

ANALYSIS

Go Down, Moses (1940)

William Faulkner

(1897-1962)

“*Go Down, Moses* [is] a collection of seven stories by William Faulkner, published in 1942, which treat the McCaslin family, white and black, from the time of Lucius, the founder at the opening of the 19th century, to the mid-20th century, all together representative of Southern history. Hunting and rituals of initiation are basic metaphors. The longest and most significant of the stories is *The Bear*.”

James D. Hart

The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83) 286

“There are in *Go Down, Moses* two loosely related strands of subject matter—the life of the ascetic Isaac McCaslin, the hunter, and the life of Lucas Beauchamp, the son of the mulatto slave who in turn had been the son of Carothers McCaslin, Isaac’s grandfather. The antecedents of Isaac are explained in ‘Was,’ the humorous story in which we learn that Uncle Bud and Uncle Buck, Isaac’s father, refused to profit from slavery. Isaac himself figures dominantly in ‘The Old People,’ ‘The Bear,’ and ‘Delta Autumn.’ Two chapters are devoted to Lucas Beauchamp and his family, ‘The Fire and the Hearth’ and ‘Go Down, Moses.’ Both of these sections, however, relate more directly and intimately to the action in *Intruder in the Dust*, a later novel, than to the chapters devoted to Isaac. The theme implicit in the sections devoted to Lucas Beauchamp is white injustice to the Negro, and the theme implicit in those devoted to Isaac is the nobility of character to be learned from life in the wilderness. In ‘The Bear’ Faulkner attempts to bring the two subject matters and therefore the two themes together, with the wilderness theme dominating.”

William Van O’Connor

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

“Ownership of the land is the basic theme of the stories in *Go Down, Moses*. The book relates the story of a family, the McCaslins, their white and their black branch, narrated not in novel form but in more or less long short stories (the most substantial being *The Bear*) which are focused on various members and events in the family history. This is their common background: Old Carothers McCaslin bought his land ‘with white man’s money’ from the Indian chief Ikkemotubbe, who in turn possessed it by treachery. (There is no sentimentalizing about the Indians here; they share the guilt.) McCaslin ‘tamed and ordered or believed he had tamed and ordered (the wilderness) for the reason that the human beings he held in bondage and in the power of life and death had removed the forest from it and in their sweat scratched the surface of it to a depth of perhaps fourteen inches in order to grow something out of it which had not been there before and which could be translated back into money....’ The ownership of the land through money as well as its use for money and profit-making are part of the guilt, because God created the earth to hold it ‘mutual and intact in the communal anonymity of brotherhood.’

Two of McCaslin’s grandsons figure prominently in these stories: Isaac McCaslin, the only white descendant in the male line, and the Negro Lucas Beauchamp, son of McCaslin’s son by a black mistress. Isaac, who was initiated to the wilderness, and manhood and huntership, by Sam Fathers, inherits the land but relinquishes it to his cousin Edmonds, a son of old McCaslin’s daughter (it seems all good heroes of Faulkner have to give up their inheritance.... Isaac McCaslin pays back, and increases, to his black cousins the money intended for them by his grandfather in atonement of his guilt.... Isaac, who renounces the rapacity and guilt of property is in that sense a forerunner of the Corporal in *A Fable*, though without quite realizing as yet that this is a renunciation of civilization and all it implies... He rejects the responsibility of keeping the farm, which his wife demands of him. But like the Corporal, he only establishes an example of refusal; he saves nobody but himself perhaps....

Cooper's Leatherstocking and Faulkner's Sam Fathers, son of a Chickasaw chief and a Negro slave, who initiates Isaac McCaslin to the woods. It is an affinity which stems not from literary tradition but from similar symbolic aims. Both are old, illiterate but wise, solitary, kinless, childless, without property... Their deaths coincide with the death of the wilderness, it is a waning away, as if they are taken back into nature, 'When I am gone,' says the dying Leatherstocking, 'there will be and end to my race'.... [He] as well as Sam Fathers had to be and remain solitary to serve their symbolic function. To start a family, to provide and procreate, would have severed their bonds to the wilderness and involved them in all the activities bearing the burden and the taint of civilization. Sterile in their solitariness, they are the representatives of a dying giant: the wilderness.... America's pre-history, the wilderness, is now in the process of being transformed into myth and the bear and Sam Fathers are taking the parts of the trolls, the giants and the Rubezahls of Europe."

Ursula Brumm

"Wilderness and Civilization: A Note on William Faulkner"

Partisan Review (Summer 1955) 340-50

"Set in Faulkner's mythical Yoknapatawpha County, the stories are unified by a common theme, the ritual of the hunt—whether it be a hunt for big Ben in 'The Bear,' for the lovesick Negro in 'Was,' for buried gold in 'The Fire and the Hearth,' or for the Negro killer in 'Pantaloon in Black.' All but the last deal with the members, black and white, of the complicated McCaslin family, beginning with the second generation in 'Was' and ending with the sixth in 'Delta Autumn.'

There is, in addition, an underlying theme of initiation into manhood and the responsibility of carrying out the social traditions. Thus young Isaac McCaslin is ritually smeared with the blood of the slain deer and recognizes his responsibility to live in a way worthy of the nobility of the animal he has killed, and young Roth Edmonds comes to an awareness of the distance imposed by society between himself and Henry Beauchamp, his Negro foster-brother and cousin. The values to be found in the wilderness and those of civilization are implicitly contrasted. 'The Bear,' the most famous of the stories and possibly Faulkner's best, deals mainly with the hunt for Big Ben, an enormous and elusive bear. A shorter but equally important section tells how Isaac McCaslin, through the discovery of his grandfather's Negro offspring, rejects his claim to the McCaslin plantation and the guilt of slavery with which it is stained."

Max J. Herzberg & staff

The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature

(Crowell 1962) 391-92

Michael Hollister (2015)

Go Down, Moses is a collection of seven related pieces of short fiction by American author William Faulkner, sometimes considered a novel. The most prominent character and unifying voice is that of Isaac McCaslin, "Uncle Ike", who will live to be an old man; "uncle to half a county and father to no one." Though originally published as a short story collection, Faulkner considered the book to be a novel in the same way *The Unvanquished* is considered a novel. Because of this, most editions no longer