

## ANALYSIS

*The Bear* (1942)

William Faulkner

(1897-1962)

“Primitivism—or what might be called ‘conceptual primitivism’—has to do with the impingement of the ‘nature as norm’ concept... This phase of primitivism... goes back at least to Greco-Roman antiquity. Its primary technique in art has been that of regression: the artist regresses in time to a far-off primal golden age (chronological primitivism); or regresses in culture to a simple, primitive savage stage (cultural primitivism); or regresses to childhood or to the domain of the subconscious (psychic primitivism)....

[Ike] learns that his grandfather, old Carothers McCaslin, has been guilty of both incest and miscegenation. He has fathered a child by a slave and then had incestuous relations with his own mulatto daughter. The boy learns this indirectly through the crudely humorous and laconic entries in an old plantation ledger which dates back before the Civil War.... Eunice, who drowned herself, was Old McCaslin’s first Negro mistress... This knowledge, disclosed with Olympian casualness by the ledger entries, is tremendously unsettling for the boy....

In terms of allegory, this story might be interpreted thus. It would seem there are two worlds: the primitive world of the old free fathers—the first world—the wilderness and the animals of the wilderness and the men who live by and in and through the wilderness; and the civilized world of contemporary man who has insulated himself against the primitive world by interposing houses, societies, and material values between himself and the land, the earth, Nature. Ike is born into this latter world but soon learns the existence of the primitive world. Through the ritual of the hunt, he is initiated into the primitive world, prefers it, and decides that, although he cannot completely escape the civilized world, he will repudiate its values and live in terms of primitive values. His problem is how to live by the rules of the wilderness when the wilderness no longer exists—how to be a primitive while living in a small Southern town. What happens to Ike is what would happen to any true primitive caught in our present society. The curse of Ike is that familiar one of other moderns who are caught between two worlds and spread-eagled.”

Harry Modean Campbell and Ruel E. Foster  
“Primitivism and *The Bear*”  
*William Faulkner: A Critical Appraisal*  
(U Oklahoma 1951) 143, 147

“The story is essentially a nature myth.... The hunters from Jefferson are gentlemen and sportsmen, representing the ideals of the old order at its best, the honor, dignity, and courage of the South. In their rapport with nature and their contest with Old Ben, they regain the purity they have lost in the their workaday world, and abjure the petty conventions with which they ordinarily mar their lives. But as Southerners they are part of...that South that has bought and sold land and has held men as slaves. Their original sins have alienated them irrevocably from Nature....

Part IV makes explicit the social comment implied in the drama of Old Ben.... It is in effect Ike’s spiritual autobiography given as explanation of his reasons for relinquishing and repudiating, for refusing to own land or participate actively in the life of the South. Ike discovers that he can do nothing to lift or lighten the curse the Southerners have brought on themselves, the monstrous offspring of their God-given free will.... Part IV and Old Ben’s story resemble the components of a binary star. They revolve about each other and even cast light upon each other. But each contains the source of its own light. It is the mythical quality of the bear hunt proper that gives the story its haunting power....

Every fall members of the tribe make a pilgrimage to the domain of the Great Beast, the bear that is more than a bear, the preternatural animal that symbolizes for them their relation to Nature and thus to life.

They maintain, of course, the forms of routine hunts. But beneath the conventional ritual lies the religious rite: the hunting of the tribal god... In this rite the established social relations dissolve; the artificial ranks of Jefferson give way to more natural relations as Sam Fathers is automatically given the lead.... Like a totem animal, Old Ben is at the same time sacred, and dangerous or forbidden (though in no sense unclean). Also he is truly animistic, possessing a soul of his own, initiating action, not inert like other creatures of Nature.... This particular legend of man and the Nature God relates the induction of Ike, the natural and pure boy, into the mysteries of manhood. Guided by Sam Fathers, Ike learns how to retain his purity and bring himself into harmony with the forces of Nature.... Yet he must see, must meet, Old Ben. He will be vouchsafed the vision, but only when he divests himself of man-made signs of fear and vanity....

Old Ben is not merely an extraordinary bear representing the wilderness and impervious to all but the most skillful or improper attacks. He is the totem animal, the god who can never be bested by men with their hounds and guns, but only by a nonhuman Boon with Lion, the instrument fashioned by the priest. Sam Father's death can likewise be explained only by the Nature myth.... Only as a part of a Nature rite does his death become fully understandable. It is as if the priest and the god are possessed of the same soul. The priest fulfills his function; his magic makes the god vulnerable to the men. He has to do it; and according to human standards he wins a victory for his tribe.... Humility becomes the proper attitude to the Nature gods, with whom man can merely bring himself into harmony as Sam teaches Ike to do. The pride comes out of the individual's realization of his manhood: his acquisition of the self-control which permits him to perform the rituals as he should....

Boon remains, but he has violated the fundamental taboo. Permitted to do this by virtue of his non-humanity, he is yet in part human. He has broken the law, killed with his own hand the bear, taken upon himself the mastery of that which was no man's to master. So when the chiefs withdraw, and the sawmills grind their way into the forests, Boon polices the new desecrations.... Having killed the bear, he now possesses all the creatures of Nature, and will snarl jealously at the innocent who walks peacefully through the woods. The result of his impiety is, literally, madness."

John Lydenberg  
"Nature Myth in Faulkner's *The Bear*"  
*American Literature* XXIV  
(March 1952) 62-72

"The first version of 'The Bear,' much simpler than the revised version, is the story of the young Ike's initiation as a hunter and his growing awareness of what is to be learned from the wilderness, symbolized by the bear, Old Ben. His two mentors are Sam Fathers and his own father (in the revised version it is his cousin McCaslin Edmonds, sixteen years his senior and the joint heir with Ike of the McCaslin farm). Old Ben is an epitome, an apotheosis of the old wild life known to the Chickasaws before man hacked away at the forest and before they sold a part of it to Jason Lycurgus Compson or any one else. Nature should be free and abundant. No one has the right to own or sell it. Sam tells Ike that Old Ben won't allow himself to be seen until, without a gun and without giving in to his fear, Ike learns to relinquish himself to the wilderness. This the boy does learn, even to giving up his watch and compass. 'Then he saw the bear....'

Then the boy realizes that he has not wanted to shoot the bear. Talking about it with his father he comes to realize that the bear represents a 'wild immortal spirit,' related to the endurance, humility, and courage of the hunter in his contest with the wilderness. Old Ben has a fierce pride in his liberty.... In Sam Fathers, Ike has seen in addition to the wild invincible spirit of the bear inherited from his Chickasaw blood the pride and humility of the Negro, the rewards of endurance and suffering. And from the little fyce he has also learned courage. Ike's father (who, incidentally, is not identified as the elderly Uncle Buck of 'Was' or of the revised version of 'The Bear') sums up the meaning of the boy's meetings with Old Ben: 'Courage, and honor, and pride,' his father said, 'and pity, and love of justice and of liberty. They all touch the heart and what the heart holds becomes the truth.' This in general is the meaning of the story—Old Ben is the wilderness, the mystery of man's nature and origins beneath the forms of civilization; and man's proper relationship with the wilderness teaches him liberty, courage, pride and humility....

The bear, as Frazer [*The Golden Bough*] and others have pointed out, has been treated reverently by primitive hunters. In seeing him walk upright, leave footprints much like a man's, sit up against a tree, and

employ a wide range of facial expressions and yet belong to a non-human wilderness, these hunters must have thought the bear a kind of bridge between man as a rational and conscious creature and man as a physical creature dependent on and involved in that same mysterious Nature. Obviously the bear almost begs to be treated as a symbol in stories dealing with man's relationship with Nature, especially those stories that present the physical world and the creatures in it as sacramental, as manifestations of a hold spirit suffusing all things and asking that man conduct himself in piety and with reverence. The latter view permeates Faulkner's 'The Bear'....

In general there are two major changes in the revised *The Bear*. It incorporates an earlier story, 'Lion'—not completely successful in its own terms—which tells how Boon Hogganbeck kills the bear when it tries to kill Lion, the courageous dog, and it presents Isaac McCaslin not only in childhood but in his mature years as a noble hunter and as a Christ-like figure who repudiates the land because it has been cursed by slavery. In the revised version of *The Bear* Old Ben is falsely suspected of wantonly destroying domestic animals, thus making it justifiable that the hunters track him down to kill him. In terms of the wilderness theme, two possible reasons for the bear's action suggest themselves: one, the wilderness even in its primeval form is evil as well as good, but there is not justification or preparation for this in the story; second, the wilderness simply seems to be taking revenge on man. This latter interpretation is clearly suggested by the unsympathetic descriptions of the lumbering interests cutting into the forest....

In section IV of the revised version, Faulkner makes an even stronger effort than he had through the symbolic figure of Sam Fathers to unite the two major themes of *Go Down, Moses*, the proper relationship to nature which is to be learned from the wilderness and the injustice to the Negro. The section is about as long as the remaining sections taken together. For the most part it is new material but it incorporates from the first version the meaning of Old Ben as symbol, here giving the remarks made by Ike's father to Ike's cousin, McCaslin Edmonds. But the section is not exclusively devoted to the boy Ike's learning the significance of the wilderness theme; it is primarily about Ike at twenty-one refusing to inherit property stained by the guilt of slavery, and it is about Ike's subsequent life. There are long conversations between the cousins, at the end of which we know of Grandfather McCaslin's mulatto heirs and their sometimes terrible sufferings, of the country after the Civil War, of McCaslin Edmonds attempts to help the mulatto heirs, of Ike's marriage to a woman who is unhappy because of his refusal to inherit his share of the family property, and of his living as a carpenter, in what some critics seem to consider an imitation of Christ....

Ike never seems a particularly good representative of the virtues to be learned from the wilderness because he is ineffectual or inactive in contexts where the virtues he has learned in the wilderness, particularly the respect for liberty, might motivate him to some positive action. For example, he allows McCaslin Edmonds to put a monthly payment in his bank account, the profit from the land he repudiates, and he allows his cousin to meet the family's and therefore Isaac's own obligations to Carothers McCaslin's mulatto heirs. Isaac would absolve himself not merely from the guilt but from the obligations contingent upon the guilt....

In 'Delta Autumn,' the final section or story in *Go Down, Moses*, we see Ike, now in his seventies, immediately confronted by an instance of racial injustice. The evil of old Carothers McCaslin is repeated: Roth Edmonds, the grandson of McCaslin Edmonds, has a child by a mulatto granddaughter of James Buchanan, whose parents had been owned by Uncle Buck and Uncle Bud. Earlier in 'Delta Autumn' Ike has been explaining that the right attitude towards Nature, for instance, not killing does and not exploiting the land, leads to having the right attitude toward man.

But that this does not relate to the present world becomes clear when Ike is more than a little horrified to discover that the Negress would like to marry the father of her child. '*Maybe in a thousand or two thousand years in America*, he thought. *But not now! Not now!* As a gesture or token of his good will and of his hopes for the future Ike gives her for the illegitimate child the hunting horn inherited from General Compson. But Ike's silent exclamation that it will take one thousand or two thousand years before such a marriage could take place makes it quite clear that the theme of the wisdom to be derived from the wilderness, even in its great prophet Ike, is merely juxtaposed against the theme of the injustice to the Negro. It merely acknowledges, it does not materially modify the injustice.'

William Van O'Connor

“The Wilderness Theme in Faulkner’s ‘The Bear’”  
*Accent* (Winter 1953) 12-20

“Like the history of Europe, the story of Yoknapatawpha County is divided into three periods: ancient, medieval and modern. The antique world is peopled by the Chickasaws, who are in many ways Faulkner’s most successful creations. Remote, immensely dignified, partners of the wilderness, they accepted the penalties of ownership, of property in slaves, with comic resignation. Dispossessed, they departed uncorrupted; their symbol, the bear, remained to be hunted by their successors. The age of chivalry began with the reckless bandits and daring settlers who founded the old Southern houses. They and their children established a feudal order which was destroyed by the Civil War....The modern age began with the Reconstruction; it is dominated by the Snopeses, the parasitic poor-whites whose descendants and allies are the politicians, the cotton-brokers, the twentieth-century despoilers of men and land. The modern symbol is the automobile, which kills old Bayard Sartoris, which carries Temple Drake to her degradation.”

Millar MacLure  
“The Historic Ages of Yoknapatawpha County”  
*Queen’s Quarterly* LXIII: 3  
(Autumn 1956) 336-37

“*The Bear* is a story about the American South in the 1880s when the frontier was rapidly disappearing; and the vividly invoked setting is the ground of the story’s being and of all that it becomes. *The Bear* is a work in the tradition of Cooper and Twain; another tale of a boy growing up and growing wiser along the border between the civilized and the still unspoiled; and it partakes, too, of that even more widespread drama of American literature, the effort of youth to mature in the face of all the obstacles our culture has erected. In *The Bear* we meet Faulkner’s first full-fledged hero in the old heroic meaning of the word; and he is a young man who quite self-consciously takes up carpentering...

*The Bear* is a canticle or chant relating the birth, the baptism, and the early trials of Isaac McCaslin of Yoknapatawpha County in Mississippi.... *The Bear*, consequently, is a pivotal work and the key to the whole of Faulkner’s fiction... Beginning with *The Bear*, and there more emphatically than anywhere else, what is positive in human nature and the moral world envelops and surrounds what is evil.... It is the honorable that permeates the wilderness, scene of the main action and home of the main actors in the drama. Old Ben, the bear, patriarch of the wilderness, embodies the virtues in some undefined and magical way; and like Old Ben, the honorable exists as an ethical reality before the story opens, ‘before the boy was born’—as a glimpse of immortality. This reality is independent of shifting urban moral fashions; it is an ideal prior to civilization. But it is not an uncivilized ideal; its priority is logical rather than temporal; it is prior because it is ideal, not so much older as timeless. It has nothing to do with ‘primitivism,’ or with noble savagery, or even the American Adamic dream of unspoiled original innocence in the New World—nothing except this, that in Faulkner’s handling of it the honorable emerges as a dialectical transformation, a ‘transvaluation’ of that dream and that innocence: at the instant the falsehood is exposed and the existence of evil is acknowledged....

The annual duel between the skilled hunters and the shaggy, tremendous, indomitable Old Ben...is enacted within a solid set of conventions and rules, older than memory and faultlessly observed on both sides; the men hunt all other beats in the wilderness, but with Old Ben they engage rather in a kind of ritual dance. It is by participating in this ritual that the young hero, Isaac McCaslin, is reborn and receives, as it were, a sacramental blessing. That process is the substance of the first half of the story.... The story is divided into five sections. But if we follow the direct temporal succession of the events in the life of Isaac McCaslin—noting in parenthesis the story’s arrangement of them through the successive numbered sections—we come upon this personal history:

(Sections 1,2,3): A boy named Ike McCaslin grows up in Mississippi in the years after the Civil War. From the time he is ten, he accompanies his cousin Cass Edmonds and several of his hometown’s leading citizens, every year, on bear-hunting expeditions in the untamed wilderness north of the town. Ike begins to acquire some of the skill of the older men, and with them the severe masculine virtues that the solemn game of hunting can produce. In that game, the greatest and most honored rival (not enemy or prey) is an

enormous and ancient bear known as Old Ben. During the boy's sixteenth year, Old Ben is at last killed by one of the men, Boon Hogganbeck, and a mongrel dog called Lion.

(Section 5): Two years later, the boy, now eighteen, comes back once more to the wilderness to find it no longer a wilderness. The old hunting lodge is gone, the group of hunters disbanded, and lumber companies have begun to invade and transform the forest. Ike encounters Boon Hogganbeck, who is lost and nearly hysterical in the new 'civilized' era.

(Section 4): Three years later, when Ike is twenty-one, he comes into his inheritance of the land and the money that have been handed down through his father (Uncle Buck) from his grandfather, Carothers McCaslin. But Ike decides to renounce his legacy, since he has previously discovered it tainted at the source by his grandfather's misdeeds. The latter had seduced and had a child by a Negro slave, Tomasina, who was probably his own daughter as well. That combination of incest and miscegenation represents for Ike the evil condition of the South, and its betrayal of moral possibility: a version of the human legacy of evil generally, from the 'original sin' at the beginning of time; but deriving, in the New World, from the corrupting effects upon both parties to it of the institution of slavery. He determines to dissociate himself from his own particular corrupt legacy; and he continues to live a simple huntsman's life in or near the forest, basing his conduct on an emulation of Jesus. He takes up carpentering and marries the daughter of his partner. He has no children....

Ike has a shocking revelation of the literal fact of human brotherhood: Turl, the child Tomasina bears, and Jim, the child Turl later begets, are actually Ike's cousins, and have their rights in the legacy he renounces. The first essential link between the two larger parts...the first three sections taken together, and the fourth as their counterweight—is the near simultaneity of the death of Old Ben and the discovery of mixed blood and incest in the McCaslin clan. The fourth section of *The Bear* is not merely the further adventures of Isaac McCaslin. The harmony of the parts may be summarized in ancient formulas: the birth into virtue, and the vision of evil. Only the person adequately initiated can have the vision at all; and only the potency of the initiation enables the reborn individual to withstand the evil when it is encountered. The action in section four (the discovery and the renunciation) is made possible by the experience that preceded it; the ritual in the wilderness *contains*, implicitly, the decision in the commissary.... The fifth section reverts to the style—relatively straightforward, though highly orchestrated and charged with autumnal splendor—of the first, second, and third sections; picking up that style where it had been left almost sixty pages before, and so enveloping and containing the very different style in between....

Like *Moby-Dick*, *The Bear* is most in tune with perennial rhythms of experience when it is most solidly American; and if we close in on the particular portion of America that provides its scene, we recognize its significant prototype in *Huckleberry Finn*. Both are narratives of boys growing up in the nineteenth century South; both record a sense of the troubled kinship between white and black, though Twain does not carry that kinship literally into the blood streams. Both suggest an ironic reversal of the conventional morality that legitimizes social injustice—though, again, Twain's humor is in charge of his outrage and prevents him from intruding lectures on social legislation and warnings to the government up north, as it protects Huck himself from a pretentious awareness of his own virtue. But the central insight Faulkner shares with Twain is one that both share with many another American writer: a sense of the fertile and highly ambiguous possibility of moral freedom in the New World.... Insofar as *The Bear* is a story about death, it is about the death of the frontier world and its possibility, of the new unspoiled area where a genuine and radical moral freedom—a kind of original innocence—could again be exercised....

The identification of the New World as a divinely offered second chance for humanity after the first opportunity had been so thoroughly muffed in the Old World—the association of America with Eden—has never been more eloquently made. But Faulkner's hero is examining the myth precisely to see where it went wrong; Faulkner and Isaac McCaslin conclude that the mistake was inherent in the myth; that the New World was not ever devoid of evil, from the moment of its settling—that it was 'already tainted even before any white man owned it by what Grandfather and his kind, his fathers, had brought into the new land...as though in the sailfuls of the old world's tainted wind which drove the ships.' It was the evil of slavery, rooted in the sin of spiritual pride and the lust of possession. What Grandfather and his kind brought with them into the New World was themselves; what they brought was the nature of man....

The imagery of the gun is diffused through the story, one of its unifying motifs; an association is noted with the taintless mongrel dog, whose color is gunmetal gray. But what is important is the use Ike makes of his gun in relation with Old Ben. The first time he meets the bear, Ike abandoned his rifle, along with his watch and compass, to present himself in humility before the ancient patriarch: an act of communion, verging on the holy. The second time he throws his gun aside and risks his life to rescue a little fyce who was barking helplessly in the bear's path; an act of charity. That, I think, is the main symbolic movement of the narrative. It is the transformation of power into charity. That is what the conversion of innocence amounts to, and Faulkner's artistic conversion of the historical image of America. In it, power suffers no real loss, but undergoes a sea-change. It comes under the control of moral understanding; a kind of grace enters into it. More concretely: Ike does not give up his weapon of destruction; on the contrary, we have swift glimpses of him in his later years as the greatest hunter in Yoknapatawpha County....

Ike continues to live near and in the dwindling forest, as close as possible to the source of his moral energy: a Natty Bumppo who is also an imitator of Christ. But Ike is not intended to represent Christ in a second coming; it is only that he seems to move in a world of light—a meager light but definite enough, for instance, to read the past by (in a way Quentin Compson could not); a New World in which values are confirmed only by raising them to a higher power; not the historical and physical New World—this is precisely what it transcended—but a world so perpetually new that Ike appears to be its only living inhabitant.... His lifelong mission of atonement and of bearing witness is of necessity solitary: as though only in solitude might purity remain undamaged.”

R. W. B. Lewis  
“William Faulkner: The Hero in the New World”  
*The Picaresque Saint*  
(Lippincott 1956, 1958)

“Faulkner uses the story of the ‘sacrifice’ of Isaac by Abraham with subtlety. In the Old Testament, Abraham, the first patriarch of the Hebrews...is commanded one day by God to take his son, Isaac, to an altar and slay him. Actually this is to be a test of Isaac's obedience to Abraham and, in turn, of Abraham's obedience to the Father. The two prove their allegiance through the preparations for the ritual, and the son does not have to die. He and Abraham both learn that God is merciful and benevolent toward those who love Him.... It is quite evident that Faulkner chooses the name Isaac to suggest religious associations... *The Bear* stresses the submission of the son (Isaac) to the priest (Sam-Abraham) and of both the priest and the sacrificial victim to the wilderness... It is Sam's *covenant* with Old Ben, and with the trees—in short, with the awe-inspiring wilderness about him—which is at the heart of the story....

Man and animal were one in the past. They were both representatives of the old order in which humility could be sought by this entry into strife. Old Ben taught Sam Fathers to search for the wildness of Nature and to tame it, in order to gain a clear understanding of the potentialities of the human spirit.... The idea of the covenant, both personal and social, is an important aspect of [Faulkner's] work, giving much of it a legalistic tone.... The covenant theme, with important variations, is repeated in *The Bear*.

Part Four, Isaac's rhetorical conversation with his cousin, stresses the idea that the entire South, not merely a Buck or Buddy, is bound to the land; the isolated covenant in *The Unvanquished* is expanded here until it assumes cosmic proportions. Isaac realizes the nature of the agreement (because of his ritual with Sam-Abraham) and provokes the anger of his cousin (a believer in the design). Isaac believes that He entered into a covenant with Southerners, teaching them the necessity of reorientation after the Civil War, the need to abide by freedom for the slaves and for the earth itself... Isaac McCaslin believes, therefore, in the recognition of a universal Covenant, a set of laws, to which all men, black and white, must aspire in order to save their land, their country, and themselves.”

Irving Malin  
“Ike McCaslin's Covenants”  
*William Faulkner: An Interpretation*  
(Stanford 1957) 70-73

“Faulkner is an agrarian Realist... His Realism shows what is true in an agricultural society, his depth and profundity speak in glowing rhetoric of the land and the part it plays in almost every aspect of Southern

life... Such philosophers as John Locke, the Physiocrats and Henry George contend that the evils which plague mankind derive from the private ownership of land, that when men claim to possess the earth they claim to possess those who live upon it as well.... Faulkner seems to see the South as cursed by the origins of its land titles and by the fact that the land is owned at all.... The curse of land ownership falls upon the people of the South when the Indian Ikkemotubbe discovers that he can sell the land of his people. By means of this discovery, Ikkemotubbe curses his own people, for as time passes they vanish...leaving only Sam Fathers to remember the past which had been their glory. Faulkner recognizes, however, that the land was generally stolen from the Indians....

The land Faulkner speaks of was to be Isaac McCaslin's heritage, land which had come from the Indians, part of it from old Ikkemotubbe, who 'knew...that not even a fragment of it had been his to relinquish or sell...' But Isaac was to deny his heritage...because he believed God's plan for earth, as seen in the Bible, was designed to raise man, not to degrade him or to make him tot slave of other men.... This man, Isaac McCaslin, whose story Faulkner tells in *Go Down, Moses*, is a symbol of the concept of natural rights as Faulkner seems to see it.... Isaac appears as the fictionalized conscience of man, revolting against the evils of land ownership, harking back to the natural state and the natural law which governed it....

The Indians, probably more than any other single group, suffered from man's greed for possession of the land, suffered so that they faced extinction in Mississippi. They were the first to suffer the evils of private property in land in Yoknapatawpha County, for it was they who partially let loose the curse of the land when they discovered they could sell the earth.... Today man recognizes the fact that slavery is an evil, yet he still fails to comprehend the evils of land ownership.... Faulkner's work, then, searches for and finds that for which he had groped as a young man, the answer to his family's fall, an answer based upon concepts of natural law similar to those of Locke, the Physiocrats and George, a reason for the great socio-historic change of the South, the idea that man can own the land privately."

Dale G. Breaden  
"William Faulkner and the Land"  
*American Literature* X.3  
(Fall 1958) 344-57

"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.... What is an annual vacation for Major de Spain and his friends becomes Isaac's life. This pastoral form of existence in which the hunter and the hunted share immortality and eternal youth constitutes Isaac's dream of escape from the McCaslin world. Because it is an escape and a desire to find personal salvation, his gesture of relinquishment is only superficially an atonement for the sin of his forefathers. He shows his own awareness of this when he calls himself 'an Isaac born into a later life than Abraham's and repudiating immolation: fatherless and therefore safe declining the altar because maybe this time the exasperated Hand might not supply the kid.'

Accordingly, Isaac's withdrawal is in reality an attempt to evade both the guilt of his forefathers and his own responsibilities. Thus, while his daily life is a humble imitation of Christ's, it also denies the spirit of Christ who did not hesitate to share in the life of men, to accept guilt, and to suffer immolation. In rejecting sin, Isaac also rejects humanity. Significantly, he holds himself aloof from close human ties; though he is uncle to half the county, he is father to no-one and husband solely to the wilderness. Having confused the wilderness with the Garden of Eden, he not only dedicates but sacrifices his life to it. Man must leave the Garden in order to discover his humanity and whatever the reason, Isaac does not do so; his knowledge stops just short of the paradox of the fortunate fall...Thus, as the wilderness retreats and shrinks in size, Isaac seems to lose stature even as his gesture of dissent loses significance."

Olga W. Vickery  
*The Novels of William Faulkner: A Critical Interpretation*  
(Louisiana State U 1959) 130-34

"Most frequently, *The Bear* was chosen as convincing evidence of Faulkner's 'primitivist' attachments. His having referred there to the wilderness and to the 'puny little humans [who] swarmed and hacked at [it]

in a fury of abhorrence and fear like pygmies about the ankles of a drowsing elephant' would seem conclusive. Kenneth La Budde called *The Bear* an 'affirmation of primitivism' (*American Quarterly*, Winter, 1950) and went so far as to maintain that Faulkner here advocated that 'the only means of salvation is to sweep all this man-made structure away so that man will hold 'the earth mutual and intact in the communal anonymity of brotherhood.' W. R. Moses, in a more perceptive essay (*Accent*, Winter, 1953), nevertheless read apart of the action with a defeating literalness: Lion stands for 'the mechanization, the applied science which finally caught the wilderness fatally by the throat.'

Surely the most elaborate and the most intelligent of essays on *The Bear* was R. W. B. Lewis's 'The Hero in the New World' (*Kenyon Review*, Autumn, 1951), which, in the spirit of his *The American Adam* (1955), described it as an admirable example of an American image of the frontier as 'a new, unspoiled area in which a genuine and radical moral freedom could once again be exercised—as once, long ago, it had been, in the garden of Eden....' Yet in his anxiety to prove *The Bear* a reworking of the Christ story...Lewis quite misrepresents the figure of Ike McCaslin, and especially ignores the marriage scene, perhaps because it does not support his argument....

But while he seemed at times to propose a return to absolute simplicities, this was no more a total denial of the present than his apparent occasional nostalgia for Sartoris and Compsons meant that he was a 'traditionalist,' as O'Donnell had said in 1939. The sanest word on this question was said by Ursula Brumm (*Partisan Review*, Summer, 1955), who, while she freely acknowledged the oppositions seen in Faulkner's work and pointed out their resemblance to other American portrayals of the hostility to civilization and progress, firmly denied that his rejection of civilization argued any savagery or paganism; instead it points to 'a form of humanism, since it is marked by a reliance on the purely human qualities under exclusion of all the mechanical inventions with which civilization has armed mankind.' To this view Faulkner would himself have subscribed, as indeed he did, in the interview in Japan. Asked if he had proposed a 'return to Eden' in these writings, he said that we can't go back to 'an idyllic condition, in which the dream [made us think] we were happy, we were free of trouble and of sin. We must take the trouble and sin as we go. We can't go back to a condition in which there were no wars'."

Frederick J. Hoffman, Introduction (1960)  
*William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism*  
eds. Hoffman and Olga W. Vickery  
(Harcourt/Harbinger 1963) 48-49

"Instead of a romantic Christian pastoral of redemption, in which the repudiation of the land and earlier the apparently selfless rescue of the fyce from under the erect bear are seen as almost sanctifying gestures of renunciation, a searing tragedy of human desire and human limitation evolves, chiefly through ironic means. From McCaslin's scornful skepticism as he listens to Ike's account of God's circuitous providence, and the 'lip-lift' of contempt when he realizes that even Ike does not wholly believe in his 'freedom,' to the almost hysterical laughter with which Part IV concludes, the principal effects are ironic....

Coming where it does in the story structure, Part IV has the effect of making the reader, as it makes Ike and McCaslin, remember and painfully reinterpret the earlier events as of some dream-idyll of human perfection, of perhaps a kind of angelic pre-existence, now dissipated in the wakeful glare of the human reality.... Faulkner's meaning in *The Bear* is that if man would live, he must be prepared for the dying too; if he would love, he must also grieve for the spilled life that loving and living require. Simply to repudiate the spilling, to relinquish the grief, by relinquishing the passion, is to remove oneself from life, and from love, which, like the hunt, necessarily involves us in blood. There is no renunciation of life and the world which we can choose to make, and there can be no 'acceptance' of the inevitabilities; we may only choose life."

Herbert A. Perluck  
"The Heart's Driving Complexity:  
An Unromantic Reading of Faulkner's *The Bear*"  
*Accent* XX: 1 (Winter 1960) 23-25, 42



“He seems to be involved in three things: reaching maturity, expiating the original sin of miscegenation and incest committed by Carothers, and reconciling or achieving a viable position with regard to the dilemmas of property ownership.... As we learn in ‘The Old People’ and *The Bear*, he comes to maturity in three stages. After a belated infant baptism in the blood of the deer he killed as a nine-year-old boy, he reaches age twelve (the Protestant ‘age of responsibility’) and under Sam’s tutelage passes through a ritual, comparable perhaps to the confirmation.... His task is to go forth into the wilderness, like the Indian boys of an earlier age, and to see a vision, vouchsafed only after he has stripped off all the accoutrements of civilization and reduced himself to the level of an animal. Then he sees Old Ben, the wilderness symbol, and returns home purified. More than this, he is ostensibly prepared to face the world on its own terms so that when he realizes the next year that Old Ben must die, he knows ‘that he would not grieve’....

What Ike achieves through this sequence of events is not only a degree of maturity but sanctity: he emerges incorruptible, a kind of consecrated altar boy, who can in time develop into the wise prophet and judge which he is destined to become, without losing the ‘young boy’s high and selfless innocence.’ But before his position is secure, he must pass through another ritual, comparable to the venerable Protestant practice of making an adult Decision for Christ, a mature reaffirmation of the childhood commitment. This Ike does when he is twenty-one by renouncing the things of this world.... He is obsessed with the desire to free himself from this land which he believes contaminates him morally (because of Carothers’ wickedness) and spiritually (because property-owning is unchristian or at least un-Christ-like)....

Later on, when Ike is an old man, the colored girl, remotely his kin and pregnant with Roth Edmonds’ child, tells him that she could have made a man of Roth, but Isaac had spoiled him before birth by transferring the McCaslin land to the Edmonds family, hence weakening or emasculating them just to save himself.... He repudiates land, writes off the guilt of slavery with three thousand dollars and a horn, proclaims for the black race a theory of ‘wait and endure,’ constantly evades responsibility to his fellow men, lives alone, isolated, impotent, ineffectual, and childish, and appears finally to have more in common with the pathetic Reverend Hightower than with Christ.... Ike, after all, is a man whose theory ought to have led him to join the local conservation club in order to preserve his beloved forests. Instead, all his life he has been a member of rich men’s hunting parties.... Ike’s God is a predestinator who first gave men Europe and then, when they spoiled it, He gave them America... Guided by God Almighty, [Ike] has done nothing to protect his beloved wilderness, nothing to save Old Ben.”

David H. Stewart  
“The Purpose of Faulkner’s Ike”  
*Criticism* III:4 (Fall 1961) 333-42

“Isaac McCaslin’s recognition of the wrong and shame that corrupt his inheritance is the central moral action of *Go Down, Moses*, primarily in the superb story, *The Bear*, and then, by way of confirming postscript, in the fine story ‘Delta Autumn’.... The whole development of Isaac McCaslin consists in his effort to reconcile wilderness and society, or failing that, to decide which will allow and which frustrate the growth of moral responsibility....

During his youth Isaac McCaslin would go each year with his friends to the Yoknapatawpha forests, ‘not to hunt bear and deer but to keep yearly rendezvous with the bear which they did not even intend to kill.... The hunt soon took on the tone of a religious retreat: away from home, from money, from women, from social distinction and gradations. For General Compson and Major de Spain and Walter Ewell, this yearly hunting trip became a ‘pageant-rite’—and still more so for the sixteen-year-old Isaac and for Sam Fathers. A ‘taintless and incorruptible’ old man of mixed Negro and Indian blood, Sam Fathers was the boy’s mentor in the hunt and the acknowledged priest of the ceremony that could be held only in the forest. It was a renewal and a cleansing, a drawing of strength from a meeting with their totem, the great bear, Ben; it was a ‘pageant-rite’ symbolizing their communion or escape from the social world.... Perhaps, too, when the men came from the town to the woods, they hoped to shed or expiate the guilt accumulated in society. And their coming was made solemn by the knowledge that the woods were doomed and the great bear also doomed. The boy Isaac, whose life rested on these unspoken verities, felt that when the bear was finally killed, ‘it must be [by] one of us.... By ‘one of us’ because none other could realize the dimensions of the loss to come on ‘the last day.’

The boy is exposed to preliminary trials. In a hunt described—or remembered—in ‘Delta Autumn’ he kills a buck, and Sam Fathers smears his face with the blood of the animal; the boy trembles at the thought: ‘I slew you: my bearing must not shame your quitting life. My conduct forever onward must become your death.’ Here the hunt is a ceremony of maturing, a test of proper conduct through which Isaac ceases to be a boy; yet truly to become a man he must retain the awe before truth that is characteristic of boyhood. In *The Bear* he finally meets Ben, but only after having stripped himself of such material objects and social possessions as his watch and compass. Seeing the bear, the boy experiences an ecstasy of communion which results in his refusal to kill the animal. When the last day comes, there flows through the men a recognition that the end of an era has also come.

Next morning Major de Spain breaks camp; the community is dissolved. To kill the great bear Ben is to violate a mute bond with the natural world, and the fraternity the men have felt in the hunting camp could exist only in terms of an equable relation to the natural world. Yet this is an inevitable violation, a fated part of their life, and this is why it is given to Isaac McCaslin—Isaac, the son blessed by the father—to lead in the destruction of the totem. He, alone, will keep true the memory of the totem and the tribe... Sam Fathers also knows that the death of the bear, the violation of the taboo, means the end of a way of life and the end of his own life, but he does not regret that the day has come. ‘For seventy years now he had had to be a negro. It was almost over now and he was glad’....

The fable of *The Bear* falls within the broad stream of the pastoral which courses through American writing, pastoral suggesting the conscious turn to simplicity as a desired way of life and the nostalgia for a time which could more fully realize that desire. Mark Twain, Melville, Cooper, Anderson, Hemingway—in these as in so many other American writers there is a persistent looking backward to that moment in our national life which seems sweeter and truer than the present. The camp of Sam Fathers is a modern equivalent of Nigger Jim’s island, as Hemingway’s Michigan woods are an equivalent of Cooper’s wilderness. For Faulkner this pastoral theme has a value beyond the yearning for an American state of innocence; it is the culmination of a shift in social allegiance, a shift that cannot and should not be transposed into political terms. In the sturdy farmers of *The Hamlet*, the strong and proud Negroes of *Go Down, Moses* and the figure of Isaac McCaslin, Faulkner has discovered new sources of hope, new possibilities of attachment. The values claimed for the tradition but denied it by the ‘curse,’ are now to be realized among ‘the doomed and lowly of the earth’....

Symbolic elements pertaining to myth, anthropology, and psychology are surely present in the story, and it needs no more than the usual second-hand acquaintance with *The Golden Bough* to notice that the bear ends itself to totemic uses.... The first three [sections] present the hunt in full magnificence and awe.... The hunt becomes a kind of ritual-game in which the virtues of restraint, honor, and comradeship are embodied.... Isaac’s earlier experience with Sam Fathers and Old Ben is a kind of baptism or initiation into the manly, heroic possibilities of life: it educates him, sets a model for him. His gesture at twenty-one then becomes a fulfillment of the vow to virtue which constituted the ‘ritual-pageant’ of the earlier pages. The decision in the commissary to remove himself from the continuity of social power is foreshadowed and even made inevitable by the events of the wilderness....

If Section IV were omitted, *The Bear* would profit in several ways; the narrative would flow more evenly toward its climax; there would be a more pleasing unity of tone; and the meaning, never reduced to the brittle terms of Isaac’s political and moral speculations, would be allowed to rest in a fine implication. Since Section IV is, so to speak, contained in the previous three, it might be desirable for the story to resolve itself on the plane of the implicit, with the ritual in the wilderness suggesting, but no more than suggesting, its relation to the life of Yoknapatawpha. And in fact, this is pretty much the way Faulkner first printed *The Bear* in its magazine version. The loss, however, would also be considerable. What Section IV now does is to give the story social and historical density, the ceremony in the forest reverberating into the life of the town; it provides an abrasive disruption of the idyllic nostalgia previously accumulated; and it keeps Faulkner’s meaning from the confinements of abstract morality. As we now have it, *The Bear* comes to seem a dialectically richer, more troubling work that demands greater energy and attention from its readers than did the earlier version—perhaps a less perfect work but also a more interesting one....

Of Faulkner's more important literary techniques—the stream-of-consciousness in which the character's voice takes over and the stream-of-eloquence in which an anonymous voice assumes control—*The Bear* is second only to 'Red Leaves' as a happy example of the latter. The voice in *The Bear* is...not so much of an individual as of the community itself, the collective conscience of Yoknapatawpha. First heard in *Light in August* it pervades most of Faulkner's later books, its very pitch and inflection conveying moral judgment."

Irving Howe  
*William Faulkner: A Critical Study*  
(Random House/Vintage 1962) 92-97, 253-59

"An abridged version of 'The Bear,' lacking the complex fourth section, was published in *The Saturday Evening Post*...two days before the publication of *Go Down, Moses* [1942, containing the long version]. The present action takes place in 1883, when Ike is sixteen. Each year the hunting party unsuccessfully tracked Old Ben, an enormous bear. A few years previously Sam had taken Ike into the woods and shown him the bear's print. At twelve the boy began trying to track the animal but never saw him. On Sam's advice, Ike went out unarmed, but had no luck until he abandoned the other marks of civilization he carried: his watch and compass. At last he came upon the bear's fresh footprints and then saw Old Ben himself. Later, Ike saved his small, foolhardy dog, snatching it from almost directly under the bear.

Though both were armed, neither he nor Sam Fathers shot at the bear. During a later summer Sam trapped an enormous dog that had killed a colt, and starved it until the animal would let him approach. The dog, named Lion, was to be used to bring down Old Ben. Boon Hogganbeck took over the dog's care, and that November Lion led the hunt. The following year Lion bayed Old Ben, and General Compson drew blood; later that night Boon missed the bear five times.

Ike, sixteen now, waits in camp for the weather to break. He is sent to accompany Boon to Memphis to replenish the supply of whiskey. The next morning Old Ben is pursued across the river and bayed on the opposite bank. Lion rushes at the bear, which grabs him in both arms, and Boon leaps on the bear's back and searches with his knife for the animal's heart. The bear is killed, but Sam has collapsed, for no apparent physical reason and Lion is mortally wounded. Though camp is being broken up, Ike begs Cass to let him remain at the hunting lodge until Sunday, for he senses that Sam is dying. On Saturday, Cass and Major de Spain find Boon and Ike in the woods, sitting between Lion's grave and a raised platform on which is Sam's body.

The fourth section is a long mediation (almost half the length of the entire story) centered on Ike's consciousness and embracing the past history of the family and reaching some years into Ike's future. Biblical, sometimes almost incantatory in tone, the long conversations between Ike and Cass that frame the dramatic interludes of memory and future happening reveal that Ike, at twenty-one, is renouncing his inheritance because he believes that land is given by God to all men in common, and that ownership, rather than stewardship, goes against God's ordinance and brings a curse upon the land.

The history of the family is recounted with Ike's discovery, at sixteen, of the mysterious notations in his father's and uncle's ledgers referring to a Negro slave who drowned herself. He realizes that not only did his grandfather have a Negro son, but that the son was gotten on his own mulatto daughter. Two years later, at eighteen, Ike tries to locate the vanished Tennie's Jim (James Beauchamp), who had run away from the plantation on the night of his twenty-first birthday. As McCaslin's mulatto grandson, Jim is entitled to a share of the legacy left by old McCaslin to, but never claimed by, Jim's father, Tomey's Turl, which had been increased to one thousand dollars for each of Turl's descendants. Later the same year Ike travels to Arkansas in search of Turl's daughter Fonsiba, and leaves her share of the money with a bank, which is to send her three dollars a week as long as the thousand dollars lasts. Lucas, Turl's third and last living descendant, claims his money at twenty-one and remains on the plantation.

A legacy was left to Ike himself by his uncle, Hubert Beauchamp. Just after Ike's birth Hubert had taken a silver cup, filled it with gold pieces, wrapped it in burlap and sealed it with his ring. The cup was to come to Ike on his twenty-first birthday, but, as Hubert's money dwindled, he had 'borrowed' from the cup, so that when Ike opened the gunny sack he found only a handful of pennies and a sheaf of IOU's.

Though having, now, no money at all of his own, Ike only reluctantly accepts Cass's offer of the sum owed him by his uncle. Ike becomes a carpenter, using the money to pay his board and rent and buy tools, and takes on as a partner a dipsomaniac ship's carpenter. He marries a girl who hopes to become mistress of the McCaslin plantation, knowing that Ike is entitled to it. When he refuses all her appeals to claim his inheritance, she refuses him her bed and any hope of children.

Set earlier in time than the fourth section, the fifth tells how Ike, in about his eighteenth year, goes out to the Bottom to hunt with Boon. Major de Spain's annual hunting parties have stopped two years before with the deaths of Sam Fathers and Lion, and a new planing mill, now half-completed, is about to spoil the wilderness. Ike stops at the graves and places as an offering to his old mentor 'the twist of tobacco, the new bandanna handkerchief, the small paper sack of the peppermint candy which Sam had used to love.' Just beyond the graves he is confronted by an enormous rattlesnake, which he salutes as it moves away from him as Sam had saluted the great buck six years before. He finds Boon sitting beneath the tree full of frantic squirrels, violently beating his dismembered gun in order to dislodge a jammed shell. His mental balance already destroyed by the 'mine' and 'thine' concepts of civilization, as the wilderness is about to be destroyed by progress, Boon screams at Ike: 'Get out of here! Don't touch them! Don't touch a one of them! They're mine!'"

Dorothy Tuck  
*Crowell's Handbook of Faulkner*  
(Crowell 1964) 100-102

"Among the hunters, a class system exists, but men are not ranked according to birth or race, but according to the skill and courage displayed in the hunt. Ash, the Negro cook, is not at the bottom of the hierarchy because he is a Negro, but because he is not fit, as he proves when he goes out with Ike, to be a hunter. Boon, who has a trace of Chickasaw blood, is not automatically a woodsman and a hunter because he is part Indian... He is unskilled and incompetent. Sam Fathers, who is society must live in Negro quarters, is the chief of the hunters. He has the skills and virtues necessary for supremacy.... In the hunt, man returns to his sources. The ritual of indoctrination and initiation that Ike goes through in 'The Old People' is repeated in *The Bear*....

In the critical scene in which the fycce attacks the bear, Ike learns the meaning of courage, but more significantly, when he comes so close to the old bear that he can see a tick on its leg, he undergoes a profound spiritual experience to which he and his cousin eventually attribute his repudiation of his inheritance.... Ike's experience is religious, a repetition of the scene in 'The Old People' in which the boy knew a oneness with nature, opened his soul to truth and understood that the dead 'buck still and forever leaped.' This profound religious experience is dramatized in *The Bear* by the use of myth. The major participants in the story are rendered bigger than life.... Ike, more at home in the woods than any of the older hunters because he has opened his soul to what they can only sense, is second only to Sam Fathers.... The experience of essence is confined to Ike and Sam....

Boon, an image of weak and frail humanity, helps to bring to a close the experience represented by the hunt. It is also indicated that he serves Sam Fathers as he had the bear.... The sale of the hunting camp right after the death of Old Ben to the logging company, except for the small area containing the graves of Sam and Lion and the bear's paw, symbolizes the encroachment of social commitment.... 'They're mine!' Boon's illusion of possession is the illusion of mankind. It is an illusion because neither Bon nor any other man can possess anything in Nature.... Though Ike sacrifices everything, including his marriage, to expiate the violation of the land and of man, he is not free of the curse of his heritage.... Ike does take with him too much of Old Carothers to fulfill the destiny that he declares God chose for him....to serve as Moses leading the Negroes out of bondage.... On the new continent, man again fails; he commits the same old sins. God, fortunately, is patient, and provides man another opportunity to start afresh—the Civil War, a baptism of blood to cleanse the old sins."

Edmond L. Volpe  
*A Reader's Guide to William Faulkner*  
(Farrar, Straus/Noonday 1964) 244-50

“For William Faulkner the unrelenting rapacity of the civilizing process in the Deep South undermined confidence in the value of American culture. The lush bottomlands had degenerated, in Faulkner’s view, into ‘the untreed land warped and wrung to mathematical squares of cotton for the frantic old-world people to turn into shells to shoot at one another.’ This spectacle compelled Faulkner to believe that the conquest of the wilderness had been unjustified.

He expressed his ideas symbolically in describing Ike McCaslin’s thoughts on killing his first buck: “*I slew you; my bearing must not shame your quitting life. My conduct forever onward must become your death.*” The point was that American civilization, in Faulkner’s estimation, *had* shamed the death of the American wilderness. The New World, once so ripe with promise, had become a ‘gilded pustule.’ Americans had not proved worthy of their opportunity. They had turned predatory, feeding on their fellows, and giving Faulkner grim satisfaction that ‘the people who have destroyed [the wilderness] will accomplish its revenge.’ This, according to Faulkner, was the final tragedy in the interaction of wilderness and civilization in America.

The pioneer did not comprehend that the chase, not the catching, is paramount and could not moderate his excess before he destroyed himself along with his adversary. Beneficial up to a point, civilization in excess proved a liability. Ironically, there could be too much of a good thing. In this intellectual climate, wilderness acquired new value. Recognizing it as the antipode of a restricting civilization, some associated wilderness with human freedom and human dignity. The existence of wild country, they thought, would be insurance against the submergence of individuality by cities and machines.”

Roderick Nash  
*Wilderness and the American Mind*  
(Yale 1967,1972) 246-47

Michael Hollister (2015)