

Faulkner and Environmental Imagination: Semiotics of Culture, Nature and Human Nature in *The Bear*.

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Abstract

Ecological perspective has broadened the constructions of environment in literary texts and contemporary literary theory. Nature, in this paper, is seen as a dynamic signifier acquiring new significations against the background of culture and human nature. Besides, Nature is also seen as a "text" in which the relationship between the human and non-human can be signified through contextual discourse. The paper shows how Faulkner's novella *The Bear* explores the philosophical and ethical concerns of environment in its ever-changing semiosphere.

1. Introduction:

William Faulkner, one of the twentieth century's great writers, explored, articulated, challenged and interpreted culture, nature and human nature in his fictional narratives from *The Sound and the Fury* (1920) to *Go Down, Moses* (1942). His interest in his "own little postage stamp of native soil" is expressed through his modernist art. He confronted the realities of culture, nature and human nature and these found expressions in his narratives through his experiments. In his use of modernist techniques such as multiple voices and viewpoints, stream of consciousness, the disruption of logical and temporal sequences, juxtapositions, repetitions, elaborate speculations on language and sophisticated rhetorical complexities, he can be easily placed side by side with Eliot, Joyce, Pound and

Proust. He has also often been compared and contrasted with Hemingway, Stein, Fitzgerald, and Wright. Besides, literary scholars have found postmodern tendencies in his fiction such as interweaving of past and present, ever shifting polyphonic narrative strategies, descriptive details together with fantastic and dreamlike elements, fusions of the everyday, the fantastic, the mythical and the nightmarish, bordering on magic realism that remind one of such postmodernist writers as Pynchon, Barth, Borges, Marquez, Grass and Fowles. He has been hailed as the interpreter of the history of the South. However, the emphasis in his fictional narratives, on the mimetic and the figurative constructions of the dynamic interaction between culture, nature and human nature has been largely ignored. The recent interest in ecocriticism has extended the boundaries of epistemological enquiry to explore constructions of environment in literary texts and contemporary literary theory. It has questioned the hegemony of anthropocentrism to discuss philosophical and ethical implications of ecology. Literature has explored the reciprocal relationship between human beings and nature since time immemorial. When our response to the changing circumstances of our lives has "doomed wilderness whose edges were being constantly and punily gnawed at by men with plows and axes" (p 187) we seem to have been looking at nature as a suppressed Other, or just a "text", a pattern of signifiers which has been and being manipulated by human readers and

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writers. On the other hand, nature can be seen as a contextual discourse with plurality of voices: human and non-human which struggle to coexist beyond a human-centered theory of value. Faulkner's environmental imagination brings his relevance in the 21st century with all the philosophical and ethical concerns by exploring new significations in its ever-changing semiosphere. Nature is not only a stage in which the history of the South is acted out but also an actor, a living presence in the drama of personal growth and social change. The paper will examine how Faulkner has perceived and represented these concerns in *The Bear*.

2. Theoretical underpinnings:

Quite recently the world of academia has witnessed an interest in the exploration of "constructions of environment in literary texts and theoretical discourse" (Foucault: 1966; noted by Campbell, 1989: 208; see Notes 10 Branch: 1994) at "the dialogic intersection of nature, culture and literature" (quoted in TCG's Ecocriticism page: 2003). This has given rise to an interdisciplinary approach of "an ecologically-oriented poststructuralism" (see Campbell: 1989) in which "language and literature transmit values with profound ecological implications" , "human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it" (Glotfelty: 1994; 1996) and a "study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis" (Buell, 1995: 430 n20). The emergent ecological thinking has perceived nature as a contextual discourse in which the human and the non-human voices struggle to co-exist. It is an emotional location (Branch: 1994), a psychological space (Buell: 2001), a semiosphere in which value, meaning, tradition, point of view and language interact dynamically.

Literature has been always concerned with the creation and recreation of a sense of place and therefore the environmental constructions in the literary works are more than the settings. This "profound sense of emotional location" is the result of "a convergence of artistic and natural spheres of literary bioregionalism" in which the writer's mimetic or figurative constructions "imaginatively inhabit a particular locale" (Ibid.). Ecological insights should be incorporated into our approach to literary texts (Glotfelty: 1994). Nature is more than simply a setting for human activity. It is an active participant, a living presence, and a motivating force in the spiritual, ethical and moral bases of the world which we inhabit. The meaning of environment has changed considerably as Sheshachari (*Weber Studies* Winter 1992) has convincingly commented:

The very meaning of the word environment ... has undergone metamorphosis from human environment to *the* environment, protean in its suggestiveness of survival as well as cyclical natural processes of regeneration.

Nature is a dynamic signifier which relies on its interpretations on both cultural and natural paradigms of human existence. As Michael Branch (1994) has said it is "a perpetually equivocal signifier", it is also in a state of semiosis; dynamically acquiring new significations. Besides, ecocritical paradigm is "fundamentally an ethical criticism and pedagogy, one that investigates and helps make possible the connections among self, society, nature, text" (Cockinos: 1994), "As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the non-human" (Glotfelty: 1994).

3. Faulkner's Environmental Imagination in *The Bear* :

Faulkner a modernist writer of considerable influence with postmodernist tendencies has been hailed recently as a "great harbinger of Southern environmentalist" (Buell: 1999 quoted in Imaoka: 2001) and as "Environmental historian" (Buell 2001:171). And *The Bear* is considered by Lawrence Buell, among other works of Faulkner, (2001: 177) a "serious and sustained" work of "environmental reflection". *The Bear* has been variously interpreted by critics. Some see it as the story of a young man's development, his 'initiation' into a ceremonial hunt of a totemic animal against vanishing wilderness, others find it a tale of wilderness destroyed by human greed, a story of the protagonist's repudiation of the forces of greed and materialism, translating the morality of the woods into social responsibility. However, "Faulkner's treatment of the loss of wilderness in *The Bear*" has been seen recently as a "prophetic intervention reflecting the rise of environmentalist concern in Faulkner's own day" and "that Faulkner should have turned to hunting narratives as a vehicle for dramatizing environmentalist consciousness" and "the scene of hunting became a favourite way of dramatizing the transition from traditional assumptions of human dominance to a newer kind of environmental-ethical awareness that might supersede it" and "in Faulkner, familiar hierarchies of gentry/subaltern and human/nonhuman were subjected to question in ways that intertwined them" (Ibid. 181-187). Buell (Ibid 190-91) argues for *The Bear* and *Go Down, Moses* as a whole as "an unusually rich meditation in environmental ethics". He further says:

In Faulkner's novella... Old Ben becomes a much more fully

realized, compelling, charismatic icon of endangerment, at once a unique figure, a symbol of the doomed Delta bottomland wilderness generally, and a latter-day avatar of human-animal liminality that pervades sacred legends about human encounters with bears in many cultures, both western and nonwestern (Ibid. 194).

In *The Bear* man and nature are emotionally and spiritually unified. Ike McCaslin, the protagonist and Old Ben, "the big old bear with one trap-ruined foot" (p 187) are the links of this spiritual and emotional unity between the dynamic interaction between culture, nature and human nature dramatizing the ethical and philosophical concerns of Faulkner.

Ike McCaslin "at the age of ten was witnessing his own birth" imbibing the values of "humility" and "patience" amid plurality of voices, human and non-human, when

It seemed to him that he could actually see the deer, the buck, smoke-colored, elongated with speed, vanished, the woods, the gray solitude still ringing even when the voices of the dogs have died away; from far away across the somber woods and the gray half-liquid morning there came two shots. (pp 189-190)

These voices are part of the hunting rites in "the big woods, bigger and older than any recorded document" (p 185) and the voices are "quiet and weighty and deliberate for retrospection and recollection" (p 186). And Old Ben "had earned a name" in "that doomed wilderness"

...through which ran not even a mortal beast but an anachronism indomitable and invincible out of the old dead time, a phantom, epitome and apotheosis of the old wild life which the little puny humans swarmed and hacked at in a fury of abhorrence and fear like pygmies about the ankles of a drowsing elephant;- the old bear, solitary, indomitable, and alone; widowed childless and absolved of immortality- old Priam reft of his old wife and outlived all his sons. (pp 187-188)

Old Ben is "old Priam", a legendary figure. His death is the end of wilderness because he is synonymous with wilderness. In his novella *The Bear* Faulkner explores the themes of the slow disappearance of the wilderness, the incursion of progress and civilization in the name of lumber companies and the issue of the ownership of land and brings these to a climax in the act of renunciation of the distraught Ike McCaslin at the turn of events with ethical and philosophical implications which question the hegemony of anthropocentrism, indicating the existence of nature beyond a human-centered theory of value. Faulkner's environmental imagination envisions this crisis when wilderness despite its "timeless woods" (p 194) is "doomed" because its "edges are being constantly and punily gnawed at by men with plows and axes" (p 187) and Old Ben, an icon of the pure spirit of the wilderness is killed despite his "furious immortality" (p 188).

3.1. The scene of hunting:

Dramatization of culture, nature, and human nature:

In *The Bear* the profound, sentient, gigantic and brooding Big Woods

described by Faulkner as "the timeless woods" (p 194) where "they were going not to hunt bear and deer but to keep yearly rendezvous with the bear which they did not even intend to kill" (p188) are the places, the narrator further comments, "in which not only bear's heretofore inviolable anonymity but all the ancient rules and balances of hunter and the hunted had been abrogated" (p 200). Faulkner's ecologically integrative vision of nature brings on the surface the ethical and philosophical implications when Ikkemotubbe, Sam's father, by selling the land which does not belong to him contributes to the doom of certain old values thus allowing the infringement of civilization upon the wilderness. Ike's renunciation of his inheritance is an act of reentering into a communion between man and nature which will "hold the earth mutual and intact in the communal anonymity of brotherhood". Sam Fathers, Old Ben and Lion after they died, were "not held fast in earth but free in earth and not in earth but of earth" (p 314). But on earth in the "Doomed wilderness" "the lumber companies moved in and began to cut the timber" (p 301) and a new planning mill is built. The "pristine" wilderness, "timeless woods" have been unlawfully invaded by human greed and materialism. The culture of the "built" nature is encroaching upon the culture of the "natural" and human nature crystallized as society

in the name of progress, is destroying, unchecked, a pure and innocent world...The bear,... deliberately lets himself be caught and killed; death being a safe retreat from man gone amok. (Monahan: 2002)

Old Ben "dies with magic and, dignity, symbolically representing the death of all

the forests and the native lands". (Rader: 2003).

The scene of hunting in *The Bear* dramatizes the changing historical, social and cultural scenario of the South. At the same time, it has the aura of universality when we look at it from the ecological perspective which "explore[s] and deeply question[s]" (Branch: 1994) the relationships between human and his natural surroundings. Besides, "writing must be seen as an organic activity, as an artifact of the psychobiotic needs of human organism" (Fritzell: 1990; quoted in Branch; 1994). Faulkner's story, built on the folkloric element of the "bear hunt" (see Thorpe's: 1841, *The Big Bear of Arkansas*), brings "folklore and literature into closer proximity and make their southernness universal" ((Henning: 1989).

3.2. Nature as a "text":

Nature is a "text" where the relationship between human and nonhuman is signified through a contextual discourse. The recent emergence of a literary bioregionalism and an ecologically-oriented poststructuralism has brought the concepts of nature as a contextual discourse in which plurality of voices: human and non-human struggle to co-exist. It is a "text" manipulated by human readers and writers (Branch: 1994) constantly changing the significations of its signs. In *The Bear* nature is Old Ben, the mongrel Lion "taintless and incorruptible" and "the wilderness, the big woods, bigger and older than any recorded document". Its value in the very beginning of the story is defined:

It was of the men, not white, nor black nor red but men, hunters, with the will and hardihood to endure and the humility and skill to survive, and the dogs and the bear and deer juxtaposed and relieved against it, ordered and compelled by and within the

wilderness in the ancient and unremitting contest which voided all regrets and brooked no quarter; - (p186)

For Ike the "text" of nature has meaning . . . more than that. If Sam Fathers had been his mentor and the backyard rabbits and squirrels his kindergarten, then the wilderness the old bear ran was his college and the old male bear itself, so long unwed and childless as to have become its own undangered progenitor, was his alma mater (p 203).

And Ike further avers that man should "hold the earth mutual and intact in the communal anonymity of brotherhood..." "and the man who bought it bought nothing" (p 246).

After the death of Old Ben, Lion and Sam Fathers, manipulation of the "text" begins with human readers and writers. Its other contexts which define its meaning and value by signifying proper role of human in the cosmic scheme are ignored. "It was the beginning of the end of something..." (p 218). It was the end of the annual ritual hunt in the wilderness that "soared, musing inattentive, myriad, eternal, green; older than any mill shed, longer than any spur line" (p308).

Nature is a "text" of an environmental discourse through which the extra-textual understanding of the world can be achieved. "A text is a space where literary, sociological, ideological and historical boundaries intersect each other" and therefore *The Bear* can be seen as an "articulation of a cultural *langue*" (Prasad: 2003) in the context of the ever-changing significations when civilization has transgressed conservation. Ike McCaslin's objections to a certain kind of authority that is a reaction against

historically "recorded" (in Part 4 of *The Bear*, the past history of the McCaslin family is recorded in the ledgers) domination and exploitation of nature as a suppressed Other. It can be seen as the "deconstruction of totalizing and colonizing discourse" (Cheney, 1989:125). In other words, "man" is an obsolete historical construct which must be superseded by a broader, more contextualist sense of identity (Foucault: 1966; noted by Campbell, 1989: 208; see Notes 10 Branch: 1994). This revolutionary ecocentric world view "seeks to break down an established hierarchy, and redistribute authority and value among all elements of the system, or to the integrative functioning of the system as a whole". It resists unjust domination and exploitation of other members of the ecosystemic community (Branch: 1994).

3.3. Nature in *The Bear*: Beyond a human-centered theory of value:

The Bear metaphorically explores the ethical propriety of individual action. Ike McCaslin's repudiation of the trappings of civilization (e.g. compass and watch) while tracking the Old Ben is indicative of his final rejection of his inheritance which he thinks improper to inherit. His musings in Part 4 of *The Bear* is an example of questioning the hegemony of anthropocentricism. The very act of repudiation of his inheritance is difficult for him to understand:

I cant repudiate it. It was never mine to repudiate. It was never Father's and Uncle Buddy's to bequeath me to repudiate because it was never Grandfather's to bequeath them to bequeath me to repudiate because it was never old Ikkemotubbe's to sell to grandfather for bequeathment

and repudiation. Because it was never Ikkemotubbe's fathers' fathers' to bequeath Ikkemotubbe to sell to Grandfather or any man because on the instant when Ikkemotubbe discovered, realized, that he could sell it for money, on that instant it ceased to have been his forever, father to father to father, and the man who bought it bought nothing. (p 246-247)

Ike McCaslin's awakening to the understanding of the ownership of land is guided by a sense of responsibility that seeks to atone for the wrongs done by his ancestors. It also involves "simultaneous processes of environmental awakening – retrieval of physical environmental from dormancy to salience – and of distortion, repression, forgetting and inattention." (Buell, 2001:18). Because to Ike, all the McCaslin land was bought by illegal and unethical means.

Ike's arrival on the scene of hunting, the domed wilderness in Part 5 of *The Bear*, after Major de Spain "sold the timber rights to a Memphis lumber company" (p 302), was with shock and "grieved amazement" at a world that was vanishing. He was surveying the scene

...on which the sidetracks and loading-platforms and the commissary store stood, and looked about in shocked and grieved amazement...: a new planning-mill already half completed which would cover two or three acres and what looked liked miles and miles of stacked steel rails red with the light bright rust of newness...(p 304)

This was a world once "the backyard rabbits and squirrels his kindergarten,

then the old bear ran was his college" with annual ritual of the bear hunt in November, and in June with the celebration the birthdays of Major de Spain and General Compson. But now

...when June came and time for the double birthday celebration there was no mention of it and when November came no one spoke of using Major de Spain's house and he never knew whether whether or not Major de Spain knew they were going on the hunt...he and McCaslin and General Compson (and that one was the General's last hunt too) and Walter and Boon and Tennie's Jim and old Ash loaded two wagons and drove two days and almost forty miles beyond any country the boy had ever seen before...(p302)

To Ike the scene of hunting is not only a stage for coming into manhood and to realize that youth is not for glory but for responsibility but also to understand man's proper place within nature and the relationship between man and nature. It is significant to note that Sam Fathers and Ike do not kill the Old Ben rather Old Ben is killed by Boon Hogganbeck and the Lion. It is also significant to note that there exists a different kind of relationship between Boon and Lion. Lion symbolizes the end of the annual, traditional ritualistic bear-hunt. Lion described as something mechanical and impersonal. When Old Ben is killed the age-old traditional, mythic and ideal relationship between the man and nature is disrupted. . Boon represents the predations of the modern world (Barnhisel: 1997). After the death of Old Ben and Sam Fathers he is described as "For six months now Boon had been town marshal at Hooke's" (p 303). At the end of the novella we find

the frenzied "frantic squirrels... until the whole tree had become one green maelstrom of mad leaves" and the frenzied Boon "hammering furiously at something on his lap" "hammering the disjointed barrel" of a gun against a piece of railroad iron "with the frantic abandon of a madman" (p316) with Ike looking at him are the perhaps symbolic representation of the fact that the world of materialism and greed has hysterically encroached upon the once pristine big woods forcing the squirrels, its non-human voices struggling to co-exist by taking refuge on a single tree which is going to be hacked by the lumber company soon.

4. Conclusion:

Faulkner's environmental imagination has immense value in the 21st century at the time when the world is passing through "ethical and aesthetic dilemmas posed by the environmental crisis". His figurative constructions of the human and non-human world in *The Bear* have been supported by the recent delineations of the themes of land ownership, man-nature relationship and the values of rituals of the past by such authors as Leslie Marmon Silko (1948-) and Linda Hogan (1947-). In the present day changing perspective when there is a healthy emergent trend to revalidate literature with an ethical, interdisciplinary, earth-centered approach in which "language and literature transmit values with profound ecological implication" (Glotfelty: 1994) by expanding the notion of the "world" to include entire ecosystem and by challenging "the metaphysics of anthropocentric "presence" " (Branch: 1994) Faulkner's *The Bear* is of profound and far-reaching significance.

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