

The Image of the Plantation in Southern Fiction: The Case of William Faulkner

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Fiction profoundly influences the images that people have concerning places. Certainly, many images that people hold concerning the South and the plantation system come from popular novels and plays such as Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*, Stark Young's *So Red the Rose*, Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road*, and Tennessee Williams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Chief among 20th century southern writers is William Faulkner. In terms of critical acclaim, he has risen above all others who have written stories about the South and the plantation.

To many persons who are superficially introduced to Faulkner's writings through such short stories as "A Rose for Emily" and "That Evening Sun," Faulkner often is perceived as one who dealt only with the morbid, seamier aspects of southern life. To appreciate Faulkner as a writer, one cannot take any single piece but must take his work as a whole. When this is done, there emerges a writer who not only had a sensitivity for the trials and tribulations of people, but also one who was a keen observer of the landscape and, therefore, one who had a keen sense of geography.

In Faulkner's works there are several themes that are related to the plantation agricultural system. Here I wish to examine the theme of the cotton plantation and the vanishing wilderness and the theme of

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the cotton plantation and landscape decay and show the relationship between the two.

THE COTTON PLANTATION AND THE VANISHING AMERICAN WILDERNESS

Most of Faulkner's stories pertain to fictional Yoknapatawpha County in northern Mississippi. Yoknapatawpha is modeled after Faulkner's home Lafayette County, and its only town, Jefferson, is patterned after Oxford, political seat of Lafayette (Aiken, 1977). Like Lafayette County, Yoknapatawpha is located in the Loess Plains, 70 miles south of Memphis and 25 miles east of the Yazoo Basin. The fictional county is a diverse place. Beat Four in the eastern part of Yoknapatawpha and Frenchman's Bend in the southeast are primarily domains of small, white farmers. The principal plantation areas are in the northern and western portions of Yoknapatawpha, which also are the principal plantation areas of Lafayette County.

In his Yoknapatawpha stories, Faulkner reveals a sense for landscape evolution. As a part of his sense of geographical progression, he deals with land use changes wrought as the Mississippi wilderness vanished. The wilderness represented one stage and the cotton economy which replaced it another stage in the sequent occupance drama.

The concept of wilderness has fascinated Americans since the Colonial period, and at least four themes are paramount in their perception of it. For much of the nation's history the wilderness was regarded as a wasteland that had to be conquered in the name of progress (Nash, 1973). During the early 19th century this discernment was joined by one that held the wilderness as a great teacher and molder of the American spirit. From each of these two early ideas grew two secondary ones, primarily in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Man had subdued the wilderness, but his conquest had not been a wise one, for he had abused the land. Therefore, man bore guilt for unwise use of an important natural gift. From the concept of wilderness as the great teacher developed the wilderness preservation movement with the idea that because it had played such a vital role in molding the American character, the wilderness should be saved, in part, so that man would always be able to return to it and learn from it. The first of these themes, the conquest of the wilder-

ness, is meticulously described by Faulkner; the second, the wilderness as a great teacher, is vividly and romantically portrayed (Wheeler, 1959); the third, abuse of a great natural gift, is philosophically lamented; but the fourth, wilderness preservation, is conspicuously absent.

The actual process of settlement in northwestern Mississippi was one in which first the interfluves, or tablelands as they were called, of the Loess Plains were occupied, followed by the clearing and drainage of the region's river bottoms. The last frontier of settlement in the state was the Yazoo Basin, the Delta, much of which remained in forest until the mid-twentieth century. During Faulkner's lifetime from 1897 to 1962, the wilderness gradually retreated from the Tallahatchie and Yocona (Yoknapatawpha) river bottoms of Lafayette County and then from the Delta. The last large significant vestige of the wilderness in Mississippi was at the southern end of the Yazoo Basin in Issaquena and Sharkey counties just north of Vicksburg.

Faulkner's fictional depiction of the vanishing Mississippi wilderness is the sequence of historical reality. The settlement of Yoknapatawpha County in the 1830's by cotton planters and farmers severed "the very taproots of oak and hickory and gum" and "drove at last the bear and deer and panther into the last jungle fastness of the river bottoms" (Faulkner, 1951, 227). By the late 1880's all that remained of the virgin wilderness in Yoknapatawpha County was contained in the Tallahatchie River bottom with "the tremendous gums and cypresses and oaks where no axe save that of the hunter had ever sounded between the impenetrable walls of cane and brier" (Faulkner, 1942, 176). To the west the Tallahatchie bottom merged with the Delta and was an "eastern gateway to the still almost virgin wilderness of swamp and jungle which stretched westward from the hills to the towns and plantations along the Mississippi" (Faulkner, 1962, 20).

In *Go Down Moses* young Isaac McCaslin accompanies Sam Fathers and Boone Hoggensbeck each November to Major DeSpain's hunting camp in the Tallahatchie wilderness which with its deer, bears, wolves, and panthers contains game that can be hunted nowhere else in Yoknapatawpha County. One vital part of the hunt is the chase of a legendary bear, Old Ben. But during the November, 1883 hunt Old Ben, Faulkner's symbol of the wilderness, is killed (Faulkner, 1942, 191-331). Major DeSpain then sells a Memphis

company the timber rights on his 4 or 5 sections of Tallahatchie River bottom wilderness and moves his camp, which is only 20 miles from Jefferson, to a point in the edge of the Delta approximately 40 miles from town (Faulkner, 1962, 20). Throughout the remainder of his life Isaac McCaslin, the last of the old hunting party, has to travel further and further each November to find the wilderness. By the 1940's the last vestige is at the southern end of the Delta, "the V of the River and the hills," 200 miles from Jefferson (Faulkner, 1955, 166).

Faulkner clearly recognized that human occupation has both inter- and intra-regional facets. Disappearance of wilderness from a place was part of its retreat across the space of which a place was but a part. Upon seeing the last significant remnant of the wilderness the aged Isaac, now known as Uncle Ike, says to his hunting companions who have grown younger and younger as he has grown older and older, "Well, boys, there it is again." But to himself he thinks as he speaks:

Because to them, there it was. They are too recent to have any past in the history of its change; to them, it has simply moved intact in geography. Only to me has it exposed geography as the dying of a body exposes its defenseless mortality (Faulkner, 1955, 201).

Although Faulkner was melancholy over the passing of the wilderness, preservation was not a theme or the principal point of his wilderness stories. Faulkner believed that "life is motion" (Meriwether and Millgate, 1968, 253) and that motion applied to area as well as people. Change had to occur and change altered what was on the landscape no matter how fine it might be. Wilderness could not endure as a land use because it was obsolete; it had abandoned motion; it was dead (Gwynn and Blotner, 1959, 277). As an old man of approximately 80 Isaac McCaslin lamented:

There was some of it left, although now it was two hundred miles from Jefferson where once it had been thirty. He had watched it, not being conquered, destroyed, so much as retreating since its purpose was served now and its time an outmoded time, retreating southward through this inverted-apex, this ∇ -shaped section of earth between hills and River until what was left of it seemed now to be gathered and for the time arrested in one tremendous density of brooding and inscrutable impenetrability at the ultimate funnelling tip (Faulkner, 1942, 343).

THE COTTON PLANTATION AND LANDSCAPE DECAY

Although Faulkner was not a wilderness preservationist, he believed that man had shamed the wilderness through the uses to which he devoted the land once he had cleared it. The principal emphasis of Faulkner's belief that the wilderness had been dishonored by what superceded it concerns replacement of the wilderness by the cotton plantation.

The economic context of Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha sagas is an agricultural system in which cotton, "a king," is "omnipotent and omnipresent" (Faulkner, 1951, 227). Three distinct eras of cotton production in the American South can be distinguished—the pre-Civil War slave era which in northern Mississippi extended from the 1830's until 1865, the furnish-merchant-tenant-farmer era that lasted from the 1870's until shortly after World War II, and the modern era of mechanized farming. Although Faulkner touches upon the modern era, most Yoknapatawpha stories are set in the ante-bellum and furnish-merchant-tenant-farmer eras.

Northern Mississippi was opened to settlement in the 1830's after the Chickasaws had ceded their lands. The period of the ante-bellum plantation was relatively short, lasting only about 25 years. At the time Faulkner conceived Yoknapatawpha County and published the first of his novels in the 1920's Lafayette County, upon which Yoknapatawpha was based, was less than a hundred years old. However, the northern Mississippi landscape contained elements that made the region seem quite ancient. And the cultural relics and fossils seemed to indicate a bygone age that was more prosperous and more elegant with people who were more noble.

The Lafayette County countryside was dotted with ante-bellum plantation houses, few of which had ever been elegant, but many of which seemed to have been grand as evidenced by their size. Throughout Faulkner's lifetime, most of these houses sat unpainted, and some of them sat abandoned and decaying. All of the big houses had legendary stories about the people who had built them. Even the cemeteries presented a bygone age of affluence. Rural cemeteries of the planters contained large tombstones for those who died before the Civil War, while the small post-war monuments and the unkept

condition of the cemeteries attested to a poverty and a seeming loss of pride that had come.

To most local persons, the relics seemed common, and they sat among newer, ordinary landscape features. Many were on holdings that were still viable plantations. Only a person such as Faulkner, who was a sensitive and discerning observer, would have questioned what the past implied. In the fiction that was developed from such reality, Faulkner could write that all that remained of the domain of Louis Grenier was “nothing but the name of his plantation and his own fading corrupted legend like a thin layer of the native ephemeral yet inevitable dust on a section of the country surrounding a little lost paintless crossroads store” (Faulkner, 1951, 33). And from such reality Faulkner could describe in his fiction Quentin Compson’s seeing the ruins of Sutpen’s Hundred as follows:

he looked up the slope before them where the wet yellow sedge died upward into the rain like melting gold and saw the grove, the clump of cedars on the crest of the hill . . . — the cedars beyond which, beyond the ruined fields beyond which, would be the oak grove and the gray huge rotting deserted house half a mile away (Faulkner, 1936, 187).

In the grove of cedars was the Sutpen cemetery with two large flat, vaulted slabs, cracked across the middle by their own weight and beside the larger monuments were three smaller headstones leaning a little awry (Faulkner, 1936, 188).

In northern Mississippi, even the land itself indicated to Faulkner decay. The hill-lands of the northern Mississippi Loess Plains are among the most severely eroded areas in the United States. The ease with which loess erodes in combination with careless tillage practices introduced by the initial settlers resulted in sheet erosion and gully-ing. In 1860, less than 30 years after settlement, Eugene Hilgard, geologist-geographer at the University of Mississippi who was one of the founders of soil science, punningly warned that the towns of the Loess Plains were “in danger of going, in the most literal sense, *‘down hill’*” (Hilgard, 1860, 293). Accelerated erosion, however, went largely unchecked for seven more decades and climaxed just prior to the introduction of aggressive conservation measures under the New Deal. By the early 1930’s much of the gullied land had been abandoned for crops and either had reverted to scrub forest or was used as

low-grade pasture. Although accelerated erosion no longer is a serious problem in northern Mississippi, the hills of the region as Faulkner knew them for most of his life were riddled with scars. It follows that his descriptions of soil erosion should be among the most vivid in American literature. The southern edge of the Pine Hills just north of Varner's Crossroads was:

a region of scrubby second-growth pine and oak among which dogwood bloomed . . . and old fields where not even a trace of furrow showed any more, gutted and gullied by forty years of rain and frost and heat into plateaus choked with rank sedge and briars. . . and crumbling revines striated red and white with alternate sand and clay (Faulkner, 1940, 196).

Throughout his life Faulkner was negative toward cotton as a crop and toward the agricultural system under which it was produced. Although Faulkner's grandfather had owned a cotton farm north of Oxford, the family was never directly dependent upon either cotton or farming. Indirectly, though, the family was economically tied to the staple through its business interests. When Faulkner in 1938 purchased a farm near Oxford for a hobby, he refused to grow cotton, and rather, planted grains and raised livestock.

Faulkner's negative attitude toward cotton comes through sharply in his novels and short stories. Essentially, he thought that both the slave and the sharecropper systems were abusive to people and to the land. In *Go Down Moses* Isaac McCaslin comes to believe that the McCaslin plantation which he is to inherit at the age of 21 is cursed:

Cursed . . . the whole plantation in its mazed and intricate entirety—the land, the fields and what they represented in terms of cotton ginned and sold, the men and women whom they fed and clothed and even paid a little cash money at Christmas-time . . . that whole edifice intricate and complex and founded upon injustice and erected by ruthless rapacity and carried on even yet with at times downright savagery not only to human beings but the valuable animals too, yet solvent and efficient (Faulkner, 1942, 298).

The people who were caught up in the cotton system, planters as well as sharecroppers and share tenants, were bound to the system and to the land and could not escape. Outward from the commissary on the McCaslin plantation flowed a slow "trickle of food and supplies

and equipment which returned each fall as cotton . . . two threads frail as truth . . . yet cable-strong to bind for life them who made the cotton to the land" (Faulkner, 1942, 255-256).

Mink Snopes is among the poor whites who are caught up in the sharecropper and tenant farmer systems. Living in a paintless rotting shack in the Frenchman's Bend area of Yoknapatawpha County and sensing that his life is being drained away by hard work that returns to him nothing but mere existence, Mink takes his hate out on the land. He has no concept of fire as any part of a scientific land management program but views fire as his tool of vengeance:

the ground, the dirt which any and every tenant farmer and sharecropper knew to be his sworn foe and mortal enemy—the hard implacable land which wore out his youth and his tools and then his body itself . . . *You got me, you'll wear me out because you are stronger than me since I'm jest bone and flesh. I cant leave you because I cant afford to . . . And not just me, but all my tenant and cropper kind . . . But we can burn you. Every late February or March we can set fire to the surface of you until all of you in sight is scorched and black, and there aint one . . . damn thing you can do about it* (Faulkner, 1959, 90-91).

Like Yoknapatawpha County, the Delta also became a land Faulkner saw as "warped and wrung to mathematical squares of rank cotton" because it was "too rich for anything else, too rich and strong to have remained wilderness" (Faulkner, 1955, 201 and 209). As the cotton system spread throughout the Delta, so also spread the sharecropper plantation with its great economic-social cleavage between those who owned and those who tilled the land. The fertile alluvial crescent was "deswamped and denuded and derived in two generations so that white men [could] own plantations and commute every night to Memphis, and black men own plantations and ride in jim crow cars to Chicago to live in millionaires' mansions on Lakeshore Drive." But on the plantations, the white tenant farmers lived like Negroes and the Negro sharecroppers lived like "animals" (Faulkner, 1955, 212).

The cotton system with its planters and tenants was part of a larger economic system that perpetually operated on borrowed money, with tenants in debt to planters, planters in debt to Memphis banks, and Memphis banks in debt to Northern banks. The Delta was a place

where cotton grew “man-tall in the very cracks in the sidewalk.” But the cotton was “mortgaged before it [was] ever planted and sold and the money spent before it [was] ever harvested.” And “usury and mortgage and bankruptcy and measureless wealth all [bred] and [spawned] together until no man [had] the time to say which one [was] which, or [cared]” (Faulkner, 1955, 212).

THE PLANTATION AND RESPONSIBILITY

Faulkner thought that the consequence of man's replacing the wilderness with a landuse which he considered inferior was that the system of land occupation would be destroyed from within. Interestingly, his concept of change originating within alluded to a controversial idea expressed by the geographer Derwent Whittlesey 60 years ago. In the article “Sequent Occupation,” Whittlesey stated that “Human occupation of an area, like other biotic phenomena, carries within itself the seed of its own transformation.” As an example of what he meant, Whittlesey went on to say:

The American farmer, inaugurating a stage of occupation by plowing and planting virgin soil, sets in motion agents which at once begin subtly or grossly to alter the suitability of his land for crops; in extreme cases the ground deteriorates to a point where it must be converted into pasture or forest, or even abandoned; when either of these events occurs, human occupation of that area has entered upon a new stage (Whittlesey, 1929, 162).

The concept of sequent occupation with its emphasis on the dynamic character of landscape in which a succession of stages of human occupation is recognized, served American geographers as an important research organizational device for more than two decades. Whittlesey's idea that a stage of occupation in an area has within it the seed of its own transformation was never seriously debated or questioned (Mikesell, 1976). That this idea in fact was rejected by most geographers as too narrow and too restrictive is demonstrated in that most sequent occupation studies recognized that external factors as well as internal ones produce changes in an area. But the Whittlesey idea of an area being changed by forces from within, especially where it pertains to abuse of land, was also held by Faulkner.

Faulkner considered *Absalom, Absalom!* one of his best books. Essentially, the novel is the complex story of Thomas Sutpen and the landed dynasty that he attempted to create. In a letter written at the time he conceived the idea of *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner stated that the book's theme was that of "a man who outraged the land, and the land then turned and destroyed the man's family" (Faulkner, 1934). This idea is also expressed in *Go Down Moses* and *Big Woods*. Near the end of the "Delta Autumn" section of *Go Down Moses* Faulkner has Isaac McCaslin thinking that the ravaged woods and fields and devastated game are the "consequence and signature" of man's "crime and guilt, and his punishment" (Faulkner, 1942, 349). Finally, Isaac believes that "the ruined woods . . . don't cry for retribution" because "the people who destroyed them will accomplish their revenge" (Faulkner, 1955, 212).

The idea that the system of land occupance would be destroyed from within brings us back to the theme of landscape decay. Soil erosion, soil exhaustion, and land abandonment traditionally have been interpreted as direct results of the cotton system. Faulkner, however, does in his fiction what some students of the South have never emphasized in fact. The ultimate source for landscape decay was not the cotton system *per se* but the system of agricultural leadership.

A principal theme in Faulkner's works is the decline of progressive pre-Civil War families such as the Sartorises, Compsons, Greniers, Habershams, and McCaslins and the passage of decision making to families such as the Varners and Snopes. The descendant of Grenier is a pathetic alcoholic who in 1905 drives the hack for one of Jefferson's livery stables. The Compson family dwindles to essentially nothing. By the 1940's two of the three male heirs are dead, one by suicide, and the third, the last of the line, is a confirmed bachelor. The domain of Grenier passes into the hands of unscrupulous Will Varner and Flem Snopes buys what remains of Compson's Mile and subdivides it into small lots for veterans housing.

Houses, fictionalized from reality, were among the landscape images that Faulkner used to convey impressions of this leadership decline and failure. The ruin of the Grenier house became known as the old Frenchman place and was "a gutted shell of an enormous

house with its fallen stables and slave quarters and overgrown gardens and brick terraces” (Faulkner, 1940, 3). Shortly after the turn of the century, Compson’s Mile had become a scene of disillusionment: weedchoked traces of the old ruined lawns and promenades, the house which had needed painting too long already, the scaling columns of the portico where Jason III . . . sat all day long with a decanter of whiskey and a litter of dogeared Horaces and Livys and Catulluses, composing (it was said) caustic and satiric eulogies on both his dead and his living fellowtownsmen (Faulkner, 1946, 742).

Underlying the theme of family decline is the theme of responsibility and the refusal to face up to it and the desire to escape from it. Among the profound examples of this tendency to escape responsibility, especially as it pertains to responsibility for the land and for a plantation, is Isaac McCaslin. Although Isaac comes to a realization of the evils of slavery and of the abuses associated with the then contemporary sharecropping system, he does not take control of the 2,000 acre McCaslin plantation and assume an aggressive role in land tenure and other progressive reforms. Rather Isaac seeks escape from responsibility by refusing at the age of 21 his inheritance, which is given to an older cousin Cass Edmonds. Isaac then squanders the remainder of his life from 1888 into the 1950’s subsisting on what he makes doing carpenter jobs and on the small, monthly “pension” that is given to him by Cass. The highlight of Isaac’s life becomes the annual two-week hunting trip each November in the vanishing wilderness where he can relive his childhood experiences. Although wilderness is a great love and he follows the retreating wilderness most of his life, Isaac McCaslin does not attempt to become a Mississippi John Muir and aggressively attempt to save any part of it. Rather Isaac comes to see himself and the wilderness as contemporaries “running out together, not toward oblivion, nothingness, but into a dimension free of both time and space” (Faulkner, 1942, 354).

Isaac, especially after he becomes Uncle Ike, is a likeable character who has been treated favorably by many Faulkner critics. Born in the harsh Reconstruction period of an elderly bachelor who marries a spinster, Isaac is orphaned by the age of 12 and reared by his second cousin who is hardly much older than he. If this is not enough to

create sympathy for him, superficial acceptance of the repudiation of the evils of his heritage does. Also, his experiences in the wilderness where he learns to know and to appreciate nature are enobling.

Although Faulkner depicted Isaac McCaslin as a likable, universal character filled with disillusionment, he had no sympathy for him. In an interview at the University of Virginia, Faulkner commented upon Isaac's repudiation of his heritage:

Well, there are some people in any time and age that cannot face and cope with problems. There seem to be three stages: The first says, This is rotten, I'll have no part of it, I will take death first. The second says, 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. The third says, This stinks and I'm going to do something about it. McCaslin is the second. He says, This is bad, and I will withdraw from it. What we need are people who will say, This is bad and I'm going to do something about it, I'm going to change it (Gwynn and Blotner, 1959, 245-246).

After Faulkner won the 1949 Nobel Prize for Literature, increasingly he received invitations to address various groups. He declined many of the invitations, but he accepted a few. In 1952 he was invited to address the Delta Council, an organization of plantation owners and business people who control the agriculture of the Yazoo Basin. Certainly the manner in which Faulkner appeared before this group of Mississippians and what he said to them should be somewhat revealing of his attitudes toward the plantation system.

Faulkner was a role player. During the 1930s he would occasionally appear at social gatherings in Oxford wearing the blue uniform of the Royal Flying Corps Canada of which he briefly had been a member. When notified of his being awarded the Howells Medal by the American Academy of Arts and Letters, he wrote that he would be unable to come to New York to accept it because he was really just a simple farmer and would have no money until he harvested his crops (Faulkner, 1950). Faulkner appeared before the Delta Council wearing seersucker trousers, an old but expensive jacket, and a shirt with a badly frayed collar. A handkerchief was stuck into his sleeve, English-style, and in his lapel was the French Legion of Honor rosette (Blotner, 1974, 1415). Although Faulkner contrasted sharply with the

Delta planters in their new \$300 suits, apparently he decided to go as one of the historic Mississippi planter group—master of Rowan Oak, a member of an old Bourbon family fallen into genteel poverty but having the lineage and credentials that made him one of them.

To many of those present, the speech probably came off as an attack on the Federal government with its programs of welfare and bureaus seeking regimentation and as a patriotic call for a return to an America as its founders envisioned it. The theme of respect for but independence from the Federal government had appeared in Faulkner's stories for more than a decade. The 5,000 who heard the speech gave Faulkner a standing ovation, and the Delta Council later issued the presentation as a pamphlet. Hodding Carter, editor of the liberal Greenville, Mississippi Delta Democrat-Times wryly observed that the prophet was not without honor in his own country (Blotner, 1974, 1417).

Analysis of the speech reveals the overriding theme not to be an attack on the Federal government, but the theme of responsibility. Faulkner observed that the founders of America had left the old world and come to the new seeking "a place, not to be secure in" because they had just repudiated that, but "a place to be free in, to be independent in, to be responsible in."

That's what I am talking about: responsibility. Not just the right, but the duty of man to be responsible, the necessity of man to be responsible if he wishes to remain free; not just responsible to and for his fellow man, but to himself; the duty of a man, the individual, each individual, every individual, to be responsible for the consequences of his own acts (Faulkner, 1952, 40).

Faulkner went on to state that we no longer have responsibility, but ended by announcing that he believed that the heirs of the "old tough durable fathers" were "still capable of responsibility and self-respect, if only they [could] remember them again" (Faulkner, 1952, 42).

The great appeal of Faulkner as a writer is not that his works are about a small fictional place in Mississippi, but that they are about great universalities. Faulkner stated repeatedly that he used southern settings for his characters only because the South was the place that he knew best (Aiken, 1979). He took the local, the ordinary and thought of it in terms of the universal. In the speech to the Delta Council, in his own mind, he may have been attempting the reverse,