

# A Study of Nature in Faulkner and Thoreau

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1.

William Faulkner and Henry David Thoreau seem to have no direct relation with each other. However, they two loved nature a great deal. They wished to face nature honestly, to think about it deeply and to describe it profoundly.

2.

William Faulkner is a Nobel prize winning author. He is a very good story teller. And most of his important novels and short stories are of the declining old families of the Deep South, Mississippi, where he spent all his life. He is also a descendant of an old family.

Faulkner was very much interested in taking a walk, riding a horse in the outskirts of his own town Oxford and going hunting in the woods of the "Delta" area near Mississippi River.

Faulkner who wished to be referred to as a "Farmer" owned his Faulkner Farm outside of Oxford. He very much loved the countryside, lakes and rivers and woods.

In *Go Down, Moses and Other Stories* (1942), especially in the stories "The Bear" and "Old People", etc. , Faulkner expressed his own thoughts on nature mainly through his other self (alter ego) Ike (Isaac) McCaslin and his hunting mentor Sam Fathers as well as their intimate friend Boon Hogganbeck, a "natural man" just like Sam Fathers. Sam and Boon both have Chickasaw blood , though Boon is regarded as a white man by town people. Sam was born of a negro slave and a Chickasaw chief who had been his spirit's father.

In "The Bear" Ike McCaslin, a grandson of the Southern planter Carothers McCaslin , goes hunting for the first time when he is ten years old. After that he takes part in the hunting camp in the woods every year. Thus he faces nature and gradually grows up under the tutorship of Sam Fathers and others. So "The Bear" is an initiation story of Ike McCaslin. Sam's teaching finally brings the boy to "Old Ben", a very big bear and symbol of the deep woods. His very innocent mind enables him to encounter the mysterious big bear.

3.

Faulkner's interest was, of course, not only in nature itself but in the relation between man and nature. Faulkner very deeply felt man's *smallness* in the face of great nature and the necessity of man's honest humbleness to nature.

Chapter 4 of "The Bear" is different in its character from the other chapters which are hunting stories in the woods including the confrontation of hunters with "Old Ben". In chapter 4 Faulkner describes the past of the McCaslin family. When Ike is 21 years old, he finds the old ledgers of his family, some of which were written by his own father Theophilus McCaslin ("Uncle Buck") and his uncle Amodeus McCaslin ("Uncle Buddy") who were twin brothers. Others were by his ancestor Carothers McCaslin. Through these ledgers Ike learns of his family's hidden and, in a sense, secret past. He first learns Carothers' immorality and inhumanity in his relation with his slave woman and her daughter. The mother named Eunice "June 21st 1883 drowned herself". He also reads "the older ledgers clumsy and archaic in size and shape, on the yellowed pages of which were recorded in the faded hand of his father Theophilus and his uncle Amodeus during the two decades before the Civil War, the manumission in title at least of Carothers McCaslin's slaves". They seem to have been treated as if they were free men. Ike finally hands all his inheritance over to his relative and he himself becomes a mere carpenter in town. He relinquishes his land and all. Faulkner's thought on nature is much reflected on that of Ike McCaslin. In chapter 4 of "The Bear" Ike argues on land with his cousin McCaslin. Ike thinks that land has never belonged to anyone, even to his own ancestors. He even cannot relinquish his land because it does not belong to him. Ike says:

'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 to sell to Grandfather for bequeathment and repudiation. Because it was never Ikkemotubbe's fathers' fathers' to bequeath Ikkemotubbe to sell to Grandfather or any man because on the instant when Ikkemotubbe discovered, realised, that he could sell it for money, on that instant it ceased ever to have been his forever, father to father to father, and the man who bought it bought nothing.'

"The Bear," Chapter 4

4.

Ike deeply thinks over the greatness of land (nature) and the smallness of men in front of that. To him men's busily hard and egoistic doings seem to be very empty. Men tame (plow) land (fields), but to Ike they only seem to have "removed the forest from it (land) 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 the money he who believed he had bought it had had to pay to get it and hold it and a reasonable profit too." ("The Bear", Chapter 4)

Ike McCaslin appears as an old man in "Delta Autumn", also a very excellent short story in *Go Down, Moses and Other Stories*. In "Delta Autumn" he talks of the revenge of the ruined woods (nature). He says like the following:

No wonder the ruined woods I used to know dont cry for retribution! he thought: The people who have destroyed it will accomplish its revenge.

"Delta Autumn"

Here we can see Faulkner's lament on the woods, that is, wilderness, destroyed by human beings. This makes us remind of Henry Thoreau angered by the destruction of the woods in Maine.

Sam Fathers also represents Faulkner's way of thinking of nature (wilderness) very well. He appears in "Old People" and "The Bear", and so on.

As already mentioned, Sam is a very nice hunter and a mentor and teacher of the boy Ike McCaslin in the wilderness. He, as a hunter, knows a great deal about animals and woods. He is a "natural man" and an inhabitant of the woods. He is faithful to McCaslin (Ike's cousin) and Major de Spain. However, he finally wishes to live alone in the woods and trains a wild big dog named "Lion" to kill Old Ben. After Old Ben is killed by "Lion" and Boon Hogganbeck, Sam dies (He asks Boon to kill him). Sam seemed to want to die now that Old Ben, a symbol of the woods, and "Lion" died and Ike became independent.

Lion is heavily wounded in the fight against Old Ben and in spite of the operation by Doctor Crawford he dies.

At any rate Sam Fathers has returned to the earth together with "Lion" and Old Ben.

The woods "would be" Ike McCaslin's mistress and his wife forever ("The Bear", Chapter 5) and he and Boon would be protectors of the woods after Sam, "Lion" and Old Ben have passed away.

5.

Faulkner sometimes finds consolation and heal in the wilderness. He sometimes uses nature as the place where his heroes and heroines escape or seclude themselves from the realities of life.

For example, "Young Bayard" (Bayard Sartoris) , hero of *Sartoris* (1929) , who has been distressed by the nightmare in which his brother John died in front of him in the airfight against Germans in World War I, rides a pony and goes to MacCallum family in the mountains in the December sunlight. That heals his heart which has been deeply hurt by the reality. He goes night hunting in the mountains with the MacCallum family members (Virginius MacCallum and his sons). Thus he can forget his hard reality though for a while.

Not long after this Bayard as a test pilot dies in the crash in Dayton, Ohio.

6.

In "The Bear" Sam, Boon and Ike, etc., almost assimilate with the woods (nature).

"Dry September", also one of Faulkner's best short stories, shows that abnormal weather (nature) drives people to the abnormal action. In this story in dry hot September after 62 days without rain McLendon and his followers lynch a negro Will Mayes to death because of the wrong rumor that he raped a white woman Minnie Cooper who was a lonesome old miss in town.

This is a very Faulkner-like story which unites nature with Southern problems (in this case a racial problem).

"Red Leaves" is also a well-known short story which shows the mismatch between the Indians who once lived with the wilderness and the manners and customs of white men which they have accepted.

This story tells the corruption of Indians who have degenerated because white men brought black slaves into their society. Indians gradually become lazy and decadent.

Indians in the wilderness once were very active and vital. They were damaged by the materialism and slavery of white people. The wilderness kept them alive, and when they left the wilderness for the civilization of white men they began to be decadent. In this case the wilderness was a very important source of life for Indians.

As Phil Stone, young Faulkner's mentor, pointed out, Faulkner was the son of his native land, northern Mississippi. He was a part of his native land which he loved a great deal. (*The Marble Faun*, 1924)

7.

Henry David Thoreau's *Walden, or Life in the Woods* (1854) must have probably been known by William Faulkner who had much interest in the woods and hunting there. Thoreau lived an experimental life in the woods to reject any convenience brought about by civilization. Like Faulkner Thoreau was a perfect individualist, a kind of genius who went on his own way throughout his life.

Henry Thoreau is an observer of nature and deep thinker of human life. He always dives into nature (wilderness) to find the true meaning of life. He seems to think that man can improve and enhance his human nature in the wilderness. He believes that nature is honest, never tells a lie. Man can and should learn much from nature. Thoreau seems to criticize men's worrying and busying themselves about trifles or being engrossed in money-making in their daily life. He says:

I see young men, my townsmen, whose misfortune it is to have inherited farms, houses, barns, cattle, and farming tools; for these are more easily acquired than got rid of. Better if they had been born in the open pasture and suckled by a wolf, that they might have seen with clearer eyes what field they were called to labor in. Who made them serfs of the soil? Why should they eat their sixty acres, when man is condemned to eat only his peck of dirt? Why should they begin digging their graves as soon as they are born? They have got to live a man's life, pushing all these things before them, and get on as well as they can. How many a poor immortal soul have I met well nigh crushed and smothered under its load, creeping down the road of life, pushing before it a barn seventy-five feet by forty, its Augean stables never cleansed, and one hundred acres of land, tillage, mowing, pasture, and wood-lot! The portionless, who struggle with no such unnecessary inherited encumbrances, find it labor enough to subdue and cultivate a few cubic feet of flesh.

*Walden, "Economy"*

Thoreau also says:

But men labor under a mistake. The better part of the man is soon ploughed into the soil for compost. By a

seeming fate, commonly called necessity, they are employed, as it says in an old book, laying up treasures which moth and rust will corrupt and thieves break through and steal. It is a fool's life, . . .

. . . .

Most men, even in this comparatively free country, through mere ignorance and mistake, are so occupied with the factitious cares and superfluously coarse labors of life that its finer fruits cannot be plucked by them. Their fingers, from excessive toil, are too clumsy and tremble too much for that. Actually, the laboring man has not leisure for a true integrity day by day; he cannot afford to sustain the manliest relations to men; his labor would be depreciated in the market. He has no time to be any thing but a machine. How can he remember well his ignorance—which his growth requires—who has so often to use his knowledge? We should feed and clothe him gratuitously sometimes, and recruit him with our cordials, before we judge of him. The finest qualities of our nature, like the bloom on fruits, can be preserved only by the most delicate handling. Yet we do not treat ourselves nor one another thus tenderly.

*Walden* , "Economy"

Furthermore he adds:

The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation. From the desperate city you go into the desperate country, and have to console yourself with the bravery of minks and muskrats. A stereotyped but unconscious despair is concealed even under what are called the games and amusements of mankind. There is no play in them, for this comes after work. But it is a characteristic of wisdom not to do desperate things.

*Walden* , "Economy"

Thoreau warns "the mass of men" and tries to "reawaken" them.

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion...

*Walden, "Where I Lived and What I Lived For"*

Thoreau wishes to "drink deeper" and to "fish in the sky". He also wishes to "mine and burrow my way through these hills" with his head. He thinks that Walden has "the richest vein" where he can mine deeply and widely.

8.

Thoreau's observation and description of nature are even scientifically exact and minute. No wonder as he is a naturalist, too.

For example, the description of the lamprey eel goes like the following:

In the shallow parts of the river, where the current is rapid and the bottom pebbly, you may sometimes see the curious circular nests of the lamprey eel (*Petromyzon Americanus*), the American stone-sucker, as large as a cart-wheel, a foot or two in height, and sometimes rising half a foot above the surface of the water. They collect these stones, of the size of a hen's egg, with their mouths, as their name implies, and are said to fashion them into circles with their tails. They ascend falls by clinging to the stones, which may sometimes be raised by lifting the fish by the tail. As they are not seen on their way down the streams, it is thought by fishermen that they never return, but waste away and die, clinging to rocks and stumps of trees for an indefinite period; a tragic feature in the scenery of the river bottoms worthy to be remem-

bered with Shakespeare's description of the sea-floor. They are rarely seen in our waters at present, on account of the dams, though they are taken in great quantities at the mouth of the river in Lowell. Their nests, which are very conspicuous, look more like art than anything in the river.

*A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers,  
"Saturday"*

The description is not only exact and detailed but also very living.

One of the author's students once said that what Thoreau wished to say was not necessarily very clear. Though Thoreau meditates on man through nature, the author, in a sense, might partly have to agree with this opinion, because there might seem to be a certain kind of "gap" between what he describes in details about nature and what he wishes to say on man and his life. A "leap" of a genius might be found in him.

At any rate, in *Walden*, for instance, Thoreau closely watches and writes on various things in nature. In "Sounds" in *Walden*, he, in undisturbed solitude and stillness, sits in the sunny doorway from sunrise to noon and listens to the songs of birds and the noise of some traveller's wagon on the distant highway. He writes on the outdoor comfortableness and splendour, plants and birds, the whistle of the locomotive. He depicts much of the fire-steed (locomotive) which has given not a little effect upon human life. He also hears the bells of several places on Sunday, the echo of which is partly the voice of the wood.

The distant lowing of some cow sounds sweet and melodious at evening. The whippoorwills chant their vespers. The serenade of a hooting owl is also very impressive to Thoreau. So are the trump of bullfrogs at the shore and the sound of cock-crowing from his leaving. All the animals and birds besiege his hut beside the pond with their "sounds." His "house" has "no gate, no frontyard and no path to the civilized world."

Thoreau finds "the most sweet and tender, the most innocent and encouraging society" in nature. Very black melancholy is unknown to those who live in the midst of nature and have their senses.

Men are the subjects of an experiment which is not a little interesting to Thoreau, who quotes from Confucius like this:

Virtue does not remain as an abandoned orphan ; it must  
of necessity have neighbors.

*Walden*, "Solitude"

Thoreau is not alone in the woods. He has "a great deal of company" in his house, especially in the morning, when nobody calls. He says he is no more lonely than a single mullein or dandelion in a pasture, or a bean leaf, or sorrel, or a horse-fly, or a humble-bee. He is no more lonely than the Mill Brook, or a weathercock, or the north star, or the south wind, or an April shower, or a January thaw, or the first spider in a new house.

Thoreau's parlor is the pine wood behind his hut. He invites important guests to this wood. His way of reception is very simple but homely and natural just like that of Indian chief Massassoit to Winslow afterward governor of the Plymouth Colony. Thoreau's visitor is, for instance, a Canadian wood-chopper and post-maker, whose character and nature are warmly described by him. Other visitors are travellers, half-witted men from the almshouse, runaway slaves with plantation manners, etc.

I had more cheering visitors than the last. Children come a-berrying, railroad men taking a Sunday morning walk in clean shirts, fishermen and hunters, poets and philosophers, in short, all honest pilgrims, who came out to the woods for freedom's sake, and really left the village behind, I was ready to greet with,—"Welcome, Englishmen! welcome, Englishmen," for I had had communication with that race.

*Walden, "Visitors"*

Of course, among the visitors are restless committed men, whose time is all taken up in getting a living and keeping it. Thoreau does not like those who "pried into" his life in the woods.

Thoreau becomes intimate with beans. He learns a great deal from growing beans in his bean-field. He says, "What shall I learn of beans or beans of me?" He cherish them, hoes them, and has an eye to them early and late.

9.

Thoreau observes Walden Pond very closely, precisely and deeply. He not only appreciates the beauty of the pond but also fathoms its depth.

He finds Concord waters have at least two colors, one when viewed at a distance, and another, more proper, close at hand. Thus he considers how various colors work in the pond. He also talks of the reason for flood, Indian legend and the origin of the name "Walden".

Fishes and birds of the pond are also observed and vividly described. To Thoreau the pond is his well ready dug. He also says, "A lake is the land-

scape's most beautiful and expressive feature. It is earth's eye; looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature." (*Walden*, "The Ponds") Thoreau thinks that "A field of water betrays the spirit that is in the air. It is continually receiving new life and motion from above. It is intermediate in its nature between land and sky." (*Walden*, "The Ponds")

Thoreau's fathoming of the pond leads to that of human heart and mind.

Through fishing and observing birds and animals including "a war between two races of ants," and through observing visitors, of course, including his intimate friends Ellery Channing a poet and Bronson Alcott a true friend of man, Thoreau deeply thinks about man and his life, man and nature, himself and others, and even about heaven and earth.

Thoreau says that what he has observed of the pond is no less true in ethics. According to him, to know how a man's shores trend and his adjacent country or circumstances is to infer his own depth and concealed bottom.

Thoreau discusses the color of ice in Walden Pond and in him the pure water of Walden is mingled with the sacred water of the Ganges.

10.

*Walden* ends with "Spring" in which Thoreau describes the phenomena at the time of thawing such as sand flowing. He also suggests that nature is the mother of human beings, the earth is "living poetry like the leaves of a tree."

In "Conclusion" of *Walden* Thoreau insists on the importance of truth and that of shooting one's self.

Thoreau has learned from his experiment that if man firmly tries to live his own life for his dream he can find new, universal and more liberal laws will begin to establish themselves around and within him. Thoreau insists that man should love his own life and live it and that he should come to his bearings. Thoreau wishes "to walk even with the Builder of the universe".

*Walden* comes to an end with the words "There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star."

11.

Both William Faulkner and Henry David Thoreau very much loved nature and also tried to think about the relation between man and nature. Both of them seem to have strongly wished to learn something important from the woods (wilderness).

Faulkner described nature as a Southern writer. His woods and hunting stories are usually covered with the veil of the South whether it is thin or

thick. His nature is often dyed with Southern colors. His wilderness stories are often told together with Southern old families, racial problems, Chickasaw Indians, Southern history including the Civil War, and so on.

Faulkner in his woods stories is not so much positive and clear as transcendentalists of New England, of course, including Thoreau. Faulkner's hunting stories might end rather tragically just like his many other stories of the South. And this often comes from their backgrounds full of the Southern misty atmosphere characterized by the old tradition, legends, fates and dooms, burden of original sins, history of slavery, defeat of the Civil War and decline of the plantation systems and old families, and a certain kind of Southern primitivism and native spirits, etc.

Briefly speaking, Faulkner's way of thinking about nature and about the relation between man and nature generally depends on his own view of the people, history and society of the Deep South. His stories of the woods are very humane in his own way.

Henry David Thoreau's peculiarities are very much of New England. Thoreau is regarded as one of the transcendentalists.

However, he was outside of Brook Farm though he was the most important follower to Ralph Waldo Emerson.

As already mentioned, Thoreau lived in the woods, travelled through the wilderness, thinking on man and nature. He observed fishes, birds and animals, villagers and Indians, flowers and herbs, rivers and streams, hills and mountains, waters and sky, etc.

He watched everything on the earth and in the sky wishing to find what man is and how he should be. Thoreau was pantheistic. He was a devotee of human beings. He told of the vastness of the universe and insisted that man should explore the new world in him. He believed that man could advance taking vital power into him from nature. He often seemed to be very ironical, even cynical, in saying things. But, in spite of that, he, in fact, was very affirmative, positive and his view of man and nature was clear and strong though he once confessed he had been awed by the original awful figure of great nature on Mt. Ktaaden in Maine.

Though Faulkner and Thoreau are different from each other in their way of viewing man and nature, it is quite clear that both of them have contributed a great deal to the history of American nature writing, each in their own way.