



An Analysis of Symbolism in William Faulkner's "The Bear"

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Abstract

This paper explores how William Faulkner through the subtle use of symbols brings to the readers multiple interpretations and associations in the story *The Bear*. The complicated and ambiguous use of language the bear appears more than just a wildlife, in the hands of the master storyteller the animal transcends its ordinary existence. Considered to be one his celebrated and complex long short story sensitizes the readers to all together new dimension that carries his special signature. The story is at the time about race identity self-realization and emancipation in a Faulknerian sense. To define the complexity of the symbolism the text has been deconstructed and decoded, by close reading to disentangle the complicated prose. Using textual analysis, the underlining meaning, and connotation have unfurled. The paper finds that though Faulkner is not going the mainstream view so far as racism or racialization is concerned yet in masterful stroke awakens in readers an n empathy missing in most of his other work about deep south the hub of race tension.

Keywords: The Bear, William Faulkner, Race Identity, Self-Realization, Symbolism

Introduction

William Faulkner's claim to fame as one of the premier novelists of twentieth century is based in part because of the fictional place in the state Mississippi, which he termed as Yoknapatawpha County, which is a setting he employed in a series of novels, specifically in the imaginary town of Jefferson.

To revisit his books is to be engulfed in a literary universe that is distinctive to Faulkner, even though many other authors have attempted to imitate it: multi-voice plots, elaborately told. What the author George Garrett says of the *Snapes* series is accurate of all Faulkner's finest work: it's about the storytelling itself, "how stories come to be and come to us and how the sum and substance of them become our history; how history is made (2003, p. 242)." According to encyclopedia Britannica, symbolism is a literary and artistic movement, originated in France during the late 19th century that spread to painting and the theatre, influencing the European and American literatures of the 20th century.

As an aesthetic movement it mainly influenced poetry not only in France but the U.K Russia and USA. Its practitioner focused more on the metaphorical and imagist representation emanating from the internal emotional impulses than objectivity. It is all about expressing the internal turmoil of the artist than the objective rational and empirical reality. Ultimately it influenced other genres and particularly novels in this respect, the works of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf from the United Kingdom and Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne from the U.S.A. However, symbolism is a recurring characteristic of modern and post-modern literature. In this respect Faulkner utilizes not only the stream of consciousness but relies more on the symbolic representation on many issues including race and racism.



Literature Review

A brief overview of the literature focusing on symbolism as a technique in the American novel reveals that almost all novelists utilize this technique to convey their subjective but traumatic experiences of the human condition around them. Significant works are available on the novels of Hawthorne, Melville, Steinbeck, Hemmingway, and Faulkner who are the literary stewards. Faulkner's works like *Light in August*, *A Rose for Emily*, *As I Lay Dying* have been researched from the standpoint of symbols and the meanings attached to them.

The short story which this article focuses on is Faulkner's most inspiring and beguiling work, *The Bear*. It is focusing on the natural environment allowing due respect and authority to the bear, who is traditionally considered a symbol of endurance, introspection, confidence and grace. In the folklore particularly those of the Native American, the bear is a god of sustenance, rebirth and the cycle of life. Inspired by these various attributes that the bear possesses, Faulkner's story is erasing a lot of potent questions not only of discrimination and stereotypes but also environmental degradation and the loss of hope and sustenance.

ANALYSIS

The Bear (1990)

The Bear (1990), is a harrowing tale written through the viewpoint of Isaac ("Ike") McCaslin. Ike studies under specialist tracker Sam Fathers during the first three sections of the book and tracks of Old Ben. It consists of a very elaborate, winding and complicated conversation between Ike and Edmonds, where Ike gives up his birthrights after discovering misconceptions in their family history. The ultimate section involves Ike's relationship with nature and his dismay at its eventual demise.

The Bear (1990) is a concise past of the Southern US due to ethnicity and culture. Remorse of past has been placed on children, and they find the responsibility as intolerable. The three sections of the story preceding this have taken place previously, in the young boy Isaac's childhood, when, at the age of 16, he accompanies the experienced hunters on their yearly ceremonial hunt for "Old Ben," the giant injured bear. This time, unlike other times, Isaac has an inkling that it will be the final hunt. "It was like the last act on a set stage. It was the beginning of the end of something, he didn't know what. (Faulkner, 1990, p.218)"

Old Ben, the mythical bear, is a sign of nature 's strength— he's almost invincible, able to overwhelm almost everything, and able to cause mayhem on human settlements and structures. The people, who dedicate their lives to operate on the sole intention of killing him, are symbolic of man's desire to dominate nature. The thematic complexity comes from the fact that hunting was described as an act of bravery and honor, but here it is, in part, a sign of man's effort to overcome nature, to which it was originally opposed. Old Ben is a nearly a mythical force of nature, and the men are only able to bring him down over the course of a number of years. Yet like the wilderness in the life of Isaac McCaslin, he is finally taken down. Old Ben 's death at Boon Hogganbeck 's hands is still somewhat vague — it's a dramatic, tragic scene, but it seems unclear if the death of Old Ben is good or bad in Faulkner 's eyes, or something more complicated than that.



Contrasting the story's rugged, grim, primitive landscape is the sterile, organized human Commissary, where Isaac reads the old ledgers of Buck and Buddy and imprints a feeling of the injustice of land possession and the twisted logic that explains it (Warren, 2009). Through this way, Old Ben is a metaphor of the human spirit, both of untamed nature and of some concept of sovereignty and liberty. Isaac, whose feelings form the conceptual core of the book, had previously assumed that slaying the deer obliged him to make his existence deserving of what he had taken from the beast that he had stalked; now Old Ben's metaphysical internalization enables him to make his future deserving of the unconquerable will of the mighty bear and of his demise.

In William Faulkner's work of trace imagery he indicates his understanding of the physical, historical and metaphysical aspects of the "trace," and especially the meaning as something which is past, not seen anymore. Nonetheless, the real, visible trace is a prevalent picture in the works of Faulkner; as a result, Faulkner's concept of trace often is found to be similar to that of the metaphysical concept of trace.

The narrative is basically a theory of nature. The Jefferson hunters are gentlemen, reflecting the values of established order at its highest, the respect and integrity of the South (Lydenberg, 2009). Throughout the association with wildlife and the battle with Old Ben, they recover the innocence that they lacked throughout their working-day, and forswear the superficial norms that usually ruin their lives. Because they are from the South, they became part of the same South that practiced slavery. Ike learns he can do nothing to remove the curse that the Southerners have put upon themselves. Part IV and Old Ben's tale are identical to the elements of a binary star. They revolve around each other. Yet both contain an origin of its own light.

The original edition of *The Bear* (1990) is the tale of Ike's induction as a hunter and his growing knowledge of that which can be increased due to the wild, signified by the bear, Old Ben (Low, 2009). His two guides are Sam Fathers and his father. Old Ben is the embodiment, a personification of ancient wild life known to the Chickasaws before man cut the forests. Nature is to be free and fruitful. Nobody holds dominion over it. Sam advises Ike that Old Ben does not allow himself to be observed until, without a pistol and without giving in to his terror, Ike agrees to embrace the wilderness (Lydenberg, 1952). This lesson the child does take to heart, so far as to even give up his compass and watch, the two instruments which gave him a sense of control in this seemingly uncontrollable wilderness. When the boy finally sees the bear, he acknowledges he didn't want to kill the bear. Talking about it with his father, he learns that the bear is a representation of the wild immortal spirit.

Textual analysis suggests that the bear exhibits those attributes which are similarly found in the concept of sublimity. The sense of dimensionality and enlightenment assigned to the bear is also a distinguishing aspect of sublimity. Ike's internal representation of the bear as a majestic entity takes these attributes into account.

The bear is a manifestation of the everlasting and timeless wilds; the wilds in which Ike's perception of freedom and rigid stability is recognised. The bear is described as "too big," and it is exactly this feeling of greatness that Ike strives to restore and preserve. Nevertheless, the existence of the trace problematizes this model of equilibrium and escapism.



Bruce Danner's article "Epic Tears: The Dislocation of Meaning in Faulkner's 'The Bear'" describes Uncle Hubert's coffee-pot functioning "as a failed metaphor of Keats's urn and its transcendent significance" (271). As Spivak posits, a "sign will always lead to sign, one substituting the other (playfully, since 'sign' is 'under erasure') as signifier and signified in turn" (xix). Faulkner was aware of the liveliness and endless polysomic "differences" that establish "sign," though he finds his chronicle within the sphere of the sublimity, as an "other," to quote Spivak, "never to be found in its full being" (xvii).

Faulkner is considered the unofficial chronicler of the South and dubbed as regionalist, his sympathy and empathy with all things southern is like a romance. In this context *The Bear* is much more than a hunting expedition.

Conclusion

Faulkner, while not known for his short stories, in *The Bear* paints a vivid and deep picture of the South and the repercussions that their history had on its people. It also explores the themes of naturalism and ecocriticism in the manner that Old Ben, the bear is portrayed. Ike's introspection on the idea of both killing the bear and on refusing his inheritance laden with history of slavery, is chock-full of symbolism. The key fact however is as this article establishes is deeper sense of sympathy that he exhibits in a subtle way for the bear who is the central character but also Sam. Boon and of course the killed by the bear.

The representation of the New World in imaginative literature, given its diverse cultural and religious milieu, the use of symbolization of events, things, both living and non-living, in this case the bear, reveal the complexity of issues where people of different racial and ethnic groups try and survive to adjust. Faulkner portray one such situation and opens the symbolism of the bear to multiple interpretations.

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