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Weaving Our Stories Together: Epic Strains in William Faulkner's Go Down, Moses and Toni Morrison's Beloved

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Epic Strains in William Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*
and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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*Time is much too short to be
living somebody else's life
I walk with dignity, I step with pride
Cause I ain't movin' from my face,
from my race, from my history
I ain't movin' from my love,
my peaceful dove,
it means too much to me
Loving self can be so hard
Honesty can be demanding
Learn to love yourself,
it's a great, great feeling.*

Des'ree

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Epic transcends its definition as a genre of literature to include a much greater role; it is a necessary element in the history of every culture. The purpose of epic is to provide a foundation of myth upon which the values of a culture can be built, a medium through which a culture can speak its name. Without it, a culture cannot know itself. Louise Cowan describes epic as "the founding genre, the mode from which civilization emerges, the originary *poesis* that enlarges its people's scope, enabling them to enter history" (Allums 25-6). In order for a national epic to fulfill its purpose, it must be accessible and enjoyable to its public. C.M. Bowra says epic "gives a special pleasure because its events and persons enhance our belief in the worth of human achievement and in the dignity and nobility of man" (1). It takes shape beginning with a defining event from the history of the culture, combining this event with a national sensibility of values and gathering the fragments of national identity to form a unified portrait of a nation, acceptable to all members of the culture.

A true epic takes the moral values most revered by a culture and represents them in a story that holds the attention of, entertains, and teaches its audience. These values should be easily recognizable as sacred by members of the culture, and the function of the story is to demonstrate the benefits of following these moral codes, as well as the consequences of violating them. An epic story should have

something for everyone. The ideal citizen should read of triumphs and see himself; the morally lost citizen should read and find inspiration. The story should be based on or concerned with a familiar event in the nation's past, whether in mythic times or in recorded history. Through the story of a true epic, all members of a culture can come to see themselves as belonging to the group because they hold those values represented in the story. There must be some element of recognition, which at the same time is unique, so that the reader can say, "Yes, these are *my people's* ideals."

The Sumerian epic, *Gilgamesh*, emphasizes valor, courage, and a sense of wholeness in one's being, a sense of knowing one's place in the natural order. *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* tell the ancient Greek story of the Trojan War and the years following, emphasizing the values of honor, duty to one's family and to the gods, courage, intelligence, sacrifice, and hospitality. The Roman epic, *The Aeneid*, adds to these values a special emphasis on duty to one's patria, one's fatherland and the fulfillment of the mutual contract with the gods. *The Song of Roland*, the epic of Medieval France, projects the image of the complete warrior, emphasizing duty and sacrifice for God, king, and country. All of these epics share the motif of journey. The hero must make some arduous trip to complete his quest successfully--a success that is extremely important in classical epics, for the hero

must be victorious so that society continues to grow. His journey is the completion of the epic movement, or *energeia*, toward the formation of a community, a whole people who can sing their name along with the bard.

The United States holds several of these same values to be essential--honor, courage, intelligence--and adds some of its own: individuality, autonomy, independence, and an identification with the chosen people of Exodus. At the core of their national sensibility, however, is the notion of freedom, embedded as early as the first English settlements on the continent, founded by Pilgrims seeking religious freedom from the Church of England. The desire for freedom underlay the declaration the founding fathers signed with such fervor and the war they fought to achieve national sovereignty. They appended to the Constitution a Bill of Rights to ensure the rights and freedom of all citizens. The United States is a young nation, without ancient myths save those brought into the culture by its hodgepodge mixture of immigrant citizens. Any of these foundational occasions in this brief history could potentially be epic moments, but they lack an essential ingredient. All are about progress and none have the sense of loss from which epic arises. Consciousness of destiny cannot emerge unless from a shared expense of defeat in the movement toward a common goal.

In the United States, our defining event has been, without a doubt, the Civil War and its concomitant elements, including slavery and emancipation. This event, more than any other in our nation's history has divided us, pitted us against each other, brought to the forefront our irreconcilable differences of opinion and prejudices, our honor and love of freedom. After our reunion under one flag, one authoritative government, we remain, even now, deeply scarred, a nation divided. The issues that sparked the war were states' rights to control their own commerce and government, an effort to slow the progression toward mechanized agriculture as opposed to manual slave labor, and above all, the issue of slavery itself. That all men, regardless of their skin color, were human beings was settled by the South's surrender, President Lincoln's passage of the Emancipation Proclamation, and the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment on December 6, 1865. The Civil War was indeed our epic moment. In that time and space Americans, as a people, came to know deep division and loss; they were stripped of their belief in continual progress toward a destiny and their sense of unity.

The Civil War has been represented in different forms, from historical accounts of the actual battles to works that use it as a backdrop or employ it as a major image or theme: from Shelby Foote's three-volume history *The Civil War*, to poems like Robert Hayden's

"Middle Passage" and Stephen Vincent Benet's *John Brown's Body*, to modern novels like *Huckleberry Finn*, *Go Down, Moses*, and *Beloved*. Even in films such as *Gone With the Wind* and *Roots*, the Civil War is ever-present in American arts and literature.

Each of these literary forms, history writing, poetry, novels, and film, contains some aspect of epic. Foote's *The Civil War* has the exhaustive description and size of epic, but lacks the *energeia*, the spirit of epic. As Aristotle discusses it in the *Poetics*, *energeia* is the spiritual or intellectual action--the thrust of the formative process--that takes place in the epic journey and constitutes the culture's maturation into community and harmony. History falls short on two levels: it lacks the epic *energeia* and it is limited by actual events. In his history, Foote "is acting on the belief that all history is narration and that the distinction between novel and history is obliterated in the art of writing" (White and Sugg preface). He hopes, thus, to translate his work from history proper to a kind of dramatic recounting of history. But history is science, not literature. Although narrative history at points touches the realm of literature, its story is fact, not fiction, and thereby it loses a claim to universal significance. For Aristotle, "The poet and the historian differ not by writing in verse or in prose....The true difference is that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen. Poetry, therefore, is a more

philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular" (*Poetics* IX, 2-3: Adams 55). Epic deals with a historical event but in recreating it fictionally gives it universal significance. James Adams' *The Epic of America* and Eisenschmil and Newman's *The American Iliad: The Epic Story of the Civil War* are other attempts at historical epics, each having the same problems as Foote.

Heretofore, epic writing has been poetry. In older civilizations, the poet was a special kind of citizen, one society entrusted with the task of speaking its name and giving it its identity. For Plato, the poet is an interpreter of the gods, and his writing results from a divine fury or madness. Poetry's function for Plato is to convey experiences, to give pleasure, to teach, and to give a distance, or window, through which a community can see itself. Aristotle's view of the poet is much the same, though he sees the poet not only as an imitator but also as a creator. This view persists through time to Sir Philip Sidney, who claims that poets are connected to divine prophets. According to Sidney, they are "makers" and bringers-in of all civility, and that they can "make [one] immortal by their verses"--verses that contain many mysteries "which of purpose were written darkly, least by profane wits [they] should by abused" (Adams 142-62).

The face of poetry changes, however, with the Romantics-- particularly William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keats, and Percy Bysshe Shelley--who believe poetry is for everyone. The expand poetry's audience to include the common man in common situations using common language. The four of them center their poetic energy on memory, imagination, beauty, and hope, respectively. These powers and values are universal and personal at the same time, holding out the promise that epic poetry would be part of the reshaping of culture Romantics saw themselves doing. Wordsworth, who composed an epic about the growth of the poet's mind, believes that the poet is a special figure, one who is exceptionally aware of feelings and sensations and "has acquired a greater readiness and power in expressing what he thinks and feels" (Adams 441). Keats contends that poetry has to be concerned not with harmony, only with beauty. Unlike Aristotle and Sidney, he does not see poetry as a "bringing together." A product of Keats' theory of "negative capability," the ability of a man to be "in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (Adams 494), is Walter Pater's observation that art no longer teaches, the loss of one of the major components of epic poetry. In the conclusion of *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, he pursues the tenet of *carpe diem*,

encouraging the sensitive souls--including artists and poets--to experience as much "passion" as possible in their short lives.

Only be sure it is passion, that it does yield you this fruit of a quickened, multiplied consciousness. Of this wisdom, the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for art's sake has most; for art comes to you professing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake. (Adams 643)

Thus, there is a growing separation between artists/poets and society. Plato, after all, wanted to expel the poets from the republic for their "lies." Here, the public is expelled from the society of poets, who reject the moral or educative purpose of art in favor of its pleasure function. The experience conveyed by the poet is personal, and no one but the poet can criticize his work. As art loses part of its public function, society becomes suspicious of poetry, art's preeminent art form, finally rejecting or dismissing it as irrelevant to life.

Attempts of various sorts to create the American epic have been made by authors such as Walt Whitman, Hart Crane, and Benet. John McWilliams, in his *The American Epic: Transforming a Genre, 1770-1860*, provides countless examples of failed attempts at epic poetry, as well as offering *John Brown's Body* as an unpopular epic possibility, though he recognizes the Civil War as the U.S. epic moment. Jeffrey Walker also defines American epic as poetry, using

Whitman as a "definitive prototype," but Whitman's work remains in the realm of vision and lacks any epic action. Modern poetry, as we have briefly seen above, has become internalized, personalized, individualized and is therefore no longer adequate to speak for a nation, especially not for one as diverse as the United States. Poetry is not our mode of epic expression in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries because of this split between artists and society and because no poet has encompassed the epic *energeia*, though many have tried.

Poetry is not the only art form that tries to encompass the epic *energeia*. Foster Hirsch defines epic as "popular national ballads that celebrate heroic passages in the history of a people. With its broad movements through time and space, and its emphasis on action and external characterization, the epic form is ideally suited to film" (12). This view is shared by John K. Newman who believes that film, especially those of Eisenstein and Pudovkin, is the modern epic form. However, film has other constraints that negate an epic function. Practically, the producer and studio must please a specific audience and maintain a certain budget. More to the point, film lacks the freedom of style and the voice of true epic. Although film is a medium that often engages the audience, it does so without requiring them to do much, if any, work. Additionally, it changes the emphasis from

word to image and thus limits response and participation. Generally a superficial, time-limited experience, it reduces the epic themes and ideas to mere spectacle, something to be watched, not partaken of or striven for.

In the twentieth century, only the novel includes the important aspects of epic--all the major themes and conventions--and is able to capture the epic spirit and convey it to American audiences. Some have argued that epic, as a genre, has "not only long since completed its development, but is already antiquated" (Bakhtin 3). Novel, on the other hand, is the only genre still developing, still having the ability to change. The claim that "it is plasticity itself" (Bakhtin 39) makes of the novel a liquid form that can take on or incorporate aspects of other genres. "The novel inserts into these other genres an indeterminacy, a certain semantic openendedness, a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality" (Bakhtin 7).¹ The argument here, put forth by Mikhail Bakhtin and others, is that novel is the heir to epic. Epic is not dead, however; it has merely been transformed in the twentieth century so that its themes, ideas, and spirit find a home in the novel (i.e., some novels, for all novels do not include these characteristics and spirit). John McWilliams also understands the problem of definition:

Because *The Odyssey* is in many ways unlike *The Iliad*, because Virgil sang of both Arms and the Man, yet made them serve a new interest in historical forces, and because Milton was convinced that the Fall was an "argument / Not less but more Heroic than the / Wrath of stern Achilles," we must acknowledge that the word "epic" describes a tradition founded, not only upon change, but upon conscious reshaping of its own defining qualities. (4)

This quotation points out that epic has always changed and adapted itself as needed. This "conscious reshaping" allows the epic *energeia* to conform itself to whatever literary form is available or needed at the time to give voice to epic, to embody it in a way that people will recognize it. These qualities and functions have manifested themselves in the novel in the twentieth century. In the novel appear strains attempting to fulfill the need for epic *energeia*. This is not to say that novel has replaced epic but only that epic has become fragmented, with only a few motifs and conventions remaining--motifs and conventions that have been adopted and adapted into the novel form.

Other twentieth-century literary critics insist on the novel as heir to epic. Georg Lukács calls the novel "the epic of an age when the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem, yet which still thinks in terms of totality" (56). For Lukács, Dante forms the bridge between Homeric and modern epics:

Dante is the only great example in which we see the architectural clearly conquering the organic, and therefore he represents a historico-philosophical transition from the pure epic to the novel....The combination of the presuppositions of the epic and the novel and their synthesis to an *epopoeia* is based on the dual structure of Dante's world: the break between life and meaning is surpassed and canceled by the coincidence of life and meaning in a present, actually experienced transcendence. (68)

The novel is indeed an architectural form, a framework upon which the values of a culture can be rationally displayed and easily viewed. Since Dante, the "organic" or poetic form of the "pure epic" has been superseded as the bearer of the epic spirit by the more trustworthy because structured form of the novel. Some aspects of the novel are indeed antithetical to epic: its lower- or middle-class milieu; an everyday hero or an antihero who wants only to survive, as in picaresque novels, or who is out to grasp the meaning of life, as in the bildungsroman; concentration on the fabric of social or political life. These aspects, though, are peripheral to the universal significance of epic and can be accommodated.

Griffiths and Rabinowitz agree with Belinsky, the "Father of Russian criticism," that "The epic of our time is the novel" (qtd 2). However, they argue that only Russian novels carry the weight and unity of epic and that the novel "in its materialism and privatization [has] portrayed the spiritual fragmentation of the West" (2). Griffiths

and Rabinowitz are referring to the content of the novel, but I argue that their theory of fragmentation applies to the novel form as well which presents the reader with multiple perspectives, abrupt shifts, a studied disunity, all analogous to the especially fragmented nature of society. The modern world is fragmented along spiritual lines as well as social and economic ones, but such fragmentation, I contend, rather than leading away from epic is the fertile ground that can give birth to epic.

Such chaos also provides the origin for the epic movement; epics portray their cultures at the beginning in a disunified, disrupted state. *The Iliad* begins in the midst of a war with men on one side beginning to fight among themselves. Odysseus' journey begins with a terrible storm that separates him and his men from the Greek forces and sets them on a ten-year quest to find home. Aeneas begins his journey without a wife or a home as he strides away from the smoldering remains of a Troy being dismantled not only by the Greeks but by the gods themselves. In chaos is possibility and the seed of change and new order. Novelistic form, which imitates its fragmented content, seems the best ground for the epic which presents a world full of possibility. Perhaps one day a voice will speak a national epic in measured lines of poetry, but for this time and place, twentieth-

century America, it is the novel that has captured, as much as any work can, the epic urge for the reading public.

Even so, no one novel has yet incorporated the thrust and meaning of our epic struggle as Americans have come to understand it. Twentieth-century America, an industrial, computerized society in which crime and skepticism run rampant, stifles any such epic movement. In his introduction to *The Epic Strain in the English Novel*, E.M.W. Tillyard explains why skepticism and cynicism work against the epic: "Only when people have faith in their own age can they include the maximum of life in their vision and exert their will-power to its utmost capacity" (17). Other epics were written when peace was finally achieved after a great upheaval. Thus, until the American public is at peace with itself, we can have no unified epic vision and no epic. In the meantime, though, we do have novels that individually incorporate major parts of the epic struggle, giving it voice from sometimes opposing perspectives.

Two of these novels, *Go Down, Moses* and *Beloved*, provide us with the two sometimes complementary, sometimes contradictory sides of the American epic struggle: white and black, South and North, man and woman. The novels of William Faulkner and Toni Morrison incorporate certain aspects of epic: national epic past as the subject, national tradition ("not personal experience and the free

thought that grows out of it") as the source, and an epic distance that separates the epic world from contemporary reality (Bakhtin 13).

Both of these novels have definite epic heroes, and both also incorporate themes at the heart of all traditional and modern epics: the journey; conflicts between chaos and order and between *kairos* and *chronos*; the transcending of personal and social action to include the religious plane; and the forsaking of *eros* for *agape* or the transformation of the former into the latter.

The epics of the Western world are what we generally look to for guidelines in recognizing and understanding modern epics. The definition of a classical epic hero is one who is noble (born into the ruling class), magnanimous (has greatness of soul and scope of vision), courageous, and pious. Achilles, Odysseus, Aeneas, and Roland all have these qualities. In modern epics, however, nobility of birth has been discarded for the notion that anyone can be a hero. Their heroes, nonetheless, have nobility of spirit, something that sets them apart from others, some sensitivity to the fabric of existence. In classical epics, the motif of journey is always present, from the Greeks' invasion of Troy to Odysseus' ten-year trip home, from Aeneas' quest for a "new Troy" to Roland's rearguard movement through the pass at Roncevalles, from Adam's fall from grace in *Paradise Lost* to Ishmael's sea voyage (to note another novel with epic themes and

proportions). In these epics, there is always a fundamental chaos that must be ordered. Aeneas must restore order through the founding of a new civilization. Odysseus must order his kingdom before it is completely overthrown. Roland must defeat the treacherous paynims threatening Christendom. In all epics, there is also a conflict between linear time, *chronos*, and divine time, *kairos*, that is settled when all time converges in a single moment; that is, the epic sees time under the aspect of eternity. Moreover, one of the functions of epic is to wrench events out of *chronos* and to re-form them in the much larger context of *kairos*. In such moments of revelation, the true structure of the universe is made apparent to the hero and to the reader. Aeneas, for example, who has blamed the destruction of Troy on the Greeks, is able to see through Venus' removal of the mist from his eyes that it is really the gods who are destroying Troy.

Another function of epic is to provide a strong moral base for cultural reference, something anyone--whether a member of the culture or not--can look to and thereby understand the values of the culture about which the epic is written. Such a base is established when the meaning of the story transcends the personal, literal, or historical level to imply a higher spiritual or religious level of meaning. One peculiar aspect of epics is that they all require that the hero forsake *eros*, the desire for another for one's own sake, for *agape*, or a

higher love that imitates the overflowing nature of God's love. Such an exchange does not always have an immediately positive effect, however. Achilles must forsake Briseis for honor and revenge, which costs many lives in the interim. This choice, though narrow at first, is necessary to lead him to the threshold of true honor and community with Priam. Aeneas must forsake Dido for piety, a departure that takes place amid curses and death, but that leads Aeneas to Pallas, a warrior whose love and character are true and worthy. Odysseus must forsake Circe, Calypso, and Nausicaa, all of whom he seeks because each answers a need in him, for Penelope; and their union recreates the sacred marriage of Zeus and Hera and brings bounty to the earth (Ithaca).

All of these characteristics come together and interact to form the major thrust of epic. The epic journey is experienced in terms of time and order, and both of these expand to a higher level. The combination of *kairos* and *chronos*, chaos and order allows the hero to get outside of himself and demonstrate the historical significance. Love is at the end of the journey. Both of these novels, *Go Down*, *Moses* and *Beloved*, contain these epic themes, through which they represent the epic strains in modern American fiction and recreate, at least partially, a sense of what America means.

Go Down, Moses

Not only does *Go Down, Moses* not fit the classical definition of epic, it also does not adhere to the strict rules of novel structure. The book is, nonetheless, a novel, not a series of short stories as is often assumed.² Its structure is fragmented in part because the hero is not at its center. Although he appears as a character in only three of the seven sections of the story, Isaac, the McCaslin heir and the Moses figure of the title-- symbolically not at the center because he has abdicated his position--emerges as the hero, for his journey, a journey not inward to his own soul but outward to the community, is the central event of the novel. *Go Down, Moses* begins with "Was," a piece of the history of the odd courtship of Ike's parents and their naive perspective on the world and the plantation, the setting here the oppressive community of slavery and ownership, but treated from a comic perspective. The novel then moves through "The Fire and the Hearth," the story of Lucas and Molly, descendants of slaves and owners, now tenant farmers on the plantation, and the bearers of a version of the household gods--the fire in the hearth--that they must tend and pass on. Lucas's attempt to "own" the land, in imitation of his white grandfather, here by mining its riches, threatens to extinguish that sacred fire until he finally, if reluctantly, chooses the

fire over the land (Cowan *GDM*). "Pantaloon in Black" is the extraordinary story of Rider, a tenant of Roth Edmonds who attempts to carry on the spark from Lucas and Molly but loses it when his wife dies. Ike's life is told in the three subsequent sections, "The Old People," "The Bear," and "Delta Autumn," all of which highlight the major events of his journey. The final section, "Go Down, Moses," recounts Molly's quest to bury her grandson. Set in 1940, with black and white working together, this last section realizes the spirit of community and completes the epic movement outward.

The background of *Go Down, Moses* is the United States', and especially the South's, past of slavery and ownership. Isaac McCaslin and McCaslin Edmonds, known as Cass, discuss the Civil War in great detail when Ike informs Cass that he does not want, nor does he intend to take, the land bequeathed to him. Yet he still feels a responsibility to the Negro descendants of his grandfather and makes an effort to find and deliver to each of them their inheritance of one thousand dollars. When he finds Fonsiba and her scholar-husband poor and starving yet too proud to admit it, Ike attempts to explain that the land is cursed: "Don't you see? This whole land, the whole South, is cursed, and all of us who derive from it, whom it ever suckled, white and black both, lie under the curse?" (266). Ike spends his life negatively and positively trying to rectify the damage done by

his grandfather, hoping thereby to lift the curse. Negatively, he abjures his inheritance; positively, he hunts and treats the land as sacred. The problem for Ike is that the people, under the curse themselves, cannot understand his actions and view him as a coward and an outcast (Cowan *GDM*). This curse is not limited to the land or to one race. It is shared by all men, white and black, and Ike's quest to lift this curse is also, unknown to them, the quest of all men.

To further understand Ike's non-presence in several sections of the novel, one should look to Bakhtin, who mentions an epic distance between the singer and the time in which he sings:

In its style, tone and manner of expression, epic discourse is infinitely far removed from discourse of a contemporary about a contemporary addressed to a contemporary....To portray an event on the same time-and-value plane as oneself and one's contemporaries (and an event that is therefore based on personal experience and thought) is to undertake a radical revolution, and to step out of the world of epic into the world of the novel. (13-14)

True more to the spirit of epic than of novel, Faulkner separates the book's action, putting part of it in the mythic past, part in Ike's lifetime, and part in a projection of the people without their Moses, this last part in a biblical framework that sets the novelistic action in a second, larger, sacred, mythic, not to say epic, context. For Ike, the present is infiltrated by the action of many layers of the past, and he,

like Sethe in Morrison's novel, tries to delineate the meaning of these interactive layers and shifts--Ike in understanding Keats and the commissary ledgers and Sethe in coming to terms with the epitaph for her baby girl and the tree on her back. Louise Cowan captures the spirit of these heroes in her introduction to *The Epic Cosmos* as she discusses the role of the epic poet, one a template for the other:

Culturally, the epic imagination requires communities with a mythic sense of identity, their tribal memory preserving the heroic past as legend if not as conscious guide....But memory is painful, both for the community and the poet. It is surcharged with images of lost and forsaken ideals, so that its retrieval is not without some risk. (Allums 4)

Analogous to the poet in the real world, the hero in the fictional world is responsible for retrieving ideals, no matter how threatening such action might be. Isaac McCaslin, "uncle to half a county and father to no one," risks his future with the community when he discovers the truth of his inheritance, symbolically represented in the replacement of the Beauchamp silver cup with a coffee pot and IOUs. In part four of "The Bear" after Ike reads the McCaslin family ledgers and learns of his grandfathers deplorable past, fathering a child by his own Negro daughter/slave, he chooses to repudiate his inheritance, leaving it instead to his cousin McCaslin Edmonds, who must make his own choice whether to bear the burden of ownership or to follow Ike.

The unsung hero

It is from an unexpected source that Isaac is educated into the role of hero. When Ike's father Theophilus dies when the boy is only ten, two men assume the role of father in his life and contribute different strains to his education: Cass, sixteen years his senior, representative of both the McCaslin heritage and a poetic sensibility-- "I knew a long time ago that I would never have to miss my father" (275)--and Sam Fathers, his spiritual guide and mentor-- "Yes, Sam Fathers set me free" (286). If Cass teaches him of Keats' Grecian Urn, it is from this old Indian/Negro that Ike inherits his epic vision. Ike sees the whole of things, the futility of war and ownership, though he may not be able to explain it to Cass (269-76). He becomes the magnanimous epic hero as the reader sees him in the wilderness, though to most he seems impotent, particularly to those whose vision is bounded by notions of ownership and physical heirship. This latter way is how his wife sees him, allowing him to have her once, and only once: "And that's all. That's all from me. If this dont get you that son you talk about, it wont be mine:' lying on her side, her back to the empty rented room, laughing and laughing" (300-1).

His wife's view of Ike is not the final word on him; she, along with Cass, Lucas, and others, represents the limited viewpoint of the recalcitrant community, the people who wish to return to Egypt

because its ideas are familiar and require no risk. From the viewpoint of the cosmic and the sacred, Ike is not a failure. From Sam Fathers' perspective Ike remains steadfast in his adherence to his principles in honoring the ancient spirits of the land, the "Old People." More important, perhaps, he does bequeath some hope to future generations by teaching boys how to hunt and what it means to hunt, as well as by passing on General Compson's hunting horn to Roth's son. He upholds his view of the wilderness and is true to it; he becomes another Sam Fathers. Like Moses, he attempts to lead his community to the promised land, in this case no land or a new understanding of that land and the promise, and the journey leads through the wilderness, where the people must either change their hearts or die (Cowan *GDM*).

Into the Delta Autumn

Journey, in some form, is manifest in all epics. In *Go Down, Moses*, the journey is to a place out of time--on the one hand, the wilderness, and on the other, the cosmos it opens out into. The journey is not only Ike's own but the one he tries to initiate in others and the journey of the community (the Israelites) out of slavery (to old ideas) to

the promised land (of true freedom). Isaac's journey to the woods every year is both physical and spiritual.

In fact, each time now, on that first night in camp, lying aching and sleepless in the harsh blankets, his blood only faintly warmed by the single thin whisky-and-water which he allowed himself he would tell himself that this would be his last....Then November would come again...[and] he would look ahead past the jerking arc of the windshield wiper and see the land flatten suddenly and swoop, dissolving away beneath the rain as the sea itself would dissolve, and he would say, "Well boys, there it is again."
(320)

For Ike, this, the last of the untamed wilderness, is all that remains of the world left by Sam Fathers, the hope of which Ike tries to restore by passing down the hunting horn to Roth's illegitimate son (346). The physical wilderness, though, is but the manifestation of a larger reality it makes present to Ike and, through him, to others. Ike's heroism is further supported by his faithfulness to the wilderness, his returning there every November without fail, his continued reverence for the land, and his attempt to teach the boys to appreciate it as well.

Isaac fights the battle between chaos and order

In typical epic fashion, the novel begins *in medias res* with Isaac "past seventy and nearer eighty than he ever corroborated any more" (3). He is present in the background as the story of his distant past is told, "not something he had participated in or even remembered" (4), but from which he cannot escape and about which he must make a momentous decision. He must either continue as his father and uncle did as heirs to this past or repudiate it and what symbolizes it as well. He knows that the concept of ownership is wrong; he knows that as soon as the Indian Ikkemotubbe realized he could trade the land for money, the land ceased ever to have been his to trade. The land belongs to no man but to all men. Ike is determined to save the land and its people, though he knows he is destined not to complete his task. Opposed to the freedom of the land is the commissary, which represents for Ike the foreboding presence of ownership and oppression on the McCaslin farm:

the square, galleried, wooden building squatting like a portent above the fields whose laborers it still held in thrall '65 or no and placarded over with advertisements for snuff and cures for chills and salves and potions manufactured and sold by white men to bleach the pigment and straighten the hair of negroes that they might resemble the very race which for two hundred years had held them in bondage and from which for another hundred years not even a bloody civil war would have set them completely free. (244)

He knows as well that he cannot repudiate the past ("it was never mine to repudiate") but perhaps, he reasons, God foresaw in old Carothers the descendants he would have and chose him to hold the land because he would have the right descendants: "maybe He saw in Grandfather the seed progenitive of the three generations He saw it would take to set at least some of His lowly people free" (248). The South, as Ike sees it, is in chaos because of this sin of ownership--land and people. Ike believes it is his duty to try and set it right, to bring some order to the South and in that gesture to make a start in reconnecting community and cosmos.

A Moses in the wilderness

The many biblical parallels in *Go Down, Moses* give us a template for the action of the novel. The title itself symbolizes the theme of exodus, the notion of movement toward a Promised Land where everyone can be free.

Isaac's name in the novel, no coincidence, transcends mere personal nomenclature and takes on a religious significance. His namesake was the "one who inherits," the one to whom the duty falls to be the father of nations. Ike disinherits himself and is thus "father

to no one." Lucas, the son of the slave woman (a symbolic Ishmael), does inherit the use of the land and carries on the line of McCaslin blood. Here, Isaac is not only "An Isaac born into a later live than Abraham's and repudiating immolation: fatherless and therefore safe declining the altar because maybe the exasperated Hand might not supply the kid" (270-1), but also a Moses figure. He is not explicitly chosen by God except insofar as a vision of the wilderness' spirits (the "Old People," the bear, the ancient deer) appoint him, but undertakes the journey on his own.

Like Moses, Ike is not successful in his lifetime; that is, he does not enter the promised land himself but only points the way. Mary Mumbach states, "Like Moses, Ike McCaslin, in what is his last expedition to the wilderness, both blesses and accuses his people, but not out of personal resentment" (Allums 255). Ike imparts a blessing by the passing of the hunting horn and an accusation by assuming Roth has killed a doe (348). Moses never saw the promised land but led the people to it. This is what Ike is doing by repudiating his inheritance and handing down the hunting horn to Roth's son. Uncle Ike, unable to rise from the cot in the tent, has Roth's mistress get the horn off the tent pole: "She went and got it...and lifted down the horn, the one which General Compson had left him in his will, covered with the unbroken skin from a buck's shank and bound with

silver" (346). This careful description indicates that the horn is symbolic to Ike, representing not only his youth but his inheritance of woodsmanship from hunters like Sam Fathers and General Compson. His passing it on to Roth's bastard child-- "It's his. Take it"--is profound indeed. As the Moses figure, Ike understands the function of "letting the people go"--not just slaves but slave owners and Ike's own progeny, but Ike has no progeny, a fact that points to the paradox at the heart of things here.

To explain his action in larger contexts, he juxtaposes himself against the tamed land:

the old wrong and shame itself, in repudiation and denial at least of the land and the wrong and shame even if he couldn't cure the wrong and eradicate the shame...at least he could repudiate the wrong and shame, at least in principle, and at least the land itself in fact, for his son at least...the same wrong and shame from whose regret and grief he would at least save and free his son and, saving and freeing his son, lost him. (344-5)

If a man would save his life he must lose it. To save his son, he must lose the land and in losing the land lose his son. Isaac McCaslin is neither Isaac nor Moses but a combination of the two biblical figures. He chooses to be Ike, chooses not to inherit the land but to let Ishmael have it instead. He would prefer a mass exodus, but he has a recalcitrant people on his hands who would prefer to worship the golden calf rather than to follow the pillars of smoke and fire through

the wilderness. Therefore he must lead the people by example, never failing in his conviction on his spiritual and cosmic journey.

Isaac out of time

For all mortal men, existence in time is a kind of slavery. We are all subject to the passing of time and must rely on memories of the past for past events to have continued significance. For some, however, there is an ability to see events from the aspect of *kairos*, which often appears as a kind of intrusion into the fabric of existence. These intrusions of the infinite serve to wrench the epic action out of the context of human experience and frame them in eternity, giving them profundity, facilitating the community's awareness of its actions and giving them an opportunity to grow and change. There are several examples of this in the novel, including the infinite's convergence on Rider as he lifts the cypress log with his bare hands (141-2), but most important are Ike's non-temporal experiences.

Ike's past, or the past of his family's ownership of slaves, is something he would rather forget or escape. The novel makes it clear, though, that he cannot forget or escape the past because it is both his legacy and a part of his existence in time. It is possible, however, for

that past to be understood and then reformed rather than simply being a dim influence on his life. It seems to be most important to know and understand, even if the knowledge is negative, as in Ike's discoveries in the commissary. The two places where such understanding occurs, places where *kairos* and *chronos* converge for Ike, are the wilderness and the commissary. He is in the wilderness with Sam Fathers when he sees the ancient deer (177) and the bear (200) and kills his first deer: "the boy of twelve had been unable to phrase it then: *I slew you; my bearing must not shame your quitting life. My conduct forever onward must become your death*" (334). These are moments when time seems to stand still--past and future dissolve into an infinite present: *kairos*. But they are only moments: "There was only the soaring and sombre solitude in the dim light, there was the thin murmur of the faint cold rain which had not ceased all day. Then, as if it had waited for them to find their positions and become still, the wilderness breathed again" (174).

In the commissary on the McCaslin farm, past and present converge while the sixteen-year-old Ike reads the ledgers. As a child, Ike held a naive expectation of what was contained in the ledgers as well as of the future itself:

he would look up at the scarred and cracked backs and ends but with no particular desire to open them, and

though he intended to examine them someday because he realized that they probably contained a chronological and much more comprehensive though doubtless tedious record than he would ever get from any other source, not alone of his own flesh and blood but of all his people, not only the whites but the black one too, who were as much a part of his ancestry as his white progenitors, and of the land which they had all held and used in common and fed from and on and would continue to use in common without regard to color or titular ownership....(256)

At sixteen, he is more prepared to deal with the truth; "He knew what he was going to find before he found it" (257) but not entirely. When he reads of the purchases, sales, births, and deaths of Negroes recorded along with the cotton, mules, supplies, food, and wages, Ike also discovers the blackness at the heart of his inheritance, that his grandfather had two children by his slaves, one by his own half-white daughter. His reponse is, "His own daughter. His own daughter. No No Not even him" (259). To get himself out from under the past recorded in these ledgers, Ike repudiates the land, the visible sign of the entire burden of his inheritance. He wants to avoid both the guilt and the sin associated with ownership and disregard for life as chronicled in the ledgers. The ledgers, like the wilderness, condense time and he has to relive his father's and uncle's lives by reading these ledgers to understand the implications of the entries. Through this understanding, he is able to see life in terms of the infinite present represented on Keats' Grecian urn (283-4). Yet he is still able

to live in the real world as a poor carpenter, though Cass and others mistake it as escapism.

Ike's two loves

There is a substantial difference between spiritual and corporeal love. Spiritual love is a mutual feeling of respect and reverence, a sacred relationship. Corporeal love, in contrast, is pure self-gratification. One can obtain sex for a price, but spiritual love is priceless and cannot be purchased; it must be received as a gift, as an inexplicable force which permeates one's soul. Although priceless, this kind of love has a cost. Something must be given up, such as the freedom to choose the one with whom one will share spiritual love; and something must be risked, as Rider risks the pain of loss when he chooses to love Mannie ("Ah'm thu wid all dat" [134]), and as a result of her death, his grief is as powerful as his strength. His outstanding show of brute strength in lifting the log bare-handed signifies the impact of the loss of her love on him as well as on the community, for in recognizing Rider's emotion the sheriff must also recognize that Rider is as human as he.

In her essay on *Go Down, Moses*, Mary Mumbach explores the concept of sacrifice in relation to love. She quotes Louise Cowan as she examines the theme of "non-consummation, of not seizing that which one has the opportunity to seize" (Allums 260). Ike does not seize the opportunity to shoot Old Ben, nor does he seize the land, nor does he seize his wife but once, with nothing to show for it. Ike "[loses] her, because she love[s] him. But women hope for so much" (335). He cares for her, but desperately wants her for a son, for the purpose of *eros*, corporeal love, a sexual relation to produce an heir. She wants him for the life she thinks they will have with the money he will inherit. He cannot reach *agape* with her. He must forsake her for his principles, for his devotion to "repudiate the old wrong and shame" of ownership. This she does not understand, and Ike does not begrudge her turning away from him. He does not expect her to love or understand him. Ike experiences *agape*, spiritual love, in the wilderness and with Sam Fathers. Here he receives all of his glimpses into infinity, here he feels most at home and most alive. Here he is married to his true wife, the wilderness (often described in human and feminine terms). Even at seventy-five, he cannot sleep on the first night in camp: "he would lie instead wakeful and peaceful on the cot...peaceful, without regret or fretting, telling himself that was all

right too, who didn't have so many of them left as to waste one sleeping" (327).

Ike's marriage to a woman was a failure, but Lucas' and Molly's is an astounding success. They keep the fire burning in their hearth all their married lives as a symbol of their everlasting commitment and love for each other. Rider and Mannie aspire toward this kind of sacred marriage also, but she is taken from him by untimely death. Roth and his mistress have only physical love; their last words to each other are spoken in anger, Roth apparently never to see his own son. For the people who share *eros*, there is only temporary, physical satisfaction with no lasting emotional rewards. But for those who share *agape* (Ike, Lucas, and Molly), there is a lifetime of spiritual love, trust, and fulfillment.

Ike's journey toward freedom is not completed in his lifetime but is neared by the next generation in "Go Down, Moses." Here the community unites for a common cause, to grant the wish of an old Negro woman to hold a funeral, with all the dignity any human being would expect. Their combined effort under the direction of Gavin Stevens shows that people with courage and compassion can transcend social structures.

Epic deals with not only what one has lost, but with what one has gained, values that are bought at great price. Molly has lost her

Benjamin and everything he could have become. What is gained, however, is a community, black and white working together: the Worshams, black and white, as well as the inhabitants of the town. They have gained truth: the child--the "lost son" that Molly says "Pharoah got"--has come back into the fold. Seen in terms of other epics, the novel ends with a funeral, the close of a life, but the gesture toward a community, just as *The Iliad* ends with the funeral of Hector and the sweet, if short, peace between Greece and Troy, and *The Aeneid* ends with the soul of Turnus moaning as it descends into the underworld but with a promise of a greater good to come. Epic, unlike Aristotle's tragedy, is not obligated to conclude the action in a definite end, "that which itself naturally follows some other thing, either by necessity or as a rule, but has nothing following it" (Poetics VII, 2-3: Adams 54). In fulfilling its duty to a culture, epic must point the way toward harmony and prosperity and leave the culture to find its end on its own.

Beloved

Beloved, by Toni Morrison, a black North American woman and Nobel Laureate, provides an answering and in some way

complimentary vision of the same general course of events as *Go Down Moses*.³ Morrison's view is from the other side of the epic mirror: the feminine, black, and Northern view opposing Faulkner's masculine, white, Southern perspective. *Beloved* is a novel about slavery and its multiple effects on the black society: those who take what is given them and make it their own. Just as Lucas in *Go Down, Moses* names himself, "not refusing to be called Lucius, because he simply eliminated that word from the name; not denying, declining the name itself, because he used three quarters of it; but simply taking the name and changing, altering it, making it no longer the white man's but his own" (269), just as Halle takes his status as a Sweet Home man and uses it to set his mother free, this people takes the terrible condition of slavery and makes it a rite of passage for survival in this strange new land. This people's past is the subject of *Beloved*; their experience of prejudice and oppression is the source of the conflict. The epic distance here, however, is of a different form than that in *Go Down, Moses*. Morrison puts the entire action in Sethe's lifetime, true to the novel form, but the use of the supernatural phenomena associated with *Beloved* throughout the book sets up an alternate reality. *Beloved* has come back from the land of the dead--as she says, "I was on the other side" (215)--and she speaks of the

crossing, the "middle passage" between Africa and the West as if she were there two hundred years ago (210-13).

A female hero

Sethe emerges as the epic hero, making the journey from Sweet Home to 124, from slavery to freedom, from individuality to community. She is certainly courageous: raising three children in bondage, enduring the torture of Sweet Home, then risking her life and the lives of her children to escape, while on the run giving birth to Denver in a leaky skiff on the Mississippi. When she finally reaches 124, her journey is not yet over, because Schoolteacher catches up to her to take them all back. Although it is too late to run, she thinks she can still save her children from the hell of bondage and torture she knows only too well. She gathers them in the woodshed and tries to kill them all, succeeding in killing only one, the "crawling already? girl" (149). Sethe's physical journey out of hell, though it takes her longer than expected is completed when she is freed from slavery and jail. She must, however, make a spiritual journey to regain the child she rejected and the self she lost. She must reacquaint herself with Beloved, reexamine the circumstances of the murder and explain to

the child why she had to kill her. "She had to be safe and I put her where she would be. I'll explain it to her, even though I don't have to. Why I did it. How if I hadn't killed her she would have died and that is something I could not bear happen to her" (200). She is explaining to herself as well, and perhaps forgiving herself, but she never comes to terms with this act of murder. Paul D says her love is "too thick" and there must have been some other way-- "It didn't work, did it?...What you did was wrong, Sethe" (164-5)--but Sethe sees none. She says it is not her job to know what may have been worse than Sweet Home: "It's my job to know what is and to keep them away from what I know is terrible" (165). Slavery, she knows, is a worse death. When recalling having the bit in his mouth, Paul D describes being a slave as being less than a rooster sunning himself on a fence post (72).

A spiteful house

Sethe lives on the fine line between chaos and order, as the wandering soul of her murdered daughter haunts the house. "124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom" (3). The baby's spirit shatters Buglar's mirror and puts its hand prints in Howard's cake, causing both of them to

leave home by the age of thirteen. Baby Suggs, Sethe's mother-in-law, doesn't take much notice of their leaving, for she is "suspended between the nastiness of life and the meanness of the dead" (3-4). Paul D, "the last of the Sweet Home men," chases the ghost out of the house by smashing the kitchen table and screaming, "Hush up!...Leave the place alone!...She got enough with out you. She got enough!" (18) The house is then silent until the spirit takes on corporeal form-- "A fully dressed woman walked out of the water" (50)-and Beloved returns to resume and play out her too-short life. When Paul D enters the scene, he brings life and love with him, which force the dead and their claims into the world of the living to exact payment. Sethe is suspended between these two worlds, a position she is willing to endure perhaps as punishment for her action but certainly as a way to have the missing child with her: "I won't never let her go" (200).

Intrusions of eternity

Beloved exists in tension between *kairos* and *chronos*. In *chronos*, pain and despair prevent any union or love, though such a thing can exist in *kairos*. One example is when Paul D, Sethe, and Denver are

walking to the fair: "They were not holding hands, but their shadows were" (47). The "tree" on Sethe's back is a symbol of *kairos*. She carries it with her, within her. She is made to suffer it. It is scarred tissue with no feeling, a "chokecherry tree" that she will never see but which Amy Denver describes to her in great detail, with "tiny little cherry blossoms, just as white. Your back got a whole tree on it. In bloom" (79). It is also a family tree, a tree of life which contains all time and space. One cannot see a family tree, or feel it, but it is there and can be sensed: invisible, unbreakable connections to one's family, the blooms representing the fertility of the future community. Sethe's tree makes an interesting contrast with Queequeg in *Moby Dick*, who has writing all over his body--the story of his entire culture (Cowan B). But Queequeg's tatoos are a symbol of manhood, of belonging to his people. Sethe's tree is inflicted upon her, an intrusion of *kairos* which Sethe must carry on her back as a burden until she can come to know and participate in it.

When Beloved appears time takes a sudden twist. No longer linear, all time seems to converge in this mysterious presence. Beloved's entrance, indeed her very character, is an intrusion of *kairos* into *chronos*: "A fully dressed woman walked out of the water" (50). Defying the limits of time and death, she has grown to be the

age she would have been had she lived, "A young woman, about nineteen or twenty" (55). The ghost has become flesh, taking her name from the tombstone for which her mother paid so dearly. She wants to see her mother smile at her, to hear her tell the story of her life and eventually of her killing her own daughter. Beloved needs to be able to fit her mortal existence into the framework of the cosmic time she has experienced. Sethe finds herself enjoying the telling which had caused so much pain in the past. "It amazed Sethe (as much as it pleased Beloved) because every mention of her past life hurt....But, as she began telling about the earrings, she found herself wanting to, liking it. Perhaps it was Beloved's distance from the events itself, or her thirst for hearing it--in any case it was an unexpected pleasure" (58).

Past and present converge in the telling, as in Ike's experiences with the ledgers. Morrison's concept for this process of reshaping is "Rememory," by which the subject reshapes *chronos* into *kairos* through tapping what Carl Gustav Jung calls the "collective unconscious...a sphere of unconscious mythology whose primordial images are the common heritage of mankind" (Adams 790). It is best seen in the section on the crossing, when Beloved becomes the voice of all black women in a single consciousness, as well as in the section with all three--Beloved, Denver and Sethe--speaking in one voice.

Some of Sethe's 'rememory' is too painful to tell even to Beloved while folding damp sheets: "She had to do something with her hands because she was remembering something she had forgotten she knew" (62). Yet Beloved makes her 'rememory' even when she would rather let everything stay beneath the surface and while she is remembering, she is out of time. She often tries to push memories out of her mind, as she does the vision of Halle with butter all over his face, but she can't. Her greedy mind "snatched up everything. Just once, couldn't it say, 'No thank you? I just ate and can't hold another bite?'" (73). A few times, Sethe is able to let go and time stands still for her. She experiences an out-of-time moment when Baby Suggs rubs her neck:

"Lay em down Sethe. Sword and shield. Down. Down. Both of them down. Down by the riverside. Sword and shield. Don't study war no more. Lay all that mess down. Sword and shield." And under the pressing fingers and the quiet instructive voice, she would. Her heavy knives of defense against misery, regret, gall and hurt, she placed one by one on a bank where clear water rushed on below. (86)

She relaxes again when Paul D comes and takes her breasts in his hands, "the responsibility for her breasts, at last, was in somebody else's hands" (18). Like Ike, she wants to live in this stolen moment when time stands still: "Maybe this one time she could stop dead still in the middle of cooking a meal--not even leave the stove--and feel the hurt her back ought to. Trust things and remember things because

the last of the Sweet Home men was there to catch her if she sank" (18). But she is afraid of these moments and the pitching of the house reminds her there is no way "to hold off eventfulness," to stop the passage of time. Like Ike, Sethe is capable of seeing time from the aspect of eternity--an overview, so their experience is of depth, not linearity.

Preaching to all men

Beloved often transcends the personal level to include aspects of religious tone. The religious aspects of the novel are a recovering of the sacred in the cosmic sense, as in Baby's sermons, but also overtly religious as in the baby's epitaph, "Dearly Beloved" and in Ike's imitation of Christ--a poor carpenter.

Baby Suggs takes on the role of spiritual guide, "unchurched preacher, one who visited pulpits and opened her great heart to those who could use it" (87). "Baby Suggs, holy" preaches in the Clearing, a place Sethe was determined to go "Before the light changed, while it was still the green and blessed place she remembered" (89). For Sethe, this place is tranquil, full of memories of "Baby Suggs, holy"

and her "great big heart." She offers self-confidence and love as the most important element of survival:

Here in this place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs;
flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it
hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it.
They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick em out.
No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they
flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands.
Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty.
Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss
them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke
them on your face 'cause they don't love that either. You
got to love it, you! (88)

Like Sam Fathers, Baby Suggs is passing on vital information to her disciples. They both bequeath a legacy of hope, trust, and understanding to the heroes of their stories. They both emphasize the importance of the action of the individual and its impact on the community. If Ike is true to the woods and himself he can have an effect on the future. If Sethe loves herself, her soul, and her flesh she can survive and thrive, like the fruitful tree on her back.

For the love of Sethe

In *Beloved*, *eros* and *agape* are not only different kinds of love, as in *Go Down, Moses*, they are bitterly opposing forces. Sethe represents *eros* while *Beloved* represents *agape*. Sethe is full of love, however

misdirected. She loves her children so much that she must somehow protect them, save them from the unlivable life of slavery. For a lack of a better solution, she chooses for them not to live at all. Paul D disagrees with her decision, but he is unable to come up with an alternative idea (164-5). By killing the "crawling already?" baby girl, Sethe not only displaces her out of *chronos*, but also out of *agape*.

Beloved is a bottomless pit of *eros*. She cannot be filled, just as she cannot get enough water to drink when she first appears in front of 124. As the sin that cries out for retribution, Beloved would suck every bit of life out of Sethe and Paul D. She usurps the physical love of Paul D and becomes pregnant, but she is pregnant with nothing. He has nothing to give Sethe but an empty tobacco tin where his heart used to be, but Beloved opens that tin. She says for him to call her by her name, but what he says is, "Red heart. Red heart. Red heart" (117). She is the "inside part" of him that he thought he had lost. She is his lust, his hunger. She is pregnant with emptiness, with *eros*. She has nothing to hide, which allows her to be "naked and smiling in the heat of the afternoon sun" (261). In order for Sethe and *agape* to prevail, Beloved must not survive because *eros* must be reabsorbed into the whole, not a whole in itself. The "hill of black people" in her front yard have come to save Sethe from Beloved. Sethe and Denver leave her behind to join the women on the sidewalk. After

this incident, Beloved is gone-- "Disappeared, some say, exploded right before their eyes" (263). She, *eros*, has been recognized, forsaken, and destroyed for the greater love, that which is represented by the black women singing:

For Sethe it was as though the Clearing had come to her with all its heat and simmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. (261)

This wave is a fulfillment of the image of the crossing, the ocean in the middle passage. Sethe is free: free from Beloved and *eros*, free from Schoolteacher, free to be a part of the community of black women, and free to become a part of the collective 'rememory.' The novel ends with Beloved as a sacrifice to this community a second time. The first sacrifice, an attempt to "save" her life, created a rift in the natural order, and the second set it right. Through her destruction, Sethe and the others can survive. Sethe can now love Paul D, whom she describes as "the kind of man who can walk into a house and make the women cry. Because with him, in his presence, they could" (272). Sixo experiences this spiritual love, this *agape*, with the "Thirty-Mile Woman." He describes her to the Pauls: "She is a friend of my mind.

She gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me all in the right order. It's good, you know, when you got a woman who is a friend of your mind" (272-3). This is what Paul D and Sethe have, what Molly and Lucas have. This is what the voice and vision of epic do for a nation as well: they take the fragmented pieces and order them.

Conclusion

Although neither Faulkner nor Morrison set out to create national epics there is within these two works an epic voice they do not want us to forget. They point us toward a building awareness of our national identity. This awareness is larger than just the recognition of epic strains in these novels (though knowledge is always delightful); it is broader, with implications that touch the entire community.

These two novels contain many epic strains, the epic *energeia*, the common national past, but neither of them encompasses the whole of our national identity. In conjunction with each other, they give a picture of guilt and shame, of juxtaposed forces struggling to unite. Perhaps at some date a voice will speak out and "gather" the

pieces of this nation, put these forces together, order them under a single cultural sensibility, put their stories together.

Who is to say what form this epic will take? It could conceivably be a novel, it could also take the form of a poem. A poet who overcomes the distrust of the public and creates a story that speaks our name could emerge and recreate the epic song (but at some future date when poetry or society has been rehabilitated). In order for this to be possible, however, the feeling of unity must be present; the tide of oppression and prejudice must be overcome and we must start acting like a single community, like that which Ike describes as "the best of all talking" in "The Bear": "It was of the men, not white nor black nor red but men, hunters, with the will and hardihood to endure and the humility and skill to survive" (184). We can achieve a national epic only when we feel about our fellow Americans how Paul D feels about Sethe at the end of *Beloved*: "He wants to put his story next to hers."

For now, the only way this nation will experience epic is in fragments, juxtaposed against each other but forming an ordered constellation above a common set of values. Ishmael expresses this sentiment in *Moby Dick* when he describes the sword-mat he and Queequeg are weaving (Melville 185) and when he recounts the epic

sense of community the two experience in bed together at the beginning:

There is no place like a bed for confidential disclosures between friends. Man and wife, they say, there open the very bottom of their souls to each other; and some old couples often lie and chat over old times till nearly morning. Thus, then, in our hearts' honeymoon, lay I and Queequeg--a cozy, loving pair. (54)

Perhaps we will never have a single national epic. Perhaps our stories can interweavingly, lovingly work together to give us a tapestried epic, layered by the contributing cultures with different but corresponding colors and by viewing the various works in this way we may be able to behold a national identity and call our name as one people.

End Notes

1. For those interested in novel theory and the novel as a replacement of the epic, see Mikhail Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination*, University of Texas Press, 1981, particularly the chapter entitled "Epic and Novel." Georg Lukács' *The Theory of the Novel*, MIT Press, 1971 also examines epic and novel, with some interesting insights in the introductory chapter "Integrated Civilizations" and the chapter on "The Epic and the Novel." Others who see the novel as heir to epic are Sisir Chatterjee in his *The Novel as the Modern Epic*, Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1965 and Alessandro Manzoni's *On the Historical Novel*, MIT Press, 1971.

For a flexible definition of modern epic including novel, poetry and film, see Paul Merchant's *The Epic*, Methuen, 1971 and J.B. Hainsworth's *The Idea of Epic*, UC Berkeley Press, 1991. Leslie Fiedler, however controversial, has a new vision of the American epic spirit contained in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Roots*, *Gone With the Wind*, and *Birth of a Nation*. See his book, *The Inadvertent Epic*, Simon and Schuster, 1979. E.M.W. Tillyard places epic in novel form in his *The Epic Strain in the English Novel*, Chatto and Windus, 1963, but his broad definitions give little insight as to where epic is headed. Irene Myers' book, *A Study in Epic Development*, Holt, 1901, parallels the development of narrative literature with political development, Oberhelman, Van Kelly, and Golsan edit *Epic and Epoch: Essays on the Interpretation and History of a Genre*, Texas Tech University Press, 1994, which discusses epic movement not in terms of politics or national sensibilities but in terms of its scope in time.

2. By no means an exhaustive list of criticism on *Go Down, Moses*, the following gives a sample of the critical work. Leading the plethora of Faulkner critics is Cleanth Brooks, who holds that *Go Down, Moses* is indeed a novel, which insight he spells out in his chapter "The Story of the McCaslins" in his book, *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country*, Yale University Press, 1963. He is joined by Olga Vickery and Michael Millgate, as well as Warren Akin, IV in his essay, "Providence and the Structure of *Go Down, Moses*," *The Southern Review*, 18:3, 495-505. Another book devoted to connecting the stories as a novel is Dirk Kuyk, Jr.'s *Threads Cable Strong: William Faulkner's Go Down, Moses*, Bucknell University Press, 1983. John Lamiman also discusses time in *Go Down, Moses* in his essay, "Walking in Breath and Air: Orality and the Presence of the Past in the Fiction of William Faulkner," *Postscript*, v 2, 107-114. Another

collection of essays on *Go Down, Moses* and *Absalom! Absalom!* is Jerry Herndon's *Faulkner: Meteor, Earthquake, and Sword*, Whitston, 1980.

To give the opposition its due recognition, some critics see Ike as a failure and have a pessimistic view of the novel as a whole. These include Susan Donaldson's essay, "Isaac McCaslin and the Possibilities of Vision," *The Southern Review*, 22:1, 37-50, not to mention David Stewart's essay, "Ike McCaslin, Cop-Out," published in *Bear, Man and God: Eight Approaches to William Faulkner's "The Bear,"* edited by Francis Utley, Lynn Bloom, and Arthur Kinney, Random House, 1964, 212-20.

Several critics discuss other epic themes in *Go Down, Moses*. Kossia Orloff actually compares Faulkner to Homer in composing *Go Down, Moses* in her essay, "Homer and Faulkner: A Study in Ring Composition," *Compass*, v 5, 1-20. James Snead comes close to an epic discussion of the novel without actually calling it "epic" as well as offering a psychoanalysis of Ike in his chapter on the novel in his book, *Figures of Division: William Faulkner's Major Novels*, Methuen, 1986, 180-211. Another interesting epic view of *Go Down, Moses* is presented in a paper by Prof. Christine Cowan entitled "This bed thy center is: The Marriage Bed as Epic Image in Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*" (unpublished manuscript).

3. Although criticism on *Beloved* is by no means as abundant as on *Go Down, Moses*, several critics have provided important work on understanding the novel. Wilfred Samuels and Clenora Hudson-Weems devote a chapter to *Beloved*, "Ripping the Veil: Meaning through Rememory in *Beloved*," giving an exceptionally insightful discussion of the sources, characters and themes of the novel in their book, *Toni Morrison*, Twayne, 1990, 94-138.

Rememory is also discussed, but from a feminist approach, by Marianne Hirsch in her essay, "Maternity and Rememory: Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," published in *Representations of Motherhood*, edited by Donna Bassin, Margaret Honey and Meryle Mahrer-Kaplan, Yale University Press, 1994. She is joined by Sally Keenan, who writes "Four Hundred Years of Silence: Myth, History and Motherhood in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," published in Jonathan White's *Recasting the World: Writing after Colonialism*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993, and Elaine Jordan, who discusses sexism, racism, and the concept of identity in her essay, "Not My People: Toni Morrison and Identity" published in Gina Wisker's book, *Black Women's Writing*, St. Martin's Press, 1993. Wisker herself contributes to the book an essay on racism and sexism entitled "Disremembered and Unaccounted

For': Reading Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Alice Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar*."

Other critics of Toni Morrison write on the presence of certain epic themes in *Beloved*. These include Carolyn Mitchell's essay, "I Love to Tell the Story': Biblical Revisions in *Beloved*," *Religion and Literature*, 23:3, 27-42, Barbara Schapiro's essay, "The Bonds of Love and the Boundaries of Self in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," *Contemporary Literature*, 32:2, 194-210, and Brian Finney's essay, "Temporal Defamiliarization in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," *Obsidian II: Black Literature in Review*, 5:1, 20-36. The aspect of community is addressed by Charles Scruggs in his essay, "The Invincible City in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory*, 48:3, 95-132.

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