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## William Faulkner's Environmental Awareness in *His Go Down, Moses*

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### Abstract

This article analyzes William Faulkner's novel entitled *Go Down, Moses*. The aim of this research is to scrutinize the author's environmental awareness which he expresses through Isaac McCaslin (Ike), the main character of the story. The data is analyzed through qualitative method, and the result is presented using descriptive method. The source of primary data is *Go Down, Moses* novel and the sources of secondary data are books, journal articles, speech and interview scripts related to the topic of the research. The writer applies ecocritical theory specifically Aldo Leopold's *Land Ethic*. The findings shows that there are three forms of William Faulkner's environmental awareness that he expresses in this novel. They are Understanding the equality of human and nature; loving and respecting nature; and being aware of nature protection and preservation.

## INTRODUCTION

Environmental issues have long been a dominant topic of discussion in the world. The rapid growth of the human population accompanied by an increase in the need for land has an unfavorable impact on the mother earth. It is getting worse due to the massive exploitation of natural resources necessary for the manufacturing of industrial products. Human behavior that does not consider the balance of nature causes damage to the environment; Eco-disasters are inevitable.

Various studies and regulations have been conducted and implemented to find solutions to minimize the adverse effects of environmental damage. Many organizations and environmental activists have done extensive campaigns to raise public awareness of environmental issues. However, the effects of all these programs have not made significant improvements. The exploitation of nature is still occurring, even increasing over time. For that reason, we need to find a better approach to solve the problem. Relevant to this agenda, as one of the moral teaching sources, literature has a role to play.

In his book, *An Introduction to the Study of Literature*, Hudson (1913) stated that literature is a vital record of what men have seen in life, what they have thought and felt about those aspects of it which have the most immediate and enduring interest for all of us. It is then fundamentally an expression of life through the medium of language (p. 11). This means that literary works are not merely the result of the author's imagination but also views on life phenomena that are considered important and interesting to be conveyed to readers. One of the issues that gets authors' attention is the phenomenon of environmental damage. "For novelists,

poets, and essayists from Cooper, Emerson, and Thoreau to Jeffers and Faulkner, the imaginative influence of nature has been of major significance” (Myers, 2013, p. 648).

*Go Down, Moses* (1942) is considered as "one of the most significant American novels- if not the most - that deals with wilderness and environmental themes" (Wittenberg, 2019, p. 3). Written in seven separate stories, this work was originally known as a compilation of stories under the title *Go Down, Moses and the Other Stories*. Though published as a short story collection in the first edition, William Faulkner, the author, considered the book to be a novel and asked the publisher to omit "and the other stories" for the next editions' cover. The novel, which is set in Yoknapatawpha (a Faulkner's fictional county), consists of multiple characters connected to the twists and turns of a large extended family, McCaslin. This novel depicts the interaction of slaves with their masters, their interaction with nature, and social changes in Mississippi bringing it to the modern era.

The central figure in *Go Down, Moses* is Isaac McCaslin, well known as uncle Ike. He is the heir to the entire land and slaves belonging to the McCaslin family. However, Uncle Ike has a different perspective from his predecessors and those around him regarding nature and land tenure systems. For him, land and people are in an equal position and there can be no claim of ownership between them. He also argues that it was human control over land that was the forerunner of slavery and other arbitrary actions that ultimately brought a curse on the McCaslin family - a relationship of incest and endless conflict. To that end, he decided to relinquish his inheritance and move to a small hut as a carpenter. He kept hunting and camping until very old age when most of the Mississippi forest had been cut down and replaced by agricultural land.

William Faulkner is a prolific American writer concerned a lot about environmental issues in the American South, as seen in his criticism on the ignorance of Southern societies through his speeches and interviews. Faulkner also conveyed this criticism through his works including *Go Down, Moses*. As James Seay (1934) in Rubin's book *The American South: Portrait of Culture* emphasizes that *Go Down, Moses* has the events and patterns which symbolize the real history. The historical fact overwhelmed the virgin forest in the South which provides one ideal model to examine the changes in the Southern landscape and the violence behind those changes. In addition, the attitudes and views of the main character of the story towards the environment also have many similarities with William Faulkner's attitude and views that he conveyed in various events.

## METHOD

The writers believe that *Go Down, Moses* novel reflects the author's environmental awareness which he expressed through the main character of the story, Isaac McCaslin. Brehm, et. al (2013) defines environmental awareness as people's understanding and awareness of the environment and the related issues. It is elaborated as behaviors that consider the sustainability of nature. In this research, the writers examined the depiction of environmental awareness in *Go Down, Moses*. The analysis was conducted using ecocritical theory specifically Aldo Leopold's *Land Ethic*.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Land Ethics is a branch of ecocriticism which is used to understand the relations between human and nature as akin to the interrelationship between humans. In his book *A Sand County Almanac* (1979), Aldo Leopold explained that being moral to nature means understanding,

appreciating, and caring about it. Overall, these attitudes bring to one quality of an individual known as environmental awareness. Based on the research conducted, there are three forms of Faulkner's environmental awareness found. They are: Understanding the equality of human and nature; Loving and respecting nature; and being aware of nature protection and preservation.

### **Understanding the Equality of Human and Nature**

In this novel, it is depicted that humans consider themselves superior and have the right to dominate and conquer nature. The land is deemed as human property to be claimed as personal assets. This is what Ike, the heir to both McCaslin and Beauchamp plantation, opposed. Ike refuses to own property because, for him, the earth does not belong to any individual or group but belongs to all humans, as well as light, water, and weather (Faulkner, 1942, p.1). He refuses the plantation and retreats further into the woods, away from both whites and blacks in his family.

Ike's decision caused conflict between him and his family, as he was the sole heir, the successor to McCaslin's line. His cousin, Cass, disapproved Ike's decision. According to him, the plantation was the result of the hard work of their grandfather (old Carothers McCaslin), who presented it to his grandchildren as a form of comfort, protection, and glory, as well as a way to keep his name and accomplishments alive (p. 177). However, Ike remained steadfast in his stance. He explains to McCaslin in the following dialogue:

"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 [the Indian leader] to sell to Grandfather for bequeathment and repudiation." (p. 177)

This statement shows Ike's environmental awareness that views nature as something humans cannot conquer. Ike sees this from the theological point of view that God first created the earth, then created man as his representative to preserve nature under his name, not to hold unalterable title for himself and his descendants forever (p. 245). He asserted that the humans' relationship with the land must be one of reciprocity and community (p. 245-246). According to Ike, although the land had long been owned by his grandfather, and then his father, and now his cousin, and then someday would belong to him, their power over it was only temporary and not real. Ike likens this quasi-ownership to the "archaic script" on Jefferson's bookshelves (p. 165).

Ike stands alone from the other characters in the novel. His choice is in stark contrast to the other characters, who kill animals in often unethical ways. For example, when major de Spain finds his colt dead, he assumes the culprit was Old Ben (a huge bear) and goes after it in retribution, even though Lion the dog committed the crime. Major de Spain said, "I'm dissappointed in him ... He has broken the rules" (p. 205). This shows the way men place themselves as the lords over the land, acting out a seemingly divine punishment for Old Ben breaking the unwritten rules. They decide that it is fair to go beyond their realm of hunting to kill the bear, claiming at life for a life. In their minds, they are responsible for bringing balance to nature as they claim to have total dominion. Seeing this human domination of nature, Ike contemplates those upon whom the value of liberty and equality had been abandoned (p. 277).

Ike sees the equality between man and nature from a theological point of view. He claims that the land belongs to God, while humans are just creatures created to oversee it. He concludes by saying that God created the wilderness to teach man responsibility and prudence. He gave an example of what God said:

“...I will give him his chance. I will give him warning and foreknowledge too, along with the desire to follow and the power to slay. The woods and fields he ravages and the game the devastates will be the consequence and signature of his crime and guilt, and punishment” (p. 332)

This statement demonstrates the way Ike sees man’s dominance over nature as theological: “He had watched it, not being conquered, destroyed, so much as retreating since its purpose was served now and its time an outmoded time” (p. 326). In addition, he saw that there was a heinous act behind this land ownership. This he sees as the curse that had tainted the South, which he communicates to Cass in the following dialogue:

“Don’t you see?” he cried. ‘Don’t you see? This whole land, the whole South, is cursed, and all of us who derive from it, whom it ever suckled, white and black both, lie under the curse? Granted that my people brought the curse onto the land: maybe for that reason their descendants alone can—not resist it, not combat it...” (p. 193)

During this conversation, Ike emphasized that the curse is rooted in land ownership. He also implies that it was the root of slavery and other arbitrary actions that ultimately brought a curse on the McCaslin family—a relationship of incest and endless conflict. An example is the incestuous relationship committed by Old Carothers McCaslin with Tommey, his own daughter, from an affair with one of his female black slaves, Eunice. The black descendants of old Carothers caused prolonged conflict in his family, mainly due to inheritance. This miscegenation is later completed by incest relationship committed by Roth (Cass's grandson) with a black woman who was still a member of their family (p. 356-363). I believe that the problems Ike considered a curse were caused by old Carothers McCaslin taking over land unfairly from the native Indians who managed land in the community and hunted "without guns" (p. 254). In an interview, Faulkner once explained about the curse in the South:

“I think the ghost of that ravishment lingers in the land, that the land is inimical to the white man because of the unjust way in which it was taken from Ikkemotubbe and his people. That happened by treaty, which president Jackson established with the Chickasaws and the Choctaws, in which they would take the land in Oklahoma in exchange ...and were paid for it, but they were compelled to leave it...” (p. 43)

This shows that Faulkner saw a curse in the South which he called "the ghost of that ravishment." He recalls how at that time, the government took land from the native Indians (Chickasaws and Choctaws) and promised them some money and land in Oklahoma in return. However, it turned out that all of that was a hoax. They were eventually expelled without getting any compensation. Faulkner added that, in contrast to the white aristocrat, Indians held the land communally without any claim to property rights (p. 44). Faulkner views that this method is wiser than the land ownership system that gives humans superiority.

The superiority over nature encourages humans to destroy nature in order to get the maximum benefit. One example of an incident in the real world is after the Civil War, the most cotton plantation owners in the South retained ownership of large tracts of land. They hired freed slaves as tenant farmers (Davis et. al, 2006, p. 193). This new arrangement enabled the expansion of cotton planting areas in the early twentieth century. Aiken argued that many plantations had abandoned reasonable soil protection measures, such as field rotation, and tenants planted cash crops on every square inch of land. Woodland and subsistence crops disappeared in the most densely planted areas, most notably in Alabama, Georgia, and Piedmont, South Carolina (as cited. in Davis et al, 2006, p. 193). Faulkner conveyed this exploitation of nature is not the right thing to do if the motive is only to develop agriculture for economic gain. According to him, if destroying the wilderness only increases the number of automobiles on the road, the wilderness is so much better (Gwynn & Blotner, 1977, p. 277).

Ultimately, Faulkner exemplifies the equality between man and nature through the figure of Ike. Ike is described struggling with the southern characteristic of conquering and dominating the land. He took no ownership of the land and saw himself as a guest when he walked into wilderness (Faulkner, 1942, p. 165). He even considered himself and the wilderness as "coevals" (p. 321). This personification of this wilderness certainly carries the message that humans are not the only subjects in this world. The wilderness also lives, grows, and develops, just like humans.

### **Loving and Respecting Nature**

Since the age of ten, Ike was taught hunting by Sam Fathers, a McCaslin Indian slave. Under Sam's guidance, young Ike learned not only to hunt, but also to respect and love the land (p. 165). These values made Ike a person who loves and respects, as well as providing him with a solid inner closeness to nature. Faulkner once talked about hunting in a positive manner. He explained the function of hunting as a symbol of pursuit, which he claimed as the basis of human life. He emphasized that the pursuit is a thing, not a reward, not a profit. He asserted that animals should be killed in the closest way to achieve dignity. (Gwynn & Blotner, 1977, p. 272, 54). This is also what Sam taught Ike as respect for animals and nature (Faulkner, 1942, p. 163).

As a youth, Ike was taught hunting by Sam Fathers. Ike becomes one with the wilderness that had accepted him when he succeeds and is ritualistically masked with the hot blood of his first deer (Faulkner, 1942, p. 171). Sam indirectly teaches Ike about respecting nature. When seeing a huge buck, he greeted "Oleh, Chief" and then called it "Grandfather" (Faulkner, 1942, p. 184). I believe that the tremendous buck symbolizes the spirituality of the power of wilderness. Sam wants to show that humans are only guests and must respect those who live there. Therefore, Sam pays tribute to the lofty respect of a great manifestation of nature. He reveals that this moment of high reverence for a single wild animal can surmount or even kill a professional hunter's will. Several years later, while visiting Sam's cemetery in the wilderness, Ike saluted an enormous rattlesnake he encountered as Sam did to the big buck (Faulkner, 1942, p. 330).

Ike nearly always lauded the splendor of nature and considered himself and other hunters too small, which made them not a significant threat to the powerful woods (Faulkner, 1942, p. 170). When Ike faced the deep, affectionate, massive, and contemplative woods, he experienced his sense of vulnerability (Faulkner, 1942, p. 169, 192). According to him, the wilderness molded him into a man. The wilderness, which he refers to as his college, has both educational and spiritual significance for him. In this place, he learns to conquer fear and witnesses his own birth (Faulkner, 1942, p. 2021, 87).

The writers found another act of Ike that shows his respect for nature is when he tries to find Old Ben (p. 200). He discarded the weapons and objects he was carrying and relinquished them to the wilderness. I suppose this as a form of submission of himself so that he can fully connect with nature. Faulkner shows the rewards of this submission through the sight, first, of a fresh paw print and the bear itself, as big as Ike, if not bigger, and non-dimensional against the speckled darkness. In my opinion, in this scene, Faulkner wants to show that only with sincerity and humility will nature accept humans. Modern weapons and equipment here symbolize human pride, and by surrendering them, humans can show respect for nature. I believe this scene also illustrates the connection between the land devastation and his southern heritage of corruption. "You will have to choose," Sam told Ike (p. 198). Ike follows Sam's advice and ventures out alone, entirely at the mercy of the land. Only when Ike leaves all of the preconceived notions of his southern identity behind and ventures alone to the woods to meet the bear does he find what he truly seeks.



Years later, after Ike grew old, Ike's love and respect for nature never faded. Ike considers the woods as eternal and deathless after realizing the unavoidable impact of the logging (p. 307, 311). I suppose his love and respect towards nature led him to a sense of sadness after discovering that the wilderness had been dwindling. Even so, as he drew closer, he recognized that it was still wilderness. He could experience some relief from his sadness because at least there was still a little wilderness left.

The love and respect that Ike has for nature reflect Faulkner's. He also did many outdoor activities in his youth because his father encouraged him and his brothers to hunt, track, and fish (Minter, 1980, p. 45). When the family moved to Oxford, Faulkner was excited and developed a love for horses and woods that would last his entire life (Hamblin 26). As an adult, just like Ike, Faulkner also has a strong connection with nature. He was a volunteer as a scoutmaster of a local Boy Scouts troop. He led the members to explore nature, showing that he loved being in nature (Hamblin 45). Faulkner's love for activities in nature is represented by Ike, who is very enthusiastic about joining the hunting party every November and refuses to return home (172). Like Ike, Faulkner's love for nature never faded. He continued to do activities that would bring him closer to nature. They included horse riding, hunting, and fishing. He also raised mules. Although it did not give him any economic benefits, as stated by his brother John, he did it simply because Faulkner loved them (Hamblin, 2016, p. 73).

Faulkner respected nature by naming his house and yard "Roan Oak" after the Rowan tree. This naming demonstrates the importance of nature to Faulkner. Faulkner also once worked at hollywood. He wrote a song lyric about the wrong way humans treat nature. Through this song, Faulkner tried to attract people's sympathy to love and respect nature. Faulkner also expressed the love and respect for nature through his works that give nature a vital position in the story. When asked about the purpose of representing nature in his works, Faulkner answered that the goal was for readers to have compassion and understanding (Gwynn & Blotner, 1977, p. 128). He believed that compassion is a basic thing that a person needs to have in order to love and respect the environment.

### **Awareness of Nature Protection and Preservation**

Ike McCaslin reflects William Faulkner regarding the awareness of the importance of protecting and preserving nature. Ike's awareness was noticed when Major de Spain sold his land to a timber company. Ike opposed it in his heart: one should not change a leopard's spots when they could not change the leopard (Faulkner, 1942, p. 315). Ike met Major de Spain for complaint even though in the end he gave up his mind. He retreated himself, not only from his confrontation with Major de Spain, but also from his legacy. He chose to go and live in the woods.

Ike's submissiveness certainly makes many people doubt his environmental awareness. Ike was expected to do something to protect the land instead of retreating. However, in an interview, Faulkner explained Ike's reasons for repudiating his inheritance. Faulkner stated that there were three options for dealing with injustice:

"The first two involve a withdrawal from society, similar to what Ike does: This is rotten, I don't like it, I can't do anything about it, but at least I will not participate in it myself, I will go off into a cave or climb a pillar to sit on." (Gwynn & Blotner, 1977, p. 246)

This asserts that Ike chose to leave not because he did not care about the realm but because he realized that he could not stop it. He was aware that Major de Spain had sold the timber entitlements to a Memphis Lumber Company, and he had no power to overturn it. Ike became increasingly aware of his helplessness when he heard the passing log train running

light and fast. He saw the destruction of the wilderness before his eyes, as well as his inability to protect it. Therefore, he chose to leave and never come back again:

“...and he knew now what he had known as soon as he saw Hoke’s this morning 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.” (Faulkner, 1942, p. 321)

This indicates that since the logging started, Ike went into the woods and lived there. He only had the clothes he could wear and things he could carry in his pocket, a thin sweater, and a mattress which he used for camping in the wilderness (p. 1). Ike gave himself completely to nature. Although he portrays the figure of Ike choosing the first and second options in response to nature’s injustice, Faulkner himself chose the third option:

“Faulkner went on to suggest a better alternative was to engage with the injustice through activism: The third says, this stinks and I’m going to do something about it...what we need are people who will say, this is bad and I’m going to do something about it” (p. 246).

In 1935, Faulkner and two friends founded the Okatoba Hunting and Fishing Club to protect the area where he had hunted since the 1920s. He asked the National Game and Fish Commission for help. He explained their plan to hire a deputy game controller to protect the game, which was soon destroyed in this section (Blotner 1973, p. 879). This shows his concern for nature protection. When an influential person chooses to replace nature with something else to obtain more excellent benefits, Faulkner shows how individual responsibility can reduce this situation to some extent.

Faulkner often emphasizes individual responsibility as an alternative to protecting the environment when government and corporations are not severe enough to handle it. Faulkner once gave a speech on his daughter's graduation. He talked to more than a thousand listeners and encouraged the students to work hard to change the world for the peace and security of humanity. He emphasized that it is a right and an obligation to choose between justice and injustice, courage and cowardice, sacrifice and greed, compassion and self (Gwynn & Blotner, 1977, p. 133). For Faulkner, individual responsibility is the best solution to all problems on the planet. Of course, the environmental crisis that swept the South at that time was no exception.

In *Go Down, Moses*, this individual responsibility is illustrated through the awareness not to kill a doe in hunting. Ike contrasts the current state of the wilderness to his memories of past hunts, noting that it was once considered taboo to kill a doe for the club. One of the hunters immediately grasps Ike's assertion of individual responsibility that if they killed does, in a few years there would not even be any buck left (Faulkner, 1942, p. 331). Faulkner tries to convey the message that if nature continues to be hunted unwisely, it will one day become extinct. Accordingly, individual responsibility can prevent it from becoming extinct. Through Ike and Roth's conversation, Faulkner also emphasized the importance of does and fawns as a symbol of natural sustainability by making them reasons to protect the land from Hitler.:

“It’s a good time to mention does,” the old man said. “Does and fawns both. The only fighting anywhere that ever had anything of God’s blessing on it has been when men fought to protect does and fawns. If it’s going to come to fighting, that’s a good thing to mention and remember too.” (Faulkner, 1942, p. 339)

This shows that Faulkner affirms the importance of protecting does and fawns and intends to emphasize the importance of preserving the environment. Killing does, and fawns are tantamount to leaving nature on the threshold of extinction so that in the future, there is nothing left for future generations. Faulkner also adds religious value in this matter by saying there is God’s blessing for those willing to fight to protect the does and fawns.

On the other hand, Faulkner talked about the influence of European colonists on the American landscape for centuries, several years after *Go Down, Moses* released. He said it in general terms, sometimes explicitly referring to the part of the wilderness represented by the Mississippi Delta. He regrets the massive damage of the wilderness, and believes that this is a change that is happening everywhere. He said that humans spend more time destroying the wilderness, rather than looking for something to replace it (Gwynn & Blotner, 1977, p. 68). There is one critic asserted that the tragic human dramas of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are described in *Go Down, Moses*. He added that it concealed the shadow of the greater tragedy from which they all originated. The land was occupied for hundreds of years and then cleared for planting. Leonard Lutwack (1984) said that this is the original sin of the South, the resentment of the old days, and all the successive social and economic blunders that Faulkner depicts have their roots (p. 163).

Taking everything into account, it would seem that Faulkner's environmental activities, both ideological and practical, show his concern for nature protection and preservation. He regretted the behavior of the Southerners, who did not consider nature in their activities. To that end, Faulkner firmly maintains that individual responsibility is the best way to reduce the negative impact on nature. He exemplifies this individual responsibility through his actions, then voices it through his speech and writing.

## CONCLUSION

The result of the research shows that William Faulkner depicts the relationship between humans and nature in *Go Down, Moses* comprehensively. This novel also describes human's domination over nature which led them to oppress it to gain economic benefit. It is very interesting how a critical reading of *Go Down, Moses* explains the roots of human's superiority and the process of how it is maintained over generations through agriculture and slavery. We have seen the economy as a 'base' factor that creates human greed and indifference to nature. We also see the role of the author in presenting a new perspective on how to treat nature through the character of Ike MacCaslin. The analysis shows Ike's environmental awareness which is found in three forms: Understanding the equality of human and nature; Loving and respecting nature; and Being aware of nature protection and preservation. This interpretation of *Go Down, Moses* is expected to raise reader's awareness of environmental problems by showing a better way to treat nature as what William Faulkner exemplifies in the story.

The analysis, however, clearly indicated there is historical links between slavery and landownership in the South. Unfortunately, these historical links have not been explored in this research yet. Therefore, further research is recommended to examine the correlation between Southern culture of landownership and the slavery institution which took place in the said area for centuries. For that reason, a study of the novel using a sociology of literature perspective is highly recommended.

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