Ike McCaslin's failure: Faulkner's investigation of the nature of freedom and bondage in Go Down, Moses

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IKE MCCASLIN'S FAILURE: FAULKNER'S INVESTIGATION
OF THE NATURE OF FREEDOM AND BONDAGE
IN GO DOWN, MOSES

by

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STATEMENT OF PROBLEM: THE OPPOSING VIEWS OF IKE

Until recent years scholars accepted without question that Isaac McCaslin is the hero of William Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*. In 1966 Joseph Gold indicated the inertia to be overcome in countering traditional critical assessment of "The Bear" and the two most closely related stories: "The critic who would complain about Ike's decisions or who would represent Ike as an object of Faulkner's criticism is in a lonely and unusual position."1 Indeed, in "The Old People," "The Bear," and "Delta Autumn"--those stories in which the significant episodes of Ike's life provide the unity--he is considered to be Faulkner's first full-fledged hero. The statements range from relatively restrained appraisals, such as that Ike's rejection of the McCaslin tradition and his subsequent life constitute "a transcendence of public morality," to the more extravagant endorsement that his story enacts "the miracle of moral regeneration." Herbert Perluck notes that the "usual reading of 'The Bear' makes of Isaac McCaslin a kind of saint who by repudiating his inheritance--the desecrated land upon which a whole people had been violated--performs an act of expiation and atonement which is a model for those acts that must follow. . ."2 Furthermore, most agree with Robert Penn Warren that as a boy Ike was prepared for his "courageous" act of repudiation by Sam Fathers, the old Indian-Negro who is Ike's trusted friend.
and mentor in the wilderness: "Sam Fathers is the fountainhead of wisdom which Ike McCaslin finally gains."  

Though in recent years there has been a growing tendency to question Ike's sainthood, the unenchanted critics are still in a minority. I would like, therefore, to make one more attempt to show the how and why of Ike's failure, hoping that it will direct evaluative discussions toward a major theme which Faulkner communicates, challengingly but effectively. This theme finds partial expression in a speech Faulkner gave in 1955: "The basis of the universal truth which the writer speaks is freedom in which to hope and believe, since only in liberty can hope exist—liberty and freedom not given man as a free gift but as a right and a responsibility to be earned if he deserves it, is worthy of it, is willing to work for it by means of courage and sacrifice, and then to defend it always." Faulkner here is speaking positively of freedom, but there is a negative side—denial of freedom. In the three stories about Ike, Faulkner investigates the nature not only of freedom but of bondage as well. Faulkner's main character, Ike McCaslin, has the opportunity to learn from Sam Fathers the conditions by which freedom exists, for Sam is the repository of virtues that are central to Faulkner. Through the portrayal of Ike's relinquishment of his inheritance and of Ike's adult life, however, Faulkner shows that Ike was unable to appropriate
such values either creatively or responsibly in the world of human relationships.

Faulkner's own responses to questions about the three *Go Down, Moses* stories under consideration may have prompted the first rereadings that led to reappraisals of Ike. Although his remarks seem deliberately contradictory at times—as when he refers to the work as a novel at one point and as strictly a collection of short stories at another—he has provided more ammunition for the critics who have attacked Ike than for Ike's admirers. For example, when a University of Virginia student commented that his favorite character of Faulkner's writings is Isaac McCaslin "because he underwent the baptism in the forest, because he rejected his inheritance," Faulkner replied, "And do you think it's a good thing for a man to reject an inheritance? . . . I think a man ought to do more than just repudiate." 5

Even if one chooses to ignore Faulkner's comments altogether (in view of the protective coloration attributed to many of his statements), the stories themselves—with their compelling demand for analysis—eventually raise questions that cannot be answered by the more generally accepted interpretations. Several of the unignorable questions that have largely escaped scrutiny are: Why does Ike, after repudiating his inheritance, feel guilty throughout Part IV of "The Bear" long after he has decided that he is not guilty and that he
will forget the whole thing? Why does Sam Fathers, the moral norm of the stories, collapse following Boon Hogganbeck's victory over Old Ben? Or why is the last picture of Ike at the close of "Delta Autumn" one of puzzled defeat?

Clearly one needs to discover and evaluate the clues that reveal the meanings Faulkner intended to convey by the bear's death, Sam Fathers' life and death, and Ike's various decisions throughout his adulthood. Attempts have been made to unravel some of the ambiguities behind these fundamental questions, and some of the answers are more convincing than others. One of the most incisive articles that penetrate the ironies and complexities of these stories is Herbert Perluck's "'The Heart's Driving Complexity': An unromantic Reading of Faulkner's 'The Bear.'" He makes a persuasive case for the ironies of Part IV which cause "a growing awareness in the reader, as well as in the characters, of the discrepancy between what we and Ike supposed him to have achieved, to have attained to, and what in fact his repudiations actually represent" (24). He speculates that "The Bear" ultimately expresses that "there is no 'freedom' in renunciation, no sanctity through repudiation. . . . If Isaac McCaslin is a saint at all . . . it is rather a 'sainthood' of unsuccess, an unwitting, unwitting elevation produced in the tragic defeat of spirit and soul . . . " (24). Central to his argument is the bearing that Keats's
"Ode on a Grecian Urn" has on Ike's dilemma of property ownership. This poem is suddenly introduced by McCaslin Edmonds to Ike as the thoughts of the two debaters turn back to the wilderness episode in which Ike refrained from shooting Old Ben at a given opportunity, saving his fynce instead. Perluck writes: "McCaslin's purpose in quoting Keats has been to show Ike how we may pursue bravely and fiercely and yet not kill . . . how we may love by not loving . . . how by not possessing in the heart we may possess all. . . . But he didn't tell him, and probably didn't know himself until much later . . . that this is only the heart's truth, and is not all we need to know, that there is a difference between knowing in the heart or in a poem and the imperfect knowing of life, between any sort of knowing and living" (27). Perluck thus explains that Ike failed because the "non-possession, the renunciations, and thus the 'freedom' which may be realized in the heart--this Ike had tried to live. . . . The moral freedom to choose not to act does not exist, except in the heart, where it is not a moral but a spiritual and aesthetic freedom" (28). His argument is clear and forceful, and he supports ably his two assertions that "The Bear" is not "a romantic Christian pastoral of redemption" and that "the principal effects are ironic."

On the other hand, Perluck's interpretation of Faulkner's use of Keats's theme does not appear to be the way in which
Faulkner intended his readers to interpret those passages. McCaslin Edmonds tries to tell Ike that "He [Keats] was talking about truth. Truth is one. It doesn't change. It covers all things which touch the heart—honor and pride and pity and justice and courage and love." That definition of truth was the definition that Sam Fathers exemplified.

Faulkner did not intend that such values be dismissed as an inadequate guide for action, or—as Perluck would have it—that Ike should have killed the bear at the described opportunity: "the hunter must slay . . . [he] cannot preserve that moment of excruciated sensibility in the timeless drama of the heart" (29). Faulkner had connected the ode with the confrontation of Old Ben in order to remind Ike and the reader of what he should have learned from Sam's lessons about responsible exercise of freedom—"when to kill and when not to kill" in that case—yet Ike cannot apply anything from that experience and the lesson therein to help him in his present dilemma. Furthermore, for Perluck to say that Ike should have shot the bear then is to ignore not only Sam's tacit endorsement of his not doing so, but also Sam's own refusal to shoot.

Before becoming immersed in "The Bear" proper, however, one may look to "The Old People" for the prelude of the theme which is intensified in "The Bear" and is most decisively pinpointed in "Delta Autumn." Because of Faulkner's unique
manipulation of time in these stories, however, it is not possible to discuss one story entirely separately from the other two. For example, Faulkner never states explicitly the precise meaning of the shared forest experiences for Ike and Sam at the time of their occurrence. If the exact meaning is ever articulated, it is at a later time, often in another story. The effect that he creates thereby—in depicting a scene, an experience, pouring meaning into it with later reflections or reanalysis—is one of the most elusive yet gripping aspects of his style. As Frederick J. Hoffman has already observed, "While a literal, lineal time has no place of appreciable significance in Faulkner's work, the pressure of past upon present is seen in a variety of complex and interesting ways as effecting the psychology and morality of individual actions." "The reader is almost never aware of a pure present . . . nor is a specific past very often exclusively given." The result is felt in the mysterious, sometimes mythical quality of the hunts and of Part IV, giving them their haunting power. Many readers have thus concluded that the moral truth which the stories impart cannot be deduced specifically; they agree with John Lydenberg that the stories are about "the mysteries of life, which we feel subconsciously and cannot consider in the rationalistic terms we use to analyze the 'how' of ordinary life." Such a conclusion seems more an evasion of the complexities
of the work than an honest grappling with the obvious fact that Faulkner had a message to convey—however ambiguous or difficult to interpret. To accept Faulkner's challenge and to respond to the questions which are implicitly though constantly raised, is to appreciate—among other aspects of his story-telling art—his piercing investigation into the nature of freedom and bondage.
SAM FATHERS: THE EMBODIMENT OF FAULKNER'S THEMES

From the outset of "The Old People," Faulkner solicits close attention to Sam Fathers, picturing him "standing just behind the boy," a position that steadily acquires significance. This phrase, creating an insistently imposing image through repetition, suggests Sam's influence as a guide and later as a conscience for Ike. He is either present at—or responsible for—every valuable learning experience of Ike's boyhood; in fact, the experiences are valuable almost solely because of Sam's illumination of their meaning. Whether or not Ike himself derives from these events all that Sam offers through them is the crux of the interpretive arguments that diverge from this point. Those who view the older Ike's decisions as noble and responsible have tried to prove that he is sufficiently enlightened by his novitiate in the wilderness, and that the wisdom acquired with Sam's help determines these later decisions. Olga Vickery's comment is typical of this view: "Isaac's repudiation of the wrong and the shame symbolized for him by Eunice's suicide is made possible by the fact that Sam Fathers has provided him with the wilderness and the code of the hunter as an alternative to the plantation world."10

It is true that Ike is deeply impressed by his teacher; their relationship is confirmed during the sacred ritual following Ike's first deer-slaying, as he is "marked forever"
by Sam with the buck's blood: "the hands, the touch, the first blood which he had been found at last worthy to draw, joining him and the old man forever, so that the man would continue to live past the boy's seventy years and then eighty years . . ." (165). It is the contention of this paper, however, that even though Ike in his youth comprehends the profundity of the forest experiences and matures in his talents and appreciation of the wilderness, he cannot extrapolate from the lessons the moral truths that are necessary resources in his adult relations with people.

Faulkner brings Sam's history before the reader almost immediately following the opening account of his guidance in Ike's deer-slaying: "the old man past seventy whose grandfathers had owned the land long before the white men ever saw it and who had vanished from it now with all their kind, what of blood they left behind them running now in another race and for a while even in bondage and now drawing toward the end of its alien and irrevocable course, barren, since Sam Fathers had no children" (165). Concentrated in these phrases, and thus converging in Sam Fathers, are the major issues explored in "The Old People," "The Bear," and "Delta Autumn," either explicitly or implicitly conveyed through the words "owned the land," "white men," "vanished," "blood . . . running now in another race," "bondage," "alien and irrevocable course," and "barren." The words
are strung together as pure description without any cause-effect relationship, yet Faulkner is investigating their relationships throughout these stories, showing how white men's ownership of land is linked to ownership of people with the obvious dire results to all that is possessed wrongly. Sam Fathers is clearly a victim of a series of irrevocable courses of action "from which the black man could never be free so long as memory lasted."

That Sam suffers in his bondage is explained in "The Old People" and verified at the time of his death in "The Bear." Faulkner describes him as the man "whose only visible trace of negro blood was a slight dullness of the hair and the fingernails, and something else which you did notice about the eyes, which you noticed because it was not always there . . . and the boy's cousin McCaslin had told him what that was: not the heritage of Ham, not the mark of servitude but of bondage; the knowledge that for a while that part of his blood had been the blood of slaves" (167). This kind of bondage is as real for him as if he were "'an old lion or a bear in a cage,'" and it remains a vivid and inescapable aspect of his life, evidenced by his last despairing words at his death: "'Let me out, master. Let me go home!'" (245). He was indeed "born in a cage" knowing nothing else because he is eminently sensitive of a lost freedom for which he grieves, yet is too proud to admit that it is lost, much
less that he grieves. This freedom was the birthright of his Indian and Negro ancestry at one time, a lost wildness—where wildness refers to an unrestrained, natural existence.

McCaslin further explains this condition to young Ike: "'He was a wild man. When he was born, all his blood on both sides, except the little white part, knew things that had been tamed out of our blood so long ago that we have not only forgotten them, we have to live together in herds to protect ourselves from our own sources!' (167). What is the implied attitude toward the consequences of taming this kind of wildness? For Sam Fathers the meaning is clear-cut and negative. When he later finds the right dog to battle Old Ben, his response to the statement that Lion will never be tamed or made afraid of a master is: "'I dont want him tame. . . . But I almost rather he be tame than scared, of me or any man or any thing. But he wont be neither, of nothing!'" (217). The bitterness of his words reveals his personal experience with the seemingly harmless concept of taming—his understanding of its true effects. Sam knows that in the spirit of man or animal or land is life—that when this spirit is tamed, freedom is reduced. Faulkner believes that "only in liberty can hope exist." Thus in man's efforts to make wild lands and wild people tractable and useful to his purposes, he has subdued part of the vibrant force of life itself. Yet the stories reveal how
continually and mistakenly white man has rationalized his right to tame, to interfere in the natural course of life by means of the concept of ownership, claiming that possession of land or animals or people entitles him to use them—more often to misuse and abuse them—for his own ends.

Faulkner manages to insert yet another significant message into this opening description of Sam Fathers. The fact that Sam suffers from a past ruthlessness—but is hardly treated as a Negro, much less as a slave—is brought out during McCaslin's account of his bondage. When young Ike cries out in enraged pity, "Then let him go! Let him go!" McCaslin's response is "'His cage aint us... Did you ever know anybody yet, even your father and Uncle Buddy, that ever told him to do or not do anything that he ever paid any attention to?'" (168). Later the observation is made that it was "white man's work, when Sam did work. Because he did nothing else..." (169). In stressing Sam's de facto freedom Faulkner is introducing a moral truth whose verity steadily expands to surround other people and events in these stories. Sam is proof that bondage carries an inef-faceable stigma long after it is ended by law or, as in the case of Sam, for all practical purposes ignored. It cripples long after "physical" restraints are lifted, and has reper-cussions that vibrate in the souls of sensitive men for an
untold and unforeseen duration. Moreover, man cannot undo some wrongs merely by ceasing to commit them. "'His cage aint us,'" McCaslin says, but that fact does not make Sam less caged. This point will find application in the heart of "The Bear," Part IV, where Ike is justifying his determination to renounce his inheritance. What, in fact, are the ethical justifications in attempting to turn one's back upon "that whole edifice intricate and complex and founded upon injustice and erected by ruthless rapacity and carried on even yet with at times downright savagery not only to the human beings but the valuable animals too . . ." (298)? In a very real sense, man is responsible for actions of even former generations so long as the consequences of those mistakes persist; he must bear the burden of guilt so long as men like Sam Fathers bear the anguish of "the knowledge that for a while [a] part of his blood had been the blood of slaves."

Thus Faulkner presents Sam Fathers as an innocent victim—a symbol of the results of man's rapacity even though his condition may have been the most that could be hoped for in the wake of slavery. By examining the actual events in the stories more closely, one can see how the human values that emerge through Sam's actions and words—through his very being—offer a countering force to that which victimized and betrayed him.
As Ike's "spirit's father," Sam taught him far more than the skills of hunting. "He taught the boy the woods, to hunt, when to shoot and when not to shoot, when to kill and when not to kill," (170) and what to do afterwards. In the hunting experiences of "The Old People" alone, both halves of these lessons are illustrated. Ike was carefully prepared for and guided in his first killing of a deer, then marked by Sam in the blood ritual which should not be dismissed as primitive superstition: "Sam had marked him . . . not as a mere hunter, but with something Sam had had in his turn of his vanished and forgotten people" (182). This something bestowed through Sam upon Ike is gradually revealed when a second buck is thereafter encountered by the two. It is the one "wild and unafraid" which the entire hunting party is pursuing, looming before Ike and Sam with "that winged and effortless ease with which deer move . . . passing within twenty feet of them." Sam's reaction to its grace and beauty is to salute--reverently, with his "right arm raised at full length, palm-outward" and the words "'Oleh, Chief Grandfather!" (184).

This expression of wonderment and awe reveals an appreciation of the value of the wilderness that makes the matter of when to kill and when not to kill an obvious and instinctive judgment. Ike therein witnesses Sam's use of
his freedom to kill the deer in a way that illustrated perfectly the conditions under which man holds "suzerainty over the earth and the animals on it" (257). The "wild" Indians had known their responsibility—knowing also that when the decision to kill was made, it was refined by "love and pity for all which lived and ran and then ceased to live in a second in the very midst of splendor and speed" (182). Furthermore, with the act of killing, a deep responsibility was assumed—one which Ike senses at his first deer-slaying but "had been unable to phrase it then." It is phrased, happily, in "Delta Autumn": "I slew you; my bearing must not shame your cutting life. My conduct forever onward must become your death" (351). The significance of these words as a part of the morality of the larger hunter's code acquires weight as the story of Old Ben is broached.

Ike "entered his novitiate to the true wilderness with Sam beside him as he had begun his apprenticeship in miniature to manhood after the rabbits and such with Sam beside him. . ." (195). These true wilderness adventures begin with "The Bear," the story in which Ike acquires the virtues of a hunter. First comes the humility, instilled largely through his frustrated attempt to see Old Ben, "the old bear, solitary, indomitable, and alone; widowered childless and absolved of mortality—old Priam reft of his old wife and outlived all his sons" (193-194). Even in their first
encounter it is Old Ben doing the hunting, and Ike is the hunted. Sam has explained that Ben has done the looking. "'He come to see who's here, who's new in camp this year, whether he can shoot or not, can stay or not. . . . Because he's the head bear. He's the man!'" (198). Patience is acquired as repeated attempts to see Old Ben fail—with Ike leaving camp each morning and entering the depths of the wilderness carrying only a gun, a compass, and a watch. After several days of futile searching Sam tells him: "'You aint looked right yet. . . . It's the gun. . . . You will have to choose!'" (206). And Ike chooses, determined to add courage to the list of virtues—or necessary equipment—for manhood, more valuable than either humility or patience.

Prior to this particular episode, Faulkner has introduced through Sam some incisive comments about the meaning and stuff of courage. At one point Sam explains to Ike the condition of the injured and "still trembling bitch" that had attacked Old Ben at the outset of the hunts. "'Just like a man,' Sam said. 'Just like folks. Put off as long as she could having to be brave, knowing all the time that sooner or later she would have to be brave once so she could keep on calling herself a dog, and knowing beforehand what was going to happen when she done it!'" (199). Later, when Ike decides to enter the woods without a gun in order to look at Old Ben, he remembers Sam's admonition: "'Be scared. You cant help that. But
Ike's fear cannot be merely set aside, however; it has to be conquered. It first grips him upon being shown the "print of the enormous warped two-toed foot" at which time he tastes "a flavor like brass in the sudden run of saliva," "an abjectness, a sense of his own fragility and impotence against the timeless woods" (200). Later "he recognised . . . what he had smelled in the huddled dogs and tasted in his own saliva, recognised fear. . . . So I will have to see him, he thought, without dread or even hope. I will have to look at him" (204). Thus Ike's quest for Old Ben becomes commensurate with his quest for self-fulfillment and self-reliance and for freedom from the fear and inadequacy that were blocking his path to true manhood.

The relationship between courage and freedom becomes clearer when Ike realizes that leaving the gun behind has not been enough sacrifice to allow him to see the bear. "It was the watch and compass. He was still tainted" (208). His willingness to put aside these items—to risk the consequences of so doing—is followed by what he doubtless expects, becoming lost. After circling and backtracking "as Sam had coached and drilled him" he finally comes upon the tracks of Old Ben,
"keeping pace with them . . . just one constant pace short of where he would lose them forever and be lost forever himself, tireless, eager, without doubt or dread" (208, 209). Suddenly, "It rushed, soundless and solidified—the tree, the bush, the compass and the watch. . . . Then he saw the bear" (209). Critics have worked over and through and around the meaning of this scene, the climax to the quest motif of Part I. They usually conclude that Ike is tainted by his material possessions, and that his mystic identity with the bear and the wilderness requires a relinquishment of the marks of civilization. Such a specific, rather limited reading of this crucial event in Ike's life, however, does not take into account the larger possibility of meaning that Faulkner seems to have been developing. At the moment when Ike "stood . . . alien and lost in the green and soaring gloom of the markless wilderness," he recognizes that he is still tainted—tainted by the fear of putting aside the last remaining vestiges of security. But he quickly realizes that he must test his courage to the fullest in order to possess it. Therefore he "relinquished completely to it. . . . He removed the linked chain of the one [watch] and the looped thong of the other [compass] . . . and entered it" (208). Faulkner thus explains the kind of knowledge that comes with this experience—Ike's awareness that true freedom is gained most meaningfully and certainly when man has made the greatest
sacrifice to attain it. He has to risk all in order to acquire all, and that Ike can then begin to call himself a man is confirmed by the appearance of the bear. "It did not emerge, appear: it was just there" (209) in the way that true freedom is there for the courageous to attain—a goal worth uncompromising pursuit, leaving man freest after he has been most threatened. The experience is afterward referred to by Faulkner as an accolade, a salutation to mark the recognition of special merit, for the bear's appearance had been both a reward and a congratulatory gesture to Ike. Old Ben himself consistently operated in that manner: "fierce and ruthless not just to stay alive but ruthless with the fierce pride of liberty and freedom, jealous and proud enough of liberty and freedom to see it threatened not with fear nor even alarm but almost with joy, seeming deliberately to put it into jeopardy in order to savor it and keep his old strong bones and flesh supple and quick to defend and preserve it" (295).
IKE'S MATURITY IN THE WILDERNESS AND OLD BEN'S DEMISE

The question that must now be dealt with, however, is that of determining the value of this newly acquired courage for Ike—a value that resides not in the courage alone but also in the knowledge about true freedom that comes through the experience. Still within the context of the wilderness, he becomes "a better woodsman than most grown men with more [experience]." More importantly, he has begun to understand the meaning which the life of Old Ben holds for him and for Sam. Faulkner portrays this awareness through the scene in which the bear is actually bayed by Ike's little fince directly before Ike and Sam, both holding guns. Ike, with no thought of killing the bear, rushes in only to save his dog: "When he overtook and grasped the shrill, frantically pinwheeling little dog, it seemed to him that he was directly under the bear. . . . Sprawling, he looked up where it loomed and towered over him like a thunderclap. . . . Then it was gone" (211). With a perfect opportunity, neither Sam nor Ike takes advantage of it to shoot Old Ben. Sam says quietly, "This time you couldn't have missed him. . . ."

"The boy was panting a little. 'Neither could you,' he said. 'You had the gun. Why didn't you shoot him?'

Sam didn't seem to have heard" (212).

Sam and Ike are now identified in their regard for the bear, recognizing its value to them, knowing that in the
pursuit itself lie the joy and the challenge and the test of their manhood. They sense that their freedom to hunt the bear is a right and a responsibility "to be earned if deserved"—not a free gift from an endlessly giving wilderness. Yet even Sam knows that somebody is going to kill Ben some day, to which Ike responds, "I know it. . . . That's why it must be one of us. So it won't be until the last day. When even he don't want it to last any longer!" (212).

Whether or not the bear's death occurs when he does not want to live any more is difficult to determine. Sam has finally found "the right dog," Lion, to bay Old Ben and hold him; Faulkner may have been implying thereby that Sam is attempting to make a sort of fair play govern the end. The case remains—however, paradoxically—that Sam refuses to kill Old Ben when given the opportunity yet trains a dog to do the job.

Joseph Gold's article "'The Bear': 'That was Symbolism,'" gives careful attention to the climax of this work—a climax that unquestionably occurs when Lion attacks the bear and Boon Hogganbeck moves in for the kill. Gold asks specifically why Boon is given the task of killing the bear—an obviously important yet confusing matter to interpret when one had so long expected that Ike would be the one, apparently trained so carefully for the job. Gold's conclusion is as follows: "History, the past, Old Ben, can never
escape change, symbolized by Lion. This is the inevitable pattern and order of the universe. . . Man plays a part in change; he must put his seal on the death of the bear. But we have seen what kind of man Boon is. He is essentially weak, incompetent and bewildered. Up to the present, as Faulkner sees it, man has helped bring about changes without the ability to cope with the inevitable new circumstances. . . . Thus does Faulkner censure man for his inadequacies in the face of evils of his own making."

Gold summarizes his symbolic interpretation by noting that "Sam dies when Ben dies. Sam, the good and innocent, the 'taintless' man, is destroyed by the surviving incompetent side of man."11

It is at this point that Gold's argument falls short of the ultimate implications of the climactic scene. He may be justified insofar as he views the confrontation between Lion and Old Ben as that of inevitable change confronting the old past. Yet his answers for why Boon is also the agent of change—thereby incurring Faulkner's censure—are overly simplified, as are his comments about Sam Fathers' death.

To say that Sam is deeply shocked by the circumstances of the bear's death is speculation, obviously. Again Faulkner chooses to remain silent about exactly why Sam is found—immediately after the bear fell—"lying motionless
on his face in the trampled mud" (242). Yet Faulkner does suggest effectively the brutal way in which Old Ben is killed. One can hardly forget the picture of Boon astride the bear's back and "the glint of the knife as it rose and fell. . . . The man . . . working and probing the buried blade. . . . He had never released the knife and again the boy saw the almost infinitesimal movement of his arm and shoulder as he probed and sought," until Old Ben finally falls (241).

To one who has been previously captivated by Faulkner's portrayal of so great a beast, the manner of his death seems excessively savage and ignoble. Particularly disturbing is the fact that it is perpetrated by Boon. From the beginning he is presented as "a slave to all the appetites and almost unratiocinative" (170). The trip to Memphis taken by Boon and Ike is described immediately prior to this final chase, and part—if not all—of its purpose seems to have been the illustration of Boon's irresponsibility. He fits well into the category of men about whom Faulkner's statement (through Ike) is applicable: "Apparently there is a wisdom beyond even that learned through suffering necessary for a man to distinguish between liberty and license" (289-290). With the vast problems of these stories, however, in which the lives of humans and animals and the existence of a rapidly diminishing wilderness are hanging in the balance, Faulkner
is showing repeatedly that man cannot afford to be irresponsible with his freedom. There is—terrifyingly and simply—too much at stake. Boon does not possess the sensitivity or sensibility to feel—nor the capability of living up to—the accompanying moral obligation that alone could have justified Old Ben's death: that code lived by Sam, "my bearing must not shame your quitting life. My conduct forever onward must become your death" (351).

Ike has once concluded of a particular event: "that was neither the first nor the last time he had seen men rationalise from and even act upon their misconceptions." The killing of Old Ben seems to have been just such a situation. The hunters—excluding Sam and Ike—hold the belief that by somehow possessing Old Ben, they will achieve a great satisfaction, happiness, a cherished victory. John Lydenberg makes a clear statement of this point concerning the men who never share Sam and Ike's awareness of Old Ben's value to them. "They have succeeded in doing what they felt they had to do, what they thought they wanted to do. But their act was essentially sacrilegious, however necessary and glorious it may have seemed. They have not gained the power and strength of their feared and reverenced god by conquering him. Indeed, as human beings will, they have mistaken their true relation to him. They tried to possess what they could not possess, and now they can no longer even
share in it. "12 This attempt to possess what cannot be possessed is a major aspect of Faulkner's theme about irresponsible use of freedom; the result is inevitably a form of bondage. In this case the loss of Old Ben initiates the loss of these hunters' liberty to hunt a vast, eternally challenging wilderness.

Faulkner's most pointed comment to this effect occurs in Part IV, clinching the evidence that was accumulating with Major de Spain's refusal to return to the camp, and Ike's sense of a "doomed wilderness." The closing scene of the entire story shows Boon deeply disturbed, or more accurately, demented. Guarding a tree full of squirrels while frantically trying to repair a broken gun, he cries to the unknown approacher (Ike), "'Get out of here! Don't touch them! Don't touch a one of them! They're mine!'" (331). The absurdity of his thinking that he can possess something so unpossessable is abundantly apparent here. Yet this scene is only a slight exaggeration of the delusion that resulted in Old Ben's death--the delusion about freedom taken for granted, wilderness taken for granted, abused, misused, and used up. Faulkner is not merely lamenting the passing of the wilderness and the necessity of change. He is showing that when irrevocable change occurs blindly, replaced by nothing as valuable as what had been, perpetrated by men who cannot distinguish between liberty and license--
therein lies the tragedy and the potential for more tragedies.

In an essay about the meaning of freedom, Faulkner made the following statements—quite relevant to these stories. "It ['the sickness'] goes back to that moment when we repudiated the meaning which our fathers had stipulated for the words 'liberty' and 'freedom' on and by and to which they founded us as a nation and dedicated us as a people, ourselves in our time keeping only the mouthsounds of them. . . . It goes back to the moment when in place of freedom we substituted immunity for any action to any recourse. . . . At which instant truth vanished too. We didn't abolish truth; even we couldn't do that. It simply quit us, turned its back on us, not in scorn nor even contempt nor even (let us hope) despir." It may be noted here that Sam is also diagnosed as having "just quit," perhaps feeling that nothing in his life could "become" Old Ben's death so well as his own death. The themes and actions of men in Part IV of "The Bear" and their final presentation in "Delta Autumn" seem to bear out the idea that as Sam's life ends, truth also suddenly quits in these stories, particularly the truth about responsible use of freedom.
IKE'S ADULT DECISIONS: FAULKNER'S IRONIC CONCLUSION

One now looks to Ike, the man who should have learned courage and who seemed to have learned courage and freedom and responsibility from Sam Fathers, and the person entrusted with perpetuating the truths that had existed "in the solitary brotherhood of an old and childless Negro's alien blood and the wild and invincible spirit of an old bear" (295). As a man of twenty-one years, Ike finds himself "juxtaposed not against the wilderness but against the tamed land which was to have been his heritage, the land which old Carothers McCaslin his grandfather had bought with white man's money from the wild men whose grandfathers without guns hunted it, and tamed and ordered or believed he had tamed and ordered it for the reason that the human beings he held in bondage and in the power of life and death had removed the forest from it . . . (254). The predicament is thus presented in all of its complexity and starkness, suggesting the problems of the ensuing pages with the words "tamed land," "white man's money," "heritage," "human beings," and "bondage."

Most critics say that Faulkner is allowing his readers to relax in the face of such problems, however--to be relieved that there is one fully prepared, full-fledged hero who can cope with the situation--to sit back and observe his heroic actions. What in reality happens, however, is that one sits back to watch Ike McCaslin sit back and watch. "Relin-
quish," McCaslin Edmonds says to him. "'Relinquish... you think you can repudiate.'" Ike not only thinks that he can, but he acts upon that misconception. In so doing, he repudiates more of his own past—the lessons about courage and freedom and compassion learned from Sam—than the wrong and shame of his ancestry accrued to the land.

The argument between Ike and McCaslin in the commissary is quite lengthy and complex; a summary of it here would only add to numerous other synopses, one of which actually breaks down the topics of debate by page numbers for ready use. The purpose of the dialogues ostensibly is to show Ike's justification for his decision to renounce his patrimony, the land that he was to inherit at age twenty-one as "not only the male descendant but the only and last descendant in the male line and in the third generation." To objectify the argument, to outline its key points concisely, however, is to distort perhaps the most significant underlying implication of its presentation by Faulkner: namely, the tortured, twisted logic of the sentences, full of circular arguments and contradictions and confusion—all suggesting the mind of one obsessed with guilt.

The manner in which Ike begins the arduous process of deluding himself is conducted in apparent openness and honesty. He is baring his soul to McCaslin, trying to explain why he both cannot and must repudiate his inheri-
tance, because it has never been his to repudiate, because it has never belonged even to his grandfather, because God had "'created man to be His overseer on the earth . . . to hold the earth mutual and intact in the communal anonymity of brotherhood . . .'" (257). The point of the opening discussion thus centers upon the matter of whether or not land can ever actually be owned. If it can be owned, then it can be repudiated by Ike and he can be free of guilt—to his way of thinking. But neither can convince the other. The only agreement reached on the subject is that the truth lies somewhere within the heart: "'there is only one truth and it covers all things that touch the heart. . . . the heart knows truth, the infallible and unerring heart'" (260, 261).

The irony of this agreement is clear, for Ike has once learned so well the truth of the heart from Sam Fathers. He has not merely been exposed to the meaning of true freedom, he has even experienced it, finding out that it cannot be had for the asking, that it must be worked for with sacrifice and courage, and that it makes man most responsible for his actions. Having witnessed in the wilderness the kind of bondage resulting from freedom used irresponsibly, and having discovered at age sixteen from the ledgers in the commissary the same story told over again in connection with his ancestry, Ike is well prepared to recognize his
present responsibility. His duty to himself and to his fellow men and to future generations is not to repudiate any more than to possess, but to live so that his own life can begin to alter the conditions that have prevailed for so long that he is forced to admit "we have never been free."

Faulkner does not present the adult Ike as evil or insensitive or conniving. When the clock is turned back to Ike's sixteenth year, to the discovery of his grandfather's miscegenation and incest, his reaction is one of horror: "No no Not even him." Perhaps more shocking to him than any other aspect of that deed has been the money that old Carothers left to the product of his incest with his slave daughter. The thousand dollar legacy is the only evidence that old Carothers was even aware that he had fathered a son but does not necessarily show that he suffered any pangs of conscience. "So I reckon that was cheaper than saying My son to a nigger, he thought. Even if My son wasn't but just two words. But there must have been love he thought. Some sort of love. Even what he would have called love: not just an afternoon's or a night's spittoon" (269-270). Clearly lust was the word, as different from love as foolhardiness is from courage and license is from liberty. And Ike with the other McCaslin descendants is bound to the guilt of that outrage, a guilt which Ike actually believes
that he can rid himself of by the attempt to find and pay
the three descendants of Eunice and Tomasina.

Faulkner's irony is much in evidence by this time, when
Ike returns from the first "abortive trip into Tennessee
with the still-intact third of old Carothers' legacy to his
Negro son and his descendants" (273). Ike enters into the
ledger the account of Tenny's Jim:

Vanished sometime on night of his twenty-first
birthday Dec 29 1885. Traced by Isaac McCaslin
to Jackson Tenn. and there lost. His third of
legacy $1000.00 returned to McCaslin Edmonds
Trustee this day Jan 12 1886 (273).

Faulkner's only comment about this entry is subtle but unmis-
takably suggestive: "his own hand now, queerly enough
resembling neither his father's nor his uncle's nor even
McCaslin's, but like that of his grandfather's save for the
spelling" (273). This is but the first of many resemblances
between Ike and his grandfather that begin to unfold—a
similar fallaciousness found particularly in each man's
attempt to make one specific gesture to rectify what he
judges to be one specific wrong—when in fact the smallness
of the gesture is almost insignificant beside the extent of
the wrong.

When Ike succeeds in finding Fonsiba, the second
descendant whom he is determined to track down and pay off,
Irony prevails again. Ike berates her husband for being unable to provide for her satisfactorily. For all of his upbringing, Ike is still unable to understand the value and meaning of freedom to human beings who have known the meaning of bondage. When he finally asks Fonsiba if she is "all right" in this seemingly hopeless, destitute situation, she answers simply and affirmatively, "I'm free." Faulkner thus shows that Ike's own act of "responsibility" in ensuring that she receive the due money is negligible beside the freedom which her husband, the preacher, had offered her through marriage (278-280). She could have added so easily to her two words "... and only in freedom can hope exist."

The commissary debate becomes yet more involved, with answers that cannot satisfy either Ike or McCaslin. Midway through their arguments Ike interrupts in complete frustration: "Let me talk now. I'm trying to explain to the head of my family something which I have got to do which I don't quite understand myself, not in justification of it but to explain it if I can. I could say I don't know why I must do it but that I do know I have got to because I have got myself to have to live with for the rest of my life and all I want is peace to do it in" (288, italics mine). Is this indeed a hero--one who will make a few concrete gestures of atonement, then opt out of what remains of his guilt and responsibility because he prefers peace?
Faulkner is saying no, quietly, ironically, but firmly. His method is indirect, often forcing one to accept seemingly unrelated scenes in juxtaposition—and then to extract for oneself the meaning thus presented. One such instance occurs when Ike is listing for McCaslin the virtues of the Negro: "... pity and tolerance and forbearance and fidelity and love of children... And more: what they got not only not from white people... because they had it already from the old free fathers a longer time free than us because we have never been free..." and it was in McCaslin's eyes too, he had only to look at McCaslin's eyes and it was there, that summer twilight seven years ago...: an old bear... ruthless with the fierce pride of liberty and freedom...; an old man, son of a Negro slave and an Indian king...; a boy who wished to learn humility and pride...; and a little dog, nameless and mongrel..." (295-296). The train of thought goes on to recapture the scene in which the fyce has bayed Old Ben, and he and Sam have refrained from shooting.

What then, is Faulkner's meaning in inserting the fyce scene into the pattern of Ike's thinking about freedom? McCaslin is on the right track when he equally abruptly introduces Keats's ode into the discussion: "Forever wilt thou love, and she be fair."... He was talking about truth. Truth is one... It covers all things
which touch the heart—honor and pride and pity and justice and courage and love. Do you see now?' He didn't know" (297). Faulkner's understatement with these last three words is significant. Ike simply cannot grasp the relationship between this definition of truth and the fycce scene and freedom. Being unable to perceive the universality—the deeper meaning—of that forest event and of all his wilderness experiences, he cannot apply any moral truths from them to his present dilemma. The reader sees—but Ike does not—that the feelings which prompted his compulsive words "'we have never been free!'" are directly related to his inability to know the value of honor and pride and pity and justice and liberty and courage and love—to know their value as a directive for responsible living.

Instead he acts upon the delusion that he is free "... and this time McCaslin did not even gesture, no inference of fading pages [the yellowed ledger-pages chronicling the deeds and guilt of their ancestry], no postulation of the stereoptic whole, but the frail and iron thread strong as truth and impervious as evil and longer than life itself and reaching beyond record and patrimony both to join him with the lusts and passions ... of bones whose names while still fleshed and capable even old Carothers' grandfather had never heard" (299). Ike's next words ("'And [free] of that too.'"), following so forceful
a statement about the extent and dimensions of human guilt, make the scene ironic. Ike can pretend that he is free, but in so doing he is betraying not only the trust placed upon him by Sam, but his own potential to live joyfully and meaningfully. It becomes increasingly evident that in his irresponsible attempts to relinquish his past, Ike is binding himself more inextricably to it. Faulkner demonstrates this fact ingeniously, first through Ike's wife's refusal to bear him a child because of her anger at his unwillingness to accept his inheritance. Her tactics are cruel—Faulkner has said in later discussions that they are those of a prostitute. The episode serves ably, however, to suggest both the way in which Ike is more bound to his past by being denied a future through children and the fact that even his least selfish motive for refusing the land is without validity.

Restating this point in "Delta Autumn," Faulkner writes of Ike: "but at least he could repudiate the wrong and shame, at least in principle, and at least the land itself in fact, for his son at least: and did, thought he had: then . . . himself and his wife juxtaposed in their turn against the same land, that same wrong and shame from whose regret and grief he would at least save and free his son, and, saving and freeing his son, lost him" (351, italics mine). In this masterful passage, Faulkner depicts a basic
irony of Ike's life—in acting in such a way that he wipes out the inherited taint for his heirs, he deprives himself of heirs. The passage also shows the extent of Ike's misguided idealism, borne out by his conduct in "Delta Autumn."

Of Ike's last trip into the Delta at the close of "The Bear, Faulkner writes: "He knew now what he had known . . . but had not yet thought into words: why Major de Spain had not come back, and that after this time he himself, who had had to see it one time other, would return no more" (321). Such a decision was not put into practice, however, for one learns at the outset of "Delta Autumn" that Ike has been returning "each last week in November for more than fifty years" (335). His desire to live in the past glory of his youth, to recapture those vital days in the wilderness, has persisted, and Faulkner suggests that nothing of significance has happened in the interim except that "the territory in which game still existed drawing yearly inward as his life was drawing inward" (335). Ike is too old to hunt now, but he can lie awake in the tent at night "wakeful and peaceful," "peaceful, without regret or fretting." The peace that he has sought at any price seems to exist for him now, but the extent of that price is yet to be disclosed.

His nephew Roth, who has been continually teased en route to camp about the "doe" that he keeps returning to
year after year, actually sees the girl on the road. Knowing that he has seen her (evidenced by his startled slamming of brakes), she appears in the camp the next morning. Prior to her arrival, Roth hands Ike an envelope with the hasty instructions: "There will be a message here some time this morning, looking for me. Maybe it won't come. If it does, give the messenger this and tell h-- say I said No!" (355). His choice of words clearly indicates the extent to which this "it" has been degraded and deprived of humanity: when she arrives, she is indeed treated as if she possesses no rights as a human being. Her message is only herself, Roth's mulatto—almost white—mistress, and a newborn son, the son of Roth. When Ike hands her the envelope and she says "That's just money," he responds with complete lack of understanding: "Then what do you want?" he said. 'What do you want? What do you expect?'

"Yes," she said" (359).

She thus refuses to prescribe the way in which Roth should meet his responsibility to her—just as Faulkner has refused to state specifically how Ike should have met his responsibility with regard to his inheritance. What is certain is that Ike fails as drastically now as he failed at age twenty-one. When the pieces of her story fall together, Ike suddenly realizes not only that she is "a nigger!" but also that she is related to him and to Roth.
"'Yes,' she said. 'James Beauchamp—you called him Tennie's Jim though he had a name—was my grandfather. I said you were Uncle Isaac'" (361). In addition to the irony now revealed of a cycle completed—the incest and miscegenation of old Carothers brought home again—is the devastating import of her words: "'I would have made a man of him. He's not a man yet. You spoiled him. . . . When you gave to his grandfather that land which didn't belong to him, not even half of it by will or even law'" (360). A more effective, specific pronouncement of Faulkner's judgment upon Ike's earlier relinquishment could not be found; one cannot ask at this point if Ike is any sort of hero without seeming facetious. His reaction to her words—to her very being—is one of complete panic. "'Then go,' he said. Then he cried again in that thin not loud and grieving voice: 'Get out of here! I can do nothing for you! Cant nobody do nothing for you!'" (361).

That Ike's endorsement of Roth's irresponsibility to the girl links him thoroughly to his grandfather Carothers' sin is too obvious to be missed. Both he and Roth choose to reject her—to refuse to accept her as a human being so that they can be absolved of their obligation to her. But Faulkner has shown in many other ways that such decisions carry with them their own commitments, their own bondages. In the end both men are in fact bound by this choice to the
pessimism and cynicism that have been evident in Roth throughout the story and are voiced by Ike at its close when he learns that Roth has shot a deer: "'It was a doe,'" he says—without hope.

The Negro girl—traditionally most bound—is freest at the close of this story, free because of her knowledge of love. Upon turning to leave Ike, in response to his guilt-ridden suggestion that she "'Go back North . . . Marry a black man . . . forget all this . . .'" she answers: "'Old man, have you lived so long and forgotten so much that you don't remember anything you ever knew or felt or even heard about love?" (363).

This is Faulkner's position. He does not end the hunting trilogy in despair of human potential. On the contrary, the single word love is his answer to the defeats that man brings upon himself. Love is the way that man can always begin to free himself from his self-imposed bondage. Love is part of the truth of the heart passed on to Ike from Sam, another aspect of that truth that Ike somehow misses, understanding it only within the context of the wilderness. Faulkner leaves him a pathetic, despondent old man presiding over a group of "hunters" whose slaying of does indicates how far as hunters they are from Sam. The price Ike pays for his purity is that he becomes tainted indelibly with the very guilt he has spent a lifetime repudiating.
FOOTNOTES


2"'The Heart's Driving Complexity': An Unromantic Reading of Faulkner's 'The Bear,'" *Accent*, XX (1960), 23.


6Quotations from Perluck’s article will be indicated by page number in the text.


12Lydenberg, 69.


LIST OF WORKS CITED.


