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FAULKNER'S LITERARY ENVIRONMENT:

ASSESSING THE SOUTH'S RELATIONSHIP WITH LAND ABUSE

by

ERIC SANDARG

ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to understand William Faulkner as an environmentally conscious author whose views on land abuse appear throughout his work. The goal is twofold: first, to examine how he criticizes ecological abuse; second, to discover which sources likely influenced him and helped him to form his perspectives on environmental issues. Index words include the following: William Faulkner, environmentalism, environmental abuse, land, land abuse, Native Americans, Chickasaw, Choctaw, South, Mississippi, agrarian tradition, Twelve Southerners, appropriation, exploitation, degradation.

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ASSESSING THE SOUTH'S RELATIONSHIP WITH LAND ABUSE

A Thesis Submitted By

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Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

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2011

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2011

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May 2011

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1. INTRODUCTION

Nature has long played an integral role in Western literature: from Greek drama of classical antiquity to the pastoral poetry of early modern England to the essays of the American transcendentalists, people's relationship with the land has remained a rich and significant literary subject. Perhaps nowhere has this legacy continued as strongly as in the American South. Southern historian Frank Owsley notes that unlike in the North where throughout the nineteenth century urban areas expanded and industry flourished, the South has maintained a society "close to the soil" and thus has become "the seat of an agrarian civilization" whose writers have attempted to uphold the tradition established by earlier literary figures (71).

However, the South underwent two environmental crises—one internal and one external—that compromised this connection between the people and the land. The first crisis occurred during the colonial era when the slave-driven Southern economy came to rely increasingly on large-scale agriculture. Small farm plots eventually gave way to expansive plantations, and fields of cotton, tobacco, and rice soon overspread much of the land. As the plantation economy further developed, pioneers cleared forests and rapidly advanced westward to obtain territory inhabited by Native Americans. These incoming frontiersmen, whom William Faulkner describes as arriving "in wagons laden with slaves" to clear "the virgin land . . . into plantation fields for profit," viewed nature in a fundamentally different manner than did the Native Americans whom they replaced ("Mississippi" 14). Many of these settlers invariably placed profit above necessity; coupled with a utilitarian view of the land, this culminated in a reckless subjugation of nature that had no precedent in America. Faulkner underscores the contrast between the

Native American culture and the white culture by placing characters from each group at either extreme: the tribesmen in his fiction (unless influenced by whites) are responsible stewards of their environment, whereas the white characters—whom Faulkner presents as willing to fell "a tree which took two hundred years to grow [just] to extract from it a bear or a capful of wild honey" ("Mississippi" 13)—reveal their negligence and disregard toward the environment.

By the end of the nineteenth century, a second wave of environmental abuse had occurred, this time from an external source, as much of the South's remaining woodlands fell victim to a burgeoning lumber industry whose exploits further denuded the remaining wilderness. Whereas early Southern settlers bear responsibility for the first wave of abuse, blame for this second wave rests largely on Northerners. Mills appeared throughout the South during the late 1800s as lumbering companies seized opportunities to exploit Southern resources. According to *Mississippi: The WPA Guide to the Magnolia State*, the South, still economically weak after its defeat in the Civil War and in need of capital, relinquished a considerable amount of land to lumber companies that had exhausted the timber supply in much of the North, especially the Great Lakes region (108).

Faulkner expressed concern for such environmental abuse by focusing his ire on the land degradation in his home state of Mississippi. In his fiction he discusses the first wave of exploitation (territorial expansion) with characters, such as Thomas Sutpen, who abuse the land not only by appropriating it but also by physically destroying it—aided by slave labor, Sutpen literally rips and tears his property out of the wilderness. Faulkner also emphasizes the second wave of abuse (lumbering) in his fiction, and he also critiques

it in his non-fiction. In the 1954 essay entitled "Mississippi," he laments not only his state's "diminishing wilderness" which began a generation earlier due to reckless clear-cutting but also the ever-growing presence of modern opportunists "destroying that little which . . . remain[ed]" (13). He further notes how the creation of "vast lumbering plants and mills" has reduced much of Mississippi's pristine forests to "stump-pocked barrens" (20-21). Faulkner's criticism of both the internal and external forms of land exploitation occurs throughout his corpus: in *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) and *Requiem for a Nun* (1951) he focuses on land exploitation, as he does in the short stories "Red Leaves" (1930), "A Justice" (1931), "Lo!" (1934), and "A Courtship" (1948); in *Light in August* (1932) and *Go Down, Moses* (1942) he explores the abuses of nature caused by lumbering operations.

This thesis presents William Faulkner as an environmentally-conscious author who not only carries on the agrarian tradition of Western literature but whose views on ecological abuse are explicit and recurrent throughout his work. This entails a two-part approach: first, an exploration of his methods of critiquing land exploitation and degradation by an analysis of selected passages from his corpus; and second, an investigation of stories, folk tales, legends, and other information—whether written or orally composed—concerning the environment of early Mississippi in order to discover which available sources may have shaped his ecological views and influenced his writing.

Exploring Faulkner's methods of critiquing environmental abuse requires applying ecocriticism to the selected passages. This interdisciplinary study emerged in 1978 with the publication of William H. Rueckert's "Literature and Ecology: An

Experiment in Ecocriticism" and by the 1990s had become firmly established as a system devoted to studying "the relationship between literature and the physical environment" by offering an "earth-centered approach to literary studies" (Glotfelty xviii). Ecocriticism thereby "firmly establishes nature as an essential referent of contemporary critical theory" with its philosophical roots dating back to the mid-nineteenth century in the transcendentalism espoused by Emerson and Thoreau (Malpas and Wake 179).

In his essay entitled "Nature," Emerson addresses themes that will later emerge in Faulkner's writings—themes concerning the intricate relationship between man and the environment. Likewise, much of Faulkner's writing includes vestiges of Thoreau's insights regarding man's place in nature. In *Go Down, Moses*, for instance, Faulkner's concern regarding industry's territorial advancement into nature—marked by log trains penetrating the wilderness to haul off lumber—echoes Thoreau's anxieties about railways encroaching into the nearby woods of Walden Pond. Furthermore, Faulkner's disdain of land exploitation parallels Thoreau's dismay of the plundering of nature's bounty by commercial interests. With a thorough understanding of Faulkner's literary antecedents and contemporaneous social milieu, this thesis will assess the South's relationship with land exploitation, profit, and Native Americans through the fiction of one of the twentieth century's foremost authors.

2. ANALYZING FAULKNER'S METHODS OF ENVIRONMENTAL CRITICISM

2.1 Land Appropriation and Exploitation

Exploring Faulkner's views on the environment involves studying his implicit criticism of land appropriation and exploitation, the latter term referring to irresponsible and unsustainable land-use practices that result in depletion of natural resources. Faulkner addresses such exploitation by focusing on both the victims and the perpetrators of land appropriation. He underscores the misfortunes of Native American characters who lose their land as white settlers encroach on their territory, and he also implicitly criticizes those settlers who exploit the new land they have overtaken.

The heart of the matter revolves around Western notions of land ownership that Europeans brought to America. Many of them held a utilitarian view of nature, perceiving the earth as a limitless bounty to be exploited for personal (i.e., financial) benefit. This differs drastically from the less exploitative and more responsible stance held by Native Americans that realizes a sustainable relationship between man and nature so that human needs are met in a manner that does not permanently harm the environment or deplete its resources. In *The Land Question*, nineteenth-century political economist Henry George condones the latter stance, asserting that we should perceive nature as a "reservoir from which man must draw the means of maintaining his life and satisfying his wants" and arguing that "every man . . . has a natural right to as much land as is necessary for his own uses, and that no man has a right to any more" (117). Faulkner[1] seems to agree with George and intimates that a root cause of exploitation is

[1] It is noteworthy that Faulkner did not come from a plantation-owning background: his relatives lived in town and held careers in railroading, banking, and politics (Blotner 4, 86).

the utilitarian notion held by many early Americans that land, like other goods, is a mere market commodity available for sale and purchase.

One way that Faulkner critiques this utilitarian model of land-use is by contrasting it with the land-use patterns of Native American characters. Whereas he portrays his Chickasaw and Choctaw characters as "partners of the wilderness," according to Faulkner scholar Millar MacLure (165-66), he frequently depicts the white characters as seeking to transform nature for monetary benefit—and often destroying it in the process. This depiction is historically accurate; concepts such as the homestead principle and manifest destiny influenced early Americans to perceive nature through a utilitarian and profit-oriented lens and contributed, if at least indirectly, to the "white man's property lust" that lies at the heart of land exploitation (Dabney 47).

Moving ever westward, pushing toward the Pacific Ocean as they overspread the continent, these settlers discovered new land and resources beyond each horizon. They had developed a pioneer culture on a vast continent that to them must have appeared nearly infinite: miles of coastline, seemingly endless tracts of fields and forests, abundant natural resources, plenty of wild game—and no one there to utilize this bounty and cultivate the land but Native Americans who, in the minds of many settlers, were unfit stewards of the environment because they did not exploit these supposedly God-given resources. In fact, colonists such as John Cotton used this as a reason for Europeans (in his case, Puritans) to settle the New World. In his 1630 sermon, "Gods [sic] Promise to His Plantation," delivered to a group of Puritan colonists departing England for the Massachusetts Bay Colony, he justifies land appropriation by asserting that, even though America is already inhabited, its denizens have not properly subdued the land, and

therefore the colonists have the right to settle the land and properly capitalize on it. He articulates this stance by expressing that "in a vacant soyle, he that taketh possession of it, and bestoweth culture and husbandry upon it, his Right it is" (Cotton 5).

Faulkner, however, explores the notion that whites have no valid claim to the land, even after they purchase it. In *Go Down, Moses* Isaac urges his cousin McCaslin Edmonds to relinquish the family property on the grounds that it does not rightfully belong to them because Edmonds is the

> direct male descendant of him who saw the opportunity and took it, bought the land, took the land, got the land no matter how, held it to bequeath, no matter how, out of the old grant, the first patent, when it was a wilderness of wild beasts and wilder men, and cleared it, translated it into something to bequeath to his children, worthy of bequeathment for his descendants' ease and security and pride and to perpetuate his name and accomplishments. (256)

One way that Faulkner critiques such land take-over is by emphasizing the faults of the settlers, portraying them not as heroic historical figures but as dishonest and manipulative. This occurs in the novels *Requiem for a Nun* and *Absalom, Absalom!* and in the short story "Lo!" In *Requiem for a Nun*, which recounts the founding of Jefferson, the county seat of Faulkner's apocryphal Yoknapatawpha County, the narrator reveals that the founders built the town on Chickasaw land that had been appropriated by white settlers. Jason Lycurgus Compson, one of the founders of the fledgling town, had swapped Chief Ikkemotubbe a horse "for a square mile of what was to be the most valuable land in the future town of Jefferson" (13). The inference here is that Compson

understood the potential worth of the land and tricked its Native American owner out of the property rights. This notion of an unfair dealing appears again in the Compson Appendix to *The Sound and the Fury* where it is revealed that Ikkemotubbe "granted out of his vast lost domain a solid square mile of virgin North Mississippi dirt" not just for the horse but "in partial return for the right to proceed in peace, by whatever means he and his people saw fit, afoot or on horse provided they were Chickasaw horses, to the wild western land presently to be called Oklahoma" (737).

Criticism of such deceitful land takeover also appears in *Absalom, Absalom!* This novel, which relates the founding myths of Yoknapatawpha County, features Thomas Sutpen's grand design of staking his claim in Mississippi and creating a family dynasty. In 1833, Sutpen purchases one hundred square miles of unspoiled wilderness from Ikkemotubbe for a devastatingly low price.[2] Known as Sutpen's Hundred, this fertile bottomland soon becomes devastated as its owner forces his slaves—guided by a kid-napped French architect—to construct a mansion that will house his future wife and progeny.

The theme of dishonest, manipulative settlers overtaking Native American land also appears in the short story "Lo!" which concerns the Indian chief Frank Weddel who leads a tribal delegation to Washington, D.C., to seek justice directly from the American President. In this story Faulkner underscores whites' unjust treatment of Native Americans by having a white character manipulate the Chickasaws for financial gain. This character (whom Weddel's nephew has murdered) had deviously purchased land

[2] No actual numeric price is given, though in *Go Down, Moses* Faulkner reveals retrospectively that Sutpen had bought the land from Ikkemotubbe with "money or rum or whatever it was" (255).

surrounding a shallow section of a river—the only spot for miles where wagons could cross—only to immediately levy a toll on all who wished to ford the river at this spot, including the Chickasaws from whom he had just purchased it. As Weddell notes in a letter to President Lincoln, the man who bought the land

> became too obsessed with the idea of owning this ford, having heard tales of his own kind who, after the curious and restless fashion of white men, find one side of a stream of water superior enough to the other to pay coins of money for the privilege of reaching it. So the affair was arranged as this white man desired it. (401)

In cases like these, the whites are manipulative because they are well aware of the "worthlessness of what they gave the Indians and the worth of what they gained in return" (Kerr 84). Thus, they trick the Native Americans into thinking that their land is valueless, something they gladly should be rid of and from which they will attain one hundred percent profit; then, the whites use the newly purchased land as a valuable commodity (now that they own it), something that can by itself generate money. By highlighting these "acts of deception" that cleared the "land of its earlier inhabitants" (Matthews 174), Faulkner stresses the dishonesty of the white characters and thereby criticizes their utilitarian outlook on nature.

2.2 Land Degradation

A second method of exploring Faulkner's environmentalism involves studying his criticism of land degradation, the actual physical abuse of land (such as erosion or deforestation) that results from exploitation. Faulkner places just as much emphasis on this as he does on land appropriation and exploitation, focusing on how the newly acquired wilderness soon becomes "the victim of the Anglo-Saxons['] rapacity" as they destroy the land (Wheeler 128). His techniques for criticizing such degradation range from simple descriptions of land abuse to scenes in which slavery and unnaturalness are juxtaposed with images of land degradation.

In *Absalom, Absalom!*, for instance, Sutpen's slaves have "dragged house and gardens out of virgin swamp" (30) after having torn from the soil the lumber and mud bricks used to construct it. Guided by Sutpen and his kidnapped French architect, the slaves use "the shovels and picks and axes of peaceful conquest" as they "overrun suddenly the hundred square miles of tranquil and astonished earth and drag house and formal gardens violently out of the soundless Nothing and clap them down like cards upon a table" (4). Faulkner's use of the sawmill, though, whose sole function is to mechanically devour the forest, is perhaps his best method of representing unbridled environmental devastation. In *Light in August* the sawmill serves as a harbinger of destruction, as it would in fourteen years "destroy all the timber within its reach" (2). Linking land abuse with such volatile images is fitting since Faulkner grew up during a time when the "industrialization of Mississippi society . . . coincided with the decimation of the wilderness" (Smith 43). He is able to express his personal scorn for such violation

by embodying ecological abuse in the form of sawmills whose unrestricted use contributes to the destruction of nature.

A second method of criticizing this abuse involves presenting images of enslavement alongside instances of land degradation. *Go Down, Moses* chronicles the history of the McCaslin family and deals with land ownership, environmental abuse, and the vanishing wilderness. In the chapter "Pantaloon in Black," the narrator focuses on Rider who has recently lost his wife. After her burial, Rider returns to his job at the local sawmill where he begins to work in a frenzy. He begins "casting loose the shackle chains" (143) that secure the lumber, an image that presents the sawmill workers as having subdued nature to the point where they have mastery over it. Faulkner also connects the lumber industry with unnaturalness in this scene, particularly when Rider begins hauling the logs at an incredible speed. The setting resonates with confusion and loud, unnatural noises as the air "pulse[s] with the rapid beating of the exhaust and the whine and clang of the saw" (143) amid a "long rumbling roar punctuated by grunting shouts and . . . chanted phrases of song tossed back and forth" (144). The lumber mill in the previously unspoiled wilderness is an unnatural entity whose mere presence there clashes with the environment.

3. ASSESSING THE CONSEQUENCES OF ENVIRONMENTAL ABUSE

3.1 The Fall of the Native American Culture

Faulkner's evaluation of land appropriation, exploitation, and degradation is not merely an end in itself; rather, his critique of this abuse serves as a platform upon which he is able to address other pertinent issues. One such issue is the precarious social position of Mississippi's Native Americans during the nineteenth century. Throughout much of his fiction, Faulkner inextricably weaves the theme of land abuse with the plight of Native Americans by relating the abuse to their cultural demise. One factor leading to their decline is their mimicking of the utilitarian land-use practices, such as land-ownership and plantation slavery, introduced by white characters, the adoption of which ultimately proves destructive to their culture. In this sense, Faulkner uses their plight as a vehicle through which he can indirectly critique the European culture responsible for introducing these practices in the first place.

The plight of Mississippi's native inhabitants, who were mainly Chickasaws and Choctaws, began with their initial contact with Europeans in the sixteenth century as Spanish expeditions passed through the region and establish settlements and small trading posts. Over time, more Europeans arrived and the territory came under Spanish, French, and then English influence until becoming part of the United States after the American Revolution (*Mississippi* 59). During this process, the Native Americans' situation progressively worsened as they ceded large land holdings to the government; eventually, they became marginalized as whites assumed the dominant social role. By the mid-nineteenth century, Chickasaws and Choctaws incrementally lost most of their ancestral land and found themselves relegated to a subservient social position with little choice but

to adjust to this new order and adopt the customs of the dominant culture—before long they replaced their tribal languages with English, substituted Western-style clothing for their traditional garb, and abandoned their communal land practices in favor of private land-ownership and Western farming methods.

The United States government played a vital role in this land take-over. Land treaties issued by the government serve primarily to remove American Indians and therefore open the area for white settlement; however, many treaties also specifically required the remaining Native Americans to farm the land, a measure undertaken as a means to civilize them by compelling them to adopt European land-use customs. The impact of this was profound. As the dominant culture imposed its will upon the few remaining members of these indigenous tribes, the role of the Native Americans progressively diminished until, by the start of the twentieth century, most Chickasaws and Choctaws were landless, jobless subalterns who lacked citizenship.

The root of this alienation can be traced back, in part, to Native Americans' mimicry of the Western lifestyle by which they were surrounded. Although Faulkner often presents "the original Indian culture . . . in total opposition to modernity" (Sayre 38) and portrays them as "cooperating with nature and maintaining the generous natural bounty of the land" (Gage 29), he also presents westernized Native Americans who have imitated certain aspects of the dominant social order. As whites continued to thrust upon them materialistic values regarding land-ownership and even slavery, most of the remaining Chickasaws and Choctaws became thoroughly "seduced by Western culture" (Rhodes 78). Enamored with this new materialistic outlook, they eventually partake in both exploitation and degradation of the land. What begins as "bewilderment at white

people's obsession with land boundaries" (Parker 92) evolves into a keen interest that eventually propels the Native Americans to "engage in a similar quest for . . . property" (Johnson 101) that serves both historically and in Faulkner's fiction as a main impetus contributing to their downfall.

Perhaps the most vivid examples of this mimicry occur in the short stories "Red Leaves" and "A Justice" in which Faulkner depicts American Indian characters as succumbing to materialistic lifestyles, which includes the adoption of plantation slavery. Patricia Galloway notes how the Native Americans in "A Justice" adopt the practice of chattel slavery and seek "to make the[ir] space a slave-based system like white-owned plantations" (63). In this story, Sam Fathers reminisces how the chief of his tribe, Ikkemotubbe, had once "owned the Plantation, the Negroes," and "all the land" ("A Justice" 344) because, in pursuit of slave-made profit, Ikkemotubbe had endeavored "to acquire more slaves and to cultivate some of his land, as the white people did" ("Red Leaves" 318). In instances such as this, in which they are "patterning the white people" (*Requiem for a Nun* 34), the "Eden of the Indians is converted to a plantation economy" (Taylor 205-06) in which profit overrides necessity.

With the shift to a plantation economy comes the concomitant abuse of land; just as white farmers had felled forests to create plantations, Native Americans eventually "cleared the land with the Negroes and planted in it grain" ("Red Leaves" 320). "Red Leaves," however, abounds with Native American characters admitting their reluctance to slavery and their acknowledgement that such mimicry of white culture poses potential threats to their traditional way of life. The character named Three Basket, for instance, opines to an unnamed fellow tribesman: "I do not like slavery. It is not the good way. In

the old days, there was the good way. But not now" (314). Although Three Basket tacitly opposes slavery and acknowledges its detrimental effects on his culture, he remains unsure of how his tribe can be rid of the burden of maintaining a slave-based economy; ultimately, in a defeatist manner, he resolves to clear more land to sustain the system of plantation slavery in which his tribe is seemingly trapped. He reluctantly suggests that they "[r]aise more Negroes by clearing more land to make corn to feed them" so that they can "sell them to the white men for money" (319).

Another example of land abuse reminiscent of the destruction wrought by white settlers occurs in "A Justice" in which Herman Basket relates how his tribe, under the direction of Issetibeha, acquired an abandoned steamboat that had run ashore on a sandbar and dragged it back to their territory twelve miles away to convert it into living quarters. The appropriation of the steamboat reveals not only their mimicry of white culture but also the environmental destruction that comes with it. This overland transport necessitated the felling of all the trees in their way in order to create a path and to use the newly cut trees as rollers beneath the steamboat. Herman Basket relates the enormity of such a task: "It had taken them five months to get it out of the bottom, because they had to cut down trees to make a path for it" (354).

Faulkner uses examples such as these to highlight the fact that, for Native Americans, contact with the dominant white culture not only leads to the "unadulterated mimicking of the property-driven white culture" (Johnson 113) that surrounds them but also "ultimately leads to their demise" (111) as the adoption of such land-use practices proves destructive to their very existence. Eventually, they "become a threat to themselves, as their appropriation of the dominant culture's mores leads them to an

immersion in the materialistic quest for property" (Johnson 108). In "Red Leaves," Three Basket relates the following regarding slavery:

> This world is going to the dogs. . . . It is being ruined by white men. We got along fine for years and years, before the white men foisted their Negroes upon us. In the old days the old men sat in the shade and . . . smoked tobacco and talked of honor and grave affairs; now what do we do? Even the old wear themselves into the grave taking care of [the slaves]. (323)

The tone here seems more ironic than empathetic, a possible attempt at black humor—after all, these characters are able to lament their predicament but are unable to effect any real change. Relegated to their subaltern social position, they lack a sense of agency and therefore can do nothing more than passively bemoan their situation.

Faulkner further alludes to the cultural damage caused by adoption of Western land practices by giving chief Ikkemotubbe—the character perhaps most corrupted by white influence—the nickname Doom. As chief of his tribe, he had assumed the title of The Man, a term his French patron and comrade Chevalier De Vitry translates to *Du Homme*, which eventually becomes ominously bastardized into Doom. Doom's assimilation into a materialistic Western lifestyle becomes apparent to his tribesmen after his return from a visit to New Orleans upon which he arrives home with fancy clothing, several slaves he has won through gambling, and a gold snuff-box filled with a mysterious poisonous powder ("A Courtship" 363).

Doom's later actions further attest to the degree to which the Western lifestyle has influenced him and, synecdochally, his fellow tribesmen, especially in *Absalom,*

Absalom! in which he sells one hundred square miles of pristine forest land to Thomas Sutpen. Faulkner scholar Dale Breaden refers to the "curse of land ownership" when "Ikkemotubbe discovers he can sell the land of his people. By the means of this discovery, Ikkemotubbe curses his own people, for as time passes they vanish from Yoknapatawpha County" (347). Ikkemotubbe thereby "incurs a curse because of his exploitation of land . . . and thus brings about the degeneration of his line" (Taylor 207)—here, the mode of exploitation being the sale of land for profit. Since "the abandonment of communal ownership of land was among the factors leading to the demise of the Native American culture" (Johnson 103), this sale contributes to his tribe's near extinction. Other characters succumb to a materialist value system as well; in *Requiem for a Nun*, Issetibeha sells the last of his tribe's land to the settlers who later found the town of Jefferson. Examples like these demonstrate how Native Americans' mimicry of their colonizers initiates their own cultural demise.

By presenting such imitation and the harm it causes, Faulkner addresses a larger issue: his portrayal of the demise of the Native American culture serves as an indirect critique of the flaws of the dominant white society. Patricia Galloway notes that this mimicry clearly suggests a "sign of the degeneracy into tyranny that Faulkner attributes to white influence" (16). One implicit critique is that white notions of land-stewardship are inherently less noble than those of the Native Americans. Faulkner's Native Americans—before being corrupted—live in a natural state in which "man holds only as much land as he can use" and their departure from that suggests that when a person "devises a method of controlling more land than the share he uses for his family's support, then destiny becomes perverted, evil stalks the earth, for natural law has been

violated and the natural order disturbed" (Breaden 346). Ward Miner agrees, stating that the

> simple, uncomplicated virtues of the Indians are ruined by the white man and his placing a property or money evaluation upon nature and even upon his fellow man—the Negro slave. This is the moral flaw of the original [town of] Jefferson. These early settlers could have avoided this moral error by emulating the austere moral virtues of the Indians. But instead the Indians, before they leave the county, are corrupted by the concepts of the whites. (132-33)

By displaying such an outcome, Faulkner critiques land abuse by presenting its imperfect replication, describing "an ironic reflection of the dominant culture" (Johnson 123), yet why he specifically employs Native Americans to convey his message requires further explanation. Breaden notes that Faulkner uses them because

> probably more than any other single group, [they] suffered from man's greed for the possession of the land, suffered so that they faced extinction in Mississippi. They were the first to suffer the evils of private property in land in Yoknapatawpha County, yet they were, in many ways, responsible for their own plight, for it was they who partially let loose the curse of the land when they discovered they could sell the earth. (354)

The crisis of the Native Americans serves a larger purpose, though, as Faulkner uses it to address another common trope in his fiction: the decline of the South.

3.2 The Decline of the South

Although adoption of Western land practices plays a key role in the destruction of Native American culture, Faulkner does not present this destruction as an end in itself; rather, he uses their cultural demise to foreshadow the eventual decline of the South. Since his Native American characters serve as "disturbing mirror[s] of the colonial authority, Faulkner ultimately alludes to the demise of the white culture itself" when he describes their downfall, so that "the degeneration of Indian culture serves as a harbinger of doom of the white culture" (Johnson 119-20). Faulkner illustrates the South's decline in two ways: by emphasizing the socio-cultural downfall of Yoknapatawpha County's quasi-aristocracy as the wealthy land-owning class disintegrates, and by stressing the region's eventual subservience to Northern economic interests, particularly in relation to the lumber industry.

The town of Jefferson, the county seat of Yoknapatawpha, originated around 1800 when several pioneering men—including Alexander Holston, Samuel Habersham, and Louis Grenier—founded the settlement. Soon a small and elite gentry emerged and, according to Faulkner's hand-drawn map in the appendix of *Absalom, Absalom!*, much of the property in the county belonged to this patriarchy: to the southeast lay Louis Grenier's cotton plantation, known as Frenchman's Bend; to the north, just above town, the Sartoris estate; in the northwest, Sutpen's Hundred; and toward the center, just outside of Jefferson, the Compson property (314-15). Although at one time these prominent citizens comprised the county's elite, this Southern aristocracy eventually crumbles as their families degenerate.

The initial land-owner in the county is Louis Grenier, who establishes a large cotton plantation and holds the first slaves. His saga receives little attention throughout Faulkner's work, although his name does appear briefly in *The Hamlet* as the narrator mentions that his plantation is now abandoned. On its site stands "the gutted shell of an enormous house with its fallen stables and slave quarters and overgrown gardens" (3). Nearly all memory of the Frenchman Grenier has disappeared, so that even "his name was forgotten, his pride but a legend about the land he had wrested from the jungle and tamed" (4). Grenier's last surviving descendant is feeble-minded Lonnie Grinnup, whom Faulkner features in the novel *Knight's Gambit*. Grinnup resides in the "center of the thousand or more acres his ancestors had once owned" and lives "in the hovel he had built himself of an old tent and a few mismatched boards and flattened oil tins," cohabiting with a "deaf-and-dumb orphan . . . who had not even grown mentally as far as he himself had" (*Knight's Gambit* 66).

Another fallen member of the land-owning class is Thomas Sutpen, who first appears in Yoknapatawpha County in 1833 when he purchases land from Ikkemotubbe. Sutpen fathers four children over his lifetime: Charles Bon, whose mother is a Haitian mulatta; Clytemnestra, the illegitimate mulatta offspring of Sutpen and one of his slaves; Henry and Judith, whose mother is Ellen Coldfield, and the baby girl of Wash Jones's granddaughter. However, tragedy arises after Sutpen endeavors to forge his dynasty. Charles Bon, who had been absent most of Sutpen's life, reemerges when Henry accompanies him to Jefferson to meet Judith, Charles's half-sister. When Thomas Sutpen realizes Charles's identity, he forbids the potential marriage of Charles and Judith, a rejection that prompts Henry to renounce his birthright and flee.

Further misfortune befalls the family as Ellen dies during the Civil War. Henry, after learning of his brother's mixed-race heritage, commits fratricide to prevent him from marrying Judith, and eventually Henry perishes in the burning house on the Sutpen property. Judith's demise is less severe but nevertheless tragic: she dies a spinster while nursing Charles Etienne de Saint Valery (Charles Bon's son) back to health. Thomas Sutpen himself dies at the hands of Wash Jones, a poor squatter who becomes incensed upon discovering that Sutpen spurned his daughter Milly's child because the baby is not male. Thus the once-prominent dynasty dissolves into complete ruin. Eventually, as related in *Absalom, Absalom!*, the Sutpen lineage ends with "the hulking, slack-faced" idiot Jim Bond, the son of Charles Etienne de Saint Valerie Bon and an unnamed woman (297).

The Compsons experience a drastic degeneration as well, as presented in *The Sound and the Fury*. The nihilistic father, Jason Richmond Lycurgus Compson III, and his hypochondriac wife, Caroline, rear four children whose ill-fated lives nearly bring an end to their family line. Their man-child son, Benjamin, suffers mental retardation following lack of proper care, is castrated due to concerns that he is potentially a carnal threat to the community, and is confined in an insane asylum. The neurotic and highly obsessive Quentin commits suicide amid severe internal frustration regarding what he perceives to be the sexual promiscuity of his rebellious sister, Caddy. Caddy gives birth to a daughter of questionable paternity and her husband, Herbert Head, soon leaves her, after which she becomes a prostitute. The eldest sibling, Jason, proves to be a devious and unrepentant sadist who remains a childless bachelor the rest of his life.

Dale Breaden notes that the "curse of the land strikes these once great families down into oblivion for the audacity of their claim to the earth" (352). Each of the chief land-owning families—all of whom acquired their property from Native Americans—suffers a drastic degeneration. Furthermore, their downfalls not only mark the demise of the land-owning class in Yoknapatawhpa County but also usher in the era of the Snopeses—a pernicious and unpleasant family featured in several of Faulkner's novels[3]—a significant low-point in the county's history.

Faulkner also measures the South's decline by noting its gradually increasing subservience to Northern economic interests, specifically those pertaining to land acquisition for the purposes of lumber operations. Whereas the initial land-grab in the South was internal, with Southern settlers appropriating land, this second wave of land acquisition is external, and Faulkner represents the frustrations of many contemporaneous Mississippians about Northerners venturing south to exploit the wilderness via the logging industry.

In *The Hamlet* Faulkner cynically expresses the Southern viewpoint of this land-grab by describing a hypothetical Yankee who comes

> all the way down to Mississippi with his hand grip bulging with greenback money and [buys] him up two thousand acres of as fine . . . land as ever stood on one edge about fifteen miles west of Jefferson and [builds] him a ten foot practically water-proof fence around it and [is] just getting ready to start getting rich . . . (87)

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[3] *The Hamlet* (1940), *The Town* (1957), and *The Mansion* (1959).

The popular Southern sentiment during the first half of the twentieth century held that Northerners bore responsibility for this second wave of land appropriation, and Faulkner forthrightly represents this viewpoint throughout his literature. In his 1954 essay, "Mississippi," he notes how "the rich Northerners" would "come down in comfort and open the land[,] setting up with their Yankee dollars the vast lumbering plants and mills in the southern pine section" (20). The extent to which the lumbering business overtakes the South becomes evident in *Light in August* in which the narrator notes that all

> the men in the village worked in the [saw]mill or for it. It was cutting pine. It had been there seven years and in seven years more it would destroy all the timber within its reach. Then some of the machinery and most of the men who ran it and existed because of and for it would be loaded onto freight cars and moved away. (2)

These rampant and unrestrained lumbering operations crudely transform the countryside into what many locals perceive as a wasteland. Afterwards, once all the available timber has been exploited, even the machinery itself falls into ruin and decay, as Faulkner expresses in *Light in August*:

> some of the machinery would be left . . . gaunt, staring, motionless wheels rising from mounds of brick rubble and ragged weeds with a quality profoundly astonishing, and gutted boilers lifting their rusting and unsmoking stacks with an air stubborn, baffled and bemused upon a stumppocked scene of profound and peaceful desolation, unplowed, untilled, gutting slowly into red and choked ravines. (2-3)

The imagery in this passage bespeaks the ruin and decay of the South itself and personifies the impoverished workers who, like the machinery, were used by Northern agents and then quickly abandoned, left to decay.

Another recurring theme expressed by Faulkner, and one that appears in *Go Down, Moses*, is the frustration of many rural Southerners concerning the encroachment of industry into a diminishing wilderness. By the time this second wave of environmental abuse approached, with Northern-funded mills exploiting the South's forests, Southern perceptions on the wilderness had changed drastically: far from viewing nature through a strictly utilitarian lens as their forefathers had, the new generation of Southerners in the first half of the twentieth century began to view the woodlands not as a space to be tamed but as a one to be preserved. The rapidly diminishing wilderness represents an abrupt social change that specifically ails those who are already poor—as the landscape changes for the worse, a way of life once common in the rural South (one marked by hunting, fishing, and tracking) fades along with it. Residents of Jefferson and its surrounding areas get a last view of the land that

> the planters with their gangs of slaves and then of hired laborers had wrested from the impenetrable jungle . . . cotton patches which as the years passed became fields and then plantations. . . . Most of that was gone now. Now a man drove two hundred miles from Jefferson before he found wilderness to hunt in. Now the land lay open from the cradling hills on the East to the rampart of levee on the West. (*Go Down, Moses* 340)

The lumbering industry devastated the South by denuding the wilderness and causing its contraction. In *Go Down, Moses*, Isaac McCaslin laments seeing "a new

planing-mill already half completed which would cover two or three acres," and he looks around to see "what looked like miles and miles of stacked steel rails . . . and of piled crossties" (318). He notes that it was as if the train "had brought with it into the doomed wilderness . . . the shadow of and portent of the new mill not even finished yet" (321)—and *doomed* is an apt word in that the lumber industry has brought Mississippi a "half-century of intensive exploitation and chronic wastefulness (of forest, soil, people, and equipment)" (Buell 2). Once this second wave of land exploitation comes to an end and the sawmills consume all they can, a barren landscape is left, reminding the local residents how far the South has declined. Originally,

> Chickasaw Indians had owned [this land], but after the Indians it had been cleared where possible for cultivation, and after the Civil War, forgotten save by . . . peripatetic sawmills which had vanished too now, [what remained was] only . . . the mounds of rotting sawdust which were not only their gravestones but the monuments of a people's heedless greed. (*The Hamlet* 190).

Ultimately, however, much of the blame lies with the Southerners themselves. Isaac McCaslin in *Go Down, Moses* "perceives that the virgin soil of Yoknapatawpha County has been plowed into a moral wasteland by its cavalier society" that is bent on ownership and profit at the expense of environmental responsibility (Jehlen 2), and he understands that Southerners—such as the character Major de Spain, who, among others, has sold "the timber rights" of his property (*Go Down, Moses* 316)—are responsible for selling the land in the first place.

4. POSSIBLE INFLUENCES

The previous chapters have explored William Faulkner's convictions on environmental issues as presented in his writing. This chapter explores the origins of these convictions in order to investigate possible sources that may have influenced what Breaden regards as Faulkner's "deep feeling for the soil" and his "recognition of the land's importance" (344). Much uncertainty exists, however, over exactly what Faulkner may have read as a young man, and any such inquiry is speculative to some extent. Nevertheless, scholars have long noted that Faulkner came into possession of Calvin Brown's *Archeology of Mississippi* in 1938 (Grimwood 263), that he relied heavily on *Mississippi: The WPA Guide to the Magnolia State* for information concerning his Native American characters, and that the infamous Southern tract *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* influenced his views on northern industrialism.

Faulkner scholar Thomas McHaney has noted that from the onset of World War I until the early 1920s, Faulkner was "reading in both the popular and literary press, and thereby discovering through essays, reviews, anecdotes, and conversations" the important works of the time (180). From 1921-24, Faulkner worked in the post office where he would have had at least limited access to (other people's) magazines and periodicals before they were delivered by mail. Journals such as *The Dial* and *The Little Review*, which published essays, poems, short stories, and reviews, circulated during his tenure in the post office. Other publications, including *Time Magazine* (which debuted in 1923), may have provided information on all manner of social topics that he could have readily absorbed (McHaney 180-87) An investigation of the sources that likely contributed to his decidedly environmentalist leanings, however, must also address orally composed works

that circulated in the form of stories and folktales during his early life. Many of these tales were later published in book form and include *The Outlaw Years: The History of the Land Pirates of the Natchez Trace* by Robert M. Coates, *The Devil's Backbone: The Story of the Natchez Trace* by Jonathan Daniels, and *Random Collections of Early Days in Mississippi* by H. S. Fulkerson.

The 1938 *Mississippi: The WPA Guide to the Magnolia State* offers a wealth of information that Faulkner uses in both his novels and his short stories. This book is one of a series of government-funded state guides produced by the Federal Writers Project of the Depression-era Works Progress Administration designed to employ writers during the 1930s. The guides detail the history, geography, agriculture, industry, and customs of their respective states and their major cities, and the *Mississippi* guide likely helped Faulkner form his views of the state's native tribes and of the lumber industry whose exploits had by that point ravaged much of Mississippi's wilderness.

Throughout his fiction, Faulkner presents his Chickasaw and Choctaw characters as noble, dignified, and most importantly, victims. Even when they commit crimes or succumb to slave-holding, he infers that external factors are to blame, and such acts merely reveal their mimicry of the dominant white culture surrounding them. This bespeaks the admiration and deference he holds for them and their culture, and the *Mississippi* guide is a likely candidate for influencing his opinions on this matter. The section depicting the state's early inhabitants portrays them in a quite positive manner: it describes the Choctaw men as "remarkable examples of physical perfection" (*Mississippi* 49) and the women as "small and beautifully formed, with sparkling eyes and long black hair" (50). The chapter further delineates their customs, dress, social structure, hunting

methods, and farming techniques, always bestowing a tone of respect upon their culture (47-59). Far from portraying them as noble savages, as was common in centuries past, the *Mississippi* guide dutifully notes their status as victims, asserting how numerous groups of Europeans—including French, Spanish, and British—had long coveted their native homelands (59). It also reveals how they suffered from the whites' land-ownership schemes, which brings to mind "Lo!" (1934) in which a devious white man purchases land near the shallow part of a river only to levy a toll on all who cross—including the Native Americans who just sold it to him.

The guide also devotes considerable attention to the state's lumbering operations in a section describing the 1890s when Mississippi, having become too dependent on cotton, shifted its focus toward the timber industry. With "the exhaustion of the timber supply in Michigan and the Great Lakes region[,] the lumber industry, seeking new forests to conquer, moved southward" (*Mississippi* 108) where its northern workers heralded "the potential wealth of Mississippi's pine forests" (109). Passages such as this likely acquainted Faulkner with the notion that northern economic interests drove the exploitation of Mississippi's land. This "Industry and Commerce" section further discusses the lumbering heyday that lasted until the early 1900s and stresses how in the 1920s "the lumber industry began to decline. The larger mills, having cut practically all accessible timber, began to move their machinery from the State, leaving the clean-up operations to small concerns" (109). The emphasis on how "the virgin pines" were "lost to Mississippi" (111) and how "[s]oil erosion had eaten the vitality from great tracts of land" (109) conjures images of scenes in *Light in August* in which the land lays

devastated and barren once the lumber companies have depleted the once-pristine forests and moved on.

A second text that may have influenced Faulkner—especially on matters concerning northern economic aggression—is the 1930 manifesto *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*, written by twelve self-proclaimed Southern agrarians (although not every essay deals specifically with agrarian issues). The authors decry both the loss of Southern identity and what they perceive to be a "headlong race for mastery over nature," both of which industrialization had accelerated (Introduction xxx). These twelve Southerners represent a conservative element within the Southern intelligentsia who advocate a return to the traditional rural and local culture as a means to remedy the rush to urban industrialism. The essay that perhaps most likely resonated with Faulkner is John Crowe Ransom's phillipic against industrialism, "Reconstructed but Unregenerate," in which he writes that in

> most societies man has adapted himself to [the] environment with plenty of intelligence to secure easily his material necessities from the graceful bounty of nature. And then, ordinarily, he concludes a truce with nature, and he and nature seem to live on terms of mutual respect and amity, and his loving arts, religions, and philosophies come spontaneously into being: these are blessings of peace. But the latter-day societies have been seized . . . with the strange idea that human destiny is not to secure an honorable peace with nature, but to wage an unrelenting war on nature. (7)

This impression of industrialism as "an insidious spirit" directly connects with what Faulkner writes in both *Light in August* and *Go Down, Moses* concerning the lumbering operations that drain the state's resources (Ransom 15).

The second essay in this collection that seems to have influenced Faulkner is Donald Davidson's "A Mirror for Artists." The author remarks that

> the making of an industrialized society will extinguish the meaning of the arts [because] they have been produced in societies which were for the most part stable, religious, and agrarian; where the goodness of life was measured by a scale of values having little to do with the material values of industrialism; where men were never too far removed from nature to forget that the chief subject of art, in the final sense, is nature. (29)

This notion of art potentially suffering as the agrarian tradition eventually gives way to industrialization reflects a possible concern that Faulkner may have had, and to which he may have alluded in his fiction; perhaps the ultimate destruction caused by industrialists was not merely of the physical environment but, more specifically, of the literary environment of which he was a part.

A third influential book for Faulkner's fictional consideration of the Native Americans and the Southern landscapes is *Archeology of Mississippi* (1926) by archeologist Calvin Brown who was on friendly terms with Faulkner and who presented him with a copy of this book in 1938 (Grimwood 263). *Archeology of Mississippi* deals chiefly with earthen mounds constructed by the state's earliest indigenous tribes and stresses their relationship to and connection with the land. These earthen mounds from two thousand years ago appear sporadically throughout Faulkner's work. *The Wild*

Palms, for instance, features two characters who become stranded atop one such mound during the historic 1927 flooding of the Mississippi River (*Mississippi* 76). Faulkner implements an ironic version of the structures in *The Hamlet* when he presents the land abandoned by whites as having "mounds of rotting sawdust which were not only their gravestones but the monuments of a people's greed" (190). This passage appears to compare the fall of the two cultures by emphasizing the similarities and differences of what each culture left behind: in the Native Americans' case, a legacy of earthen mounds they had constructed; in the whites' case, a legacy of prostrate forest land they had destroyed. In a more general sense, though, *Archeology of Mississippi* may have instilled in Faulkner "a continuing identity between himself and the delta" and urged him to rely on Native Americans as vehicles through whom he can critique his own culture (Grimwood 262).

Written texts are not the only sources that may have contributed to Faulkner's environmental leanings. Other likely candidates include the numerous stories, folktales, and legends that circulated orally during his young adult years, and which did not appear in printed form until the middle of the twentieth century. Robert M. Coates's *The Outlaw Years: The History of the Land Pirates of the Natchez Trace* (1930) is one such collection of stories. Coates recounts a detailed history of the volatile area of western Mississippi known as the Natchez Trace, a lawless, dangerous region that Faulkner features often in his works. During the antebellum era, this area was perilous and ungoverned, filled with colorful outlaws and other rogue sorts whose criminal exploits relegated them to infamy. Coates describes these land pirates of the Natchez trace as the menace of the wilderness (26) and fills his stories with not just their outlaw behavior but also with images of "the

forest being cleared away" by land-hungry pioneers (169)—images that bring to mind the clearing of land on Sutpen's Hundred in *Absalom, Absalom!*

In contrast to the whites whose connection with the land is unsustainable, Native Americans in *The Outlaw Years* enjoy a healthy relationship with the environment. However, the forest eventually becomes associated with danger because it serves to protect the land pirates. Coates notes how "the wilderness fed them, hid them, inspired them: its dense canebrakes aided them in the ambuscade, its thickets, its swamps and its ready bottoms covered their escape and concealed their hiding places" (17). The significance of this passage and others like it is that perhaps Faulkner at least partially adopted his view of equating white settlers with deception after hearing it.

A similar collection of early Mississippi tales is *The Devil's Backbone: The Story of the Natchez Trace*[4] by Jonathan Daniels. While on the surface it seems only to chronicle the exploits of the region's unruly settlers, it subtly reveals their irresponsible relationship with the land. Scenes of land degradation abound in this book; in the first chapter the author recounts the story of a Frenchman, Jean Baptiste Le Moyne, who in 1716 places a French outpost in the Southern section of the Natchez Trace. When Natchez tribesman kill four of his troops and ransack a depot of supplies, Le Moyne retaliates first by capturing the tribe's leader and then, as further retribution, by forcing the tribe to supply him bark from three thousand cypress trees and over two thousand pieces of acacia wood to be woven into walls to strengthen his fort (Daniels 13). Stories like this may have influenced not only Faulkner's formation of Yoknapatawpha County's

[4] Although published *after* Faulkner died, the stories retold in this book date back to the late eighteenth century.

early settlers—people like Alexander Holston, Samuel Habersham, and Louis Grenier—but also his notions of the rocky relations between whites and Native Americans.

Daniels presents many other images that directly relate to what Faulkner writes in his fiction; in violence reminiscent of Sutpen's slaves ripping up the land to build his mansion, Daniels notes how in the 1770s black slaves "had hacked the first plantations" out of the wilderness (26). Phrases like "[l]and hunger was in the eyes of them all" and "white encroachment" (8) onto Indian territory and the numerous instances of settlers utterly subduing nature for their benefit in this collection presents a list of characters who may serve as the predecessors of Sutpen and Major de Spain, and countless other inhabitants of Yoknapatawpha County.

A final collection of oral tales is H. S. Fulkerson's *Random Collections of Early Days in Mississippi*, which contains sketches about the Natchez Trace and which presents white settlers as eager to possess the lands inhabited by local tribes. The Natchez Trace—in words almost identical to those in Daniels' book—"was a place of 'opportunity' for the land-hungry" (Introduction vii). As in the other books, Fulkerson dramatizes the vanishing wilderness as it is cleared and tamed by enthusiastic yet irresponsible pioneers; and stories like these likely would have implanted in the young Faulkner's mind that these early settlers were poor stewards of the environment, in stark contrast with members of native tribes whose ancestral homeland was being the settlers were appropriating.

This section offers a new means of understanding the origins of Faulkner's personal convictions on environmental issues. If he had been familiar with these books and tales, his views on the environment may have been forged during this time and ideas

for his later fiction may have been gleaned from these works. Hearing the stories of the Natchez Trace—which associate the land-grab with villainy—likely would have instilled in Faulkner at the very least a keen sense that the early settlers of Mississippi exploited the land for their own benefit. The books that he read quite possibly alerted him to the aggressive northern economic interests that also led to the exploitation and degradation of his state.

5. CONCLUSION

This thesis has presented William Faulkner as an environmentally-conscious author whose views on ecological abuse appear throughout his fiction and non-fiction. His texts reveal that he regards land abuse as a symptom of rampant materialism, and he dedicates much of his corpus to rejecting those who fight "against nature" and "propose to put nature under their heel" (Ransom 9). Faulkner's critiques of the despoiling of nature vary widely, ranging from criticizing specific instances of land appropriation, exploitation, and degradation to addressing the larger theme of how unchecked materialism has harmed his home state. By focusing on Mississippi, he is able to pursue his "life-long exploration of what he perceived to be the doomed culture of the American South" (Johnson 101). In this manner, he has carried on the agrarian literary tradition by stressing man's relationship with the environment and by upholding the notion that industrialism harms society. However, Faulkner complicates the agrarian legacy when he departs from this tradition; by emphasizing how the negative consequences of agrarianism—from the appropriation of land for plantation-use to the degradation that ensues—have devastated society, he challenges the notion advocated by the Twelve Southerners that a remedy for modern problems simply involves a return to traditional rural culture.

Overall, this thesis aims to provide a significant contribution to Faulkner studies by assessing the general mood in Mississippi before and during Faulkner's writing career regarding environmental sentiments to discover possible influences that likely shaped his views on land abuse. Understanding the origins of these views enlarges the scope of Faulkner studies by allowing critics to appreciate how social ideologies of the late

nineteenth and early twentieth-century impacted him. Faulkner, far from being merely a Southern author interested in the concerns of his fictional world, now emerges as a concerned global citizen interested in issues that affect everyone: he addresses human rights violations in his depictions of the mistreatment of Native Americans, habitat destruction in the portrayals of land abuse, and loss of cultural identity faced by both Native Americans and white Southerners. Scholars may also begin to approach his trope of the physical environment as an allusion to the literary environment, so that perhaps Faulkner's most vital concern is that the moral decay of the South will abet the decline of this region's fertile literary environment of which he is an important and valued member.

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