fight, hoping to let nature take its course. Instead of fighting against it, he accepts the inevitable that comes with his southern heritage. He recognizes his existence within a hostile environment and surrenders the fight against it. Darl seems to be more insightful than the other characters and often contemplates the meaning of existence. "I don't know what I am. I don't know if I am or not," he wonders one night (74). Darl realizes how fickle his existence is in the light of the

inevitable. His mother is no longer, as she is dead, and he realizes how quickly people pass from “is” to “was.” Like the rotting corpse, the Bundrens carry with them the burden of poverty, little education, and little social mobility. Like the people outside of the ark as the floodwaters rose, or the southerners watching the Mississippi floodwaters rush closer to their homes, Darl is forced to surrender to the inevitable forces of nature.

The natural world is an inevitable force against the Bundrens on their journey across Mississippi, which means the members of the family must find ways to cope and survive within the context of their environment. A mark of southern identity is the tie to the land. Throughout the novel, the animals become important symbols to the grief-stricken characters to contemplate death and existence, specifically, Vardaman’s fish and Jewel’s horse.

The youngest member of the Bundren clan, Vardaman, often has the most broken dialogue and views events simply, for he sees them through the eyes of a child. Around the time of Addie’s death, young Vardaman catches a fish, to which he compares his mother in his simple but powerful one-sentence narration: “My mother is a fish” (76). It’s easy to see how Vardaman, being young, understands his mother’s death by comparing it to the tangible death fish, putting it into simpler terms. But Vardaman’s understanding of his mother’s death by comparing her to the fish has a more significant meaning within the story. Christopher White, in his article about the imagery of zoology employed in *As I Lay Dying*, argues that there is more meaning to the animal imagery, beyond that of Vardaman’s child-like innocence. He argues, “The fish dramatizes the widespread, though largely unconscious, sacrificial logic by which ‘real’ animals are turned into figures of speech, while emptied of their material substance—reduced, that is, to *mere* signs and symbols” (White 84). Here he argues that Vardaman’s deliberate killing and eating of the fish, which he describes in an earlier narration, demonstrates

his conscious “killing” of his mother, releasing her out of tangible existence. A central theme to the book is the characters’ contemplation of moving from life to death and from a state of being to a state of nonexistence. His mother, the dead fish, and the natural world around him are the same. Addie Bundren, through Vardaman’s eyes, must follow the natural life cycle of life then death, and must therefore be killed, not just dying a physical death, but by being forced out of personhood. Upon dying, Addie moves from having an identity as a person to being a symbol of existence. In his article on the use of totemism in *As I Lay Dying*, Reuben Ellis comments on the language of Vardaman’s claim and how it relates to identity. He draws from the Native American use of totems, of which Faulkner would have been aware, as he named his fictive county after a Native American word. Faulkner’s works contain echoes of Native American culture, linking the characters closer to the natural world. Ellis claims Vardaman’s language binds his mother to the natural world as a totem would in Native American culture, extending his grammar to make the assertion: “I recognize my mother as, like all fishes, a fish/She shares in the unity of the world/She is my saying of this” (Ellis 413). Studying Vardaman’s language clues the reader in to what he is meaning when he makes that famous statement. Vardaman proclaiming his mother to be a fish releases her out of personhood and into the natural world. This reveals Vardaman’s deep interaction and unity with the natural world. It is his means of understanding what is happening around him and the lens in which he views others, the world, and himself. Throughout the novel, Vardaman still holds on to the notion that his mother, though dead, still maintains existence. “Where is ma, Darl?” He asks when Darl comes up out of the water, holding Addie’s coffin. “You never got her. You knew she is a fish but you let her get away. You never got her. Darl. Darl. Darl” (139). Vardaman does not view Addie’s body as an “it” but still gives her personhood as a “she.” However, like the fish, Vardaman begins to release

her in his mind to the natural world. Fish swim away, as seen by his frantic yelling at Darl to catch the coffin. But fish are also caught, killed, and eaten, as Vardaman narrates later on in the story. Comparing his mother to a fish allows Vardaman to understand not just the death of his mother, but also her role in the cycle of life.

Similarly, Darl tells Vardaman, "Jewel's mother is a horse" (86). This seemingly absurd claim is grounded in Addie's secret affair with the minister, resulting in Jewel, her favorite child. Jewel secretly works on another farm and saves up enough money to buy the horse on his own, symbolizing not only financial independence, but also symbolizing his deliberate separation away from his identity as a Bundren. The horse was bought with no help from others and allows him to move freely away from the family if he wanted to. Unable to cultivate a healthy relationship with the existing, alive characters, Jewel resorts to taking out his wrath but also his devotion on the symbol of his mother and independence: his horse. At the river, Jewel does not initially help with stabilizing the coffin on the wagon, but chooses to stay behind on the bank with his horse, seeing his horse having a heavier weight of importance than Addie's body. The horse is now, going along with White and Ellis's arguments, a symbol of Jewel's mother. He worked hard for it, fights to protect it, and treasures it above all else. Addie exists to Jewel, according to Darl, in his horse, no longer in the coffin or the body the family is carrying to Jefferson. The horse travels with the family until Anse eventually sells it, symbolizing Jewel's struggling fight for independence and contemplation with existence. In Jefferson, Anse sells the horse and gets a new wife, replacing Addie in essence with a new woman and replacing her in symbolism, introducing a new wife and mother to the family. Jewel, who had worked so hard to separate himself from the Bundrens, is suddenly brought right back into the family identity and placed once again under the authority and provision of Anse, restoring order to the family

dynamic. The horse helps Jewel ground his identity as he struggles to move further and further away from his family heritage.

The animals also provide a way for the readers to understand the scrutiny the family is undergoing from fellow southerners. Early in the story, as Addie is dying, the curious and somewhat invasive neighbors begin to gather around the house. Jewel describes the neighbors as “sitting there like buzzards” (11). The imagery of buzzards follows the Bundrens throughout their entire journey. These are birds of prey, hungry for food, and stalking the dead, waiting for the family to give up or be defeated: an eerie image of the natural world of the South. The buzzards are a symbol of Gothic-style genre, which Faulkner uses in his story. The novel closely follows the Gothic style, which is defined by Elizabeth Kerr as “a fascination with time, with the dark persistence of the past in sublime ruin, haunted relic, and hereditary curse” (Kerr 4). Here, Faulkner employs dark ecology, using the symbolism of the buzzards that fly over the family for their entire journey to cast a shadow over the story, creating a somber, dark tone. The scent of decay from Addie’s corpse attracts the birds to the coffin, as the news of death or gossip attracts people from all around to look into the matter. The ever-present birds of prey remind the family of their ever-present poverty and low social standing. Poor whites like the Bundrens had no social standing and were ridiculed rather than revered in society. This illustrates how the South was not a region of united people, but rather full of division and strife among its own citizens. These birds of prey also symbolize a darker meaning: namely, the inevitable cycle of life. Darl describes, “Motionless, the tall buzzards hang in soaring circles” (86) in the sky and Jewel’s later watches “the buzzard is as still as if he were nailed to it” (108). The buzzards seem to be omnipresent, a reminder to the Bundrens that death and difficulty are real and unavoidable. In true Gothic style, these truths fly over the family on their journey, haunting them. The buzzard-

like neighbors, poverty, social constrictions, and ultimately, death, were inevitable parts of life facing people like the Bundrens.

Following the pattern of the family members using the natural world to relate to themselves, the nature symbolism also characterizes the existence of the physical female body as Dewey Dell and Addie, the daughter and mother of the family, use animals to contemplate their existences because the natural world can provide explanation for them that constructed language cannot provide. The natural world gives the women in the story a place in which to ground their identity. Dewey Dell feels very alone throughout the novel, not just from the death of the only other close feminine figure, but also from the isolation of hiding her pregnancy from the rest of her family. In one scene, she converses with a cow in the barn, understanding the cow's urgency as it follows her around, moaning to be milked. White argues, "Dewey Dell's desperation, her struggle alone to hide and bear her secret, is juxtaposed within the cow's desperate need to be milked, relieved of its own burden" (White 89). Dewey Dell relates to the cow on a personal level, a bond she does not have with anyone else around her. "She follows me into the barn where I set the bucket down. She breathes into the bucket, moaning" (55), she narrates. The passage is full of sensory language describing her physical body with sexual undertones, signaling the closeness she feels with the cow. Dewey Dell not only relates to the cow desiring to be freed of her burden, but also in the cow's desperation to do so. Dewey Dell is hiding her pregnancy and is desperate to get an abortion. Similarly, the cow follows her around the barn, constantly moaning to be milked. Unable to confide in those around her, Dewey Dell seeks solace in escaping to the barn and comparing herself to the cow, thus relating back to the natural world around her. Through her undesired situation, she feels a part of the natural world of the farm and is able to then ration with how she is feeling. Knowing that she cannot receive what

she needs until she has the courage to tell someone her secret, Dewey Dell tells the cow “You’ll just have to wait. What you got in you aint nothing to what I got in me, even if you are a woman too” (57). As the cow is full of milk and begging to be milked, so Dewey Dell is with child and begging to be released of her pregnancy through abortion. She can relate to the cow’s persistence and desire to be milked. As the cow that desperately needs to be milked, she has no control over her bodily environment any longer. Dewey Dell’s language is very physical, describing the cow as breathing through her dress, “against my hot nakedness, moaning” (55). The language is overtly sexual, as Dewey Dell relates to the cow, contemplating her own sexual desire for Lafe, who impregnated her, creating the secret her body is now hiding. Though the cow is nonhuman, Dewey Dell feels the animalistic and lustful desires as she contemplates the results of those: the existence of a child inside her. Her southern and feminine identity links her to her environment.

Both Dewey Dell and Addie use the natural world to contemplate and discuss their feminine bodies. Before she dies, Addie, who seems to simply be a symbol throughout the story, gets a chapter of narration. Her voice grants her some existence within the story and haunts the rest of the family, as she remains the universal matriarch figure, controlling the family even after death as they struggle to fulfill her dying command. Addie, though dead throughout the majority of the novel, arguably has the strongest grip on the characters. Their entire journey is to bury her in Jefferson, away from their own family burial plot, revealing her desire to remain disconnected from her family, especially Anse. Addie struggles her entire life with defining her own existence, sexuality, and sense of self. For her, words are inadequate. She marries Anse, but feels no love in marriage or tenderness in motherhood, saying, “I gave Anse the children. I did not ask for them” (162). Immediately, the reader senses the tension, hardness, and bitterness Addie faces towards her inevitable role in society: being a wife and mother. The expectation of the southern woman

was to get married, have children, and tend to the household: an identity that Addie bitterly resents. Yet, just like the rest of the characters, there is no escape. Addie's way of describing herself comes through looking to nature. In her narration, she recalls a moment observing rotting leaves on the damp spring earth and contemplates, "I could just remember how my father used to say that the reason for living was to get ready to stay dead a long time. And when I would have to look at them day after day, each with his and her secret and selfish thought, and blood strange to each other blood and strange to mine, and think that this seemed to be the only way I could get ready to stay dead, I would hate my father for having ever planted me" (157). Faulkner's narrative, which switches between narrators and moments, reflects a fluidity of time and a close relationship between the past and present and life and death. Addie compares her life to the life of a leaf, a tangible example of the cycle of life through the changing of the seasons. She feels trapped in her relationship with Anse and often daydreams of being free like geese that can fly wherever they want. Her relation to the deep-rooted tree and jealousy over the free-flying geese reveal Addie's resentment over how society runs: that women are expected to stay rooted with their family. This expectation robs Addie of her individuality and she dies bitter and emotionally isolated. Southern tradition at this time kept women in the domestic sphere, as southerners clung to more conservative ideology. For Dewey Dell, she feels trapped in her pregnancy, afraid of her secret being revealed. Addie feels trapped in societal expectations. This stubborn tradition the women to bitter isolation, searching for comfort, which is found, in the case of this mother and daughter, in sexuality.

In an effort to escape these confines, Addie has an affair that results in Jewel, her favorite son. Addie describes Anse as dead, but unaware of it (162) which led her to another man, secretly in the woods. Dewey Dell also echoes this, alone in the barn calling out Lave's name

(55). However, both women's affairs end with pregnancy and therefore, shame: the consequence of their actions. Faulkner uses the language of the natural world to characterize both Addie and Dewey Dell because man-made language fails both of them. They feel attached deeply to the land around them and turn to the natural world for explanation. Addie envies the free geese, feeling trapped as a tree planted into the ground. Dewey Dell relates personally to the cow who is longing to be milked, but cannot find the words to ask.

In the novel, Peabody bitterly describes the southern culture of the day: "That's the one trouble with this country: everything, weather, all, hangs on too long. Like our rivers, our land: opaque, slow, violent; shaping and creating the life of man in its implacable and brooding image" (40). As Addie's corpse rots in the hot sun, as Cash's leg continues to fester and bring immeasurable pain, and as Anse stubborn search to find a new wife and start the cycle of absurdity all over again, so the traditions and lifestyle of the South sits bitterly in the minds of its people. Faulkner's writing highlights the consequences of southern pride and the refusal to recognize the problems with their ideology and society. In his essay on southern identity, Philip Weinstein describes the South as "a proud region undergoing defeat and sustaining (often with stoic dignity) the absence of any formula for turning that defeat into victory" (Weinstein 19). Faulkner's writing does offer up any solution to these problems in society, but rather shines a light, no matter how controversial or uncomfortable they may be, on problems that have continued to fester in the way things are now. Every southern has a tie to their land and those in poverty never seem to be able to overcome the harsh natural forces that rage against them with little to no aid from those higher up in society. Rather than fight against their existence and identity, the Bundren family must learn to succumb to them and exist within their environment. *As I Lay Dying* chronicles their struggle as lower-class southerners navigating through the harsh

Mississippi landscape and the unforgiving southern culture and society of the mid-twentieth century. The natural world is not, however, merely a backdrop for the Bundren family, but rather, another active character in which the individual members of the family converse with, relate to, and use for contemplation of their own existence.

The Planting of Nature and Men: Exploitation in *Absalom, Absalom!*

In 2009, the southern magazine, *Oxford American*, polled 134 scholars to find the best southern novel. Coming in first, and often referred to as the greatest American novel, was William Faulkner's 1936 masterpiece, *Absalom, Absalom!* which tells the story of the rise and fall of Thomas Sutpen and his family: an allegory for the southern region of the United States before and after the Civil War. The southern landscape plays a key role in the novel, as its characters are constantly interacting with the land, using it for personal gains until they are completely and inevitably consumed by it. Faulkner's works create a dialogue with the land, tying social and political issues to the southern landscape. This chapter will the history of land exploitation in the south during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and how this exploitation of land and people haunts the characters and setting in the tragic *Absalom, Absalom!* story.

To understand what Faulkner is discussing about the land, we must first understand how he handles this discussion. As seen in *As I Lay Dying*, Faulkner's novels often follow the Gothic style genre, which uses mystery, suspense, horror, and gloom and focuses on a particular, dark setting (usually a castle-like structure). Specifically in this novel, Faulkner uses the Gothic elements of mystery, ghosts, and horror to discuss the underlying environmental issues. In traditional Gothic plotlines, things are not always as they appear to be. Behind the beauty of the southern landscape lies a dark history. "Ultimately," writes Matthew Wynn Sivils on the relationship between Gothic and the environment, "the power of the American environmental Gothic resides in its genius for playing upon the terror that resides behind a curtain of pastoral beauty, forcing us to recognize the ecological horror buried, corpselike, in the landscape" (Sivils 130). At first glance, the horror is easy to miss. Thomas Sutpen's elaborate "design" for his life

is, by society's standards, a beautiful and inspiring story of an individual building himself up to success. However, Sutpen's success was built upon the backs of his slaves. The pastoral beauty of the Antebellum South, clothed with lavish mansions, plantations, and strict social codes, cloaks the brutality of slavery and the blood of the exploited bodies upon which the society was built.

Silvil's reference to corpses is a major component of Gothic stories, referencing the dead and supernatural return of the dead. Like the ghosts of traditional Gothic narratives, the ghosts of slaves and exhausted land haunt the characters to a bitter and violent end. The southern land unites the southern characters through the generations, binding them together in memory, and with the Gothic theme, creating haunting memory. The sins of the past southerners haunt the next generations of southerners as they carry the burden of their southern heritage. Quentin Compson, the primary listener of the story being told, feels a connection to Thomas Sutpen as a southerner. The novel opens in the home of Miss Rosa Coldfield, who is a southern ghost herself, prepared to pass on her burden of heritage to young Quentin. Quentin describes the opening scene as a "long still hot weary dead September afternoon" (Faulkner 3). The language Faulkner uses here lack proper punctuation and drone on and on like the story Quentin is listening to. The room is old and decaying, stuffy and dark. Quentin feels uncomfortable, as though suffocated with the history. As he begrudgingly listens to Miss Rosa's story, Quentin realizes the inevitable unity he has with his southern heritage. He describes, "Then hearing would reconcile and he would seem to listen to two separate Quentins now—the Quentin Compson preparing for Harvard in the South, the deep South dead since 1865 and peopled with garrulous outraged baffled ghosts, listening, having to listen, to the ghosts which had refused to lie still even longer than most had, telling him about old ghost times; and the Quentin Compson

who was still too young to deserve yet to be a ghost but nevertheless having to be one for all that, since he was born and bred in the deep South the same as she was” (4). In true Gothic storytelling form, the characters are haunted by their unresolved past, trying to build a new legacy on a blood-soaked ground. The ghosts of defeated Confederates, outdated ideology, and shame for violence and unspoken sins hang in the hot air like humidity. The memories of the south--defeat, exploitation, and shame--are reflected as ever-present, haunting memories in the southern landscape. The mystery and haunting of southern history creates a horror associated with southern environment and the minds of the characters, as they are unable to cope with their heritage. Elizabeth Kerr argues that, in using the Gothic tradition of writing the horrors into the landscape, Faulkner is able to convey “the transmogrification of the American dream into the American nightmare” (Kerr 52). Sutpen’s Hundred--his perfect southern “design”—looms over the characters in the story as a constant reminder of their heritage and all they have worked to build and protect. His plantation, built on the labor of slaves, illustrates how the South’s violent and forceful exploitation of land, people, and resources created this “nightmare” that eventually, metaphorically and quite literally, went up in flames.

The destruction is not limited to American soil but stretches beyond the borders, proving that the haunting southern heritage is not just a regional problem. Faulkner’s use of the Gothic tradition highlights the issues of the southern land, but more specifically, Faulkner focuses on the United States’ relationship with Haiti. James Watkins writes, in regard to Faulkner’s works especially, “The literature of the American South is characterized primarily by its deep and abiding sense of place” (Watkins 1011). Both Gothic novels and southern novels have distinct settings that act as not only backdrops of the story, but as omnipotent, active environments that

engage, challenge, and change the characters as they fight against or reconcile with them. There are two main places in *Absalom, Absalom!*: the Mississippi plantation and the West Indies.

Faulkner employs the Gothic story-telling style to critique the United States' controversial relationship with Haiti that had spanned for hundreds of years. A former French colony, Haiti was soon filled with imported African slaves and was home to harsh slavery and dangerous sugar plantations. By the end of the 18th century, Haiti had an established slave trade with the United States and much of the American slave labor was modeled after the Haitian slave labor system. The bloody Haitian Slave Revolt in 1791 ended slavery in Haiti but also brought about a widespread paranoia in the South that the revolt would spread to the U.S. The U.S. government sent aid to the whites in Haiti, accepted immigrating slaveholders, and inflicted harsher slave codes on their own slaves to discourage any ideas of rebellion. Slavery in the United States legally continued until 1865 when it faced a violent end in the South's defeat in the Civil War.

But relations with Haiti didn't stop after slavery. In 1915, President Woodrow Wilson sent United States forces into Haiti to protect the interests of U.S. corporations after political turmoil in the Haitian government and mounting suspicion over German interests in the midst of World War I. While the infrastructure of Haiti improved under the occupation, many claimed it exploited the Haitian people and benefited the U.S. more than Haiti. Donald Cooper argues, "The United States occupation of Haiti--despite benevolent intentions--was a thinly-disguised military dictatorship...It deceived no one, particularly the large number of Haitians who resented foreign experiments in benevolent despotism in their land" (Cooper 83). The U.S. troops withdrew from Haiti in 1934, just two years before *Absalom, Absalom!* was published. The tension-filled "white savior" mentality that the general public opposed during the Haitian occupation is not simply an

addition, but rather, an expansion of the United States' ideology of race, dating back to the time of slavery in the South. The American government felt it was its duty to govern the apparent "ungovernable" people. It is interesting to note, then, with all of this bloody history in mind, that Sutpen's slaves are from Haiti. Haitian land and people, specifically African slaves imported to work Haitian sugar plantations, play a key role in Faulkner's work as it expands Sutpen's relationship with the environment from a regional to a more global perspective.

Faulkner's novel illustrates this strained diplomatic relationship through the character of Thomas Sutpen. He is the embodiment of southern history. According to Miss Rosa's narrative, Sutpen arrives to town mysteriously, with twenty-five Haitian slaves and a French architect. He buys land and begins to build up a house and plantation: Sutpen's Hundred. Following the Gothic trope of a large, mysterious, castle-like structure, Sutpen's Hundred becomes the symbol of Sutpen's quest to establish a dynasty. Rosa Coldfield describes the frenzied building process: "He now had a plantation; inside of two years he had dragged house and gardens out of virgin swamp, and plowed and planted his land with seed cotton which General Compson loaned him" (30). The language used here carries undertones of rape, explaining that Sutpen "dragged" his plantation "out of virgin swamp," expressing force and hostility. He takes dominion over the land, plowing and planting, using it to establish personal wealth and reputation. The southern environment underwent harsh turmoil as the plantation culture flourished and spread among the region. The once beautiful, wild landscape became rows and rows of crops as slaves and farmers turned over the land, pulling out all of its natural resources.

Sutpen's use of the land for his own gains represents a larger southern and ultimately American way of exploitation that haunts southerners throughout the novel. The consequences cause the struggle to reconcile the abusive relationship with the land. Quentin's grandfather, a

friend of Sutpen's, calls the land of Haiti "a spot of earth which might have been created and set aside by Heaven itself, Grandfather said, as a theatre for violence and injustice and bloodshed and all the satanic lusts of human greed and cruelty" (202). These are harsh, condemning words, but according to Faulkner, they are not inaccurate. Sutpen is easily identified villain of the story, filled with deceit and greed, seemingly unable to empathize with humane emotions. However, Sutpen's character is not bound to himself, but represents a larger southern society: one obsessed with power, reputation, and wealth, willing to do whatever is necessary to establish a dynasty. But this idea is not limited to the American South alone, but stretches globally to the Caribbean. In her essay on how Faulkner uses Caribbean spaces, Valérie Loichot claims that by using the Caribbean land in his writing, "Faulkner locates the problematic roots of the Mississippi plantation in post-revolutionary Haiti" (Loichot 47). Sutpen's character ties the two places together and allows readers to see the troubled relationship between them. The sins of the past are not limited to one region, but instead have larger, even global, implications.

Later on in the novel, Sutpen narrates an important discovery in his young life. "That was how I learned of the West Indies," he recalls. "Now where they were, though if I had known at the time that that knowledge would someday serve me, I would have learned that too. What I learned was that there was a place called the West Indies to which poor men went in ships and became rich, it didn't matter how, so long as that man was clever and courageous" (195). At a young age, as a southerner (and more specifically, a white male), Sutpen learns of his own incredible power of dominion. Sutpen uses the West Indies to further himself, gathering slaves and getting rich off of its resources. To him, the West Indies region is a mysterious wonderland, filled with resources ripe for the taking. Again, this description eerily carries connotations of rape. The wild, untamed West Indies exist merely for Sutpen and white southerners' use. Land,

in this story, is merely a product to be consumed. This problematic behavior does not seem to disturb Sutpen, however. In fact, this dominion of the land seems only logical to him, if not necessary to further and sustain his life's ambitions. In his article on the relationship between Faulkner's South and Haiti, John T. Matthews argues that young Sutpen's innocence represents the larger South's views on slavery and exploitation. Over time, willful ignorance had led to a naive innocence. From this, Matthews concludes, "Sutpen launches his design with that obliviousness that is American innocence" (Matthews 238). Stupen believes that he is entitled to the land and its people. The South turned the entire region into a large-scale plantation system, completely relying on the forced labor of slaves, exhausting both the land and people. When the Civil War destroyed all they had worked for, they had nothing left. They had already taken so much from the land. This overlooking of the history of slavery in the Caribbean and the South eventually catches up to them, as Quentin struggles with his hatred of the South and Clytie eventually, out of fear and no other options, burns down Sutpen's Hundren in a murder-suicide that destroys the Sutpen legacy.

But land was not the only thing being exploited. The white supremacy ideology was grounded in the belief that blacks needed to be controlled and Faulkner's ecology is saturated with racism. Quentin's narration of his grandfather's tale continues as he shifts from the use of land to "the planting of men too: the yet intact bones and brains in which the old unsleeping blood that had vanished into the earth they trod still cried out for vengeance" (202). The land ran with the blood of those who had worked it for so long. The exploitation of the land not only reflects the southern history of plantations and dynasties, but also the exploitation of people, particularly, black bodies. More specifically, readers must look to Sutpen's strained relationship with his slaves and his son. In *The Faulkner Journal*, Kevin Railey writes about the system of

racial ideology in the South, saying that racial identity “is a social construction whose origin was formulated as conscious ruling class policy designed to serve specific social purposes and maintain specific class relations” (Railey 41). This system of ideology is present in both the southern United States and in the Caribbean. The plantation model held greater power than simply supplying the South with the cash crop of cotton. According to Matthew Guterl, it “enabled the survival of a particular form of white supremacy” (Guterl 36). The plantation system of slavery was a form of social control that dehumanized African slaves, stripping them of all individual value and rights, making them objects to be bought, sold, and used to work the land. This model held the society together by wielding all power to the wealthy white elite, but it then crumbled when the slaves were emancipated and the plantations were taken away from southerners. This exploitation of the black body is another issue haunting the characters as they struggle to reconcile in a region still full of racial tension.

Early in the novel, Rosa Coldfield narrates an important scene to Quentin, as she’s telling of Sutpen’s marriage to her sister, Ellen. One night, Ellen goes into the stable to see what’s happening. There, to her horror, she sees “in the center two of his wild negroes fighting, naked, fighting not like white men fight, with rules and weapons, but like negroes fight to hurt one another quick and bad” (20). Her own husband had joined in as well, “naked and panting and bloody to the waist” (21). The language describing Sutpen’s slaves throughout the novel characterizes them as animalistic, wild, and dangerous. Sutpen seems to be always in the middle of the chaos. He stirs up trouble, encouraging violent behavior. Looking back at his young desire to go to the West Indies and become rich off of the resources there, Sutpen sees himself clearly as master of the slaves, training them and encouraging wild behavior as if they were animals. To

southerners, the Caribbean is mysterious and untamed, much like Sutpen's slaves. They, like the land, therefore, are subject to exploitation: something to be claimed and ruled.

Another major character in the novel Charles Bon, who, in true Gothic fashion, comes cloaked in a mysterious past. Bon, though it is later revealed that he has "black blood" in him from his mother, stands in contrast to Sutpen's wild slaves. Bon is Henry Sutpen's friend from college and engaged to Judith Sutpen, yet Thomas Sutpen holds a terrible secret about Bon: he is his own child, cast out because of his tainted blood. Though he does not appear to be, Bon is black and therefore unwelcome to the family because his heritage contradicts Sutpen's desired dynasty. Sutpen tells Henry of Bon's mixed race, and Henry initially refuses to believe him. Yet as the story drags on, Henry is tormented by this knowledge and cannot reconcile with it. He eventually kills Bon in a climactic scene at the gates of Sutpen's Hundred, representing white supremacy over the black body in the shadow of the plantation. Peter Schmidt describes the conflict: "Bon obviously is not a black servant, nor is he a white son and heir" (Schmidt 172). He is trapped between identities and fates, representative of Old and New South ideologies. Since the two cannot coexist, he meets a violent end and is shot dead by his white brother in front of his white father's home. Bon's identity, body, and therefore, according to Henry Sutpen, purpose and life are called into question. For Thomas and Henry Sutpen, the violence and exploitation of land and the black body were necessary to further the "design" of their southern dynasty.

Absalom, Absalom! cries at the injustices done to the land and people in the South. Thomas Sutpen works tirelessly to build and perfect his Sutpen's Hundred plantation and family by exploiting everything around him. His actions, and the actions of southerners, results in the future generations being haunted by the shame of a land built on the blood of African slaves. But at what point does it become, as Philip Weinstein dubs it, "the land's turn"? Quentin's father tells

him, “It’s going to turn and destroy us all someday, whether our name happens to be Sutpen or Coldfield or not” (7). Faulkner is warning the South that the past is gone, but its sins still haunt the heritage of the New South. The land devastation and racial violence carry heavy consequences and stand in the way of any progress being made towards healing, rebuilding, or reconciliation. Southern identity bears a heavy, haunting cost of inheritance. Faulkner’s does not celebrate the glory of Antebellum America, but calls out its deep-rooted flaws, claiming that these problems still haunt the landscape.

In traditional Faulknerian style, characters meet a violent end. Charles Bon is shot outside the gates of Sutpen’s Hundred by his best friend and soon-to-be brother-in-law. The great Thomas Sutpen is murdered by a lower-class servant. In one of the final scenes of the novel, Clytie, the child of Sutpen and a slave, sees the police coming up the road to arrest Henry Sutpen, who has been hiding out in the house for years, for the murder of Charles Bon. She sets the house on fire, killing herself and Henry in a dramatic fury. Quentin describes the scene: “The monstrous tinder-dry rotten shell seeping smoke through the warped cracks in the weatherboarding as if it were made of gauze wire and filled with roaring and beyond which somewhere something lurked which bellowed” (300). Sutpen’s Hundred, the allegory of the southern plantation system, the center of Sutpen’s crazed quest for power, and the symbol of white supremacy through exploitation, “collapsed and roared away, and there was only the sound of the idiot negro left” (301). The fire destroyed all Sutpen, and the South, had worked for. His home, his plantation, his slaves, his family, and his legacy burned to ashes, for his violent conquest met a violent end. It would seem that, as the natural cycle demands, these characters go up in noisy, destructive flames, both literally and figuratively. However, this seems to be the only fitting ending to such a tragic narrative. Quentin’s grandfather describes the consequences

of continued exploitation, “as if nature held a balance and kept a book and offered a recompense for the torn limbs and outraged hearts even if man did not” (202). Nature, it seems, has the final say in dominion as Sutpen’s Hundred is burned to the ground. These wrongs cannot go unpunished, but the punishment is drawn out in the conflicting ideology and racism that is continued in the South. Sivils notes, “(Faulkner’s works) contain a natural environment wronged by shortsighted land-use practices and tainted by the human injustice it has absorbed” (Sivils 128). Faulkner makes the land come alive, and it is angry over the injustices committed in the name of progress and prosperity. The land cries out in retribution, demanding blood for the blood that was spilled upon its soil. Faulkner’s use of Gothic tradition brings to the surface the long-buried ghosts of exploitation, forcing the characters like Quentin to wrestle with the consequences of exploitation. The violent abuse of land and people in the southern region of the United States and the West Indies eventually, as Faulkner writes, has no choice but to come to a violent end. The two ideals of the Old and New South cannot exist together and progress cannot be made until the problem is resolved. Faulkner argues that until these issues are recognized, destruction will reign in the South. *Absalom, Absalom!* provides no other alternative.

The Dark and Ravaged Fatherland: Ecological and Racial Devastation in *Go Down, Moses*

Perhaps one of the most ecologically focused works by Faulkner is *Go Down, Moses*, which tells the long, fragmented story of the complicated McCaslin family and their interactions with each other and the environment around them. The novel was published in 1942, where we meet a South that has been raised up on the backs of slavery, forcefully struck down through the Civil War, and turned to chaos by Reconstruction and Jim Crow. While the South had engaged in national and global conflict, there was also turmoil within the region. “Don’t you see?” cries Isaac McCaslin, “This whole land, the whole South, is cursed, and all of us who derive from it, whom it ever suckled, white and black both, lie under the curse?” (Faulkner 266). Throughout the story, the characters struggle with their ecologically and racially devastated land. This chapter will discuss how Faulkner’s fragmented writing style illustrates the South’s broken social order through ecological devastation and racial brutality and misunderstanding. The cycle of consequences from these actions begin to come full circle, changing the environment of the South and bringing it into a more modern era.

It is important to explore what was happening to the southern landscape to understand how the land shapes the stories. In 1927, a massive flood (discussed in an my chapter on *As I Lay Dying*) destroyed the Mississippi Delta region, wiping out land, homes, and livestock, increasing poverty, and heightening racial tensions. The flood not only brought about natural disaster, but humanitarian disaster as well. In his book on the massive flood, John Barry writes, “It began as one of man against nature. It became one of man against man. For the flood brought with it also a human storm” (Barry 6). This flood enflamed social, political, and racial tensions. The federal government seemed to only aid the white and wealthy, leaving many poor blacks to suffer on their own or in camps where they were confined. The disaster, while destroying southern land

and livelihood, also further fueled racial tensions as many African-Americans, though no longer slaves, were not considered worthy of aid by the federal government. This event further plunged the South into poverty as its citizens were left to rebuild (without their slave work force) after the massive destruction.

In addition, from 1892 to 1920, a boll weevil infestation destroyed the southern crops and wreaked havoc on the economy, feasting on the cotton plant. In their report over the boll weevil infestation, Fabian Lange, Alan Olmstead, and Paul Rhode report that the devastation of southern crops was much broader than what was originally thought. The Bureau of Entomology and Plant Quarantine study on cotton production yielded between 11 and 33 percent between the years of 1920 and 1936. They conclude that “the march of the weevil had dramatic, persistent consequences” on the southern economy and planters (Lange 30). Low cotton production meant low income. The Civil War and the emancipation of slaves brought down the plantation order, which had supplied and withheld the economic prosperity of the southern economy through slave labor and the flooding and pestilence only further ate away at the economy. Southerners watched as natural forces stripped them of their means of income and entire livelihoods.

The land was not only devastated by natural forces, but also by human hands. Albert Cowdrey’s book, *This Land, This South: An Environmental History*, chronicles the ecological devastation in the South. The Southern Homestead Act of 1866 gave unoccupied southern land to the federal government for use and distribution. Five and a half million acres of land in the South was sold from 1881 to 1888 and, Cowdrey reports, 68 percent of that land was acquired by northern lumberjacks and dealers. Cowdrey argues that the South offered the timber industry of the Gilded Age “something of the character of a new frontier” (Cowdrey 112). When the war ended, Northerners, eager to see the South become urbanized, came in large numbers to buy

land, make investments, and use the region's raw materials. The land that had once been the pride of the southern economy, and its source of prosperity on a global scale, was now stripped of its resources and ownership. And while the region was providing the raw materials, it was still too poor and economically unstable to support large industry, so the materials were shipped up North, keeping the South in a state of poverty. The loss of timber and natural wooded areas inevitably also led to the decline and even extinction of animals, such as different kinds of wolf, elk, sheep, and birds. All of this destruction is reflected in Faulkner's writing in the stories of *Go Down, Moses* as these characters struggle with the "curse" of the land.

The economic poverty, political chaos, and social erosion in the South can be tangibly represented in the region's ecological devastation. In the novel, the subjects of the stories are divided between stories of nature and hunting and stories of race and violence. Read together, it creates a story of overall devastation. In his work on the ecological devastation in southern literature, Christopher Rieger writes, "A landscape of clear-cut forests, worn-out soil, and severely eroded fields provides Faulkner with his own 'heap of broken images'" (Rieger 205). Stylistically, Faulkner's writing adheres to that idea of broken images (taken from T.S. Eliot's dark and complicated poem, "The Waste Land"), a theme of the Modernism movement in literature. Faulkner brings the destruction of the South physically into the novel through this style of writing. The modern style literary movement emerged in the early twentieth century, breaking from the structure of nineteenth century realism and introducing chaos to writing as the people's thinking patterns began to change. The world was thrust into the Great War and, in the chaos, people questioned long-standing institutions like religion and governments. Dialogue and narration is fragmented, narrators are often unreliable, and characters speak and think in stream-

of-consciousness. Faulkner's works tend to follow these trends, making him notoriously difficult to read and understand.

The novel does not flow in typical fashion, but is made up of seven short stories, dealing with many different characters and spanning over a period of about one hundred years. The chronology of the overall story is not obvious and the relationship of the small stories is not made apparent at first glance. John T. Matthews asks of this issue, "What are we to make of a work that presents itself as generically and formally unstable?" (Matthews 21). This arrangement is done on purpose and the chaos the reader faces is intentional. Faulkner's broken writing style mirrors a South that is broken in many ways. Matthews argues that the book's seven different stories have common themes throughout and "they formalize a partially incoherent social scene" (Matthews 22). Adhering to Eliot's idea of a heap of broken images, we as readers are presented with seven stories, seven moments in the southern narrative, and must scramble to fill in the holes, connecting them to the overall commentary on southern history and identity.

Just as the South has fallen to pieces ecologically, economically, politically, and socially, this is a novel written in pieces. Faulkner uses this fragmented style to present long-term problems and their consequences in the region. Rieger remarks, "the novel's disjointed form demonstrates that the seeds of both a ruined land and a vitiated family are planted many decades before by men blind to the long-term consequences of their actions" (Rieger 203). The work is to be read as a whole unit, starting with the family history in "Was" and ending with a new chapter in southern racial politics with "Go Down, Moses." Instead of reading the novel as seven individual stories, it is essential to read it as one long history of a family and a region that shows readers the long-term consequences of the actions of early generations being passed down to later generations. These actions range between exhausting the physical land to enacting racial

violence upon the newly freed black population. It is a land that is changing and moving with the times, morphing into a new region, exhausted by the hands of men. Ike describes the scenery of the Delta: “The paths made by deer and bear because roads and then highways, with towns in turn springing up along them and along the rivers” (324). The modern writing style echoes the modern feeling of tension and resistance to so much change. There is a new age of progress entering in and southerners must grapple with these changes in their land and culture.

Within the overall fragmented story, the language itself is broken, made up of long, rambling sentences that forsake proper punctuation and grammar. When asked the reason for this complicated stylistic move at the Virginia Colleges Conference in 1957, Faulkner responded, “the long sentence is an attempt to get his past and possibly his future into the instant in which he does something” (Faulkner). In very deliberate fashion, Faulkner crams entire histories into small moments, signifying the history of a region that is crammed into its land and people. The first page of the book begins the story, “Was,” which gives a history of the McCaslin family and sets up many themes that are echoed throughout the rest of the novel. The entire first chapter contains zero periods, with sentences that ramble on and then stop suddenly. Isaac McCaslin recalls hearing the story from his family’s history. He hears the story from “his cousin McCaslin born in 1850 and sixteen years his senior and hence, his own father being near seventy when Isaac, an only child, was born, rather his brother than cousin and rather his father than either, out of the old time, the old days” (4). All of that rather confusing family history is crammed into one lengthy sentence, as if it is overflowing out of Isaac. A mark of the southerner is the containment of both the past and present in each moment. Each character is a collection of moments, beliefs, and movements, just as the family is a collection of eclectic people and the novel is a collection of different stories.

Knowing the general region's history with the land and understanding Faulkner's fragmented writing style, we can now take our heap of broken images and look more closely at the characters of *Go Down, Moses*, specifically, Isaac McCaslin and his relationship with the land. Isaac's first encounters with the land come at a young age when he is mentored by Sam Fathers, who is half-black and half-Cherokee. Once again, we see Faulkner's inclusion of Native American tradition and culture into his works. Sam is blended race and therefore, blended identity as a southerner. In the story "The Old People," young Isaac, under Sam's guidance, learns not only to hunt, but also to respect and love the land as Sam does, setting him apart from the other members of the hunting party. He recognizes that even though the land will soon be given to him, his "hold upon it actually was as trivial and without reality as the now faded and archaic script in the chancery book in Jefferson" (165). Isaac struggles with the southern characteristic of inheritance. He takes no ownership of the land and surrenders to its power as a young boy, an idea that will later cause great conflict within his family. Isaac sees himself as a guest "and Sam Fathers' voice the mouthpiece of the host" (165). Isaac holds a great respect for Sam, citing his first hunting experience where Sam marked him as his becoming a man. It was in this moment that Isaac felt one with nature, breathing its same breath. Isaac's sympathy for the landscape comes with his youth. He is the notably youngest member of the hunting party, yet surpasses them all in skill. Isaac represents a new generation of southerners that did not revel in the glory of the Old South, but he instead recognizes evils and injustices done to the land by the hands of white men. He is more easily moldable by Sam and seeks to move in a different direction than his ancestors.

The story "The Bear" chronicles an epic hunt and battle between hunters and bear, man and wilderness and demonstrates Isaac's further isolation from the rest of the hunters as he

moves further and further into the realm of nature. While the others want to kill Old Ben, the massive, destructive, lone bear, Isaac simply longs to see him. Sam tells him that the bear has been watching him so Isaac is determined to look back at the bear. Following Sam's advice, Isaac leaves behind all he knows and heads into the woods alone, signaling his total submission to the land. In his book on the creation of Faulkner's spaces, William Ruzicka comments, "Ike's complete surrender to the wilderness before seeing the bear is important to the relationship of orientation and dwelling" (Ruzicka 108). Isaac, aware of his own shortcomings, chooses to leave behind his gun and compass, his protection and direction, for a chance to finally see the bear, forsaking all symbols of his dominion over the land and making a defined statement of his unity with it. Ruzicka argues that Isaac had to first become lost, venturing away from what he thought was home (his southern heritage) before he could find where he truly belonged, as one with the woods. By wandering around aimlessly, he is stripped of what he once knew and finds a new dwelling and identity, apart from all he's been taught as a southerner. Ironically, he finds the bear right where he had originally left his compass and watch. Yet he returns with a renewed perspective.

Isaac McCaslin stands alone from the other characters in the novel. When he is twenty-one, he turns down his inheritance to the plantation in a final battle against his heritage. He claims that the land belongs to God who created it and mankind is simply the overseer. This is in stark contrast to the other characters, who kill for sport in often unethical ways. For example, when Major de Spain finds his colt dead, he assumes the culprit was Old Ben and goes after him in retribution, even though it was Lion the dog that committed the crime. "I'm disappointed in him," Major de Spain says, "He has broken the rules" (205). In response, the men place themselves as the lords over the land, acting out a seemingly divine punishment for Old Ben

breaking the unwritten rules. They decide that it is fair to go beyond their realm of hunting to kill the bear: a life for a life. In their minds, they are responsible for bringing balance to nature as they claim to have total dominion.

Hunting plays a key role in the stories and Isaac's upbringing. Hunting in this era is no longer solely necessary for a food source, but has become a recreational pastime. In his article discussing southern values within hunting, Steven Knepper draws correlations between the misuse of the land by the hunters and the misuse of minorities (being slaves, women, or Native Americans) by southerners: "One in civilization and one in the wilderness, they represent opposite sides of the same coin. Together, they epitomize that which is exploited by the dark side of the sporting culture" (Knepper 102). The southern white man's crusade to rule his landscape is seen in his hunting practices. Faulkner includes the sport of hunting as a crucial part of Isaac's identity in the stories to further the metaphor of how the white men take harsh dominion over the land. Hunting is a distinct part of white southern culture. As many young men grew up with hunting as a natural part of their life, Faulkner uses the sport to demonstrate the problems with the treatment of the land. Knepper argues that the members of the hunting party exhibit no self-control in killing, regardless of the outcome. He references back to when Roth killed a doe in full knowledge that hunting does was illegal. Nature, like the women, blacks, and natives of the South, seems to exist merely for the use of white southern men, the cursed heritage Isaac McCaslin turns his back to as he refuses the plantation and retreats further into the woods, away from both whites and blacks in his family.

The abuse of the land can be compared to the history of racial abuse in the South, for both are a result of white dominion. For centuries, the southern economy, social hierarchy, and political power was dependent upon slave labor. When slavery ended after the Civil War,

southerners were suddenly left with another major problem of how to handle race as free men. Isaac contemplates on “those upon whom freedom and equality had been dumped overnight and without warning or preparation or any training in how to employ it or even just endure it” (277). The old society of slavery and white social hierarchy was violently torn down after the Civil War, turning the region to chaos as both races struggled to pick of the pieces of everything they’d previously known. Similarly, the natural disasters, land redistribution, and overall destruction of the land tore away the old southern land, and its citizens were left to struggle with poverty and rebuilding a completely new economy accommodate the rest of the world’s new industrial societies. As the old systems were stripped away, the South went to pieces, both literally and figuratively. Many slaves could not afford their own land or livelihood, so they stayed to work plantations as tenant farmers and sharecroppers. While they were now legally free, their own poverty and lack of proper education and skills forced them to stay in a lifestyle they had fought so hard to be liberated from and they remained trapped in a cycle of debt to their white landowners.

Within a few short years, the old politicians came back to power and the South turned to political white supremacy, resulting in a land of Jim Crow, full of racial violence, terror, and brutality for the newly-freed black population. In his book over the evolution of Jim Crow in Mississippi, David Oshinsky argues that this violent, legal repression of blacks was even worse than slavery. Oshinsky’s book focuses on how the chaos and destruction in Mississippi after the Civil War led to the Jim Crow laws. In the aftermath of the war, white southerners were struggling to survive on their war-torn land. “For the planter, emancipation meant the loss of human property and the disruption of his labor supply,” Oshinsky observes. “For the poor white farmer, it meant even more. Emancipation had not only crushed his passionate dreams of

slaveholding; it had also erased one of the two ‘great distinctions’ between himself and the Negro. The farmer was white and free; the Negro was black—but also free. (Oshinsky 229-232). In an effort to contain the “primitive” Negro, white Mississippians put racism into the law of the land, creating an oppressive system to maintain control. The land once again ran with blood.

With ecological and racial devastation as the backdrop, the scene is set for the stories of *Go Down, Moses*. Faulkner’s novel comments on how white men used women and black men for their personal gain as they did the land. The first story “Was” gives us a flashback into the early members of the McCaslin family and their slaves and is very telling to how people of color were viewed at this time. When Uncle Buck goes after his escaped slave, Tomey’s Turl, he views it as though he were hunting an animal. A parallel can be made between retrieving slaves and hunting a deer. Uncle Buck admits that he forgot the common knowledge to “not ever stand right in front of or right behind a nigger when you scare him; but always to stand to one side of him” (18). Similarly, in the story “The Old People,” Sam tells Isaac when approaching the deer, “Don’t walk up to him in front. If he ain’t dead, he will cut you all to pieces with his feet” (158). One of the commands comes from a white slave owner about a slave and the other comes from a mixed race hunter about an animal, yet both sound eerily similar. Blacks were seen as objects to be purchased, hunted, and used as southerners viewed animals to be killed and eaten. The hunting allusions are not simply southern colloquialisms, but actual ideologies about white supremacy and dominion over the natural environment, with slaves included.

At the end of the story “Was,” Uncle Buck, Uncle Buddy, and Hubert Beauchamp have a poker game to determine who will take home the two slaves and Hubert’s sister, who wants to marry Uncle Buck. Just like livestock or tools, the fates of the two slaves and a woman are decided by a hand of cards. They get no say in the matter and at the end, the two slaves are

carted home by the brothers to begin work on the farm the next morning. The brothers see nothing wrong with the matter and are actually annoyed it inconvenienced them. In his book, *Games of Property: Law, Race, Gender, and Faulkner's Go Down, Moses*, Thadious Davis lumps race and games together in the perspective of Uncle Buck and Uncle Buddy. Davis argues that "Was" displays how blacks had no identity outside of slavery and that race could be made into a game for whites. Going after Tomey's Turl was just another game for the brothers and Tomey's Turl's identity was found, argues Davis, in being a decisive player in the game by running away (establishing a small bit of individual autonomy). "Beginning with Tomey's Turl's running," writes Davis, "*Go Down, Moses* deploys games (fox-hunting with dogs, gambling with cards and dice, racing) as constructions both of chance and of strategy that represent the arbitrariness and the boundedness forms of identity" (Davis 44). The land, the game, the slaves, the women: all of it becomes a game to the white men and a product to be consumed. That is how southern society has always run for them, and emancipation doesn't change that ideology, but only creates more tension and black begin to adapt to their new (yet still limited) freedom as the black population struggles to gain identity outside of being the property of white men.

The white characters in the stories have a tendency to not want to be inconvenienced, often times to the detriment of those of the opposite gender or race. At the end of "Delta Autumn," when Ike meets the black woman whom Roth impregnated, he is angry at Roth's recklessness and urges the woman to move away and marry a man of the same race. The woman is actually related to Ike and Roth, with the cycle of the incest in the family from generations ago coming back full circle: the actions of the white man's dominion still having consequences. After the woman takes Roth's money and leaves, Legate returns to the tent looking for a knife and Ike knows Roth has just killed a doe, which are illegal to hunt. "Just a deer, Uncle Ike," Legate says

in defense to Isaac's questions about the matter, "Nothing extra" (348). And yet, ironically, Roth has recklessly killed an illegal doe, just as he had a reckless affair with a black woman with no intention to marry her. For the white men in the story, it is all just a game or a sport. They play cards, shoot deer, or sleep with black women with, in their mind, no consequences. "No wonder the ruined woods I used to know don't cry for retribution!" Isaac thinks, "The people who have destroyed it will accomplish its revenge" (347). As the social, economic, and political order continue to shift and change comes upon the land, Isaac knows the white supremacy cannot last in the South. The white supremacy ideology in the Jim Crow Era came down to the belief that it was the duty of the white population to control the black population. Oshinsky explains the reasoning behind this thinking: "Bondage had been good for the Negro, it was argued, because the system kept his primitive instincts in check. And freedom would be bad for the Negro because those checks had been removed" (Oshinsky 298-299). Whites viewed black freedom as dangerous. The long-standing system of slavery had been the rock upon which southern society was built and whites had a difficult imagining a world any different than the one they had known for so long. But as whites fought violently to maintain control by physical repression, blacks were slowly gaining more psychological freedom as they were fighting for a place in society.

As the environment of the South lay in pieces, the black community was picking up the pieces of their identity and creating a larger narrative. No longer slaves, this newly freed people were able to piece together history and culture to create a new identity, separate from the one their white masters had always forced upon them. Yet it was not easy to do, as whites still brutally lorded over society. Rider faces this tension in the story "Pantaloons in Black," with a devastating end. After his wife's death, he is overcome with grief, and kills a man. Attempting to break out of prison, he's lynched by a mob of white men and his body is found later. The

sheriff's deputy just doesn't seem to understand Rider's actions, which are fueled by grief. "They ain't human," he remarks, baffled as to why Rider would inconvenience him. Rider, a man mourning the death of his wife is seen by whites as simply another wild, violent black man. The deputy doesn't see blacks as the same human level as whites, therefore justifying horrific and violent actions against them. He compares black people to a herd of wild buffaloes (150), stripping them of humanity and identity. Instead of making any effort to understand Rider's actions, or even realizing that there is a need to do so, the white mob responds in violence to suppress him. In her article on adjudication in *Go Down, Moses* Tician Sassoubre analyzes the practice of lynching in the South. She defines lynching as the "ritualized reassertion of racial hierarchy through violence" (Sassoubre 184). It was way to control blacks by terrorizing them in the name of the law and allowed whites to show supremacy in an era of changing social statuses. "Historically," argues Sassoubre, "southern racial and economic anxiety had been expressed through the culture of lynching, which effectively intimidated black labor and reinforced the power and status of white owners" (Sassoubre 185). As a farmer would break a wild stallion or train a dog to herd, so the white men of the day used terror and force to control the black population. Lynchings became a common part of southern culture as a quick way deal with (what was inferred as) black insubordination and maintain white control.

Yet white control was gradually losing its grip. Barbara Ladd's essay, "Reading William Faulkner after the Civil Rights Era" focuses on emerging black identity in the twentieth century. She discusses the importance of having two branches of the McCaslin family: one black and one white, the black emerging from white sexual relations and abuse. Within the time that Faulkner was writing, right before the emergence of the Civil Rights Era in the mid-century, Ladd highlights the developing ideas of race in the South. There is an evolving movement of "what

‘blackness’ meant to white Southerners in 1920 and 1930” and urges readers to watch for the “previously unseen traces of African American modernity” (Ladd 213). The black modernity that Ladd is describing has roots back in Africa. Black modernity is the gradual shaping of identity, which, in this case, comes from many sufferings and trials like the Transatlantic Slave Trade, slavery on plantations, emancipations, and the struggle with poverty, racism, and violence, especially in the South. Famous writer W.E.B. DuBois describes the struggle that African-Americans faced in this racially charged society in his 1903 work, *The Souls of Black Folk*. He analyzes the inner division and struggle blacks face in determining identity as a double-consciousness. Double-consciousness, which gives rise to black modernity, is “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, —an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (DuBois 3). Going back to Ladd’s essay, it is now easier to see what Faulkner is wrestling with in creating the McCaslin family tree and giving black southerners a voice. The McCaslin family, though one whole family, is made up of multiple identities: old and young, poor and wealthy, white and black. Most notably, there is a white branch and a white branch of the family. The black branch emerges out of this white family through Carothers McCaslin’s rape of his illegitimate daughter, Tomey, resulting in her son, Tomey’s Turl, who is introduced in the first story, “Was.” The black and white branches meet again years later with Roth’s affair and resulted son with the granddaughter of Tomey’s Turl in the story, “Delta Autumn.” These black and white identities are separate, yet interwoven together within the same family, creating a complicated overall southern identity.

The experiences of black people shaped new culture and maintained old culture, creating a distinct identity. The wrecked environment of the South allowed for the emergence of a distinctly black southern identity. "Black" therefore is not confined to one African race, but is rather a mixture of many different elements to create one, unified identity. By the time Faulkner was writing in the early to mid twentieth century, black modernity was becoming more and more defined as the century progressed. Black identity took a more distinct shape after slavery and the rapidly evolving changes in society created a harsh tension in southern lifestyle, as Sassoubre discusses in her article. Rather than having one southern culture of white supremacy, whites were at odds against the emergence of black modernity: the creation of another independent culture entirely. This was a dangerous concept for many southerners at the time, because it challenges white dominion and authority. We can see this evolution more clearly at the end of "Pantaloon in Black," after Rider's lynching, when the deputy is recalling the incident to his wife. As mentioned earlier, the white mob, not understanding Rider's rash actions, decide to take control and lynch him. As the deputy recounts the story to his wife, she simply tells him in response to come to dinner. There is no desire for understanding and thus no move towards recognition or ownership of the problem. The ending should disturb readers, however, because of how quickly the white couple dismisses the issue at hand. Fast forward to the last story, "Go Down, Moses," and we see an abruptly similar and equally disturbing ending.

After the county attorney, Gavin Stevens, has witnessed the wake of Samuel Beauchamp, a young black man executed for killing a white police officer, he tries to ration with himself, justifying why he should not listen to the pleas of Samuel's grandmother, Mollie, to the young man. This falls right into the theme of misunderstanding. Stevens, a white southerner, struggles with understanding the black family. "It doesn't matter to her now," he reasons fervently with

himself, “since it had to be and she couldn't stop it, and now that it's all over and done and finished, she doesn't care how he died” (365). The end of the story has Gavin Stevens torn between feelings of guilt and sympathy and feelings of alienation. As he attends the wake of Samuel, he is shocked and disturbed by the deep wails from the friends and family members, and feeling like he doesn't belong in this culture, abruptly leaves the house. He returns to work, hoping to easily forget the recent events. For white southerners like the deputy and Stevens, there is little recognition of what is happening in the social order of their environment. For centuries, black identity was equated with a primitive labor system, controlled by and used for the benefits of whites. White southerners had never had to reckon with the black population having their own identity as members of society.

As the war ended and the white southerners had begun to come to terms with the racial atrocities committed, it was easy to turn a blind eye, trying to move towards healing without ever addressing the real wound. The story, “The Bear” illustrates this need for recognition as Isaac McCaslin recognizes the connection between the land devastation and his southern heritage of corruption. “You will have to choose,” Sam told him (198). Forsaking all he's known and been taught, he follows Sam's advice and ventures out alone, completely at the mercy of the land. Only when Isaac McCaslin leaves all of the preconceived notions of his southern identity behind and ventures alone into the woods to meet the bear does he find what he truly seeks. But Faulkner's stories do not end on a note of hope, harmony, and racial healing. These broken people continue to grow further apart as whites hold tightly to an exhausted, old ideology of race.

The old order of things has been violently stripped away through the Civil War and Reconstruction. Like the aftermath of the Flood of 1927 or the boll weevil infestation, southerners were left to recreate a brand new society on the revenged land. Isaac McCaslin sees

the land as though he 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" (276). From the beginning to the end, the stories of *Go Down, Moses* tell of a family and a community of white southerners that exhort dominance over the land, each other, and the blacks around them. As the story progresses, each new generation inherits the ideology and guilt that comes from these unethical practices, creating a deeper tension within the South as the land is destroyed and blacks fight to maintain identity in a culture dominated by and catered to whites. The land is laid to waste by war, flood, infestation, poverty, and racial violence.

The southerners, both black and white, wrestle with the curse of their land. Through poverty, natural disaster and devastation, and racial violence and misunderstanding, the characters of *Go Down, Moses* become as exhausted as they land upon which they have been fighting. At the end of his life, Uncle Ike McCaslin reflects back on his hunting trip long ago with Sam, and how the land has changed. "This land which man has deswamped and denuded and derivered in two generations," Ike recalls about his beloved southern landscape (347). The ecological devastation mirrors a much deeper problem in the region. While outwardly, resources were being stripped from the land, inwardly, there was violence and misunderstanding between the races. Black identity emerges, challenging the white ideology of racism. Old ideas are gone in a violent rush and southerners must grapple with rebuilding a completely new society. Together, these seven stories create a fragmented story of a fragmented land with fragmented people.

Conclusion

William Faulkner was a southerner tied tightly to the land and examining his writings show readers how southerners interact with their natural environment. The land is not simply a backdrop to his stories, but plays an active role in developing the characters and portraying major themes. Faulkner's writings do not celebrate the glory of the Old South but instead illuminate major problems in southern society that have been absorbed into landscape. Critics can agree that Faulkner's works are distinctly southern, and his gothic, modern fragmented writing style weaves together elements of horror and absurdity to reveal a land plagued by tragedy and haunted by its own history. The Southern Renaissance of the 1920s and 30s allowed those who had been silenced for so long to finally develop a voice. Shifting social classes in an unstable society resulted in a chaotic environment out of which a distinct southern identity was created. *As I Lay Dying* illustrates the South's tragic history with natural disasters, land depletion, and restrictive poverty. *Absalom, Absalom!* symbolizes the rise and fall of the South and outdated Old South ideology of exploiting land and black bodies and how later generations are still haunted by the ghosts of the land. And lastly, *Go Down, Moses* discusses the overall devastation of land and racial violence that comes with the attitude of destruction. The characters in the works interact with their natural environment, mostly through struggle as they fight to get away from their southern heritage that links them to the land.

The land reveals the heritage of its people, making it essential to listen to what it says. "Tell me about the South," Shreve asks Quentin Compson. Studying the land and its people leads to larger implications about identity. In my research, I began to understand more of Faulkner's perspective on his characters that, though fictive, inhabit the same space he did. No matter where these characters travel, they are bound to the land and their heritage. Doyle asks readers, "What

was Faulkner attempting to ‘tell about the South’? What was he making of the larger historical drama in which his actors were playing parts?” (Doyle 15). Faulkner’s created space of Yoknapatawpha County in the Deep South Mississippi during the tumultuous time of defeat, reconstruction, racial divides, and shifting politics allows him to wrestle with the region’s problems and controversies on a magnified scale.

Faulkner's works describe a South whose civilization has been buried under the soil: a land that has absorbed trauma and run thick with blood, crying out to those who have trampled upon it for so long. The characters, both white and black, inherit a tragic narrative of their homeland, and the ghosts of past sins haunt their memory. Faulkner's South exists in the fluidity of time, where the past is always present and southerners carry with them a burden of inheritance. Quentin Compson’s reaction to being asked why he hates the South encompasses the burden of the southerner: “‘I don’t hate it,’ Quentin said, quickly, at once, immediately; ‘I don’t hate it,’ he said. *I don’t hate it* he thought, panting in the cold air, the iron New England dark: *I don’t. I don’t! I don’t hate it! I don’t hate it!*” (303) Hate it or love it, the landscape of the American South stands as a force to be reckoned with. The stories and voices of people of different times, gender, and races are woven into the fabric that provides the setting of Faulkner’s distinctly southern narrative.

As I was reading, I was constantly searching for a happy ending. Being a southerner, I so desperately wanted to find harmony and hope within the pages of Faulkner’s tales. The last pages of his novels don’t end in handholding and great strides toward improvement, however. They end in fire, misunderstanding, and violent deaths. But Faulkner’s aim is not to give us a happy ending, calling for redemption and reconciliation. Instead, he demands recognition for what the land is saying and what stories have been absorbed into the soil. His works urge readers not to

strive towards redemption, but to stop, drop every inhibition, as Isaac McCaslin laid down his gun and compass, and recognize the cry of the land. To know the South, look to its landscape. In studying what the land is saying, we get a deeper insight and understanding into this fascinating region and people.

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