Clear-cutting eden: representations of nature in Southern fiction, 1930-1950

Christopher B. Rieger

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College

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CLEAR-CUTTING EDEN:
REPRESENTATIONS OF NATURE IN SOUTHERN FICTION, 1930-1950

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
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by
Christopher B. Rieger
B. A., Emory University, 1993
M. A., Louisiana State University, 1997
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Abstract

This dissertation examines how Southern literary representations of the natural world were influenced by, and influenced, the historical, social, and ecological changes of the 1930s and 1940s. Specifically, I examine the ways that nature is conceived of and portrayed by four authors of this era: Erskine Caldwell, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, Zora Neale Hurston, and William Faulkner; through their works, I investigate the intersections of race, class, and gender with the natural environment. I argue that during this time of profound regional and national upheaval there exists a climate of professed binary oppositions and that these authors’ representations of nature in their fiction reflect the tensions of such polarities as past/present, male/female, left/right, white/black, and culture/nature.

Although there is no clear linear development of the way the idea of nature is used in Southern literature, the period now termed the Southern Renaissance (roughly 1930-1950) is fueled by a new wave of Southern authors who reconfigure the use of nature in their fiction in conjunction with modernist analyses of the self and the South. The relatively belated arrival of modernism in the South offers a special opportunity for studying the shift from nineteenth- to twentieth-century culture, a change that proceeded in the South in far more concentrated fashion and with greater tension and drama than in the rest of the nation. I focus on the natural environments of the texts as dynamic, expressive spaces, and I also connect the representations of the natural world in selected novels of Caldwell, Rawlings, Hurston, and Faulkner to their responses to issues of race, class, and gender while situating their works within the contexts of Southern history and literary traditions.
Introduction. Changes in the Air and on the Ground: 
Nature and Southern Modernism

The American South has always been a region closely aligned and identified with nature and the land, both in the popular imagination and in the realities of its agrarian past. From the lush, Edenic descriptions of the landscape in the reports of explorers like John Smith to the reactionary essays of the Nashville Agrarians in *I’ll Take My Stand* (1930), writers have consistently sought to construct and employ versions of a South defined by its relationship to nature for their own purposes. Whether seeking to lure new settlers and investors to the New World or trying to make a case for Southern exceptionalism in the twentieth century, authors writing about the South often rely on conceptions of nature in creating a definition of the region, and these conceptions can vary widely from author to author. That is, the idea of nature is an important tool in the construction of the idea of the South and in the construction of the actual, physical conditions of Southern society. Notions of the South as an abundant paradise, as a pastoral haven of order and simplicity, as a feudal, aristocratic anachronism, or as a place cursed and ruined by its legacy of chattel slavery all depend on particular versions of the relationship between the South and nature for their force; generally, the region and its inhabitants are seen as either in harmony with or in opposition to a specific view of the natural world that is posited as an objective depiction of the natural order of the universe.

Although there is no clear linear development of the way the idea of nature is used in Southern literature, the period now termed the Southern Renaissance (roughly 1930-1950) is fueled by a new wave of Southern authors who reconfigure the use of nature in their fiction in conjunction with modernist analyses of the self and the
South. The relatively belated arrival of modernism in the South (generally dated around the end of World War I) means that its effects were more pronounced and concentrated in the region. Daniel Singal argues that “the South offers a special opportunity for studying the shift from nineteenth- to twentieth-century culture.” Because its writers are more self-conscious of the effects of modernism than its “northern pioneers,” change proceeded in the South “in far more concentrated fashion [and] with greater tension and drama,” and the culture clash was “fiercest in the South,” as well as “comparatively self-contained.” Issues of race, class, and gender figure prominently in modernist reappraisals of the contemporary and historical South, and representations of the natural world are inextricably tied to such analyses. At the same time these intellectual changes were sweeping the South between the two World Wars, significant social, political, and economic revolutions were creating what has come to be known as the “New South.” This period of profound upheaval includes the great migration of blacks out of the South, increased industrialization and urbanization, and a decreasing number of Southerners making their living as farmers. This dissertation examines how Southern literary representations of the natural world were influenced by, and influenced, the historical, social, and ecological changes of the 1930s and 1940s.

Specifically, I examine the ways that nature is conceived of and portrayed by four authors of this era: Erskine Caldwell, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, Zora Neale Hurston, and William Faulkner; through their works, I investigate the intersections of race, class, and gender with the natural environment. I argue that during this time of profound regional and national upheaval there exists a climate of professed binary
oppositions and that these authors’ representations of nature in their fiction reflect the tensions of such polarities as past/present, male/female, proletarian/bourgeois, left/right, white/black, and culture/nature. Allen Tate accurately describes this time in Southern history as a clash of opposing values and claims that this conflict is responsible for the Southern Renaissance, which he compares to “the outburst of poetic genius at the end of the sixteenth century when commercial England began to crush feudal England.” After World War I, Tate says, the influences of modernism prompted the South to rejoin the world and created a peculiar dual perspective among the region’s writers: “with us, entering the world once more meant not the obliteration of the past but a heightened consciousness of it; so that we had . . . a double focus, a looking two ways, which gave a special dimension to the writings of our school.” In short, the sense was that one era was ending and a new one beginning. Consequently, writers of this time reassess and redefine the South, and Southerners’ relationships with nature are reevaluated in a new age.

The domination of agriculture in the economy and culture of the South was already on the decline prior to 1930, but the Great Depression sped the pace of change, compelling Southern authors to more closely examine the causes and effects of the industrialization and urbanization of a historically rural farming region. Since the very identity of the South as an entity distinct from the rest of the country had been inextricably tied to its agricultural economy, these changes destabilized and threatened to destroy traditional ways of life, and, indeed, challenged the assumption that a clearly definable South exists at all. According to Jack Temple Kirby, the South
lost over 1.5 million farms from 1920-1960, sending shockwaves throughout the region:

The capitalization and enclosure of southern farmland was more dramatic and chronologically compressed than that in the Northeast and Middle West. Northern farms were always relatively well mechanized and not so overpopulated; so the social disruption of the rural South in so brief a time seems particularly intense (and traumatic).

This sense of dislocation made the land itself a logical starting place both for attempts to sustain the institutions of the past in the chaotic present (e.g., *I’ll Take My Stand*) and for modernist critiques of the validity and usefulness of inherited knowledge (e.g., W.J. Cash’s *The Mind of the South*).

Although any definition of modernism is subject to debate, Singal and Michael O’Brien have offered useful descriptions in the context of Southern literature. Singal includes as modernist traits “the recognition of man’s irrational nature, the acceptance of an open and unpredictable universe, the notion of conflict as inherently virtuous, the tolerance of uncertainty, and the drive toward probing criticism.” O’Brien notes the presence of “a heightened awareness of the sharp pace of social change; a sense of intellectual dislocation and doubt in the sufficiency of inherited wisdom; a feeling that change . . . has enlarged the existential obligation of self-definition;” a stronger awareness of myth and symbolism; and the knowledge that personal liberty is restricted by “increasingly structured and influential public institutions.” As these definitions make clear, the time of the Southern Renaissance was one of unprecedented and self-conscious interrogations of the South and the self.

The accompanying reassessment of individual relationships with the natural
environment, as well as of Southern culture’s historical relationship with the land, were therefore bound to social issues of race, class, and gender.

An underlying assumption of this study is that the natural world is more than just the passive physical background, or *terra nullius*, against which the substance of life (or fiction) is played out. Nature is at once a cultural construct and an external reality not fully contained by human constructions. Taking my cue from the insights offered in the fields of humanistic and cultural geography in recent decades, I emphasize the dynamic element of natural places. As geographer E.V. Walter suggests, there is a reciprocal influence between human beings and their environments: “People and things in a place participate in one another’s natures. Place is a location of mutual immanence, a unity of effective presences abiding together.”

Similarly, J. Nicholas Entrikin reminds us that lived places resonate with the energies of their inhabitants: “We live our lives in place and have a sense of being part of place, but we also view place as something separate, something external. . . . Thus place is both a center of meaning and the external context of our actions.” Of course, not all natural environments can properly be called lived places, especially those commonly classified as wilderness. Nonetheless, the tenet of cultural geography that a profound interdependency exists between people and places is readily adaptable to a wide variety of lived and uninhabited natural places. Each of the authors discussed in the subsequent four chapters demonstrates the mutually constitutive nature of place and social reality.

Rather than survey a wide range of authors from this time period, I have selected four distinct and important writers for more detailed examination. The four
principal authors selected for this study were chosen because they all make Southern relationships to the land and nature central concerns of their work, and because each interrogates those connections and their implications from a different angle. Close readings of major works will provide a more profitable analysis of the significance and complexity of literary representations of nature in Southern Renaissance fiction than would an attempt to include a panoply of voices contributing to Southern discourses on nature at the time. In many ways these writers are representative figures in that their specific renderings of human relationships with the natural environment attest to a variety of more general cultural anxieties about the destabilizing effects of the Great Depression, the rise of modernism, and the creation of the New South.

Although the similar need of these and other Southern writers to respond to questions about human beings’ place in nature provides a connection among diverse authors, there is not a monolithic Southern viewpoint to elucidate. I examine the fiction of Caldwell, Rawlings, Hurston, and Faulkner for their different approaches to writing about the natural world as much as for any similar awareness of the importance of natural environments in “purely” human affairs. Caldwell’s focus is on the land and, in particular, Southern agricultural use and abuse of the soil. Rawlings’ best work is set in the wilderness of north Florida and offers a pastoral critique of society, even as it questions and revises the pastoral mode itself. Hurston examines the development of land and wilderness, contemplating how attitudes towards nature intersect with issues of race, class, and gender. Faulkner, as we might expect, confronts virtually all of these issues in a single novel, *Go Down, Moses*, exploring
the connections of a degraded environment to a degraded culture and specifically probing the idea of wilderness in relation to the McCaslin family plantation.

While Faulkner is clearly essential for any study of Southern, and indeed American, literature from 1930-1950, the inclusion of Hurston, Rawlings, and Caldwell perhaps requires further elaboration. In the last twenty-five years, Hurston has become an indispensable part of the Southern and American canons. Much of the current scholarship, however, tends to examine her work primarily in relation to African-American literary traditions or considers her a protean writer who defies inclusion in any literary movements or traditions. By discussing her work in the contexts of modernism, Southern literature, and environmental studies, I offer readings that suggest her continuity with seemingly disparate authors, while also juxtaposing her portraits of nature, women, and African-Americans with those of white authors from the same era and region.

Rawlings and Caldwell are the least obvious choices for this project, and a major reason for their selection is perhaps best explained considering the two together. Rawlings’ work falls closest to the loose category of “nature writing” of any of these four authors. An apt moniker for her major works, all set in the backwoods of Florida, might be “environmental fiction” in that they directly focus on the struggles of people in rural and wilderness settings where the specter of ever-encroaching modern civilization always looms. Caldwell, on the other hand, is identified with the milieu of social criticism or social protest fiction much more than any of the other three authors in this study. Sometimes classified as a proletarian writer, Caldwell, at first glance, appears least concerned with the natural environment per se, as opposed
to the human activities occurring within them. Thus, my approach is to show, on the one hand, how Rawlings’ environmental fiction incorporates significant subtexts regarding social issues (particularly gender) and, on the other, to reveal how Caldwell’s social criticism expands from, and largely depends on, his conceptions and representations of the natural world. Despite the wide variety of ways these authors choose to represent nature and investigate the mutually constitutive relationship of humans to their natural environments, each of the four responds to, contests, and revises, in some manner, the pastoral traditions of American and Southern literature.

Although the pastoral mode characterizes the majority of colonial and nineteenth-century American writers’ portraits of nature, the pastoral ideal of a balanced middle state between city and country, culture and nature, is especially enduring in Southern literature. As Leo Marx has shown, American pastoral readily adopts machine technology into the pastoral ideal as a means to convert more effectively the wilderness to an improved garden. In the agrarian South, however, the pastoral mode is invoked against industrialism as a supposedly harmonic convergence of binary extremes. Thus, the Southern pastoral tradition tends to emphasize order and stasis as a reaction to a variety of perceived threats, including abolition, Reconstruction, and industrialization. Representations of nature in antebellum and Reconstruction-era pastoral tend to oppose the chaotic wilderness outside the boundaries of the plantation to the improved garden within its confines.

This dichotomy of nature is routinely accompanied in pre-Renaissance Southern literature by an association of African-Americans with wild nature, while
whites are portrayed as tamers or domesticators of the unruly elements of nature. Placing the natural and African-Americans outside of a cultural space with Edenic overtones helps to justify racial separation and subjugation as natural. Critic Melvin Dixon points out that if America has been constructed as both a paradisiacal garden and a howling wilderness, then “slaves developed different ideas about the dichotomy between order and chaos." The wilderness becomes a place of potential deliverance for those who know the pastoral reality to be quite the opposite of Eden. Hurston extends this reversal to the twentieth-century South and revises traditional pastoral notions of wilderness, creating an empowering bond between nature and African-Americans in opposition to the dominant white culture.

The same logic that subordinates African-Americans by identifying them with a passive, objectified natural world has also historically been applied to women. Male authors from William Gilmore Simms and Thomas Nelson Page to Allen Tate and William Faulkner have recreated versions of the pastoral myth in which women represent, at different times, the virginal garden of the South, a postlapsarian Eve in a ruined wasteland, a nurturing and protective “earth mother,” and a sexually potent and seductive “earth goddess.” Whether women are portrayed positively or negatively, they tend to be objectified and viewed as property of the dominant class in the traditional pastoral mode. This process of reification subordinates women, along with African-Americans and nature itself, to white, male culture in a dualistic conception of the world, as Rachel Stein explains:

When nature is viewed in this manner as the “terra nullius,” or empty background for culture, as a passive resource for human domination, those persons equated with nature may analogously be treated as natural inferiors, and ensuing inequitable and divisive social interrelations may be cast as
natural rather than humanly created, as inevitable rather than open to question and reform. It is the American tradition of viewing nature in this manner that Louise Westling is chiefly concerned with understanding in *The Green Breast of the New World*, in which she defines the “imperialist nostalgia” of American pastoral as “a sentimental masculine gaze at a feminized landscape and its creatures that masked the conquest and destruction of the ‘wild’ continent.” Novelists like Rawlings and Hurston, rather than deny a bond between women and nature, reconstitute the relationship as active and potentially empowering. When the natural environment itself is envisioned as more than merely a passive field for the exercise of masculine power, then the women characters identified with a vital, active nature can emerge beyond symbolic representation as virginal or despoiled land. Rawlings and Hurston utilize specific environments, notably places that are more wilderness than civilization, to create mutually empowering relationships between women and nature.

In the field of sociology, Rupert Vance’s classic 1932 study *Human Geography of the South* shows that the interaction and reciprocal influences of humans and nature is a topical matter for Southern academics as well as novelists. Vance’s study coincided with a growing environmental awareness, both nationally and in the South, and with the compositions and publications of the works examined in this dissertation. Judith Bryant Wittenberg rightly notes that “although the environmental crisis in the United States was deep-rooted and increasing with each decade, the public perception that it was fast assuming disastrous proportions grew during the 1930s and 1940s.” These factors help explain the increased prominence of nature in Southern fiction between 1930 and 1950, an era of literary production
that is directly related to the belated arrival of modernism to the region. While mass
deforestation, soil erosion, and depleted fertility were hardly new phenomena in the
twentieth century, they were not major themes for Southern writers until the Southern
Renaissance period.

One reason that environmental concerns began to affect the popular psyche
more significantly is that the results of nineteenth century policies and practices were
being felt decades later. Albert Cowdrey has called the South of 1900-1930 “a theater
of environmental disasters,” featuring a boll weevil infestation, a tularemia outbreak
among rabbits, a yellow fever epidemic, a great flood, drastic erosion, and the clear-
cutting of millions of acres of forests. As I will discuss in more detail in chapter
four, the most damaging of these disasters to people trying to live off the land were
deforestation and the loss of soil fertility, both direct consequences of human
activities in nature. The monocrop planting, first of tobacco and then of cotton, wore
out the soil and increased its susceptibility to erosion, while the commercial fertilizers
used to compensate for lost fertility eventually exacerbated both problems.

Don H. Doyle, in his recent study *Faulkner’s County: The Historical Roots of
Yoknapatawpha*, grimly concludes that by the time Faulkner began writing about his
native Mississippi in the 1920s, the “evidence of destruction” was vivid and
abundant: “He grew up in a land torn apart by gullies that ran down the hillsides, with
creeks and rivers clogged by quicksand sludge, a landscape also of denuded fields
pocked with stumps left by the lumbermen who had cut their way through the woods
like locusts.”
The landscapes were much the same throughout the South following more than a century of intensive agriculture and widespread, mechanized logging of Southern forests from 1880-1920. Nor were these two chief sources of environmental problems unrelated, as Cowdrey explains: “The relationship between forests and soil, rivers, and wildlife amplified the losses, implying disruption of the linked systems which constituted the natural regimen of the landscape.” Hugh Bennett, the first head of the Soil Conservation Service, estimated in 1930 that 97 million acres were completely decimated by erosion in the South and that the amount of farmland denuded of topsoil ranged from 1.5 million acres in Virginia to over 5 million in Georgia. The dust bowl phenomenon of the 1930s, a consequence of the earlier agricultural practices of the so-called “sodbusters,” displaced thousands of farming families and helped fuel the public perception that an environmental crisis of disastrous proportions was already underway by casting environmental problems in visible and tragic human terms.

Events like the dust bowl, along with the publication of a number of influential environmental texts, contribute to a wider acceptance of the idea that human communities--and individuals’ livelihoods--are not separate from the natural world but part of the same larger system. Paul Sears’ Deserts on the March (1935), for instance, was an influential study that condemned the land-use practices which led to erosion in the South and the dust bowl of the Southwest. Other works that had a significant impact on the public environmental discourse in the 1930s and 1940s were Albert Schweitzer’s autobiography, the journals of John Muir, Aldo Leopold’s landmark environmental work Sand Country Almanac, Charles Elton’s Animal
Ecology, and a reissued edition of George Perkins Marsh’s Man and Nature, which had originally warned readers in 1864 of the “hostile influence of man.” As Wittenberg puts it, these works continue the “gradual tipping of the conceptual scales from nature-as-commodity to nature-as-community.” The shift was not purely conceptual, however, as the Soil Conservation Act was passed by Congress in 1935, six southern states passed legislation in 1937 authorizing local districts to work with the Soil Conservation Service, the Civilian Conservation Corps planted millions of trees throughout the cut-over South, and the Southern Pulpwood Conservation Association promoted more responsible forestry. Historian Richard Pells additionally notes the connection between environmental problems and the sense of total collapse engendered by the Depression: “Men became preoccupied with floods, dust storms, and soil erosion not only because these constituted real problems but also because they were perfect metaphors for a breakdown that appeared more physical than social or economic.” The apparent collapse of nature itself provided Southern writers not only a metaphor for chaotic, fragmented modern society, but also the material embodiment of T. S. Eliot’s “wasteland.”

Southern literature reflects these developments not only in novels that deal directly with land-use issues, like Caldwell’s Tobacco Road (1932), Rawlings’ South Moon Under (1933), and Faulkner’s Go Down, Moses (1942), but also in works that posit something of a sociological corollary to what is often called the First Law of Ecology: everything is connected to everything else. SueEllen Campbell has identified an intriguing similarity between the idea of intertextuality and this concept of ecological interdependence, and she demonstrates that post-structuralism and
ecology both critique “the traditional sense of a separate, independent, authoritative center of value or meaning; both substitute the idea of networks.” In essence, both literary and ecological theory challenge the notion of autonomous individuality. For example, the existence of billions of microscopic creatures on our bodies problematizes any rigid distinction between self and other. In this way, the ideas of someone like Foucault, who says that an individual is a “node within a network,” can be compared to the principle of contemporary biology and ecology that “the individuality of an organism is not definable except through its interaction with its environment, through its interdependencies.”

The philosophical underpinnings of such notions of interdependence are elucidated by Alfred North Whitehead, best known for his influential *Science and the Modern World* (1925), who says that no unit can exist independently of others and that “an actual entity by its very nature requires other actual entities as ingredients.” Whitehead extends this challenge to Cartesian subject/object duality to the realm of temporality, as well, claiming that “the whole past world of actualities is in some way present in a present actual occasion. . . . Whatever is in a certain occasion’s past . . . is objectively present in it.” Faulkner articulates a strikingly similar principle in his famous formulation that “the past is not dead; it’s not even past.” He also demonstrates this idea in *Go Down, Moses*, where we see the rippling effects of L. Q. C. McCaslin’s actions on his descendents mirrored by the juxtaposition of past and present in book’s jumbled chronology. It is perhaps not coincidental, then, that this novel about the long-term, unintentional effects of the past and the interrelations of
black and white Southern families also tackles issues of land ownership, hunting ethics, logging practices, and the destruction of wilderness.

While the other authors studied in this dissertation do not utilize the same sort of chronological and structural experimentation as Faulkner, each suggests in their fiction an interdependency among people as well as between humans and nature. A new tradition of communal values that replace Victorian hierarchies is implicit in the ideas of nature as conceived by the formerly marginal voices of African-Americans and women. When nature is perceived as an interdependent network that affirms multiplicity, diversity, and equality (as in the novels of Rawlings and Hurston), then the claim can be made that similar values in the human community are, in fact, more “natural” than the hierarchical structures of a previously dominant and oppressive system. Whether this system is identified as pastoralism, Victorianism, the patriarchy, slavery, or Jim Crow-ism depends on the particular author and text in question (and on the critic discussing them). However, the validity of each of these hierarchies also rested on the assumption that they were merely replicating the natural order—only the idea of nature was much different.27

This idea of a new system of communal values based on an environmental model is very close to what prominent ecocritic Lawrence Buell calls “ecocentrism,” an attitude that exhibits a “shift from representation of nature as a theater for human events to representation in the sense of advocacy of nature as a presence for its own sake.”28 Indeed, my own approach has some affinities with the burgeoning fields of ecocriticism and ecofeminism. Although ecocriticism remains a loosely defined theoretical and critical movement that derives from ecological, biological, platial, and
sociological bases, this flexible interdisciplinary approach is perhaps its greatest asset. Despite recent works like *The Ecocriticism Reader* in which an ecological sensibility proper dominates, Buell promotes the value of leaving the field open to a multiplicity of approaches, noting that “the phenomenon of literature-and-environment studies is better understood as a congeries of semioverlapping projects than as a unitary approach or set of claims.”

A basic premise of my approach to this study is the inherent usefulness of the open, interdisciplinary method espoused by Buell for creating fresh perspectives on even the most-analyzed literary classics. Moreover, a combination of theoretical strategies seems only appropriate for a study that posits—and examines how authors represent—a fundamental interdependency among individuals, specific environments, cultural and historical trends, socio-economic systems, and the biotic community of nature. Thus, the following chapters utilize a combination of historical, psychological, genre-based, feminist, and ecocritical hermeneutics in order to demonstrate the degree to which human relationships with nature affect nearly every aspect of culture. I argue that these Southern authors counter the prevailing assumption that humans are inherently separate from, over and above, the natural world, and in doing so, confront and negotiate in various ways other seemingly fixed oppositions of culture/nature, male/female, white/black, high/low, and self/other.

In this study, I focus primarily on representations of nature in major novels of Caldwell, Rawlings, Hurston, and Faulkner, which differentiates this project from the majority of literary ecocriticism. One of the limitations of this burgeoning movement is the tendency of its practitioners to study principally, or exclusively, nonfiction.
“nature writing” by a relatively small group of canonized writers, including Thoreau, Leopold, Annie Dillard, John Muir, Wendell Berry, Edward Abbey, Robinson Jeffers, and Barry Lopez. This is not to suggest that these writers are somehow less important, less skilled, or less worthy of critical study than canonized novelists; they are none of these. However, when works that actively promote environmental awareness are made the predominate objects of ecocriticism, there is the risk of marginalizing the theoretical approach itself as useful for explicating environmental texts, but not “real” literature. By applying some general ecocritical principles to works not normally categorized as nature writing, I demonstrate that nature is often centrally important even when (sometimes even because) it is not explicitly foregrounded.

Certainly, there are critics who do treat the role of nature in a wide range of fiction, and not all of them would be considered practitioners of ecocriticism or ecofeminism. Buell is perhaps the most prominent, especially in his most recent work, *Writing for an Endangered World* (2001), in which he investigates the environmental imaginations of such writers as Charles Dickens, Richard Wright, Gwendolyn Brooks, Herman Melville, and Faulkner. Noteworthy examples of what might be termed ecofeminism (although, admittedly, this term and ecocriticism are shifting and variable by nature, as it were) include Rachel Stein’s *Shifting the Ground* and Stacy Alaimo’s *Undomesticated Ground*. Studies of the role of nature in Southern literature are more difficult to find, which is surprising considering the region’s historically rural and agricultural identity. Three excellent books that helped guide my thinking for this study through their examinations of Southern writers’ treatments of the pastoral tradition, the idea of wilderness, and the relationships of
race and gender to nature, are Lucinda Hardwick MacKethan’s *The Dream of Arcady*, Elizabeth Jane Harrison’s *Female Pastoral*, and Melvin Dixon’s *Ride Out the Wilderness*.31

In the chapters that follow, I connect the representations of the natural world in selected novels of Caldwell, Rawlings, Hurston, and Faulkner to their responses to social issues while situating their works within the contexts of Southern history and literary traditions. Although my readings are characterized by their attention to race, class, and gender dynamics, I also strive to remain focused on the natural environment itself as “expressive space” or “location of mutual immanence,” in E. V. Walter’s terms, that fosters these dynamics. For as Barbara Ching and Gerald Creed shrewdly note, quite often in contemporary literary and cultural theory, the representation of “social distinctions primarily in terms of race, class and gender . . . masks the extent to which these categories are influenced by place identification.”32 Buell, too, makes a similar complaint of current criticism (even including much ecocriticism) that “marginalizes the literal environment too much when it portrays the green world as little more than projective fantasy or social allegory.”33

Chapter one analyzes Erskine Caldwell’s two best and most popular novels, *Tobacco Road* and *God’s Little Acre*, within the context of the Great Depression. Critiquing a spirit of “acquisitive individualism,” Caldwell identifies the social factors that have depleted the soil and dispossessed independent farmers of their place in the Jeffersonian yeoman tradition. In both novels, I argue, Caldwell emphasizes the impotence and frustration of male characters who can no longer work to grow cotton in the fields nor transform the cotton to textiles in mills. Farmers who cannot farm
and weavers who cannot weave lose touch with a feminine natural world and find their manhood threatened. Caldwell links women and nature through the physically deformed women of *Tobacco Road* who reflect the scarred landscape and through the sexual vitality of the women in *God's Little Acre* who embody a natural energy that Will Thompson, Caldwell’s mill worker übermensch, cannot find in the earth or in the idle machinery of the closed mill. Economic and social factors are the root causes of Caldwell’s degraded natural environments, which, in turn, exert a debilitating influence on their human inhabitants, illustrating the mutually constitutive nature of place.

In chapter two, I examine three works by Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings—*South Moon Under*, *Cross Creek*, and *The Yearling*—and argue that she relocates the pastoral garden to the heart of the wilderness in order to free her characters from traditionally confining and artificial gender identities. Rawlings finds many of the positive attributes of the middle ground in an environment typically considered an untenable extreme in traditional pastoral modes. The elemental qualities of life in the isolated Florida “scrub” country necessitate more natural conceptions of gender, in Rawlings’ formulation, by virtue of its proximity to pristine wilderness. The distance of the scrub from modern civilization reveals that gender inequities are justified by positing social constructions of gender as natural and therefore immutable. Rawlings essentially suggests that an interdependent, fluid model of nature that she finds in the wilderness is more accurate than traditional pastoral versions of an ordered and static garden. Therefore, dynamic and changeable gender roles are more natural, and thus more correct, than the fixed hierarchy of a purely cultural construction that
subordinates women to men. I also claim that Rawlings’ version of nature is not necessarily more accurate than others and that her conception of wilderness as a corrective to the ills of society threatens to replicate the problematic pastoral ideal in the new setting of the wilderness.

Chapter three expands this investigation of the relationship of nature to gender dynamics by considering two novels by Zora Neale Hurston—*Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Seraph on the Suwanee*—that reconstruct the passive association of women and nature as active and empowering. Hurston utilizes the controlling symbol of a pear tree for the story of Janie in *Their Eyes* and a mulberry tree for Arvay Henson’s tale in *Seraph*. Both women undertake journeys of self-discovery and the trees they identify with as young women serve as paradigms of their future relationships: Janie’s pear tree as a positive symbol of egalitarian love and Arvay’s mulberry tree as a poisoning reminder of poor “Cracker” roots she would like to forget. I argue that, in *Their Eyes*, Hurston’s burgeoning knowledge of Afro-Caribbean Vodou informs her representation of nature as a vital, active force that counters attempts of white- and male-dominated culture to objectify nature, women, and African-Americans. In *Seraph*, I read Hurston’s choice to focus on white characters as a method of emphasizing class and gender dynamics, while matters of race hover on the periphery. Hurston creates what I call a working-class pastoral that celebrates the diverse environments of Florida, as well as the economic rise of the Meserve family that is facilitated by Jim’s labor in the natural world.

In chapter four, I examine Faulkner’s *Go Down, Moses* using what I refer to as an “ecohistorical” approach to argue that a history of particularly damaging human
relationships with the land in Mississippi influences the composition of the novel. Short-sighted, profit-driven agricultural and logging practices create a landscape that appears scarred, broken, and deteriorated in the decades preceding the publication of Faulkner’s tale of the similarly degraded McCaslin family. The land and its inhabitants are linked not only by their metaphorical debasement, but also by reciprocal material influences, demonstrating E. V. Walter’s notion of place as a “location of mutual immanence” where people and their environment “participate in one another’s nature.” Faulkner also critiques the romanticizing of wilderness as a place outside or apart from a culture that harms people and nature. He reveals that the privileged position afforded wilderness by Ike McCaslin (and by Rawlings) reproduces the polarity that separates humanity and nature, the very philosophy which sanctions wanton environmental destruction.

The destruction of nature figures prominently in every work I examine in this study. The authors’ responses to the process are far from uniform, nor are they consistently negative. Destruction is quite often figured as productive human labor that actually serves to forge a deeper bond between people and nature. If, as I have claimed, the South of the 1930s and 1940s is understood by these writers as an era of binary oppositions (e.g., past/present, Victorianism/modernism, rich/poor, left/right, individualism/collectivism), then the fundamental separation of humans and nature becomes an underlying problem that must be solved in order to address the visible and growing social inequities of the time.

The notion of society as composed of separate, independent persons seems no longer tenable in the depths of the Great Depression. The past, thoroughly dismantled
and discredited by modernist analyses, is useless as a guide for the future. Through reappraisals of nature, Southern writers find a model for social collectivism (as well as a justification for it as natural) in the conception of ecosystems as networks of interdependent, inseparable relations. The natural world also can provide a physical place for connecting with the “Other” of nature and with other people: through the communal labor of the muck in the Everglades, the dangerous work in Florida shrimping communities, the joint efforts to save orange groves from frost or livestock from bears, and transcendent experiences that one’s existence is, in Rawlings’ words, “a torn fragment of the larger cloth.” My title reference to clear-cutting Eden, then, works in more ways than one: there is the literal environmental destruction that these authors portray and respond to, and there is the demythologizing of an idealized view of the past as a lost Golden Age. This study suggests how these four authors answer the question that remains: what is the nature of the future?

End Notes


3 For example, the number of farms in Mississippi rises every decade until a drop of 0.8% from 1910-1919. After a 15% increase in relatively prosperous 1920s, the total decreases 7% in the 1930s, 13.6% in the 1940s, and 45% in the 1950s. In Georgia, there is a steady increase in the number of farms until a 15.8% drop in the 1920s, followed by a 15.5% decrease in the 1930s, another 8.2% in the 1940s, and a 46.3% plunge in the 1950s. The losses were mainly small farms and were accompanied by a rise in urban populations throughout the South, with Florida by 1930 the first Southern state with over half its population in urban areas. See Donald B. Dodd and

4 See Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South 1920-1960* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1987), 276, who also notes that the alteration of farming practices virtually destroyed a 75-year-old sharecropping system, mechanized agricultural labor, and “convulsed” the region by dispersing millions of people to cities (51).

5 Singal, 8.


7 The term “the land” in this study refers specifically to the soil and includes the food or cash crops grown in the ground. Nature is a more general term that encapsulates everything not specifically man-made, including animals, plants, and minerals, as well as weather, water, and air. Another frequently recurring term is “wilderness,” a more ideologically loaded word used to describe natural landscapes completely, relatively, or seemingly unaffected by human activity.


10 Leo Marx’s *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964) remains one of the best examinations of the appeal of the pastoral in America.


14 See Rupert B. Vance, *Human Geography of the South* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1932). Vance’s bibliography reveals a spate of books in the previous decade alone
that examine the effects of humans on the natural world, and vice versa, on a national scale, including Thomas Brues’ *Insects and Human Welfare* (1920), O. D. Von Englin’s *Inheriting the Earth, or The Geographic Factor in National Development* (1922), Ellsworth Huntington’s *Civilization and Climate* (1924), Lucien Febvre’s *A Geographical Introduction to History* (1925), Milton Whitney’s *Soil and Civilization* (1925), and Franklin Thomas’ *The Environmental Basis of Society* (1925).


16 Albert E. Cowdrey, *This Land, This South: An Environmental History* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1983), 127-130.


19 Cowdrey, 114.

20 Tindall, 405.

21 Wittenberg, 56. Also see chapter five of Lawrence Buell’s *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2001), where Buell, like Wittenberg, makes an extensive comparison of the ecological ethics of Leopold and Faulkner (particularly as expressed in *Go Down, Moses*).

22 Tindall, 405; Fickle, 160-63.


heart of the science of ecology is that nature is indivisible, and therefore it cannot be comprehended by studying only its isolated fragments” (10).


26 These quotes are taken from a piece by David Griffin rather than directly from Whitehead, “the ecological philosopher par excellence,” as Griffin has helpfully consolidated Whitehead’s theories of nature from various works into his article “Whitehead’s Contributions to a Theology of Nature,” 3-26 in *Bucknell Review*.

27 For an analysis of how the shift in scientific thought to a mechanistic model of nature sanctions both environmental abuse and the subjugation of women, people of color, and other minorities, see Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980). Merchant’s overview traces the ascent of the modern scientific conception of a passive natural world that Whitehead’s philosophy controverts: “Nature as purely objective, was given only instrumental value for man, who, as a subject, was given absolute value as an end in himself. Any amount of exploitation could be justified if it gave even the slightest benefit to man” (Griffin, 8).


30 Both Stein’s *Shifting the Ground* and Alaimo’s *Undomesticated Ground: Recasting Nature as Feminine Space* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000) compellingly treat a wide variety of texts and help broaden the scope of ecocriticism in general.

31 Each of these works differs significantly from this project, however. MacKethan’s *The Dream of Arcady: Place and Time in Southern Literature* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1980) is exclusively concerned with the pastoral mode and ranges from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. Harrison’s *Female Pastoral: Women Writers Re-Visioning the American South* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991) focuses, obviously, only on women authors, arguing that feminist appropriations of the pastoral mode re-vision the association of women and nature in empowering terms. Dixon’s *Ride Out the Wilderness* treats several Southern writers, but the overall context is African-American, rather than Southern, literatures and traditions.


34 Walter, 121.
Chapter One. Depleted Land, Depleted Lives: Erskine Caldwell’s Impoverished South

In Erskine Caldwell’s two best-known and most important novels, *Tobacco Road* (1932) and *God’s Little Acre* (1933), the natural world mirrors the depressing, barren, and stagnant lives of his characters. Because he is writing in order to expose the conditions of poor farmers and workers in the South and to advocate the need for social change, Caldwell represents nature anthropocentrically, reproducing in the land the best and worst of human beings, their behavior, and their society. The bleak, exhausted rural environments of both novels suggest a betrayal of the pastoral ideal in the American South of the Great Depression. While the traditional pastoral landscape is a harmonic blend of culture and nature, city and country, Caldwell shows that, in this place and time anyway, culture and nature both work against the people caught between them. The ideal of balance is replaced by a nightmarish cycle of reciprocal causes and effects in which socio-economic forces hasten the depletion the land and diminishing agricultural returns further subject families like the fictional Lesters and Waldens to the capriciousness of the Depression-era marketplace.

The depleted soil and barren landscapes in the two novels are the result of a set of values that have traditionally been coded as masculine, particularly a scientific, mechanistic world-view that encounters nature and others as unresisting feminine sites for the exercise of male power. Although he does not fundamentally alter the association of women and the natural world, Caldwell does critique the hierarchical polarization of masculine culture to feminine nature. In *God’s Little Acre*, for example, the intrinsically masculine power of machines is not superior to the organic fecundity of the soil, but another version of the same vitality. He is also overtly
critical of the paternalistic sharecropping and tenant farming systems that keep most farmers in a state of virtual servitude. In his nonfiction collaboration with the photographer Margaret Bourke-White, *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937), Caldwell clarifies the implicit material connection between humans and nature in his fiction. Not only is the soil depleted and eroded, he claims, but its tenants also are “worn out physically and spiritually” because “the institution of sharecropping does things to men as well as to land” (76).

The economic system, rather than nature or the farmers themselves, is responsible for “the degeneration of man as well as for the rape of the soil in the South” (76). The paternalistic plantation owners and absentee landlords, whom he equates with the scions of industrial manufacturing, are castigated as representatives of “the agricultural system that acquires sharecroppers and mules for their economic usefulness, and disposes of them when no more profit can be extracted from their bodies” (113). The body of the earth has been a similarly disposable commodity in the history of Southern agriculture, as Caldwell asserts in a later interview: “Nobody thought of saving the land. . . . If the soil was depleted, you moved on to somewhere else. Land was so cheap they could afford to abandon it.” By portraying human beings as no more than raw materials and economic resources, like mules and land, Caldwell moves beyond a purely symbolic construction of nature. At the very least, he combats the notion of nature as *terra nullius* or “empty background for culture” by positing an interdependent relationship between humans and their environment in which specific places play an active role in the formation of culture and material reality.
It is useful to turn briefly to the realm of cultural geography for its insights into the relationship of human agency, social process, and spatial location. Martyn Lee claims that spatial location is in danger of assuming subordinate status to the cultural points of this tripartite structure, but he argues that the influence of place should not be undervalued:

space, when taken culturally, represents a relatively coherent and autonomous social domain which exercises a certain determinacy upon both the population and the social processes located upon its terrain, and as such should be seen as far more than the mere aggregation of the actions and activities of those populations and processes.

Lee extends Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of “habitus” to the realm of place studies in order to explain how places exist fairly autonomously, as more than simply passive sites for the actions of humans and social processes. Lee defines the habitus of location as “a set of relatively consistent, enduring and generative cultural (pre)dispositions to respond to current circumstances, or ‘the outside world,’ in a particular way.” In other words, habitus, as experienced by individuals, is a “conceptual lens through which particular understandings or interpretations of the social world are generated and as such invite particular forms of response or action to the social world.” While Lee is speaking specifically of the habitus of cities, his ideas are equally applicable to rural locations, and, in essence, Caldwell demonstrates the mutually constitutive nature of place and social reality in the rural setting.

The barren, sterile landscape, for example, of the Lester farm in Tobacco Road, can be seen not only as metaphorically related to the debased lives of its inhabitants, but also as a presence that simultaneously constitutes and is constituted by the Lester family and their actions. As over-fertilization and one-crop farming
have contributed to the impoverishment of the soil, so has the barren and unproductive land helped create a family that accepts hunger, greed, lust, idleness, and sickness as the normal conditions of existence. The Lesters have been conditioned by the realities of their place to formulate particular conceptions of “the outside world,” including the belief that all commodities are scarce, necessitating constant and violent competition, and the mistrust of any outsider (often anyone outside the self). The moral depravity of the clan need not be categorized as either comic exaggeration in the vein of Southwestern humorists or an overly-sentimental portrait designed to induce pity and charity from middle and upper class audiences, just as the novel itself is neither a work of comedy or social realism exclusively. Instead, this degeneracy can be read as a result of the specific effects of spatial location and social processes, while remembering that these factors are, in turn, affected by the actions of the Lesters: each aspect of the three-part structure constantly modifies, and is modified by, the other two.

Caldwell’s illustration of the interdependence of humans and the natural world suggests that barriers between self and other may be overcome, but his interest in nature is chiefly in its capacity as “place,” that is, in its relationship to people rather than its potential as an entity or system that exists independent of human consciousness. For Caldwell’s male characters, nature is invariably identified with a nebulous feminine vitality that is missing from their own lives. In *Tobacco Road*, Jeeter’s wife Ada and Mother Lester are wracked with disease and perpetually on the verge of death; one daughter, Ellie Mae, is physically disfigured and barely able to control her sexual urges; another, Pearl, is a mute who refuses to be touched by men,
including her husband; and an unknown number of other daughters are prostitutes in the nearby mill-town of Augusta. In *God’s Little Acre*, Ty Ty Walden’s wife has died before the action of the novel; his daughter-in-law Griselda is an earth goddess type, similar to Faulkner’s Eula Varner, who inspires lust in all men and happily obeys the commands of the dominating Will, whom she says she would have followed “like a dog” had he lived; Darling Jill Walden is a vapid nymphomaniac who seduces and discards men in rapid succession; and her sister Rosamond is content with mothering her husband--she feeds him, puts him to bed, and spanks him with a hairbrush after catching him in bed with Darling Jill--and graciously accepting whatever time and attention he deigns to give her. Ultimately, it seems that there is not much difference between Caldwell’s conceptions of women and the stock, pastoral roles of virgin, whore, mother, and love goddess. However, Caldwell’s men are denied the traditional pastoral roles of masters of nature. They are more often emasculated by the land’s infertility than empowered by ritual conquest of it, and Caldwell’s impetus for this revision lies, I argue, in the historical and social climate wrought by the exigencies of the Great Depression.

Historian Robert S. McElvaine has shown how the pressures of the Depression reawakened the conflict between the simultaneously-held American desires for both “the Abundant Life,” represented by large-scale mass production, and the life of “former simplicities,” associated with the needs of the average person as opposed to big business. He understands these conflicting ideals as opposite ends of a continuum between which the middle class fluctuates based on historical circumstances: “The categories are far from absolute, but workers have tended to
move toward cooperative individualism and businessmen toward acquisitive individualism. McElvaine describes how, in periods of liberalism and in trying economic times, the American middle class tends to identify with the cooperative values of the working class. During conservative eras and times of relative prosperity, on the other hand, “many in the middle class have tried to emulate those above them on the social scale and so adopted their values.”

The 1930s is, of course, a period both of liberalism and of widespread economic collapse. The previous decade of relative prosperity had successfully convinced much of the working and middle classes to adopt an ethic of acquisitive consumerism and to accept the premise of a scientific, amoral marketplace. Historian Richard Pells corroborates McElvaine’s assessment of the national mood, and argues that American writers saw the breakdown of America’s financial and industrial systems as symptomatic of a deeper spiritual malaise: “The depression confirmed their belief that American ideals were dangerously distorted and unreal, that competition and acquisitiveness were eroding the country’s social foundations, that the quality of human life under capitalism offered men no sense of community or common experience.” As the Depression worsened and affected more and more people, disillusionment with the unfettered marketplace grew, as did the cries for a moral economy that would stress collectivism as the means of achieving independence and individuality.

Caldwell’s notorious ambiguity and penchant for self-contradiction in both style and philosophy reflect the increasing polarity of class division in the period and the conflicting impulses of cooperative and acquisitive individualism. Malcolm
Cowley, argues that there are two Erskine Caldwells, “Caldwell One, the sociologist,”
and “Caldwell Two,” the imaginative writer, who work at cross purposes in his
novels, but who sometimes achieve “an almost perfect union” in certain short
stories. Cowley’s implicit judgment of the novels as imperfect or flawed
combinations of the two tendencies is a fairly common attitude in the relatively thin
annals of Caldwell criticism. Writing in 1979 about Tobacco Road, Robert
Brinkmeyer, Jr. summarizes the consensus opinion at that time: “Social realism and
comedy, two separate and apparently incompatible purposes, seem to be at work in
the novel; and the prevailing critical trend finds the novel flawed as a result of this
mix: too comical for social indictment, and too socially zealous for pure humor.”
While later critics like Sylvia Jenkins Cook and Richard Gray have taken a more
positive view of Caldwell’s ambiguities and discrepancies, there has been practically
no mention of the relationship of “the two Caldwells” to the divided sentiments of the
American lower and middle classes during the Depression: the simultaneous desire
for “the Abundant Life” and for the imagined simplicities of a previous era that
seemed a Golden Age during the hard times of the Depression. Caldwell’s bifurcated
portrait of Jeeter might be read more profitably as a reflection of the social divisions
of the era rather than as evidence of two Caldwells working against one another. The
notion that Caldwell’s comedic and reformist purposes are simply incompatible too
hastily dismisses the more complex and potentially rewarding possibility of an
intentionally contradictory depiction of Jeeter as both a sympathetic victim of socio-
economic forces and as a tragi-comic whose dire straits are a result of his own
foolishness and ignorance. At the center of these disparate views is Jeeter’s tenacious and simultaneously heroic/irrational attachment to the land.

The barren and fruitless existence of Caldwell’s impoverished and debased characters is reflected in recurring images of nature as a ruined or decaying garden. Yet Jeeter’s refusal to leave his family’s worn-out land for a more secure job in one of the nearby cotton mills is, in fact, practically his only redeeming quality. He is otherwise a man who has fathered countless children by neighboring wives, who exhibits little or no feeling for his family, including his silent, starving mother whom he beats for stealing food, and who readily offers his pre-teen daughters for marriage (the ones who have not run off to Augusta to become prostitutes). Nonetheless, Caldwell allows Jeeter to remain sympathetic as a distorted descendant of the Jeffersonian yeoman farmer who has been unfairly dispossessed of his agricultural inheritance. Thus, even a licentious reprobate who would sell his daughter and steal food from his mother, as Jeeter does, can seem endearing and justified when he complains, “It don’t look like everybody ought to be poverty-ridden just because they live on the land instead of going to the mills.” In a novel with a rambling, episodic plot structure and minimal character development, the setting of the story is perhaps its most important element, as Wayne Mixon has also claimed: “Caldwell’s depiction of an environment that is so brutal it can crush all decency from its victims gives the novel its great power.” The barren, depleted land of the Lester farm is at once symbolic of the family’s degrading poverty and a material factor in their plight.

_Tobacco Road_ demonstrates that the present exhaustion of the soil stems from its historical abuse. In a 1964 interview with Caldwell, Morris Renek asks the author,
“What happened to Jeeter’s grandfather and father that they could be brought up on the land and know so little about preserving it?” and Caldwell replies, “No one knew enough about the soil. Nobody thought of saving the land. There was just too much of it around. If the soil was depleted, you moved on to somewhere else. Land was so cheap they could afford to abandon it.” This short-sighted approach to land management, combined with a mono-crop cotton culture and extensive fertilization practices, ensured rapid rates of soil depletion and erosion, a devastating combination for those who depended on the land for their livelihood. Irresponsible farming techniques along with the severe impact of the Depression on small-scale farmers, a double-whammy of culture and nature, combine to produce a particularly crippling habitus of place that conditions the responses and actions of its residents.

While most sectors of the American economy experienced a period of recovery and prosperity following the brief depression of 1920-22, agriculture remained mired in a slump that only worsened with the onset of the Great Depression. With over one quarter of American agricultural income in 1929 coming from exports, individual farmers were extremely susceptible to the vagaries of the world market. A useful comparison can be drawn between the relationship of the marketplace mavens to the farmers and of the farmers to the land itself. During World War I, the American government, and particularly Food Administrator Herbert Hoover, encouraged massive increases in farm production, leading to a severe glut in the postwar world market. During the general prosperity of the 1920s, abundant credit was extended to farmers in order to shore up the lagging agricultural sector, worsening the plight of many farmers when exports dropped severely beginning in 1929. Similarly, Caldwell
has the Lesters, as a representative type for the independent farming family, overwork their land to the point of exhaustion. Jeeter’s father, for example, switches his crop from tobacco to cotton in response to the dictates of the marketplace, hastening the depletion of soil that was too sandy and loose to support extensive cotton farming. Overproduction of crops and massive extensions of credit were not policies that would ensure the healthy, long-term existence of individual farmers, but rather expedient maneuvers for maximizing short-term profits. Mono-crop farming and intensive fertilization also may yield large returns at first, but it is a combination that guarantees a rapid and lasting decline in soil fertility.

The Lester land, that seventy five years earlier “had been the most desirable soil in the entire west-central part of Georgia,” (83) has been exhausted by the less-than-ideal farming practices of Jeeter’s father. The sandy soil was never well-suited for growing cotton, and the large amounts of fertilizer employed as compensation have depleted the land so much that Jeeter is forced to relinquish the entire “Lester plantation” to creditors about twenty years before the action of the novel. At the opening of the novel, the fields around the Lesters’ shack resemble a nightmarish wasteland of broom-sedge, “gnarled and sharp stubs of a new blackjack growth,” and thickets of “briars and blackjack pricks” where Jeeter’s feeble and forgotten mother collects dead twigs “morning, noon and night” looking like “an old scare-crow, in her black rags” (17-18). Caldwell’s bleak portrait offers a compelling counterpoint to the romantic agrarianism espoused by Andrew Lytle in his essay “The Hind Tit” in *I’ll Take My Stand*. Lytle’s essay promotes a self-sufficient agrarianism in which the trappings of consumerism are avoided through a return to home manufacturing. As
Tobacco Road makes clear, however, removing one’s family from a market economy is not so simple. Years of overproduction have left the land unable to produce much more than wormy turnips, and any type of extensive labor seems beyond the scope of the listless and diseased family. In calling the nation’s attention to the plight of the Southern farmer, Caldwell sounds the death knell of the pastoral dream.

Caldwell shows in several passages that Jeeter’s economic burdens are even more onerous than the depleted land. Even if the soil had been fertile and productive, he has no recourse for obtaining the seed and guano needed to raise cotton. Jeeter demonstrates this when reflects on his experience with a loan company after failing to secure credit from the merchants in Fuller or the banks in Augusta. After an initial two hundred dollar loan, Jeeter pays interest that “amounted to three per cent a month to start with, and at the end of ten months he had been charged thirty per cent, and on top of that another thirty per cent on the unpaid interest” (148). Added to that is a fifty dollar fee “for making the loan,” leaving the family with seven dollars for a year’s work, not including a ten dollar debt for renting a mule. In the end, “He had done all the work, furnished the mule and the land, and yet the loan company had taken all the money the cotton brought, and made him lose three dollars” (149). Caldwell’s naturalist depiction of the tenant farming system makes it difficult to blame Jeeter for his woes. He seems as defenseless against the forces of economics and history as the land has been against irresponsible and destructive farming practices. While the pastoral ideal assumes a combination of the best of culture and nature on the middle ground of the farm, Caldwell shows that it can also combine the worst.
The issue of who or what is to blame for the dire straits of the Lesters and countless families in like situations illustrates Caldwell’s famous ambiguity and inconsistency towards his subjects. At least some of the responsibility for the depleted land falls on the individual farmers and their ignorance of effective land use, even amid the pervading atmosphere of naturalistic determinism in which the Lesters seem unable to effect meaningful change. Yet Caldwell presents their ignorance of responsible farming practices as a consequence of a tenancy system that makes the land the *de facto* province of cotton brokers and mill owners. Forcing farmers to plant only cotton in soil ill-suited to that purpose in order to repay loans and meet obligations to landlords is even unnatural, or at least anti-ecological, in the sense that “any system which covers too many fields with the same plant falls afoul of the ecological principle which states the simplest systems are apt to be the most unstable.”

The implication is that a market based on the acquisitive individualism that McElvaine describes favors a very small percentage of the population and makes self-sufficiency practically impossible for many. It commodifies people as well as nature, and this objectification alienates individuals from one another and from the natural world. Tom Lester is the only one of the seventeen Lester children who we can positively know has escaped abject poverty. His successful cross-tie business marks him as a “winner” in the amoral economy of consumerism, but his conservative view of his parents as “losers” who should move to the county poor house indicates the immorality Caldwell sees as inherent in that system. In refusing to help his family, Tom refutes the values of collectivism and cooperation that Caldwell promotes as a
panacea for a sick society. Through Tom and other well-to-do characters like the auto salesmen who mock and cheat Sister Bessie, and the bankers who mercilessly plunder the Lester estate, we can understand that the moral depravity that is so pronounced in the Lesters’ behavior imbues the character of the “winners” in the consumerist competition as well.

The annual renewal of life that occurs each spring is also a time of renewal for farmers like Jeeter. In a vain effort to participate in the cycle of renewal, Jeeter burns his fields each spring, despite the fact that he has not planted anything in seven years. His attachment to nature goes beyond the symbolic; his mental and physical health are profoundly affected by his inability to participate in spring planting. Explaining his disdain for the mills, Jeeter romanticizes farming and ignores his family’s serious health problems while suggesting a metaphysical superiority of the land to the mills:

when it comes time to break the land for planting, you feel sick inside but don’t know what’s ailing you. People has told me about that spring sickness in the mills, I don’t know how many times. But when a man stays on the land, he don’t get to feeling like that this time of year, because he’s right here to smell the smoke of burning broom-sedge and to feel the wind fresh off the plowed fields going down inside his body. So instead of feeling sick and not knowing what’s wrong down in his body, as it happens in the durn mills, out here on the land a man feels better than he ever did. (29)

He goes on to assert the presence of God in nature, saying that the workers are ill because the mills are made by humans and the land by God. However, his malnourished and disease-wracked family belies this claim of a healthy spiritual connection to nature. Jeeter’s reverie seems more an example of the longing for simpler times, which McElvaine describes as a common reaction to the Depression, than an accurate assessment of the relative health of farmers and mill workers.
Although Jeeter suggests that alienation from the land and its natural cycles causes a kind of spiritual sickness, Caldwell implies that the absence of a material connection with nature, chiefly from lack of food, is the root of the problem. With each passing year, Jeeter’s prospects for ever farming cotton again grow bleaker, and he begins to feel that he cannot sustain his own life without the internal recuperation he attributes to working the soil: “In all the past six or seven years when he had wanted to raise a crop he had kept his disappointment from crushing his spirit by looking forward to the year when he could farm again. But this year he felt that if he did not get the seed-cotton and guano in the ground he would never be able to try again” (153). This insistence on planting cotton even as he and his family slowly starve to death reveals how fully indoctrinated in the culture of tenant farming Jeeter has become. Rather than plant food or work in a cotton mill, where he and his wife “together could make twenty or twenty-five dollars a week,” Jeeter clings to the notion that cotton farming defines him as a person: “I know it ain’t intended for me to work in the mills” (152). The power he derives from working the land is more fundamental to his survival than food:

The urge he felt to stir the ground and to plant cotton in it, and after that to sit in the shade during the hot months watching the plants sprout and grow, was even greater than the pains of hunger in his stomach. He could sit calmly and bear the feeling of hunger, but to be compelled to live and look each day at the unplowed fields was an agony he believed he could not stand many more days. His head dropped forward on his knees, and sleep soon overcame him and brought a peaceful rest to his tired heart and body. (154)

Jeeter’s laziness and inactivity begin to seem less like character flaws than outward signs of the complete exhaustion of his will to live. The creeping broom-sedge of
despair can only be burned away by the fire of hope so many times before Jeeter’s spirit and body lie barren and broken, vainly awaiting the rejuvenation of spring.

Economic, ecological, and historical factors (including a family tradition of farming) conspire to put the Lesters in their debased position, an inverted pastoral ideal that combines the worst of nature and culture. Caldwell’s emphasis on the Lesters’ exclusion from the natural processes of renewal and growth reveals that the pastoral reality is not an equal blend of the natural and the cultural, but a way to make social systems seem more natural. For example, an independent farmer in the Jeffersonian yeoman tradition might be truly outside the marketplace by growing his own food. The cotton culture and the tenancy system, however, compel farmers to plant every inch of their land with cotton and makes them indebted to the system that includes the landlords, mills, bankers, brokers, and foreign markets. Thus, Jeeter has never been as separate from the mills that he despises as he would like to think. His fields become the first step on an assembly line rather than a natural realm apart from that industrial culture. These cultural forces, then, align the Lesters with nature, but not in the positive sense of pastoral purity. As we can see through Jeeter’s reliance on the land for his own rejuvenation, he is not so much in tune with nature’s rhythms as he is enslaved by them, unable to break the habits he views as natural. The tenancy system equates farmers and land as objects and commodities, grist for the mill to be used up and discarded. The Lester family exhibits the unromantic baseness of living naturally, as they often resemble animals with no familial bonds in constant competition for food.
Jeeter feels his spirit withering away because he can no longer farm the land, but the lack of food is a more literal alienation from nature that threatens the family in numerous ways. In a 1980 interview, Caldwell explains that his characters’ laziness, which seems at odds with his deterministic portrayal of them as victims of economic oppression, is primarily a by-product of malnutrition:

When you’re in poverty and your sustenance consists of only one or two items . . . your body is just not getting all that it needs to function. . . . Often [poor whites] contracted pellagra and hookworm . . . [which] would not be apparent to the naked eye. So what happened was that even though nothing appeared to be wrong with these people, they had serious diseases which resulted in habitual laziness. 21

Caldwell’s use of humor throughout the novel often blurs these realities by playing on traditional stereotypes of poor white Southerners as immoral, stupid, and lazy, characterizations which can be traced back as far as William Byrd’s *History of the Dividing Line Betwixt Virginia and North Carolina* (1728).22 By making it so easy to laugh at Jeeter and the other Lesters, Caldwell supports a reading of the family as foolish hicks who have created their own problems, even as he provides sociological evidence of their victimization. This split portrait corresponds neatly with McElvaine’s description of a fundamental American tension between acquisitive individualism and cooperative individualism. That is, from the standpoint of acquisitive individualism, the Lesters are to be mocked and perhaps pitied, but only for their comical ignorance and poor choices. From the view of cooperative individualism, an increasingly popular philosophy throughout the 1930s, they are hapless prey of vast, impersonal forces who deserve the aid of society (and particularly the government).
Caldwell goes on in the same interview to attribute the “apparent moral depravity” of Jeeter to the same conditions of poverty: “When a person is subjected to a very severe beating in life, he might get the feeling that he has to protect himself first. Therefore, he’s not going to give his wife or his mother anything to eat; he’s going to keep it for himself.” Thus, the loss of connection with the land produces a family that conspires to keep food from the oldest and weakest member, buries dead children in the fields, and plows over the unmarked graves. It is little wonder that none of the numerous children who have left home have ever returned or sent any messages to their family. Yet Jeeter seems oblivious to his paternal shortcomings when Dude relays to him a message from Tom telling his father he should move to the county poorhouse: “That don’t sound like Tom talking. . . . Me and him never had no difficulties like I was always having with my other children. They used to throw rocks at me and hit me over the head with sticks, but Tom never did” (204). Despite such evidence of his affection, Tom concludes his message to Jeeter with a simple “go to hell.”

The breakdown of family relationships is directly related to the impoverishment of the land and, more importantly, to the material poverty that prevents Jeeter from planting a crop. Especially for men, it seems, the inability to work the land weakens interpersonal relationships, deadens emotions, and isolates them from everyone and everything around them. The man who cannot work, cannot love—a theme Caldwell returns to in greater detail in God’s Little Acre. Jeeter’s estrangement from the world is represented as a turning inward, and Caldwell’s description of the tough and wiry blackjack tree (the only flora that flourishes on the
Lester land) parallels his characterization of Jeeter: “The blackjack never grew much
taller than a man’s head; it was a stunted variety of oak that used its sap in toughening
the fibres [sic] instead of growing new layers and expanding the old, as other trees
did” (173). The inability to establish and maintain meaningful human relationships is
a result of Jeeter’s similar failure to expand outwards, to make connections with
others. The entire family, in fact, seems inert and incapable of any sort of progress:
phrases and actions are repeated over and over, and nothing ever seems to “happen”
in the novel.

The mechanical nature of the characters’ behavior emphasizes the loss of
humanity caused by debilitating poverty. The chief object of affection in the novel is,
fittingly, Sister Bessie’s brand new automobile. Dude’s primary reason for marrying
this itinerant preacher, who has a grotesquely deformed nose and is twenty years his
senior, is so that he can drive the car. The image of the car hurtling along the dusty
country roads with Dude at the wheel maniacally blowing the horn (which he tends to
do the entire length of every trip) recalls Leo Marx’s machine-in-the-garden metaphor
in which the machine is an aggressive, masculine intruder on a feminized landscape.
And, with Dude at the wheel, this car is an agent of destruction, mowing down
grandmother Lester and an African-American man guiding a horse and wagon,
symbols of a less-mechanized, bygone era of simpler times. Yet, unlike in the self-
conscious pastoral mythologizing of I’ll Take My Stand, this machine does not cause
a devaluation of humanity. There is no “war to the death between technology and the
ordinary human functions of living,” as Lytle’s essay in the manifesto proposes.
because the crushing poverty created by an outdated agricultural system has already dissolved these ordinary functions.

After Dude relates the story of carelessly killing the defenseless wagon driver, Jeeter vacuously comments, “Niggers will get killed. Looks like there ain’t no way to stop it” (159). The description of the accident—“When we drove off again, he was still lying in the ditch. The wagon turned over on him and mashed him” (159)—is echoed in that of the appalling death of the grandmother: “Mother Lester still lay there, her face mashed on the hard white sand” (215). Dude and Bessie again drive off after twice running over the old woman, Ada stares at the body briefly “then she walked inside and shut the door” (215), and Jeeter kicks his mother’s body and delivers a fitting eulogy to Lov: “She ain’t stiff yet, but I don’t reckon she’ll live. You help me tote her out in the field and I’ll dig a ditch to put her in” (225). The detached narration mirrors the detachment of the characters from one another, from their own emotions, and from life itself. All energy seems to be slowing dissipating on the Lester farm. Even Bessie’s brand new car, which at first thrilled the family with its speed and loud horn, is virtually totaled in a matter of days: “Springing the front axle, cracking the wind-shield, scarring the paint on the body, tearing holes in the upholstery, and parting with the spare tire and extra wheel were considered nothing more than the ordinary hazards of driving a car” (199-200).

Each spring offers the potential for rebirth, but neither the Lesters nor their land are able to achieve the promise of regeneration. The only life still clinging to the land is a dreary mix of stunted blackjack trees, turnips full of “damn-blasted green-gutted worms,” and the dwindling brood of Lesters. Each family member seems
unable to do more than mechanically repeat certain behaviors: Dude throws a baseball against the side of the house over and over; the grandmother collects twigs for the stove three times a day in anticipation of food that never comes; Ada worries constantly about owning a stylish dress to be buried in; Jeeter repeats his vain wish for seed and fertilizer while burning the fields each year in vain preparation for planting; and the hare-lipped Ellie May voyeuristically watches everything from behind a chinaberry tree. Similarly, the characters’ speech is marked by numerous repetitions of particular words and phrases, reflecting the monotony of their lives as well as the barrenness of their environment.26

Tobacco Road reveals another side of the rosy, Agrarian view of the simple farmer living off of the land and avoiding the modern alienation of the urban dweller. The Lesters living on the farm seem as estranged from the earth as do Caldwell’s prominent characters who live in towns (e.g., Jim Leslie Walden in God’s Little Acre or Chism Crockett in This Very Earth). Only Jeeter professes a strong attraction to the earth, compulsively longing to “make plants grow in it” (21), even though he has no way of securing seed and fertilizer and nothing is likely to grow in the depleted soil. His emotional obsession with the plowing the earth is not shared by the other Lesters, and Jeeter’s fixation is often sexual:

When the winter goes, and when it gets to be time to burn off broom-sedge in the fields and underbrush in the thickets, I sort of want to cry. . . . The smell of that sedge-smoke this time of year near about drives me crazy. Then pretty soon all the other farmers start plowing. That’s what gets under my skin the worse. When the smell of that new earth turning over behind the plows strikes me, I get all weak and shaky. It’s in my blood—burning broom-sedge and plowing in the ground this time of year. I did it for near about fifty years, and my Pa and his Pa before him was the same kind of men. Us Lesters sure like to stir the earth and make plants grow in it. I can’t move off to the cotton mills like the rest of them do. The land has got a powerful hold on me. (21)
In being denied the opportunity to renew his ritual interaction with the soil, Jeeter is
denied the chance to reaffirm his purpose for living and assume his place in a
masculine tradition. Plowing the soil and growing crops have defined the Lester men,
so his failure to continue farming seems to Jeeter a form of temporary emasculation.
Seeing the other farmers plowing only reinforces his impotence and increases his
despair. Only by encountering the land as a feminized field for the exercise of male
power could Jeeter experience such extreme plow envy. He equates the prospect of
working in a mill, however, with the total relinquishment of masculinity: “Them durn
cotton mills is for the women folks to work in. They ain’t no place for a man to be,
fooling away with little wheels and strings all day long. I say it’s a hell of a job for a
man to spend his time winding strings on spools. No! We was put here on the land
where cotton will grow, and it’s my place to make it grow” (151).

Jeeter’s desire to remain on the land reflects the need for security felt by many
people of the 1930s who faced a chaotic present and frightening future. It is this same
longing for security that gives rise to the popular nostalgia for an imagined golden
age (in many of the essays of I’ll Take My Stand, for instance); both the past and the
land can provide a stabilizing sense of place and identity. Jeeter constantly projects
his desire for a better future on to the land, as in his oft-repeated belief that if he only
had a mule, some cotton seed and guano, he could grow “a bale to the acre.” The land
that Jeeter feels compelled to work represents individuality and freedom from the
money-based society that has left him with nothing. The fact that he cannot work and
control “his” land is extremely emasculating for Jeeter, a common complaint of
thousands of unemployed men of the era. Tobacco Road dramatizes these feelings
of frustration and impotence in its narrative form: the solitary and questing male hero of American myth and literary tradition is here confined to the domestic sphere usually associated with stasis and femininity. Like the land itself, the house is a feminine place that is barren, diseased, and dying.

Although the novel’s episodic narrative structure mirrors that of the picaresque and other tales of quest, Jeeter Lester is a parody of the masculine hero, a picaro with pellagra who can never quite get started on the triumphant journey: “Jeeter made a false start somewhere nearly every day” (102). Rather than a progression, the episodes of *Tobacco Road* either never see Jeeter leave home or they end right where they began with nothing having changed significantly. A car trip to Augusta begins promisingly: Jeeter is going to sell a load of wood and it seems food may finally be on the way. The excursion ends, however, with Jeeter and Dude leaving the unsold blackjack on the side of the road, having only succeeded at further destroying Sister Bessie’s prized car and inadvertently putting her to work for the night in a brothel. Time and again any hope of advancement is thwarted by Caldwell’s narrative structure, adding to the pervasive sense of frustration and stasis. While the novel opens with Lov Bensey walking steadily forward on the old tobacco road, it ends with Dude figuratively filling his now-dead father’s stagnant footsteps, taking his place in a new tradition of Lester men, repeating the hopeless refrain, “Maybe I could grow me a bale to the acre, like Pa was always talking about doing” (241).

While Caldwell’s naturalist portrayal of the Lesters obviates Jeeter from direct blame for their plights, this method also sometimes points a finger at women through
their implicit identification with the ruined land. The numerous physical deformities are perhaps the most memorable grotesque elements for which Caldwell is so notorious, yet they are limited, almost exclusively, to female characters. Ellie May has a harelip that makes her mouth look “as if it had been torn” (49), and Bessie Rice is disfigured by her nose that “had failed to develop properly. There was no bone in it, and there was no top to it. . . . it was like looking down the end of a double-barrel shotgun” (58). Youngest daughter Pearl is a beautiful child but refuses to speak a single word and will not let her husband, Lov, touch her at all. Ada, whom Jeeter says was similarly silent for years after their marriage, is suffering from pellagra “that was slowly squeezing the life from her emaciated body,” as is old Mother Lester, withered away to seventy-two pounds and reduced to eating “wild grass and flowers in the field” (93-4). While Pearl seems an exception who has “far more sense than any of the Lesters,” Caldwell also informs us that her intelligence, “like her hair and her eyes, had been inherited from her father,” a nameless stranger who happened to pass by one day (40). Her shortcomings, then, derive from the Lester women.

Neither Dude nor Jeeter are afflicted the way that the women characters are; rather, they are afflicted by the women, who are burdens that must be cared for, and by the feminine earth that lacks the fertility to provide for them. In the end, it seems that the beautiful and silent Pearl is Caldwell’s lasting symbol of estranged feminine nature. Pearl never appears directly in the novel, and her absence is symbolic of the lost connection between humans and their natural environment. Jeeter has sold his daughter into the consumer marketplace by trading her to Lov for seven dollars, “some quilts and nearly a gallon of cylinder oil” (32), but she is completely
unresponsive toward her new husband, never speaking to him and rarely acknowledging his existence. (Money can’t buy Lov love, it seems.) Always an object who never speaks, Pearl finally flees to Augusta to be a prostitute, like her sisters, a commodity of the mill workers, like the cotton itself.

Caldwell constructs his tale so that the central, male subject is assailed by diseased, degenerate women and land whose otherness is signified by their “unnatural” deformities. In this sense, women and nature are figured as background information, lumped in with market fluctuations, greedy cotton brokers, and irresponsible farming techniques as part of the naturalistic machinery that proscribes Jeeter’s life. As readers, we experience the women of the novel as Jeeter does—as objects rather than fully independent subjects in their own right. Caldwell’s semi-omniscient narrator rarely permits access to the interior thoughts of the women characters, but often seems to fuse with Jeeter in brief and extended monologues. Just before he swipes Lov’s bag of turnips and runs for the woods, for example, Jeeter pauses to muse to no one in particular about the place of turnips in God’s plan: “It’s a shame for God to let them damn-blasted green-gutted turnip worms bore into turnips. Us poor people always gets the worse end of all deals, it looks to me. Maybe He don’t intend for humans to eat turnips at all; maybe He wants them raised for the hogs, but He don’t put nothing else down here on the land in their stead” (46). While Jeeter’s words in this instance do not seem especially out of character, this sort of commentary seems designed to prod readers’ class consciousness, and in several passages Caldwell’s voice is more intrusive, imparting a certain eloquence and erudition seemingly incompatible with Jeeter’s otherwise banal thoughts and words.
Caldwell’s narrative intrusions further emphasize the differences between the Jeffersonian myth of the independent planter and the depressing reality of the modern tenant farmer and suggest that such pastoral visions are untenable in the economic climate of America and the South in the 1930s. It is worth quoting one such passage at length in order to demonstrate Caldwell’s occasional sermonizing. This description of Jeeter’s former landlord, Captain John Harmon, is as close as Caldwell comes to offering a solution to the problems of *Tobacco Road*, but even here the central aim is exposing the causes of the present predicament:

Jeeter could never think of the loss of his land and goods as anything but a man-made calamity. He sometimes said it was partly his own fault, but he believed steadfastly that his position had been brought about by other people. He did not blame Captain John to the same extent that he blamed others, however. . . . When Jeeter had over-bought at the stores in Fuller, Captain John let him continue, and he never put a limit to the credit allowed. But the end soon came. There was no longer any profit in raising cotton under the Captain’s antiquated system and he abandoned the farm and moved to Augusta. Rather than attempt to show his tenants how to conform to the newer and more economical methods of modern agriculture, which he thought would have been an impossible task from the start, he sold the stock and implements and moved away. An intelligent employment of his land, stocks, and implements would have enabled Jeeter, and scores of others who had become dependent upon Captain John, to raise crops for food, and crops to be sold at profit. Co-operative and corporate farming would have saved them all. (82-3)

Caldwell’s prescription for curing the ills of the small farmer is not a detailed model for agricultural reform, but a lament that the current problems could have been avoided through earlier intervention. He aims to represent and expose the squalor he knew actually existed throughout the South, “to write about people as they actually lived, not as readers had been misled by ingenious novelists to think they existed,” as the author himself wrote in the novel’s introduction.
Throughout *Tobacco Road*, the only things “planted” in the soil are the bodies of dead Lesters. With Dude married to Sister Bessie and Ellie May gone to take Pearl’s place as Lov’s wife, Jeeter has only himself and Ada to offer to the land. The fire that he again sets in baseless anticipation of planting a crop spreads to the house, consuming the oblivious couple as they sleep. As Dude pokes through the ashes for anything of value, Lov reiterates Jeeter’s plea for an equitable redistribution of wealth: “[The Lord] could make the rich people lend out their money, and stop holding it up. I can’t figure out how they got hold of all the money in the county, anyhow. Looks like it ought to be spread out among everybody” (237). With 0.1 percent of American families in 1929 earning an aggregate income equal to that of the bottom 42 percent, such ideas were quite common, even gaining brief national popularity among the lower classes ready for any sort of redistribution of wealth.\(^{31}\) Despite his proletarian sympathies, Caldwell was often criticized in the pages of *New Masses* (to which he sometimes contributed) for not extolling Communist solutions to the problems of Southern farmers.\(^{32}\) Instead, his approach falls somewhere between overt politicizing and the Agrarians’ tendency to ignore altogether poor whites, whose eagerness to move to mill jobs does not fit the Agrarian program.

Caldwell offers no easy solutions for the ills that plague the Lesters and other farming families. The assertion that “Co-operative and collective farming would have saved them all” implies that the time has already passed when such ideas might generate a recipe for social reform. This type of statement, and the novel as a whole, are only broad claims that something can be done, that there is the possibility of change and progress through human action. In part, Caldwell is refuting the primacy
of the naturalistic determinacy that pervades the novel, but he is also revealing the
difficulty of raising the class consciousness of rural people enmeshed in devastating
poverty. Jeeter, for example, sometimes rails against class inequities: “If we has to go
to the poor-farm and live, it will be because the rich has got all the money that ought
to be spread out among us all and won’t turn it loose and give me some credit to get
seed-cotton and guano with” (152). Yet as soon as he gets a decent meal in the big
city, his revolutionary zeal is quelled: “Augusta is a fine place. . . . All these people
here is just like us. They is rich, but that don’t make no difference to me. I like
everybody now” (186). A full belly can quiet the desire for social change, and the
stubborn belief that the land will somehow take care of farmers can mask the need:
“The ground sort of looks out after the people who keeps their feet on it. When
people stand on planks in buildings all the time, and walk around on hard streets, the
ground sort of loses interest in the human” (239). Some sort of collective action is
needed to survive and improve the economic plight of the Southern farmer of the
1930s, Caldwell suggests, rather than a return to the self-sufficient homesteads of
nineteenth-century agriculture that Lytle proposes in “The Hind Tit.” Jeeter’s
heartfelt connection to the land and desire to dedicate himself to farming are simply
not enough to forge even a rudimentary existence.

Caldwell’s next published novel, God’s Little Acre (1933), is also his most
successful, selling over 4.5 million copies within fifteen years of its publication,
thanks largely to publicity from obscenity charges leveled at the novel by the New
York Society for the Suppression of Vice. The novel reprises the theme of hunger
from *Tobacco Road*, but replaces the craving for food with a sexual hunger and a hunger for work that are always associated and sometimes equated. The natural environment does not hold the same sway over Ty Ty Walden’s family as the barren and fallow soil of the Lesters’ home. Ty Ty is, like Jeeter, a cotton farmer in name only, for he and his sons Buck and Shaw have been digging deep holes in their land for the last fifteen years in a vain search for gold. The “big city” of Augusta reappears as an urban counterpoint to the rural farm, but the most interesting and important setting is the cotton mill town of Scottsville, South Carolina, just across the state line. The mill has been shut down for eighteen months by a strike prompted by the owners’ imposition of a stretch-out, and the workers, led by Ty Ty’s son-in-law Will Thompson, are quickly running out of food. The dichotomy between the rural setting of the Walden farm and Scottsville is coupled with differences in narration and style: a realistic style for the country setting where most of the novel’s comedic interludes occur and an expressionistic, sometimes surreal, rendering of the more serious city episodes. The metaphor of hunger connects Ty Ty’s reverence for gold, the land, and female sexuality with Will’s infatuation with the dynamic power of both machinery and sexual conquest.

The novel’s title comes from Ty Ty’s commitment to tithe the proceeds from one acre of his land to God, although the only current farming is done by his two black tenants, Uncle Felix and Black Sam. In order to avoid sharing the proceeds of his expected gold strike, Ty Ty constantly shifts the location of “God’s little acre” to an area he is not currently excavating. He is convinced that his “scientific” approach to mining is the best method of extracting value from the earth, and considering
Jeeter’s experiences with cotton farming, Ty Ty’s method is perhaps not as crazy as the other characters derisively suggest. Faulkner’s Lucas Beauchamp similarly abandons farming to search for buried gold in *Go Down, Moses*, and both characters retain a strong bond with nature as they seek a greater financial reward in the land than they ever found on it. There is also a suggestion of a desired return to the womb of Mother Nature in the image of a man compulsively digging twenty-feet deep holes in the ground. Ty Ty’s wife has died, and he constantly extols the sexuality of his daughters Darling Jill and Rosamond, who is married to Will, and his daughter-in-law Griselda, but unlike the lecherous Jeeter, he is only interested in sex as something to think about and watch others participate in. He transfers his sexual energy to his obsessive digging for gold.

Will Thompson is a step further removed from the soil than Ty Ty as a textile mill worker who converts the cotton from farms like the Waldens’ into fabric via the powerful machinery that is now idle and silent. His ceaseless womanizing—Rosamond says he has “had every girl in town, once”—is a substitute for his erotic fascination with the energy and power of the mill. Jim Leslie Walden is even more detached from the natural world, living on “The Hill,” a rich section of Augusta, and working as a cotton broker, a middle man with no direct contact with raw materials, who profits from the abstract fluctuations of the market. His wife’s gonorrhea and emotional frigidity prompt Jim Leslie’s frantic attempts to buy or take by force his sister-in-law Griselda. Nature, then, is perhaps most significant in the novel in its absence and its degrees of separation from the lives of the principal male characters.
All three men pursue a feeling of vitality, the “secret of living” in Ty Ty’s words, which they associate with women and other feminine forces.

After fifteen years of using his “scientific” approach, Ty Ty has had no luck finding gold, and he readily embraces the idea of capturing an albino man who lives nearby in order to harness his supposed mystical divining powers. Ty Ty assumes that Dave, the albino, like the women and African-Americans of the book, is somehow closer to nature because of his otherness. Dave is the same as “a coal-black darky,” Ty Ty says at one point, suggesting that Caldwell includes this bizarre incident in order to mock racist attitudes. Fittingly, the albino lives on the edge of a swamp, a type of landscape historically associated with the female body, and the Walden clan regards him as a strange object: “With their eyes upon him, Dave felt like an animal on exhibition” (124). Will seems to think that he is literally a creature of the swamp:

“How do you like it up here on solid ground, fellow?” Will asked.
“It’s all right.”
“But you’d rather be back home in the swamp, wouldn’t you?”
“I don’t know,” he replied. (125)

Ty Ty treats Dave as if the albino was part child, part animal, like some sort of magical pet the family can keep and train to divine the location of gold: “Sure, he can do it . . . He can do it and don’t know it . . . When he grows up, he’s going to be some almighty gold-diviner. He’s young yet. Just give him time” (124). Not until he notices Dave and Darling Jill flirtatiously looking at one another does Ty Ty even realize that the albino is, in fact, another person:

Up until then Ty Ty had not for a moment considered Dave a human being. Since the night before, Ty Ty had looked upon him as something different from a man. But it dawned upon him when he saw Darling Jill’s smile that the boy was actually a person. He was still an albino, though, and he was said to
possess unearthly powers to divine gold. In that respect, Ty Ty still held him above all other men. (125)

Dave’s sexual desire for Darling Jill signals his personhood and manhood to Ty Ty, but his supposed ability to transcend the domain of masculine reason and science always marks him as not quite human. Indeed, Ty Ty’s essentialist definition of albinos does not place him “above” other men, but classifies him as a tool for producing wealth from the earth.

While the albino scenes are clearly comical (Dave quickly vanishes from the novel), they establish a pattern of male characters seeking to fill a void through the conquest of a feminized object or of actual women. Despite his claim that “I don’t take any stock in superstition and conjur and such things” (22), Ty Ty so much as admits his inability to divine the secrets of the earth when he kidnaps Dave for help. Will, who is frustrated by not being able to work in the mill, and Jim Leslie, who endures similar feelings of impotence because of his wife, both seek recourse in the body of Griselda, Buck’s wife whom Caldwell figures as an earth-goddess like Faulkner’s Eula Varner. The widower Ty Ty fulfills his urges by continuously extolling the virtues of Griselda’s body parts and by repeatedly assaulting and penetrating the earth in search of its buried treasure. In his most frustrated moments, Ty Ty attempts to literally beat the earth into submission: “There were times . . . when he was so provoked that he would pick up a stick and flail the ground with it until he dropped exhausted” (3). Instead of wanting to make things grow from the earth like Jeeter, Ty Ty prefers his self-proclaimed “scientific” method for extracting value from the land, a parody of the “scientific” farming practices that had exhausted the soil of the South for the previous century.
James Devlin identifies the vitality missing from the three men’s lives as an “ineffable life force” or “élan vital” that is “intimately linked with aggressive sexual drive,” and says that for Will, “the inaccessible, closed mill is another woman to be overcome and won.” Lawrence S. Kubie, in an insightful, if somewhat dated, psychoanalytical reading claims a similar “deep inner logic” in the relationship of nature, the mill and women: “the book is a story in symbolic language of the struggle of a group of men to win some fantastic kind of sustenance out of the body of the earth, the ‘body’ of factories, and the bodies of women.” These readings, while useful, fail to account for the strange masculine power of the mill that threatens to displace men from their position of dominance, as well as for the fact that some of the women, especially Griselda, feel a similar compulsion to access this vaguely defined life-force, which is not, for them, gendered as feminine. These critics’ reliance on opaque phrases like “ineffable life-force” and “some fantastic kind of sustenance” testifies to the difficulty of articulating an idea that is clearly key to the novel but that is never delineated conclusively by Caldwell. At the risk of merely substituting one nebulous idea for another, I would suggest that the characters are tapping into a collective identity, a communal vitality that transcends but includes the self. Thus, while the male characters (and perhaps Caldwell, too) identify this power as feminine, it need not be for everyone (for Griselda, for example, it is masculine). Similarly, access to the collective identity may be through nature, but also through the machinery of the mill or through work itself (like Ty Ty’s digging). Once this collective vitality has been tapped, there is a compulsion to return to it over and over.
As in *Tobacco Road*, Caldwell associates the inability to work with emasculation, and the Great Depression, of course, swells the ranks of the unemployed in big cities, small towns, and country farms. Ty Ty is compelled by “gold fever” to work ceaselessly digging holes, and his confidence in the secret abundance of the earth is connected to his fascination with sex and feminine beauty: both are sources of sustenance for him. Will feels driven to turn the power on at the mill himself, fantasizing that the workers can run the facility independently of its owners. He consistently rebuffs Ty Ty’s suggestion that he dig with them; Will feels no attraction to nature and longs to be back amid the humming machinery: “The sight of bare land, cultivated and fallow, with never a factory or mill to be seen, made him a little sick in his stomach” (148). Will’s nausea at the sight of the land opposes the novel’s most dynamic and charismatic character to its endearing agrarian philosopher, Ty Ty. Coupled with Caldwell’s jaded depictions of fruitless farm labor, the result is a thorough dismantling of pastoral myths. The mill town emerges as a more viable site for productive Southern labor, but as the strike makes clear, exploitative class relations threaten to make the “lint-heads” no better off than the tenant farmers of *Tobacco Road*.

Caldwell constructs the mill as a contested site, neither exclusively masculine or feminine, suggesting the possibility that machines can dominate men the way that men have historically dominated nature. The “ivy-covered walls” of the mills also suggest an updated, revised version of the pastoral combination of nature and culture without, however, the order and stability of traditional pastoral hierarchies. Even when the Scottsville mill was operating, Will remembers that “the girls were in love
with the looms and the spindles and the flying lint” (99-100). Caldwell blends realistic and expressionistic techniques as Will imagines the women workers, who have been hired across the valley because they accept “the harder work . . . the longer hours [and] the cutting of pay,” as unfaithful to their men:

> when evening came, the doors were flung open and the girls ran out screaming in laughter. When they reached the street, they ran back to the ivy-covered walls and pressed their bodies against it and touched it with their lips. The men who had been standing idly before it all day long came and dragged them home and beat them unmercifully for their infidelity. (98-9)

The men’s estrangement from nature appears less important than their estrangement from labor. Although contact with the land can sustain men like Ty Ty, Will has broken with the agricultural traditions of the past, and he needs the sustenance of work more than the paltry rations provided by the union.

Industrial machinery is able to resist the control of men in a way that the passive land cannot. On the farm, humans (and particularly men) are conceived as the providers of the family; the machinery of the mills, however, can be operated by women as well as men. Will imagines that the machines are idolized as the source of power by the women who press their bodies to the ivy-covered walls, and he is therefore in danger of being feminized, displaced into a subservient role. When the aptly named Will is able to seduce Griselda and make her submissive to his masculine desire, he is consequently able to enter the mill and turn on its power himself. Sexual acts allow him to overcome the powerlessness and idleness symbolized by the silent machinery of the mill. Will’s sexual exploits, his desire for collective appropriation of the mill, and his holding a dying rabbit in his hands enable transcendence of solipsism through a palpable sense of collective vitality.
Just before his seduction of Griselda, Will explains to the obese and effeminate Pluto Swint his affection for the mill towns of the valley: “You don’t know what a company town is like, then. But I’ll tell you. Have you ever shot a rabbit, and gone and picked him up, and when you lifted him in your hand, felt his heart pounding like—like, God, I don’t know what!” (220). For Will, feeling the rabbit’s pulsing body provides an unmediated connection to life outside his own. The communal nature of the mill town (where the houses are so close together that a tryst between Will and Darling Jill is interrupted by a neighbor beating her dust mop on the wall beside the bed) engenders a similar feeling in Will, who can feel the pulse of life in the network of families: “Murmurs passed through the company streets of the company town, coming in rhythmic tread through the windows of the company house. It was alive, stirring, moving, and speaking like a real person” (219-220). In these passages, Will is overcoming his feelings of alienation through recognition of and connection with the life around him. His reticence yields to thundering soliloquies in which he attempts to reach out to his audience of Rosamond, Griselda, Darling Jill, and Pluto and make them understand his thoughts and motivations. While he never seems capable of truly egalitarian exchange or dialogue, he succeeds in tapping into what Ty Ty refers to as “the God inside of a body” (268) and “something you’ve got to feel” that cannot be expressed in words (271).

Just before the climactic scene of her seduction, Griselda experiences an epiphanic moment when she too feels the pulse of collective life joining her to the community of beleaguered strikers, a sensation unknown to her on the Walden farm:

Through the open windows the soft summer night floated into the room . . . but with the evening air there was something else that excited Griselda. She
could hear sounds, voices, murmurs that were like none she had ever heard before. A woman’s laughter, a child’s excited cry, and the faint gurgle of a waterfall somewhere below all came into the room together; there was a feeling in the air of living people just like herself, and this she had never felt before. The new knowledge that all those people out there, all those sounds, were as real as she herself was made her heart beat faster. (215)

When Will strolls into the house, Griselda feels like running to him and embracing him, and she knows that “[h]e was one of the persons she had felt in the night air” (216). For both Griselda and Will, the empathetic bond they feel leads paradoxically to an empowering sense of individuality, echoing the sentiment of cooperative individualism on the rise among the lower and middle classes of the 1930s. Will explains to his “enthralled” audience that only the atmosphere of the company town provides him with the senses of both a collective life force and the sense of individual power that will allow him to reopen the mill:

Back there in Georgia, out there in the middle of all those damn holes and piles of dirt, you think I’m nothing but a dead sapling sticking up in the ground. Well, maybe I am, over there. But over here in the Valley, I’m Will Thompson. You come over here and look at me in this yellow company house and think that I’m nothing but a piece of company property. And you’re wrong about that, too. I’m Will Thompson. I’m as strong as God Almighty Himself now, and I can show you how strong I am. . . . I’m going up to that [mill] door and rip it to pieces just like it was a window shade. (221)

Reviving the image of a withered tree from *Tobacco Road*, Caldwell continues, in passages like this one, to suggest the obsolescence of living off the land in the Depression-era South. For Will it is, instead, the collective humanity of Scottsville that gives him the power to act for the betterment of the community of individuals to which he belongs.

Will’s reference to ripping the door as if it were a window shade reasserts the masculinity that he imagines has been taken from him. He prepares for his
reclamation of the mill by ritually and obsessively shredding Griselda’s clothes in a frenzied display of virility: “I’m a loomweaver. I’ve woven cloth all my life, making every kind of fabric in God’s world . . . We’re going to start spinning and weaving again tomorrow, but tonight I’m going to tear that cloth on you till it looks like lint out of a gin” (224). When he fulfills his promise, Caldwell describes him as “a madman,” “tearing it insanely,” “tearing, ripping, jerking, throwing the shredded cloth . . . frantically . . . [and] savagely” (225). The shredding of the fabric undoes the work of the machinery that he operates and suggests that his attack on the closed mill is an indirect reassertion of his masculinity, making a woman of the mill that had taken his place by “making a woman” of the women of the Valley. Taking matters into his own hands, Will removes a symbolic level of mediation between himself and Griselda, and like Ty Ty, he searches for a treasure buried somewhere beneath the external surface.

Will’s role as the agent of Ty Ty’s desire becomes evident as he explains himself to a now-naked Griselda:

Ty Ty was right! . . . he said you were so God damn pretty, a man would have to get down on his hands and knees and lick something when he saw you like you are now . . . And I’m going to lick you, Griselda. Ty Ty knew what he was talking about. He said that was what a man would do to you. He’s got more sense than all the rest of us put together, even if he does dig in the ground like a God damn fool. (226)

When Will takes Griselda from the room to perform “the first act of cunnilingus in serious American literature,” in Devlin’s memorable phrasing, we can see that Caldwell has fashioned a somewhat crude parallel to Ty Ty’s forays into the womb-like craters of the earth. Cook also points out that the frequent oral imagery associated with sexual craving “suggests a strong connection between women and nature as
literal sources of sustenance.  Caldwell makes this connection clear when Will eats a full breakfast of ham, grits and coffee before heading to the mill. The three sisters, whom we might expect to be hostile towards one another since Will has now had sex with both his sisters-in-law, display a collective unity and cooperative spirit: “Darling Jill brought a plate, a cup, and a saucer. Griselda brought a knife, a spoon, and a fork. Rosamond filled a glass of water. They ran over the kitchen, jumping from each other’s way, weaving in and out in the small room hurriedly, easily, lovingly” (234).

Will’s conquest makes him feel “as strong as God Almighty himself,” and he sets off to repeat his action of “turning on the power,” this time at the mill. Overlooking the townsfolk who have gathered as one outside the mill, Will stands in an open window and repeats his shredding action, ripping his shirt and throwing it to the women below who fight for the pieces as Rosamond, Darling Jill, and Griselda are “pushed forward with the mass.” Will leads the way but inspires a collective sense of purpose and power in the crowd. The men rush in after him and fling their shirts out the windows to the “crowd of women and children” below (240), his effortless sense of control another parallel to the previous night’s empowering seduction of Griselda: “She stood up immediately, rising eagerly at his command. She waited for anything he might tell her to do next. . . . When he told her to sit down, she would sit down. Until then she would remain standing for the rest of her life” (222-3).

Although he may be the “male man,” as Uncle Sam and Black Felix call him, Will assumes that he can also lead the striking workers to victory and dominate “the body of the mill” the way he dominates the bodies of women. However, when he successfully turns on the power in the mill, his illusion of himself as one “as strong as
God Almighty” is shattered by three bullets in the back from the guards hired by the mill owners. It is never quite clear what the workers hope to achieve by occupying the mill nor what the plan is after turning the power on, making the endeavor appear, in retrospect, as delusional as Ty Ty’s search for gold. Will’s death means that the strike will end soon and the workers will be forced to accept lower wages because Will was the galvanizing force, creating a collective entity from a group of individuals. “I don’t reckon there’ll be any use of trying to fight them without Will,” an unnamed worker comments to no one in particular, “They’ll try to make us take a dollar-ten. If Will Thompson was here, we wouldn’t do it. Will Thompson would fight them” (250).

Even though the strike appears doomed, Caldwell suggests that the communal identity will continue through the town’s apotheosis of their leader: “The bare backs of the men were strong with their arms around Will Thompson’s wife and sisters-in-law. . . . He belonged to those bare-backed men with bloody lips. He belonged to Horse Creek Valley now. He was not theirs any longer. He was Will Thompson” (250-1). In his typical fashion, Caldwell allows the barest gleam of hope in an otherwise pessimistic world, a pattern that continues in the final three chapters.

Jim Leslie Walden is a prosperous cotton broker and, consequently, the most estranged of the characters from nature and from other people. A stylized villain, apparently unredeemable in any way, Jim Leslie profits by evicting families from their homes and selling their meager possessions. He is also a cotton broker, a profession that got its name, according to Will, “[b]ecause they keep the farmers broke all the time. They lend a little money, and then they take the whole damn crop. Or else they suck the blood out of a man by running the price up and down forcing
him to sell” (109). While Ty Ty is a cotton farmer (nominally, at least) and Will a weaver who transforms the crop into fabric, Jim Leslie gets rich as a middle man whose only contact with cotton is in the abstract figures of a ledger. Alienated in his mansion on The Hill with only his gonorrheal wife, he is completely cut off from a sense of collective life he might experience with his family or the community. Spurred by another of Ty Ty’s speeches about the virtues of Griselda’s “pair of rising beauties,” Jim Leslie sets his sights on his brother’s wife and appears at the Walden farm after Will’s death in order to take her by force.

The same sexual longing that is a source of power for Will is portrayed as degenerate and hostile in Jim Leslie. The difference for Caldwell appears to lie in the motivations for the two men’s actions. As Ty Ty says to Griselda, she and Will come to understand “a secret of living” from their mutual desire: “It’s folks who let their head run them who make all the mess of living. Your head can’t make you love a man, if you don’t feel like loving him. It’s got to be a feeling down inside of you like you and Will had” (262-3). Caldwell constructs Jim Leslie as a representative of the greedy mill owners who are responsible for Will’s death and of the entire market system that cheats farmers and starves workers and their families into submission. As readers, we are supposed to differentiate between Jim Leslie’s attempted abduction of Griselda and Will’s unleashing of her “natural” feelings. For Ty Ty, this difference is no less than that between a person who is “dead inside” (262) and one who has “the God inside of a body” (268).

For Caldwell, the difference is one of the desire for possession. That is, Jim Leslie’s lust for his sister-in-law appears quite similar to Will’s, as if he, too, has
realized the connection to a collective sense of life through Griselda’s archetypal female form. Rather than seduce her into a willing affair, however, Jim Leslie can only bark commands like, “Come out of that corner and get into the car before I have to come and pull you out” (280). Griselda is simply another possession to acquire, a replacement for his unsatisfactory wife. Will is never interested in possessing her, or any one woman for that matter; instead, fulfilling his desire once lets him tap into the energy he needs to turn on the power. When Buck shoots Jim Leslie in the yard and then walks off to commit suicide before the sheriff arrives, his actions seem as much a revenge for Will’s seduction of his wife as a response to his brother’s immediate threat. Jim Leslie runs to his car, apparently ready to leave at the sight of the shotgun, and, since Will is already dead, Buck finds a fitting surrogate in his greedy brother. This substitution suggests that Will and Jim Leslie are not so different after all and even, by extension, that the sentiments of collective individualism and acquisitive individualism are quite similar as well. One can easily bleed into the other, as the violent deaths of both men attest.

Ty Ty, who waxes philosophical throughout the final three chapters, invokes God as he defines the desire for possession as unnatural: “When you try to take a woman or a man and hold him off all for yourself, there ain’t going to be nothing but trouble and sorrow the rest of your days” (285). He additionally seeks to justify the idea that sexual drive is a natural instinct and the repression of it is antithetical to God’s wishes. He asserts that preachers who denounce sex are leading their followers astray, that a personal relationship with God is possible only through feeling rather than reason, and that the girls understand more clearly than his boys that there is more
to life than having “a little money to spend and a new raincoat or some such
knickknack and a belly full of barbecue” (271).

Caldwell undermines the authority of Ty Ty’s oratory, however, when the
er elder Walden interjects the story of his encounter with a gold miner from North
Georgia while the women were in Scottsville. The man explains that Ty Ty’s digging
is a form of lode mining and that placer mining is the only possible way to find gold
in the soil of the southern part of the state. The “scientific” Ty Ty resolutely
concludes that the man “don’t know no more about digging for gold on my land than
one of those mules out there. I’ve been doing it for nearly fifteen years, and I reckon
if anybody knows what I’m doing, I do” (266). This comic interlude potentially
undermines, as it were, the credibility of Ty Ty’s explanations of events. In typical
Caldwellian fashion, we are ultimately left with more ambiguities than dogmatic
pronouncements of truths. Sexual desire may be liberating and sacred or pernicious
and profane; that same instinct is an uncontrollable and determining force in a
naturalistic universe, yet its power of compulsion can be harnessed or directed
through individual will and agency. Most frustrating to Ty Ty is that the secrets of
living are knowable but inexplicable to his sons: he can only tell them that they do not
feel it.

After two of his sons have died on his land, Ty Ty is seemingly on the brink
of a drastic change of heart regarding his quest for gold. Having failed in his life-long
mission of “keeping peace in his family,” he ponders the futility of his obsession and
even of life itself: “The farm before him looked desolate. . . . He no longer felt the
strength in his muscles when he thought of the gold in the earth under his farm. . . . At
that moment he felt that there was no use in ever doing anything again” (295-6). The piles of earth that “had always made him feel excitement” are now repellant to him, the gaping holes now ready-made graves, as the death of his sons has altered his perception of the landscape: “The mounds even had a different color now, and the soil of his land was nothing like earth he had ever seen before. There had never been any vegetation out there, but he had never realized the lack of it before” (297). Minutes later, however, the pall of death lifts and vitality returns to Ty Ty’s exhausted body, if not the barren land: “The moment he looked down into the crater, he felt a consuming desire to go down to the bottom of it and dig” (301). For Ty Ty, the only choice is between continuing his obsessive digging and ceasing all activity—the choice between life and death.

The obsessive repetition of manually digging holes for fifteen years is mirrored in the narration’s obsessive repetition of particular words, phrases and descriptions (and even in Ty Ty’s name). Caldwell employs this technique chiefly when writing about Griselda and the Scottsville mill, two bodies that are objects of infatuation. Ty Ty takes great pleasure in praising Griselda’s attractiveness and his choice of words is almost always the same:

Did you ever see a finer-looking girl anywhere in the country? . . . Griselda has the finest pair of rising beauties a man could ever hope to see. . . . The first time I saw you . . . I felt like getting right down there and then licking something. (43)

I reckon Griselda is just about the prettiest girl I ever did see. There ain’t a man alive who’s ever seen a finer-looking pair of rising beauties as she’s got. Why, man alive! They’re that pretty it makes me feel sometime like getting right down on my hands and knees . . . You just ache to get down and lick something. (128)
Griselda is the prettiest girl in the whole State of Georgia... She’s got the finest pair of rising beauties a man ever laid eyes on. (171)

Even when the speaker changes, the description is nearly identical. Black Sam tells Uncle Felix that he glimpsed Griselda as he passed by an open window one day:

“What I saw made me just want to get right straightaway down on my hands and knees and lick something” (278). Likewise, Will inquires of Darling Jill early in the novel, “How’s Griselda?... Is that girl as good-looking as ever? Griselda’s got the sweetest pair... Griselda can’t keep from being the prettiest girl in the country” (68-9). And, as we have already seen, Will concludes his seduction of Griselda by telling her, “Ty Ty was right! He said you were the most beautiful woman God ever made, didn’t he? And he said you were so pretty... a man would have to get down on his hands and knees and lick something when he saw you like you are now” (226). The use of repetition helps to capture some of the feelings of compulsion and obsession that drive the characters, and the effects are even more pronounced in descriptions of the mill.

The narrative takes on more of a frenzied, obsessive quality in these passages, especially as the repetition occurs more often and closer together. In chapter seven alone, we find these three passages within a few pages of one another:

He could see the ivy-walled cotton mill... there was a quiet stillness about the ivy-walled mill... they ran back to the ivy-covered walls and pressed their bodies against it and touched it with their lips. (98-9)

The wild-eyed girls on the inside of the ivy-walled mill looked like potted plants in bloom. Up and down the Valley lay the company towns and the ivy-walled cotton mills and the firm-bodied girls with eyes like morning-glories and the men stood on the hot streets looking at each other while they spat their lungs into the deep yellow dust of Carolina. ... In the mill streets of the Valley towns the breasts of the girls were firm and erect. (100)
In the streets in front of the houses he saw the bloody-lipped men spitting their lungs into the yellow dust. As far as he could see, there were rows of ivy-walled mills . . . and the eager girls with erect breasts and eyes like morning-glories ran in and out endlessly. (101-2)

And later, when the action returns to the town of Scottsville, there are no less than six similar fusings of harsh reality and fantastic visions in chapters fifteen, sixteen and seventeen, including:

He could see . . . the faces of the wild-eyed girls like morning-glories . . . their bodies firm and their breasts erect . . . The men stood in the streets watching the ivy-covered mills . . . There again were the girls with eyes like morning-glories and breasts so erect, running into the ivy-covered mills; and out in the street, day and night, stood his friends and brothers, looking, and spitting their lungs into the yellow dust at their feet. (218)

When the sun rose, he would be able to see the endless regiments of wild-eyed girls with erect breasts, firm-bodied girls who looked like morning-glories through the windows of the ivy-walled mills . . . the endless rows of bloody-lipped men, his friends and brothers, standing with eyes upon the mills, spitting their lungs into the yellow dust of Carolina. (232)

There was a man with blood on his lips. He spat into the yellow dust at his feet. Another man coughed, and blood oozed through the corners of his tightly compressed mouth. He spat into the yellow dust of Carolina. . . . These were the girls of the Valley whose breasts were erect and whose faces were like morning-glories when they stood in the windows of the ivy-walled mill. (248)

The mantra-like repetition of certain phrases—“ivy-walled mills,” “wild-eyed girls,” “erect breasts”—joins with the repeated images—girls running in and out of the mills, looking like morning-glories through the windows, men standing, watching, and spitting in the yellow dust—to produce narration that mimics the compulsive actions of the characters.

Only the descriptions of Griselda and of the mill employ these repetition techniques to the degree shown above. Just as Will returns continually to sexual trysts with “every girl in town” and dreams of turning on the power in the mill and Ty Ty
digs hole after hole in his land, Caldwell revisits the same words and scenes trying to capture, approach, or express the vitality of the community and its individuals. It is as if the forces of compulsion and obsession, in their inherent uncontrollability, offer access to a “life force” when economic factors have nearly ground living to a halt. In the absence of the normal work of cotton farming and textile making, the *idée fixe*, for Ty Ty and Will, provides collective identity through common purpose and it compels action. Ty Ty tells Buck at one point that “when you get God in your heart, you have a feeling that living is worth *striving for* night and day” (268, my emphasis). The key is that living is a constant process, a continual striving without ever necessarily reaching an endpoint or goal: the striving ends only in the literal death of the body or, metaphorically, with the death of “the God inside of a body,” as in those people Ty Ty refers to as dead inside.

The fact that these characters must find a connection to something bigger and more important than themselves through empty labor like digging holes and occupying idle mills is a testament to Caldwell’s bleak view of Southern society. Jeeter’s burning of his fields each year has this same empty quality, but his lack of literal nourishment means that his feeble attempt at work affords no spiritual sustenance. Caldwell shows that the will to live and produce is strong, but the social and economic structures of the nation and of the South, in particular, have failed the ordinary people. Ty Ty’s futile digging suggests that the land is no longer a viable resource, and the glimpses of collective life in Scottsville offer some hope of creative, productive labor. In his introduction to the 1940 edition of *Tobacco Road*, Caldwell claims that nature itself has failed people, as first tobacco and then cotton deplete the
soil: “They had so much faith in nature, in the earth, and in the plants that grew in the earth, that they could not understand how the earth could fail them. . . . First, tobacco, and then cotton . . . depleted the soil of its energy . . . they had both come and gone. But the people, and their faith, remained.” In both novels, though, we see that exploitative economic arrangements lead to the impoverishment of both the land and the people. Thus, the tenancy system is being reimposed on the mill workers as the cycle of helpless poverty threatens to begin again. In Caldwell’s South, the failure is not one of the natural world but of human nature.

End Notes

1 Westling, for example, describes in The Green Breast of the New World how a gendering of nature as feminine in the American pastoral tradition sentimentalizes the conquest and destruction of the wilderness. In the fiction of Ernest Hemingway she finds “an exclusively masculine code of values” that highlights images of death and decay to the exclusion or marginalization of traditionally feminine ones of life and growth (101). The same may be said of Caldwell’s representations of nature in Tobacco Road and God’s Little Acre, although I would attribute to him a degree of awareness that his evocations of atrophy and death signify the consequences of, in Westling’s words, “a sentimental masculine gaze at a feminized landscape” (52). See also Merchant’s The Death of Nature for a historical account of the rise to dominance in the Western world of the conception of science as masculine and nature as its feminine object of study.

2 Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White, You Have Seen Their Faces (New York: Viking, 1937), 29. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.


4 Stein, 17.

6 Ibid., 132.


8 Ibid., 202.

9 Richard H. Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years* (New York: Harper, 1973), 98. Pells cites a 1934 essay in *New Masses* by Rebecca Pitts, “Something to Believe In,” as the best expression of the mood and attitudes of American writers, and her description is accurate for Caldwell’s fiction. The fundamental dilemma of the 1930s, Pitts says, is how to become part of a social group or gain satisfaction in a collective cause without sacrificing one’s “personal integrity . . . individuality and self-awareness” (117).


14 Renek, 68.

15 See Rupert Vance, *Human Geography of the South* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1932), especially pages 93-106. Vance notes widespread concern over Southern soil exhaustion from 1840-60, followed by a period of heavy fertilization: “It was finally commercial fertilization which came both to repair the ravages of soil exhaustion and to extend to further reaches its primary cause, the culture of cotton” (95). Erosion also leaches chemicals from the soil, and “the South is more susceptible to erosion than any other section of the country” (103).

16 As McElvaine notes, one of the bitterest ironies of the Depression is that warehouses of goods sat idle and tons of “surplus” food were destroyed even as millions starved and lacked basic necessities.

17 In his introduction to the 1940 Modern Library edition of *Tobacco Road*, Caldwell demonstrates his familiarity with the South’s history of soil problems: “Their
forefathers had seen tobacco come and flourish on these same plots of earth. But after its season it would no longer grow in the depleted soil. . . . Then came cotton. Cotton thrived in abundance for several generations, and then it, too, depleted the soil of its energy until it would no longer grow.”

18 Jack Temple Kirby, in *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South 1920-1960* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1987), cites evidence that Caldwell’s figures are no exaggeration. He notes that during the late 1920s and early 1930s Arthur Raper surveyed two rural Georgia counties and found “landlords and merchants charging 10 percent interest on advances for three and a half months. Four-month money cost 25 percent, and the actual annual rate was about 35 percent” (149).

19 Albert Cowdrey, *This Land, This South: An Environmental History* (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1983), 79.

20 For more on the decline of diversified farming and the rise of staple crops in the South, see Vance, *Human Geography of the South*, 154-9; Vance, *Human Factors in Cotton Culture* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1929), 179-92; and George B. Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South, 1913-1945* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1967), 124-7. Tindall also shows that “the Jeffersonian vision of the independent yeoman farmer” persists in the South, despite the rise in tenancy rates from 36.2 per cent of all Southern farms in 1880 to 55.5 per cent in 1930: “It was a perennial irony that such invocations of the agrarian myth accompanied the steady drift of farmers into the dependent status of tenancy and sharecropping” (125).


23 Broadwell and Hoag, 90.

24 Caldwell’s comparison of Jeeter and the blackjack tree contrasts especially well with Hurston’s tree symbolism in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Seraph on the Suwanee* (discussed in chapter three). Janie’s pear tree and Arvay’s mulberry tree are
natural symbols of female identity and strength that signal an empowering relationship with a healthy natural world. While these trees blossom and grow, the blackjack tree hardens and turns inward.


27 McElvaine cites numerous letters that reveal the feelings of shame, guilt and inferiority experienced by men, many of whom state that they would rather kill their families and themselves than lose everything or ask for assistance. Thousands of letters were written to the Roosevelts, and the majority of those asking for clothing and food or direct financial assistance came from women: “Men might be as pleased as women to receive help, but their expected sex role made it more difficult for them to ask. To do so would be further admission of failure as a provider” (175).

28 The Lester domicile, however, has none of the activity and vitality that authors like Eudora Welty and Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings show can be as rich, varied, and meaningful as typically male spheres of action.

29 For a discussion of these techniques, see Richard Gray, The Literature of Memory: Modern Writers of the American South (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1977), 112-128. Gray argues that Caldwell produces an almost Brechtian detachment in the reader in Tobacco Road and God’s Little Acre in order to juxtapose the existence of the Georgia cracker with that of the mythical Jeffersonian yeoman: “Jeeter Lester and Ty Ty Walden are not the noble farmers of regional legend and the fact that they are not, the fact that they stand for a dream or an ideal betrayed, is, I believe, meant to be the real measure of their absurdity” (125).


31 Francis Townsend proposed a tax that would fund a $200 per month stipend for all Americans over the age of sixty. Huey Long’s more radical idea involved confiscating assets from the rich whose fortunes exceeded a certain level and giving that money to the poorest families. Although both plans were unrealistic in their scope, Long’s wealth-sharing idea was so popular that a secret Democratic National Committee poll in 1935 suggested that 3-4 million Americans might vote for him as a third-party presidential candidate (McElvaine, 237-249).
32 Many of these reviews, which also tend to fixate on Caldwell’s depictions of sex, are collected in *Critical Essays on Erskine Caldwell*, 6-7, 17-18, 20-25, 38-44.


34 The famous Gastonia, North Carolina, strike is Caldwell’s model for these events. This six-month, often violent, dispute between the Communist-led National Textile Workers Union, on one side, and the mill owners, police, and National Guard on the other was played out in the national press. When police raided a tent colony of evicted workers, gunfire erupted and Chief D. A. Aderholt was killed. Protests during the ensuing trial ended with Ella May Wiggins, a balladeer from the tent colony, shot to death as well. Cook, in *From Tobacco Road to Route 66*, pp. 85-97, notes that at least six novels were inspired by the insurrection. Generally considered the best account of the strike is Liston Pope’s *Millhands and Preachers: A Study of Gastonia* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1942).


36 Vance, in *Human Geography of the South*, explains how the mono-crop culture of nineteenth-century Southern agriculture fostered a pattern of farmers exhausting their land and then moving on to other areas and repeating the process (just as Ty Ty digs a deep hole and moves on without ever filling it in or repairing the damage). The boom in commercial fertilization from 1840-1860 was a temporary solution that eventually worsened soil erosion. Vance sees the same dependence on fertilizer returning in the 1920s (over 70% of fertilizer in 1929 is used by Southern states) and warns his audience of an impending crisis.


39 A few years later, John Steinbeck makes a similar identification between men and labor in his novel of dispossessed farmers, *The Grapes of Wrath* (New York: Viking, 1939): “The last clear definite function of man--muscles aching to work, minds aching to create beyond the single need--this is man. To build a wall, to build a house, a dam, and in the wall and house and dam to put something of Manself, and to Manself take back something of the wall, the house, the dam” (207).

40 Devlin, 65; Cook, 73.
For what it's worth, Caldwell offers a leaner version of this idea in his introduction to the 1949 edition of the novel: “It is merely a story about a man who wanted to find gold on his land, and happiness in the hearts of his children. It is not nearly so important whether he did or did not find these elusive things as it is that he had the undeniable desire to seek them at all costs” (reprinted in *Critical Essays on Erskine Caldwell*, 225-6). Of course, Caldwell liked to claim that he did not even know what the word symbolism meant, so his own words should not necessarily be considered an authoritative source for critics.
Chapter Two. Cross Creek Culture: Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings’ Pastoral Wilderness

No Southern writer, and perhaps no American writer, of the period between the two World Wars is more identified with a particular place than is Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings with the area around her adopted home of Cross Creek, Florida. Had she not moved from Rochester, New York, in 1928, it is quite likely that Rawlings would have never found success as a fiction writer, and certainly she would not have been nominated for two Pulitzer Prizes, winning for *The Yearling* (1938). While Rawlings was uncomfortable with the label of “regionalism” often applied to her writing, she was fascinated by the connection between people and place, particularly that of the poor “crackers” and the lush, isolated landscapes of Alachua, Putnam, and Marion Counties in north central Florida. In the opening pages of *Cross Creek*, her 1942 memoir about her life in the Florida backwoods, Rawlings proclaims

> the consciousness of land and water must lie deeper in the core of us than any knowledge of our fellow beings. We were bred of the earth before we were born of our mothers. . . . We cannot live without the earth or apart from it, and something is shrivelled [sic] in a man’s heart when he turns away from it and concerns himself only with the affairs of men.

A large part of the allure of Cross Creek for Rawlings was undoubtedly its remoteness from the “civilized world” to which she belonged until purchasing seventy-four acres of orange grove in 1928. In numerous letters Rawlings remarks that she is especially compelled by the “elemental” and “primal” quality of life in her new home. Gordon Bigelow, in his 1966 biography *Frontier Eden*, notes that “this pull she felt toward elemental things . . . was something she shared with many other American writers of her generation,” notably Robert Frost, William Faulkner, Thomas Wolfe and Ernest Hemingway.
This quest for the elemental and the desire to retreat from the modern, urban world is, at least partially, a reaction to the horrors of World War I, the panic following the Wall Street crash of 1929, and the onset of the Great Depression. To again quote Bigelow, “Economic catastrophe and social unrest produced a widespread renewal of interest in the regions, so that life in the village began to receive new scrutiny as a source of those virtues which could heal the ills brought on by too much city and too much big business.” In Erskine Caldwell’s fiction, these villages, too, are suffering from the trickle-down effects of “too much big business,” but Rawlings’ settings are even more rural and further removed from the economic and cultural metropoles whose influence remains tangible in Caldwell’s southern Georgia landscapes. Rawlings’ adopted home of north central Florida is geographically close to Caldwell’s of south Georgia, and her characters are also usually poor farmers isolated from and ignored by the economic mainstream. While Caldwell’s sharecroppers tend to have an antagonistic relationship with barren earth and bleak landscapes, Rawlings’ work is populated by industrious yeomen protagonists who experience an intimate bond with their natural surroundings (the sort of bond Jeeter nostalgically imagines his father and grandfather having prior to the depletion of the soil).

If Caldwell’s landscapes of desolate wastelands in *Tobacco Road* and *God’s Little Acre* stem from his despair at the prospects faced by poor Southerners during the Depression, then we might expect similar portraits from Rawlings in nearby Florida. But Rawlings admittedly shies away from a head-on confrontation with the political, social, and economic problems of the era. Instead, Rawlings claims to seek a
metaphorical return to childhood in the Edenic sanctuary of wilderness that she depicts in her work where the problems of modern civilization melt away: “time frightens me, and I seek, like a lonely child, the maternal solace of timelessness” (243). Caldwell laments the loss of the American and Southern pastoral garden, but Rawlings finds that it still exists, not in the traditional locations of farms, plantations, or country estates, but in the wilderness and frontier settlements of north Florida.

In *South Moon Under* (1933), for instance, she replaces the static hierarchies which are the mark of order in the plantation fiction, or “Old South” pastoral, of writers like John Pendleton Kennedy, Thomas Nelson Page, and William Gilmore Simms with a more fluid and dynamic conception of both nature and society using wilderness as a model. Of particular interest to her are the intimate bonds, both material and metaphysical, that develop between people and natural environments. In a 1941 letter to her renowned editor Maxwell Perkins, written while she struggled to finish *Cross Creek*, Rawlings explains that she aims to convey “[t]he sense of knowing a particular place and people with a deep, almost Proustian deepness and intimacy and revelation, with my own feelings about things back of it.” The setting is so dominant, in fact, that it sometimes seems to weaken Rawlings’ character development and narrative unity. While these two elements are relatively strong and consistent in *South Moon Under*, much of her other fiction, especially early stories like “Cracker Chidlings,” exhibit her journalistic background by relying heavily on factual information about the region without much concern for psychologically complex and realistic characters.
Rawlings often portrays the uninhabited Florida scrub country as something of an idealized pastoral realm free from many of the complications of the “civilized” world, but she also is always cognizant of the illusory nature of the pastoral ideal of the middle state as a supposedly harmonic balance between nature and culture. Certainly her settings are endowed with many of the characteristics of the middle state, but Rawlings seems consistently troubled by the binary formula of traditional literary pastoralism. The ideal of a balanced middle ground presumes a fundamental opposition of culture and nature, a spectrum with urban civilization at one end and unpopulated wilderness at the other. As feminist and ecofeminist critics have shown, it is precisely this type of dualism that results in the subjugation of women (as well as, quite often, children and people of color) through their identification with the inferior position which nature is assigned by a dominant, masculine culture. Since the dualistic philosophy originates from the culture side of the equation, culture is always the privileged term, and any attempt at mediation, rather than bridging the nature/culture gap, merely reinforces it.

The improved garden of the traditional pastoral middle ground is not so much a harmonious blend of culture and nature as it is an ideologically loaded transfer of culture into a rural setting. For instance, pastoral identifications of (white) women with the Southern garden itself, and of slaves and black laborers with the other property of the plantation, reinforce cultural hierarchies and even justify them as natural in this setting. While issues of race and gender are linked in pastoral representations of nature, Rawlings’ writing largely avoids race and is concerned with freeing women from the narrow and limiting gender roles that are reproduced in the
pastoral context. She therefore offers a reformulation of the pastoral equation by rejecting the orderly, improved garden in favor of an open, free, and chaotic wilderness that, in her presentation, embodies “real” nature. The wilderness model of nature is an interdependent web of which humans are a part, along with all other members of the biotic community. The hierarchical, pastoral model, on the other hand, posits humans as over and above the natural world, as stewards of the garden.

In essence, Rawlings’ conception of nature as a network of relations in which humans participate is presented as more accurate than a Newtonian, mechanistic view that deepens the divide between nature and humans by assuming an ideal of scientific detachment. The issue of accuracy is debatable, but also, I think, irrelevant. What is most interesting is that nature is made the arbiter of social systems in order to promote a particular ideology as more natural, and therefore more correct, than another. Authors like Rawlings and Hurston identify the natural world with principles of egalitarianism and cooperation in order to critique the absence of those values in the societies of the South and the United States. Conversely, someone like Thomas Nelson Page or Andrew Lytle can celebrate the orderliness of nature on a farm or plantation to lament and decry the perceived loss of “proper” stability in the social order of the post-Reconstruction New South. Thus, Rawlings attempts to move her characters beyond the restrictive pastoral garden and into the liberatory landscape of wilderness where artificially constructed gender roles are replaced with more relative and flexible identities.

This less-civilized natural realm of the Florida scrub, instead of being a hostile environment for its scant human population, is more hospitable to those in tune with
its natural processes than are the small towns across the river. Even though her characters are often just as destitute as the Lesters or the Waldens in south Georgia, Rawlings never portrays nature as a cause or reflection of impoverished lives. If anything, the opposite is true. The natural environment is quite often the only significant source of hope, beauty, wealth, and sustenance, and consequently, her characters do not at all resemble the starving, forsaken souls of Caldwell’s stories. Rawlings settings are, by virtue of their isolation, places of refuge where she seldom permits the harsh realities of Depression-era American life to enter. Since she is not a native Southerner, Rawlings also does not feel compelled to grapple with the ghosts of Southern traditions and the legacy of slavery, in the manner of Faulkner and other Southern writers. Therefore, her landscapes are relatively free of the burden of Southern history, and she chooses to explore more “elemental” questions of human beings’ attachment to specific natural places, as well as issues of gender, in a fairly hermetic environment.

Rawlings’ greatest success as a writer prior to her move to Florida was a daily series of poems called “Songs of the Housewife,” initially published in the Rochester Times-Union and eventually syndicated in over fifty newspapers. These unremarkable poems that appeared six days a week from May 24, 1926, to February 29, 1928, were “uniformly cheery, sentimental pieces about little boys who tracked dirt across mother’s clean floors on the way to the cookie jar . . . [and] the clean, sweet smell of laundry just taken from the line.” She moved to Cross Creek in November of 1928 with her husband of nine years, Charles Rawlings, himself an aspiring writer, and she immediately realized that she had found a place and a people rife with stories waiting
to be told. The Rawlings’ already strained marriage could not be salvaged by the change of locale, and they separated early in 1933, just after the publication of her first novel, *South Moon Under*, with the divorce to be finalized several months later.

In a letter written just after the divorce, Rawlings characterizes her marriage as fourteen years of hell from which she was all too ready to be liberated: “It was a question, finally, of breaking free from the feeling of a vicious hand always at my throat, or of going down in complete physical and mental collapse.” It is perhaps not surprising, then, that a central concern of *South Moon Under* is revealing the artificiality of societal gender roles that are commonly justified as natural and therefore unquestionable and immutable. The chief female protagonist, Piety Jacklin, *née* Lantry, is, like Rawlings, an independent and self-sufficient woman who is able to resist and ignore traditional notions of proper gender roles because she lives in the sparsely populated wilderness that abuts the scrub region. Piety’s identity is integrally tied to the natural environment in which she lives, but Rawlings does not reduce this association to the stereotypical passive identification so prevalent in American culture and literature.

Her isolated home allowed Rawlings to retreat from the modern world and, somewhat paradoxically, to grapple with the problematic oppositions of the culture she left behind, including those between civilization and wilderness, men and women, and the individual and community. She felt particularly drawn to write about the seemingly simple people who lived around her in the Cross Creek area: “They have a primal quality against their background of jungle hammock . . . The only ingredients of their lives are the elemental things.” This withdrawal in order to criticize society
from a distance by a set of supposedly purer, more natural standards is actually a staple of the pastoral mode, which, as Jan Bakker explains in his study of antebellum Southern literature, “characteristically deals with the complexities of life against a background of apparent simplicity.” Rawlings therefore may overestimate her own evasion of modernity in a 1936 letter to F. Scott Fitzgerald: “I have probably been more cowardly than I’d admit, in sinking my interests in the Florida backwoods, for the peace and beauty I’ve found there have definitely been an escape from the confusion of our generation. You have faced the music, and it is a symphony of discord.”

Historian Richard Pells attributes the “extraordinary interest in folk cultures, agrarian communities, and peasant life,” especially among intellectuals and writers, to their attraction to societies that seemed “outside the pale of capitalist civilization” of 1930s America: “many writers felt more justified in offering a symbolic reproach to American materialism and greed than in outlining programmatic solutions to the depression.”

In choosing a pastoral retreat into the sparsely populated Florida scrub, Rawlings undertakes a critical revision in South Moon Under of the traditional pastoral mode itself, replacing the garden with a wilderness exhibiting values of interdependence, cooperation, and egalitarianism.

In the Southern pastoral tradition of the nineteenth century, the land inside the boundaries of the plantation is figured as the ideal middle state, a balance between the howling wilderness and the effete city that provides a stable and static refuge from the chaos of time and the outside world. The act of fencing, particularly in the pastoral tradition, helps man to symbolically domesticate land and nature by delineating boundaries and imposing a sense of order on previously “wild” terrain. Rawlings,
however, repeatedly shows us the double nature of fencing: fences disrupt an existing
order while signaling the creation of a new order that threatens the wildness of the
scrub, as well as the communal values of its inhabitants. The fences symbolize the
modern society that Rawlings seeks to escape, and their encroachment into the
virtually uninhabited scrub region of north central Florida entails, in her view, the
threat of subjugation for nature and women alike. The fences erected by a new wave
of cattle ranchers threaten to disrupt the free-range tradition of the locals, and
Rawlings links women to land and fencing to the imposition of limiting gender
identities. She reveals that, though these limitations are justified as naturally ordained,
they are, as much as the idea of property, social constructions. By positing a
nonhierarchical conception of nature--a more complex web or network as opposed to
a linear chain--Rawlings suggests that the principles of egalitarianism,
interdependency, and cooperation found in wilderness ecosystems are actually more
natural models for human social relations than the classificatory traditions that tend to
isolate and rank individual parts of communities.

The identification of women with nature (and of nature with women) has been
examined in its historical and scientific contexts by Carolyn Merchant, traced from its
New World origins by Louise Westling and Annette Kolodny, and analyzed as a
staple of Southern pastoral fiction by Elizabeth Jane Harrison. As these authors
note, to view nature mechanistically, as fundamentally passive raw material to be
shaped and used by masculine culture, is also to justify as natural a social hierarchy
that subordinates women, African Americans, and Native Americans—those people
deemed closest to nature. In *South Moon Under*, Rawlings does not seek to deny
outright the perceived connection between women and nature, but to reveal that
association as dependent on historical and cultural factors. Viewed in this light, the
novel is akin to a proto-ecofeminist text in its illustrations of the standpoint claims
of an ecofeminist critic like Ariel Salleh, who writes:

It is nonsense to assume that women are any closer to nature than men. The
point is that women’s reproductive labor and such patriarchically assigned
roles as cooking and cleaning bridge men and nature in a very obvious way,
and one that is denigrated by patriarchal culture. Mining and engineering work
similarly is a transaction with nature. The difference is that this work comes to
be mediated by a language of domination that ideologically reinforces
masculine identity as powerful, aggressive, and separate over and above
nature. The language that typifies a woman’s experience, in contrast, situates
her along with nature itself.18

In her attempt to counteract this dominant ideology which aligns woman/nature
against man/culture, Rawlings envisions fences as representative of a hierarchical
society that tends to establish a sense of order by defining nature (and therefore
women) as raw material without any identity outside of their relation to masculine
culture. Her attempt to refute these reductive versions of women and nature in South
Moon Under is twofold: she shows that men can be situated as a part of nature, rather
than over and above it, and that the assumption that women and nature are
fundamentally passive objects to an active, masculine subject is as much a purely
human creation as a split-rail fence.

As the novel opens, the Lantry family has just moved to the Florida scrub, and
Pa Lantry feels uneasy in the darkness of his new home, musing to himself, “Time I
get me a fence raised tomorrow, maybe ‘twon’t seem so wild, like.”19 It is significant
that the fence is constructed through the collaborative efforts of neighbors and
relatives who rarely converge as a group. Their interaction allows us to glimpse an
example of how gender is constructed socially, even in a far-flung and loose-knit community. The novel’s female protagonist is Piety, then fifteen and the youngest Lantry daughter, and she notices the patterns and forms that govern the group’s social behavior. Rawlings shows how Piety’s adolescent conception of proper gender roles are being shaped as she is, quite literally, being fenced in to a socially acceptable notion of the woman’s sphere—the clearly delineated space around the homestead. Piety’s distaste for domestic work and her antagonistic relationship with her mother are clear indications that she will not inherit the traditional gender roles that her mother embodies.

Rawlings shows Piety already resisting these patterns by leaving each day to work in the fields with her father instead of remaining around the house with her sister and mother, who complains to the other women about her daughter’s fondness for field work. Piety is closer in spirit to her aunt Annie Wilson who, in response to taunts from the men, compares building the fence to sewing, runs across the yard, and good-naturedly throws an armful of fence rails at the men. Piety’s mother, whom Rawlings refers to only as Mrs. Lantry, scolds her cousin, saying, “’Tain’t mannerly no-ways to go scaperin’ acrost to the men-folks that-a-way” (18), but Rawlings’s sympathies are clearly with Annie as a free-spirited role model for Piety. When her mother dies, Piety is less than overwhelmed by grief:

The house was no emptier than before. No place would be empty, she thought, with Lantry in it. The man’s bulk, the fire of his presence, filled the room so certainly that his wife, returning from the grave, would have crowded it. Piety stared at the hearth, missing the accustomed sight of her mother sitting near the fire. It was as though a sharp-nosed, snappish bitch of long association was gone. (41)
This rather brutal eulogy indicates Piety’s disdain for the confining role of wife/mother through this more traditional association of woman and nature, and may also suggest Rawlings’ own desire to escape the confines of traditional domesticity. The hearth may have been the place for her mother, but Piety prefers to be behind the plow and continues working in the fields while reluctantly assuming her mother’s domestic duties as well.

Two years after his wife’s death, Lantry has a near-fatal heart attack and consequently begins to seek security for his daughter within the comforts of traditional gender roles: “he could not endure to leave her here alone. She would have to live with Martha, or keep house for widower Zeke. That was no life for a woman. He saw in a new light the stupid Jacklin boy, Willy” (49). Lantry’s argument for his daughter’s marriage rests on the premise that the societal convention is, in fact, a mandate of nature: “A man o’ your own’s natural. Seems like ever’ thing go along better when you do what’s natural” (52). Piety’s bewilderment with her father’s sudden fixation on marriage—“she could not read his eyes. She went to bed in a daze. For the first time she did not understand him” (51)—gives way to resigned acceptance—“He suits me good as ary feller, I reckon”—and the whole situation seems uncomfortable and very much at odds with her own inner nature. Sleeping in her parents’ old bed with her new husband, Piety feels uncomfortable inheriting the place of her mother that she had always resisted: “She felt a detached affection for her husband . . . It seemed to her that she was picking up in the middle something that had been interrupted. But if there was a meaning, she could not find it” (54). The idea of conforming to the pre-defined, culturally-determined roles of wife and mother
appears to Piety to be quite unnatural, and Rawlings subtly links this situation to the imposition of masculine will on nature.

Lantry’s first conversation with Willy Jacklin about the possibility of marriage is also the first mention of the lumber company that Willy will work for and that will soon descend on the scrub, removing thousands of trees before abruptly pulling out again. The connection between Willy’s impending marriage to Piety and the lumber companies’ ravaging of the land is clear: both are self-defined masculine forces that threaten to impose a passive femininity on the objects of woman and land. In Rawlings’ novel, though, neither the land nor Piety assumes the passive role of inert raw material or of the defenseless woman in need of protection from active, masculine subjects. Rawlings, as a woman and a non-native Southerner, avoids reducing Piety to an idealized symbol of virgin land, a common convention of antebellum pastoral as well as post-bellum Southern pastorals such as Allen Tate’s *The Fathers* (1938). Rawlings’ treatment of Piety closely resembles what Elizabeth Jane Harrison (who omits Rawlings from her study) refers to as “female pastoral,” a genre in which landscape “is ‘re-visioned’ as an enabling force for the woman protagonist. Her interaction with land changes from passive association to active cultivation or identification.” It is actually Willy Jacklin whose role in the novel is primarily symbolic, representing the hubris of a patriarchal culture that envisions men as rulers of nature rather than part of it.

Willy’s “slow usefulness was ended” (55), Rawlings tells us, as soon as Piety’s son, Lant, is born. When Lant is ten years old, Willy is crushed by one of the falling trees that he was helping to remove as a drone-like employee of the lumber
company. Piety, who naturalizes her husband (like her mother) as “a good dog, that fetched and carried as she told him” (54), is hardly devastated by Willy’s death. Her father, however, imagined Willy as security for his daughter and is so distraught by “the fool [making] a pore widder-woman o’ Pytee before her time” (75) that he suffers another heart attack. Still clinging to the notion on his deathbed that Piety needs a man for security, he tells his daughter that young Lant will be able to make a living and care for her. But Piety provides her own security; her femininity is not symbolized by the hearth or by the fertile land that submits to the plow, but by the plow itself and by that side of nature that occasionally flattens those who abuse it. Lantry relies on the pastoral conception of woman-as-land in his belief that she requires a masculine force to guide and protect her, but Rawlings suggests in the course of the novel that the individual and nature can nurture one another free from a relationship of dominance.

In order to depict this type of symbiotic relationship, Rawlings relies on several stock conventions of the pastoral tradition. Her opposition of country and city follows some of the characteristic patterns described by Leo Marx in his classic study of American pastoral, *The Machine in the Garden*. Most obvious in *South Moon Under* is Rawlings’ assessment of industrialization as the primary threat, or “counterforce,” to use Marx’s term, to the ideal of the middle state. Rawlings’ Florida scrub setting exemplifies Marx’s contention that “what is important about the rural world [in pastoral writing] is not merely the agricultural economy but its alleged moral, aesthetic, and, in a sense, metaphysical superiority to the urban commercial forces that threaten it.” As we have already seen, Rawlings goes to great lengths in
South Moon Under to detach her rural setting from the rest of the “civilized” world. She equates this separation with a freedom from society’s inherent restrictions, the metaphorical fences of customs, laws, and communal norms. Lant becomes the focus of the second half of the novel, and he exhibits the type of kinship with nature traditionally denigrated as feminine.

In the American pastoral tradition, masculine individuality tends to be defined by resistance to feminine extremes of suffocating society and liberating wilderness and by the ability to remain in an independent middle state. This gendered conception is insufficient for both Rawlings and her female protagonist in its artificial, or “unnatural,” consignment of women to a permanently peripheral position. Fencing works two ways, for women are fenced out of the supposedly ideal middle state and fenced in to confined gender roles by virtue of their association with an idea of nature that is fundamentally opposed to a masculine culture. The relatively disordered and unstructured lifestyle of the scrub region represents freedom, for both female and male characters, from the seemingly arbitrary restrictions of society. Piety, especially, associates the world across the river with confinement to a socially permissible feminine sphere of activity. Even the fences around her homestead on the edge of a vast wilderness prove too limiting, hence her preference for the “men’s work” of farming and hunting. Of course, farming and hunting are no more fundamentally masculine than other types of labor, nor does Piety see them as such. In her eyes, these tasks are simply more enjoyable than the housework her mother performs and allow her to be with her father, whom she prefers. Rawlings, however, realizes that activities like trapping, hunting, plowing, and logging have been
traditionally coded as masculine, and she demonstrates that these and other gender-based divisions are very often illogical, impractical, and arbitrary notions that are passed off as infallible laws of nature.

The idea of fencing assumes added significance in the novel when “the Alabamy feller” moves into the area and fences in “two square mile o’ worthless scrub” (141). Leonard Lutwack, in his study *The Role of Place in Literature*, offers a useful and succinct formulation of the attitudes that fences produce:

> Enclosure automatically bestows special value on places and things . . . But there is a price to pay for their worth: because of their concentrated richness and exclusiveness, paradisal places require constant protection and create feelings of guilt and fear of loss instead of the free, expansive feelings inspired by the spaciousness and openness of cosmic places.

I find Lutwack’s summary helpful for understanding the particular order that fences impose on undefined terrain, but I think the arbitrariness of the “special value” he mentions must be emphasized in order to comprehend why Rawlings’ fences seem so out of place, so “unnatural,” in the landscapes of *South Moon Under*. The land that was “worthless” as unfenced scrub is now meaningful and valuable to Lant and the group of men from his extended family who confront the Alabaman, ordering him to dismantle the fence. They explain the community customs of allowing stock to roam across all land and fencing in only yards and crops. The fences that help to create the order of the pastoral ideal here lead to the disruption of a less visible order of collective arrangements, dividing the communal space by making shared land private property. The action is taken by the local men as a serious threat to the community, and they work together to drive the interloper out of town.
When “a distant legislature” decrees that all cattle must be kept “under fence,” state law is pitted against the customary law that the locals view as a natural order. Increased automobile traffic has led to an “urban outcry . . . complaining of the savagery of cattle loose on the highways” (255), and the legislature assumes the responsibility of stewardship, seeking to impose order through more man-made restrictions. In other words, this incident is an example of how the nature/culture split is created and reinforced by the culture side of that dualistic structure. The result of this polarization is that Lant and the other residents of the scrub are forced to choose between what are now mutually exclusive alternatives: either they must break the law and continue their free-range customs or they must obey the government’s restrictions and thereby allow the society they have deliberately avoided to encroach further into the unregulated wilderness.

New laws and new fences bring a new type of people into the scrub country. Rawlings introduces the Streeters, a family of recent emigrants from Arkansas, who exploit the new law by rounding up cattle, driving them within their fences, and claiming the impound fees mandated by the legislature. Spurred by the potential for purely personal profit, the Streeters’ actions illustrate how the new regulations are antithetical to the well-being and survival of this heretofore isolated and self-sufficient community. The tradition of cooperation through sharing land for collective benefit is replaced, practically overnight, by an atmosphere of jealousy and possessiveness caused by fences. What seems particularly unnatural to Lant and his kinfolk is the arbitrary and illogical creation of monetary value: cattle that are practically worthless on one side of a fence are suddenly worth much more on the
other side because of the new impound fees offered by the state.\textsuperscript{28} Piety is similarly defined earlier in the novel as appropriately feminine when inside the fences of the homestead, but not when she is outside these boundaries, farming or hunting.

Abner Lantry explains that the residents adhere to their own code of behavior that supercedes that imposed by the state: “The law’s the law, and the law’s always changin’, but they’s things beyond the law is right and wrong, accordin’ to how many folks they [the Streeters] he’ps or harms” (257). In short, Rawlings shows that the binary opposition of culture and nature upon which the pastoral ideal depends--in this case, pitting the customary law mentioned by Abner against the state’s laws--precludes the possibility of a truly balanced middle state.\textsuperscript{29} The same situation occurs later in the novel, this time with moonshine instead of cattle at the heart of the dispute. The state begins offering cash rewards for information about illegal moonshine stills, like the one Lant helps his Uncle Zeke run in the protective wilderness along the river. Cleve Jacklin is Lant’s shiftless cousin who occasionally helps out at the still and whose wife, Kezzy, is very obviously constructed by Rawlings as Lant’s soul mate. It is hardly surprising when Cleve betrays his relatives by reporting their illegal corn liquor operation to the government revenuers in order to claim a promised reward. His actions leave Kezzy with a choice between the official law of the state and the communal standards of the scrub.

Neither option is a good one because the rigid nature/culture dualism forces her to either betray her husband by disclosing his actions to Lant or to betray her moral sensibilities through silent complicity with Cleve’s back-stabbing of his kin folk. Forced to choose between mutually exclusive opposites, Kezzy selects nature
over culture, Lant over Cleve, justifying her action, as Abner did, by asserting her allegiance to a higher code than human customs: “Hit ain’t natural for a woman to go agin her husband, whatever he do. But ‘tain’t natural for Cleve to do what he’s a-doing’” (308). The dominant, external culture’s idea of the natural is allegiance to the civil bonds of marriage, while the minority culture of the scrub considers fidelity to blood relatives and opposition to government intrusion to be the natural course of action. What Rawlings shows in such episodes is that the binary opposition of nature and culture inherent in the pastoral desire for a middle landscape creates an either/or dilemma with no possibility of a truly harmonious balance. Perhaps unintentionally, she also reveals that both of these competing versions of the natural are cultural constructions, but the minority culture is portrayed as the more legitimate by virtue of its immersion in the more natural setting of the wilderness. Rawlings reproduces this situation in a different context when “the almost virgin wilderness” of the scrub is subjected to the symbolic enclosure of government “protection.”

When the government takes over the majority of the scrub and designates it a game refuge where hunting and trapping are forbidden, the symbolic fencing creates the same fear of loss that is symptomatic of literal enclosure: “the law had come into the scrub and lay over it like a dark cloud. . . . it had seemed at first, with one section shut off by invisible lines, as though there were no other section worth hunting” (233). The designation of the land as a National Forest appears particularly arbitrary and capricious to the residents who regularly hunt on those lands for subsistence and trap on them for furs. That such activities are now crimes seems to Lant and many of the other locals a foreign imposition of regulations that are in no way responsive to
nature’s rhythms: “The varmints came obligingly to the swamps to be trapped as before. The deer still came to the river to drink” (234). The government’s creation of a refuge where animals can breed redefines the scrub as wilderness, a purely human construction that William Cronon has recently critiqued as “the fantasy of people who have never themselves had to work the land to make a living.”

Cronon’s argument is that the category of wilderness is an anthropocentric creation meant to represent the antithesis of an unnatural civilized realm, but that the designation of land as wilderness actually reinforces the primacy of culture and fosters an alienated relationship with nature:

the romantic ideology of wilderness leaves precisely nowhere for human beings actually to make their living from the land. This, then, is the central paradox: wilderness embodies a dualistic vision in which the human is entirely outside the natural. . . . [W]e reproduce the dualism that sets humanity and nature at opposite poles. We thereby leave ourselves little hope of discovering what an ethical, sustainable, honorable human place in nature might actually look like.

To put Cronon’s statement in the terms I have been using, the ideology of wilderness precludes the possibility of an ideal middle state between culture and nature. To Lantry and his family the scrub is not wilderness; it is home, and they ignore the illogical government boundary, continuing to hunt and trap while being more wary of game wardens and government agents. Although one goal of designating the scrub a refuge is to “keep away the devastating fires” (244), a huge off-season fire rages a few years after the government’s appropriation of the land, fed by unmaintained fire lines intended to halt its path. As for the other goal of creating a refuge for animal breeding, Lant’s assessment is, “They was more game in the scrub when they wa’n’t no laws, than they is now, with ’em” (213). Thus, the enclosure ostensibly meant to
protect the “wilderness” of the scrub kills more of nature than it preserves. Rawlings shows that only by moving beyond simplistic dualisms like nature/culture and masculine/feminine is it possible to realize Cronon’s hope of discovering “what an ethical, sustainable, *honorable* human place in nature might actually look like.”

When the residents of the scrub and surrounding areas are employed to help battle the fire, they adhere to divisions of labor based on a tacit acceptance of communal gender roles: “The men loaded axes and hoes and shovels. The women would go along and drive the wagon back again” (236). The propriety of this arrangement is not questioned by the text, but its status as a natural division is. Kezzy, for one, views her role as changeable rather than essentially determined and immediately joins the men beating back the flames on the front line saying, “Well, I cain’t see a mess like this un and not git into it” (238). On the other hand, the traitorous Cleve (frequently compared by Lant to a woman) sleeps under a bush for most of the ordeal. Rawlings demonstrates in these scenes that loosely-defined, communally-created boundaries work well, while rigidly-enforced, externally-imposed ones create more problems than they solve. The division of labor between men and women is effective because Kezzy can transgress the boundaries when necessary. The unyielding boundaries and regulations of the government, on the other hand, lead to an unintended depletion of game and the worst fire that the locals can remember.

As the plot works toward the inevitable coupling of Lant and Kezzy, Rawlings utilizes the character of Ardis Mersey as a foil for the unsophisticated and rugged Kezzy. Significantly, Ardis is the cousin of the game warden, and her introduction
into the novel is followed immediately by the revelation that the government has created a National Forest in the scrub. Having only recently moved to the small town across the river from the scrub, Ardis is a product of a more urban society and her “pretty and soft-like” (268) femininity is equated with enclosure and the fencing of the scrub.

When Lant later discovers her fraternizing with his enemies--the Streeters, the sheriff, and the game warden--Ardis becomes to him as unnatural and unpalatable as the fencing and game laws of the society she represents: “she was something he had bolted whole in his hunger and had spewed up” (282). The choice between Ardis and Kezzy is simplified into a choice between the artificial and imposed regulations of civilization and the natural freedom of the scrub. Lant at first believes he can combine the best of both worlds, but he realizes that in the world across the river, the realm of culture, there is no middle ground. Marrying Ardis would mean fully accepting the limits represented by game wardens, sheriffs, cattle rustlers, legislators, and all the rest of society’s regulations. Lant runs as fast as he can “toward the river” (283).

The remote region of the scrub is situated on a peninsula, separated from the small town of Eureka by the St. John’s River, which functions as a symbolic boundary between nature and culture. Unlike the fences, however, the river is not designed as a marker or protective barrier (although it may be conceived as such by humans). The river is alive and part of nature, and even as a symbolic fence, it is a boundary that one can live on--not a space that mediates the binaries of nature and culture, but one where that distinction may lose all meaning. Lant’s extended river
trip illustrates his ability to live harmoniously, honorably even, within nature without
fetishizing wilderness as a morally pure corrective to an immoral civilization.

Lant, unlike his father Willy, wants no part of the logging work that
exemplifies the stereotypical notion of masculine identity as “powerful, aggressive,
and separate over and above nature.” His brief foray into logging, therefore,
Involves methods quite different from those of the lumber companies that are
described by Rawlings in the “language of domination” that so often defines the
relationship of masculine ideology to nature and anticipates Leo Marx’s machine-in-
the-garden metaphor:

The noise of the timber outfit hummed in Lant’s ears. He heard the shouts of
men above distant axes and cross-cut saws. The drum on the pull boat
chattered, the gears ground and creaked. A steam whistle blew, the engine
puffed and chugged. The great cypress began to fall. Three hundred feet away
he saw a trembling in the dark canopy that was the tree-tops over the swamp.
There came a ripping, as woody cells, inseparable for a century, were torn
violently from one another. The tree crashed, flattening everything in its path,
and the roar of the fall went like a roll of thunder through the swamp and
hammock and scrub. The boy thought there was a hush after the last echo, as
though the men waited before they began to trim and saw, watching the tree
like a great prone animal that might not be entirely dead. (62-3)

To Lant, the loggers seem like puny and insignificant creatures compared to the trees
he calls the “giants of the swamp.” His relationship with his environment is based on
an ecological model of interdependence; that is, he conceives of himself as part of the
network or field of relations of nature, not separate from them. Lant consequently
chooses to raise the immense cypress logs discarded at the bottom of the river by the
lumber companies. Just as he has seen the plants and animals of the scrub utilize
decaying trees and rotting carcasses, Lant converts the waste products of the loggers
into a marketable commodity. Rawlings uses Lant’s approach as an example of a
male relationship with nature that is mutually beneficial rather than exploitative, characterizing his work as part of an organic cycle instead of a mechanical assault on the land.

She also reintroduces the symbols of the hearth and the kitchen, traditionally coded as feminine but rejected by Piety earlier in the novel, and this time associates them with Lant’s primary source of income, his illegal corn liquor still. In several passages, Rawlings describes how the still blends man-made, store-bought components with the wilderness that surrounds and protects it. The flame that heats the copper kettles is protected by a roof of thatched palm fronds, creating a small kitchen in the midst of the natural beauty of the scrub. The split-rail fences that signify the confinement of the kitchen and the homestead to Piety are replaced by the natural barriers of the creek and thicket, which emphasize continuity with the landscape rather than division from it. His work at the still allows Lant to feel enmeshed in the natural environment: “he liked the blue flame of the burning ash in the black of night, and the orange glow in the sweet-gum leaves. Here he liked the intimacy with the hammock. Its life washed over him and he became a part of it. . . . he and the scrub were one” (224).

While Rawlings herself was an accomplished cook and gourmet--she even wrote a cookbook based on the cuisine of north central Florida, Cross Creek Cookery (1942)--practically the only cooking scenes in this novel describe Lant’s recipes and meticulous preparation of moonshine. In the scenes of Lant at his still, Rawlings effectively questions conventional assumptions about gender identity. Does Lant’s love of cooking somehow feminize him? Is his desire to commune with nature a
masculine trait when hunting yet feminine when cooking? Are his acts of cooking more masculine because of where his kitchen is and what he makes? Is corn liquor more masculine than corn bread?

By raising such questions, Rawlings shows how certain limited conceptions of gender are purely human constructions and not the immutable dictates of nature itself. Her metaphorical understanding of nature as a fluid, interwoven web of life not easily divisible into self-contained entities is a model for a society liberated from binary oppositions that only reinforce the superiority of those who already occupy the privileged pole. If the fence is a symbol of these artificial divisions, Rawlings’ counterpoint is the river, with its constant motion and its ability to divide and unite simultaneously.

As Lant travels on this fluid, living boundary, history and culture seem to disappear and his subjective identity disintegrates into the oneness of the river:

The river flowed interminably but as though without advance. The boy thought that he had been always in this still, liquid place. There was no change. There was no memory and no imagining. The young male restlessness that had begun to stir along his bones was quiet. If Piety and Cleve and Kezzy were really persons, instead of names, they lay drowned behind him. Nothing existed but the brown, clear water, flowing in one spot forever. (164)

The very concept of opposites is swallowed up in water that is both brown and clear, always flowing but never advancing. Lant’s “young male restlessness” is also subdued on the river where the duality of gender is washed away. The distinction between male and female in a general sense, and between masculine culture and feminine nature particularly, lose their meaning outside of anthropocentric structures that “lay drowned behind him.” Even the fundamental split between humanity and nature is fused (at least temporarily) in a denial of nature’s essential otherness: “The
river flowed, a dream between dreams, and they were all one, the boy and the river and the banks” (165).

In the remote setting of the Florida scrub, Rawlings is able to free her chief female characters from traditional associations with the Southern garden. In this context of wild nature, the fences which are typically the mark of domesticated nature seem particularly unhealthy and, by association, the confines imposed on women by a patriarchal society are revealed as unnatural, artificial constructs that can potentially be resisted. Rather than denying the association between women and nature, Rawlings questions fundamental definitions of masculinity and femininity in her depictions of nature and humans’ interactions with it. Lant’s experiences on the river interrogate the issues from another angle, presenting a male relationship with nature not bound by traditional notions of masculinity or an ideology of dominance. In those scenes, the possibility is offered that nature can represent and embody a measure of freedom from restrictive, dualistic conceptions of reality.

In the novel’s final chapter, Lant and Kezzy are finally coupled and Rawlings voices their view of the scrub as free from boundaries and restrictions: “‘Man, the scrub’s a fine place to be,’ she said. ‘If things ever gits too thick, you and me jest grab us each a young un and a handful o’ shells and the guns and light out acrost it. I’d dare ary man to mess up with me, yonder in the scrub’” (333). The deepest interior of the scrub has never been populated, and much of it has never even been seen by human eyes. Ultimately, then, Lant’s remote dwelling on the borders of this true wilderness retains something of a pastoral identity as a location between the extremes of culture and nature. However, Rawlings moves this site, both spatially and
conceptually, away from a middle state to the very fringes of total wilderness. Its
distance and independence from society allow it to remain a place outside of
restrictive anthropocentric dualisms. While the threat to the traditional pastoral ideal
may come from either nature or culture, all the dangers in *South Moon Under* come
from civilization. The scrub itself is neither hostile nor hospitable; it simply exists
independent of human consciousness and impervious to humankind: “It was there, the
scrub, immense, aloof and proud, standing on its own ground, making its own
conditions, like no other . . . within, it was inviolable” (125). Through the rejection of
the idea that nature has meaning only through its relation to culture, Rawlings offers a
critique of the traditional pastoral ideal of balance, even if she only tips the scales a
bit more towards wilderness.

Although the characters of *South Moon Under* may not define their home by
its relationship to the larger, external society, in the autobiographical *Cross Creek*,
Rawlings often openly seeks to convey the advantages of her isolated community.
She explains in the book’s opening that the lack of a human population in “the Creek”
creates a more harmonious community than those of crowded towns and cities:

> We know one another. Our knowledge is a strange kind, totally without
> intimacy, for we go our separate ways and meet only when new fences are
> strung, or some one’s stock intrudes on another, or when one of us is ill or in
> trouble . . . or when the weather is so preposterous . . . that we seek out
> excuses to be together, to talk together about the common menace . . . And
> when the great enemies of Old Starvation and Old Death come skulking down
> on us, we put up a united front and fight them side by side. (4-5)

Even the simple gesture of using “we” unselfconsciously to speak for the Creek
residents is a sign of how much Rawlings felt accepted as a part of this community
after living there for barely a decade. She suggests that their immersion in nature
engenders the cooperative spirit possessed by her and her neighbors. Feeling an intimate, personal connection with the lives of the plants and animals with which they coexist daily seems to foster a kinship among the human inhabitants that is somehow lost in the primarily, or exclusively, human realm: “I am often lonely. Who is not? But I should be lonelier in the heart of a city” (5). Loneliness is impossible, Rawlings says, when one conceives of nature not as an always foreign “other,” but as a network of relations of which the self is an integral part, as she illustrates in a ruminative passage that closes the introductory section of *Cross Creek*:

Folk call the road lonely, because there is not human traffic and human stirring. Because I have walked it so many times and seen such a tumult of life there, it seems to me one of the most populous highways of my acquaintance. I have walked it in ecstasy, and in joy it is beloved. Every pine tree, every gallberry bush, every passion vine, every joree rustling in the underbrush, is vibrant. I have walked it in trouble, and the wind in the trees beside me is easing. I have walked it in despair, and the red of the sunset is my own blood dissolving into the night’s darkness. For all such things were on earth before us, and will survive after us, and it is given to us to join ourselves with them and to be comforted. (6)

Rawlings apparently feels that the majority of the “civilized” human population have lost this connection with nature and are suffering from the pervasive modernist affliction of alienation. Her recipe for reintegration with “the cosmic life” entails lowering the barriers between self and other until one knows “that Life is vital, and one’s own minute living a torn fragment of the larger cloth” (39).

An interesting and important consequence of such an interdependent conception of the world is an implicit critique of the commodification of nature and of the market economy in general. Radical geographer David Harvey astutely summarizes the connection in *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*: 
pursuit of monetary valuations commits us to a thoroughly Cartesian-Newtonian-Lockeian and in some respects ‘anti-ecological’ ontology of how the natural world is constituted. If we construe the world, in the manner of deep ecology, as networks or fields of relations in which things participate and from which they cannot be isolated, then the money valuation of things in themselves becomes impossible.

Seen in this light, Rawlings’ exclusion of virtually any reference in her fiction to life outside the Florida scrub and its surrounding hamlets is perhaps not only the avoidance of the discord of modern society, as she herself claims. Her deliberate isolation is also a tool for portraying a self-sufficient world that is more or less impervious to the rise of capitalism and industrialism and their itinerant boom and bust cycles that dominated the lives of millions of Americans in the 1920s, 30s, and 40s. While the reality is that Cross Creek was not as untouched by the outside world as we might surmise from her writing, Rawlings consciously chooses to portray it as such by depicting traditional and timeless activities--like hunting, fishing, cooking, and farming--to the exclusion of practically all else.

One of Rawlings’ tactics for distancing the world of the Creek from the rest of the nation is to illustrate its residents’ independence from a money economy. Carolyn Merchant convincingly argues that the prevailing mechanistic model of nature denies any inherent vitality in the cosmos and has associated with it “a framework of values based on power, fully compatible with the directions taken by commercial capitalism.” That is, passive nature has no value in and of itself in the view of nature that has come to dominate Western scientific thought; therefore, the commercial use of nature is not just amoral utilitarianism, but actually bestows use value on previously worthless objects. Rawlings’ organic and animistic conception of nature, then, is also a rejection of what Harvey calls an “anti-ecological ontology” or what
Merchant describes as a framework of power. The economic simplicity of the Creek society suggests an egalitarian system free of the class divisions inherent in the complicated economy of the outside world. Put another way, the increased complexity of natural ecosystems is in inverse proportion to the simplified social systems in the wilderness.

This relatively simple economy is, for Rawlings, another sign of the place’s moral superiority to the urban world. In a chapter of *Cross Creek* titled “Residue,” Rawlings explains that no one locks their doors at the Creek, nor do they deny others access to their tools and possessions. She tells of gasoline disappearing from her truck and tools being taken from her barn, explaining that “this is only because some man needs a shovel and a shovel is available” (123). Although she is often repaid with a gift of frog’s legs or an offer of free labor, Rawlings pointedly describes this borrow and trade system as eminently natural: “This seems no more predatory than the taking of fallen timber from the open woods, the drinking of water from a stranger’s well” (123). Again, this supposed naturalness of life at the Creek is taken by Rawlings as a sign of the metaphysical superiority of rural life, a common convention of the pastoral tradition.

In case her readers may miss her point that the lack of material wealth in this remote community is more than compensated for with less tangible riches, Rawlings offers her own interpretation of the Biblical proverb that it is as easy for a rich man to enter Heaven as for a camel to pass through a needle’s eye: “The poor, the unfortunate . . . stand nakedly for what they are. A poor and simple man stands with bare outstretched hands at the gates of Heaven, and his essential character is written
in broad letters across him, for life has stripped him down to it” (122-3). The poor are not virtuous despite their lack of money, Rawlings suggests, but actually because of it. This example of how the natural becomes the arbiter of social systems undoubtedly would have appealed to Depression-era audiences, and it provides further moral justification for Rawlings’ flight from the world to the sanctuary of the Creek.

Rawlings’ more common method of illustrating an anti-Cartesian, anti-hierarchical conception of nature in Cross Creek is through anecdotal examples, spread throughout the book, of nature’s interdependence and fluidity. Taken together these images form something of a tapestry, a general impression pieced together throughout the narrative of the continuous, but continually changing, connections among all individual beings and their environment. Introducing a rather lengthy discussion of ants and her nagging desire “to exterminate the last one” of these pests, Rawlings pauses to consider the philosophical implications of her own longing for ant genocide and of the ants’ unyielding pursuit of every available scrap of food: “In a still predatory world, good and evil are not fixed values, but are relative. ‘Good’ is what helps us or at least does not hinder. ‘Evil’ is whatever harms us, or interferes with us, according to our own selfish standards” (151). Rawlings’ wish to exterminate the ants that interfere with her is not “evil” nor “anti-ecological,” to use Harvey’s term, because the complex fields of relations that constitute the natural world render such absolute values and rigid dichotomies artificial, insofar as they are human constructions not reflective of how nature “actually” works.

Rawlings extends her examples from the insect world when, a few paragraphs later, she explains the danger of assuming mastery over nature in the pursuit of self-
interest. The “old-timers,” she says, have learned from extensive experience not to spray the orange groves in order to kill “unfriendly parasites” because the “friendly” ones (those that kill the unfriendly ones) are often wiped out as well. Acting purely out of short-term self-interest, it seems, is as likely to be harmful as helpful to one’s own interests as well as to those of others. This same principle is evident in the custom Rawlings describes of taking only half of the turtle eggs from the nests that the locals raid for these regional delicacies. When Rawlings’ aunt comes for a visit, they go quail hunting and Aunt Wilmer is appalled at the killing of the “darling” birds. Rawlings explains that sensible hunting—using what one kills as opposed to wanton slaughtering—can actually benefit the quail population: “‘It’s really not so frightful to shoot them,’ I told her, ‘for if a covey isn’t shot into and broken up, it stays together and the quail don’t mate that year’” (320). By recognizing the complex interrelationships in nature, Rawlings argues that a system of relative values is fundamentally more natural than the stringent hierarchies and reductive dualisms she associates with the culture of the outside world.

In the final chapter of Cross Creek, Rawlings summarizes her contention that simple binary oppositions fail to account for the dynamism and fluidity she witnesses in nature: “All life is a balance, when it is not a battle, between the forces of creation and the forces of destruction, between love and hate, between life and death. Perhaps it is impossible ever to say where one ends and the other begins, for even creation and destruction are relative” (364). There are even instances in the book where Rawlings asserts the relativity of the boundaries of self-hood. When the connections she feels to the vitality in nature around her are particularly strong, it becomes difficult to say
where she ends and the world begins. Rather than feeling frightened at the prospect of the negation of her individual identity, Rawlings feels comforted by the almost tangible connection she experiences with an eternal and timeless world. It is useful to quote a rather lengthy passage, prompted by Rawlings’ encounter with a wild pig and her new-born litter, that exemplifies these sentiments:

The jungle hammock breathed. Life went through the moss-hung forest, the swamp, the cypresses, through the wild sow and her young, through me, in its continuous chain. We were all one with the silent pulsing. This was the thing that was important, the cycle of life, with birth and death merging one into the other in an imperceptible twilight and an insubstantial dawn. The universe breathed, and the world inside it breathed the same breath. This was the cosmic life, with suns and moons to make it lovely. It was important only to keep close enough to the pulse to feel its rhythm, to be comforted by its steadiness, to know that Life is vital, and one’s own minute living a torn fragment of the larger cloth. (39)

Rawlings’ sublime moment does not result from the traditional awe-inspiring mountain or castle of Burkeian aesthetics, but from the sight of helpless, infant pigs discovering their mother’s teats for the first time. This rather domestic, even mundane, image is the catalyst for a more general, transcendent knowledge about the oneness of the world. For Rawlings, the temporary loss of her subjective self in the cosmic unity of her natural environment allows a stronger ‘I’ to emerge with a clearer understanding of the permeable boundary between life and death, imperceptible twilight and insubstantial dawn, self and other.

Towards the end of Cross Creek, in the well-known chapter “Hyacinth Drift,” Rawlings again demonstrates the necessity of loss. The chapter begins with Rawlings confessing, “Once I lost touch with the Creek. . . . I loved the Creek, I loved the grove, I loved the shabby farmhouse. Suddenly they were nothing” (342). Immersed in depression, Rawlings agrees to go with her friend Dessie on a several hundred mile
river trip in her small boat. At one point, the pair becomes lost in a labyrinth of false channels, the water obscured by countless floating hyacinths. Unable to navigate with the map and compass, they rest for the night and in the morning simultaneously realize that, by turning off the motor, they can follow the drift of the hyacinths along the channel they had lost. Rawlings comments that, when they floated away on the current, “we gave ourselves over to it . . . The strangeness of flowing water was gone, for it was all there was of living” (347). Reflecting on her complete immersion in nature, where the difficulties of life that spurred the trip have completely disappeared, Rawlings’ narrative ‘I’ is able to recognize transcendent truth: “Like all simple facts, it was necessary to discover it for oneself” (347).

Returning home at the end of her journey, Rawlings rediscovers the affinity with the “place” of Cross Creek that she felt was lost. The chapter’s opening sentiments that “the Creek was torture” and “life was a nightmare” (343) are transfigured in the closing paragraph to “[t]he Creek was home” and “the only nightmare is the masochistic human mind” (358). The encounter with the sow and her young allows Rawlings to merge her identity with the life around her so that she might find a stronger self. Similarly in “Hyacinth Drift,” Rawlings loses her deep attachment to the Creek and her conception of that place as “home” only to rediscover those feelings with more intensity upon her return: “when the dry ground was under us, the world no longer fluid, I found a forgotten loveliness in all the things that have nothing to do with men. . . . Oleanders were sweet past bearing, and my own shabby fields, weed-tangled, were newly dear” (358).
The rivers in *South Moon Under* and in *Cross Creek* are places where the problems, contradictions, and restrictions of the human world melt away. The fluidity and freedom of the river are part of all the natural world, and Rawlings associates those qualities with an alternative vision of society where an individual’s status is relative and fluid, rather than absolute and fixed, and where values of cooperation, nurturing, and sharing supplement the principles of domination, independence, and progress, traditionally coded as masculine. Life at the Creek exhibits these values because of its isolation from mainstream society and its proximity to unspoiled nature. The episodic structure of *Cross Creek* presents numerous instances of the residents uniting temporarily for a common cause: protecting orange groves from frost, caring for sick neighbors, building fences, hunting wolves or bears preying on livestock, and even enforcing their own brand of justice on one of their own who has done wrong. What emerges is a portrait of an organic community, aligned with nature and loosely-knit enough to incorporate aspects of the larger, external society without losing its core of individualism. The lack of stratification and behavioral restraints (mind your own business is the rule of thumb) are presented by Rawlings as signs of the community’s egalitarianism and “naturalness.” African-Americans, however, are noticeably consigned to the periphery of this portrait of bucolic splendor.

Just as she questions the naturalness of gender roles in *South Moon Under*, Rawlings contends in *Cross Creek* that any racial differences should be attributed to economic and social factors rather than to essentialist assumptions about the “natural” inferiority of African-Americans. However, her racial views fluctuate (within the book as well as over time), and there is never a sustained critique of societal racial
norms approximating her challenges to ingrained gender roles. Although the local community in which she lives and the similar ones portrayed in her fiction have conceptions of nature and gender different from those of the dominant culture, they have not worked out or accepted an alternative to regional and national understandings of racial difference. Proximity to wilderness facilitates unconventional attitudes about property, nature, and gender roles because of the peculiar hardships of life in a frontier setting (e.g., crossings of gender boundaries are accepted during the forest fire). While the logic may be the same in terms of crossing racial boundaries, the societies of Cross Creek and the scrub have had no real impetus to develop an alternative model. Thus, Rawlings may have her own ideas about racial difference, but they are not accepted as “natural” in her local society where the concept of the “natural” is the arbiter between competing social systems.

*South Moon Under, The Yearling,* and the majority of Rawlings’ short stories contain no significant African-American characters, but she does discuss her hired domestic help, all African-Americans, in the somewhat ominously titled chapter “Black Shadows” of *Cross Creek*. Rawlings uses most of the pages to vent her anger and frustration about the parade of unreliable workers and their lecherous and drunken spouses or boyfriends, but she does not assume the behavior indicates general racial traits: “The long line of Negroes has come and gone like a string of exploding firecrackers . . . Most have gone in insanity, mad love affairs, delirious drunkenness and shootings. Their shadows lie long and black against the pattern of the Creek” (182). Although Rawlings at times exhibits conventional racial prejudices
(as do many other modernists), she also shows the ability to be understanding and sympathetic, and her attitudes change over the years.

Rawlings uses the term “nigger” in several letters written in the 1930s, but the term gradually disappears from even her most private letters. In a 1942 letter, she describes her meeting with Zora Neale Hurston at the hotel owned by Rawlings’ second husband, Norton Baskin, and praises her fellow Floridian’s “ingratiating personality,” “brilliant mind,” and “fundamental wisdom that shames most whites” (223). This letter is written, oddly enough, using the persona of Rawlings’ dog, Moe, who is writing to Patrie, the dog of her friend Norman Berg. Perhaps seeking some ironic distance from which to criticize her own ambivalent racial attitudes, Rawlings has Moe chastise her lack of conviction, apparently referring to Hurston using the back stairs, rather than the front elevator, of the segregated hotel in St. Augustine:

The Missus has had quite a jolt and feels rather small. By all her principles, she should accept this woman as a human being and a friend—certainly an attractive member of society acceptable anywhere—and she is a coward. If she were on her own, she would do it. She feels that she cannot hurt her husband in a business way. But her pioneer blood is itching.

While such sentiments may sound well-intentioned, even progressive for the time, John Lowe has also pointed out that when Hurston spent the night in Cross Creek, she had to sleep in the maid’s cabin.

Rawlings is clearly more comfortable assailing racism from a distance than through her own actions. In a 1943 letter responding to a Jacksonville newspaper columnist’s support of segregation, Rawlings argues that justice and opportunity for African-Americans are impossible “as long as the artificial barrier of ‘segregation’ is maintained.” She also, in that same letter, refutes the stereotypical white fear that
integration will lead to “Negroes” taking over. Linking the situations of women and African-Americans, she notes that the same argument was made when women were fighting for the right to vote and that “since women were given ‘equality,’ they have not even done their proper share toward solving national and world problems, to say nothing of ‘taking over.’” She ends the letter by claiming that she has gradually overcome her personal prejudices through “long soul-searching” and, consequently, “It was not the Negro who became free, but I. The validity of Rawlings’ claim of complete liberation from prejudice is perhaps suspect, but her public declaration of such notions in the South of the 1940s shows at least some willingness to challenge the dominant attitudes of the region and the era.

The “so-called civilization” that African-Americans currently live in, she writes in *Cross Creek*, is as unjust as the system of slavery it has replaced: “In the South his wages are a scandal and there is no hope of racial development until racial economics are adjusted” (180-1). Overall, Rawlings appears genuinely puzzled by questions of race and unable to arrive at a definitive conclusion on the subject. She claims not “to understand the Negro,” then asserts that the stereotypical depictions by whites of “Negroes” as “childish, carefree, religious, untruthful and unreliable” seem to her “reasonably accurate.” However, these are only “superficial truths,” she also writes, employed as necessary “defense mechanism[s]” in an unjust system that further obscure “the mystery of the primitive African nature” (181).

Continuing this vacillating line of thought, Rawlings claims that the “mental and emotional turmoil” of African-Americans is “past the comprehension” of white Southerners, but almost immediately she concludes that “only in rare instances can a
Negro work for long on his own initiative,” although this, too, she attributes to economic and social oppression. While her views on race may appear wildly inconsistent, they are perhaps consistent with her mistrust of mutually exclusive binary structures. That is, she seems unwilling to commit either to an essentialist, biological view or to an exclusively socio-economic explanation of racial difference. This is precisely the type of complicated issue that Rawlings refers to in her term “the confusion of our generation” and that she claims to want to avoid in her writing. Accordingly, the first sentence of “Black Shadows” is a disclaimer to the reader: “I am not of the race of southerners who claim to understand the Negro” (180). She prefers to write about simpler conflicts and “fundamental problems,” like those of a young boy coming of age and his beloved pet deer in her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Yearling*.

Rawlings always maintained that *The Yearling* was not only a book for boys, but, first and foremost, a novel that happened to have a young boy as the main character. Despite her protests, the book has become nearly exclusively identified with juvenile or adolescent fiction. Its coming-of-age theme, sometimes obvious symbolism, and occasionally hackneyed writing (e.g., “The words were as strengthening as the sweet potato. ‘I’m all right now, Pa.”45), however, rank the novel a notch below two other notable examples of works that have been co-opted into the category of adolescent fiction, *Gulliver’s Travels* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. This is not to suggest that *The Yearling* is “merely” a children’s book, for it is certainly much more than that, both in Rawlings’ intention and her execution. There is much to admire in Rawlings’ writing, including the pared-down,
elemental quality of the narrative that provides the story with much of its power and intensity.

Rawlings is able to capture the youthful viewpoint of Jody Baxter, who finds wonder in virtually everything new that he encounters, creating a compelling novel and a classic of adolescent or children’s literature. All of Jody’s activities and adventures gain additional significance and poignancy for adult readers who, like Rawlings, empathize with the desire for the “maternal solace of timelessness” represented by the pastoral garden of childhood that we see Jody preparing to leave forever. The wilderness and natural world of *The Yearling* are not, however, employed only as symbols of pastoral refuge from the complexities of the “outside world” of modern society and of adulthood. Rawlings instead shows that the desire for a static garden of the middle landscape, permanently insulated from exterior threats, is a childish wish that must be abandoned in maturity. Yet, to some extent, this novel represents an indulgence of that wish in its avoidance of the larger social issues of the time.

As in *South Moon Under*, the remote setting provides Rawlings with a place relatively unfettered by artificial, human-imposed restrictions in which to examine issues of gender. Although her first novel utilized a female character, Piety, almost as much as the central male figure, Lant, in its explorations of the social construction of gender, *The Yearling* includes only one female character of note, Jody’s mother, Ora Baxter, and relegates her to a minor role. This authorial choice is a major factor in the novel being pigeonholed as a boy’s rite of passage story and in Rawlings’ exclusion by most critics from the canon of Southern female writers. Rhonda Morris has
suggested that because her most acclaimed work does not tell a “woman’s story”
similar to that of other Southern women’s texts, Rawlings has often been overlooked
as a constituent of “a female tradition.” Morris points out that, in order to achieve
the type of critical success she was seeking, Rawlings may have had good reason to
eschew ostensibly feminine issues, especially since she was already battling the
derisive “regionalist” appellation. As Morris puts it, “regionalist writing by a woman
which explored women’s situations seemed destined for critical rejection.” As we
have seen already, Rawlings was trying to escape her “Songs of the Housewife” days,
so it is hardly surprising that she may have assumed that a vigorous, “masculine”
style would be more in tune with the critical atmosphere of her day.

Morris argues, and I concur, that despite a sometimes glaring lack of
representations of women in her work, Rawlings merits inclusion in a larger Southern
female tradition of writers because she “recognized that gender was not just a self-
construction but a social construction” and because she was concerned about the
limiting effects of gender roles, particularly on women. Although *The Yearling*
focuses on male characters, Jody and his father Penny, like Lant in *South Moon
Under*, reshape traditional notions of masculinity by transgressing conventional
societal boundaries of gender identity. By portraying their seemingly feminine
maleness as entirely natural—that is, in harmony with their inner selves (with human
nature) and with their environment—Rawlings again seeks to subvert the polarizing
structures which restrict conceptions of gender to mutually exclusive opposites. The
male Baxters share a bond with one another and with their natural environment, but
female characters are portrayed as disruptive of male companionship, again
undermining women’s supposed naturalness.

In the first chapter of *The Yearling*, Penny announces that Jody’s propensity
for “ramblin,” abandoning his work in order to play in a nearby glen, is a sure sign of
masculinity: “Most women-folks cain’t see for their lives, how a man loves so to
ramble” (10). Less obvious as a sign of adolescent male identity is Jody’s intense
longing for “something with dependence to it” (98). And Rawlings tells us that after
seeing the numerous semi-wild pets of his friend Fodder-wing Forrester, “Jody
longed for something of his own” (63). When Jody finally gets his wish, it is because
Penny has been bitten by a rattlesnake and killed a fawn’s mother in order to use her
liver to suck the poison from his body and save his life (a clear snake-in-the-garden
moment). Still unsure if his father will survive, Jody is driven by guilt to find the
fawn who has already lost his primary parent. This desire to nurture the deer has been
read as a maternal instinct, but it is also Jody’s attempt to imitate the behavior of his
caring father.50

Penny is clearly closer to his son than is his wife, Ora, and Jody feels a closer
kinship with his father than his mother: “She was outside the good male
understanding” (199). On the night of the rattlesnake attack, Jody does not even
remember the orphaned deer in the woods until he first imagines his father’s death:
“He could not help but feel a greater security here beside his father, than in the
stormy night. Many things, he realized, would be terrible alone that were not terrible
when he was with Penny” (159). Consequently remembering the fawn alone in the
woods, hovering near its mother’s carcass, Jody cries himself to sleep and has a
“tortuous dream” of battling a gigantic rattlesnake that is slithering over the bloated corpse of his father. When the snake and Penny suddenly vanish, Jody is standing “alone in a vast windy place, holding the fawn in his arms” (160). Faced with prospect of losing his father, Jody recognizes a counterpoint in the abandoned, grieving fawn.

Upon retrieving the fawn from the woods, Jody feels he can possess the deer and thus ensure its constant companionship: “It belonged to him. It was his own” (171). This belief that humans can own nature (because they are outside or above it) is one that Rawlings critiques throughout her writing, and in this context, she reveals the idea as a childish fantasy. The lesson is a harsh one for Jody, who learns that he cannot control the deer’s behavior any more than he can the weather.\(^\text{52}\) Jody’s friend Fodder-wing Forrester has made numerous pets of forest creatures, and his naming Jody’s deer Flag signifies a change of identity from wild animal to pet. When Flag’s destruction of crops threatens the Baxter family’s survival, the yearling must be killed. However, it is not the seemingly climactic act of killing his pet that symbolically ushers Jody into adulthood. Rather it is the entire experience of caring for and nurturing the animal until its death, as well as Jody’s reaction to the shooting, which signify that the boy is “moving into that mystic company” of men (201).

Rawlings is able to include values of caring and nurturing in her definition of Jody’s manhood without stigmatizing them as stereotypically feminine attributes because she incorporates those same qualities in the character of Penny, Jody’s model of masculinity. Penny Baxter has been described by one critic as “kind, sympathetic, strong [and] ecology-minded”\(^\text{53}\) and Rawlings shows him as a doting, caring father
and an expert woodsman. Penny tolerates his son’s frivolity during working time, delivers a heart-felt eulogy when Jody’s friend Fodder-wing dies, visits regularly an elderly friend, Grandma Hutto, who lives across the river, and refuses to use poison to kill a pack of marauding wolves because it “jest someway ain’t natural” (287) and might harm other innocent animals. Rawlings also demonstrates repeatedly that Penny is more than equal to the rough-and-tumble Forrester men when it comes to marksmanship, hunting, and trading, traditionally more masculine endeavors. Rawlings seems deliberate in her efforts to create in Penny a strong male character who is also a sensitive, loving parent. I hesitate to say that Rawlings feminizes Penny because I think what she is doing in *The Yearling*, as well as in *South Moon Under*, is insisting on the need for revising, if not abolishing, the limited (and limiting) conceptions of gender that have come to seem natural because they are so institutionalized.

Jody’s final adventure of the novel occurs on the river as he determines to flee his home after he kills Flag. He plans to flee to Boston to pursue a romanticized vision of life at sea with the friend he idolizes, Oliver Hutto. Unlike the river scenes in *South Moon Under* and *Cross Creek*, the water does not provide solace or liberation, but it is still a place where the certainty of fixed categories disintegrates. In the aftermath of Flag’s death, Jody sees only that his father has betrayed him, undermining the sense of safety and order Jody associates with home: “Without Penny, there was no comfort anywhere. The solid earth had dissolved under him” (415). As Jody paddles a small canoe towards the middle of Lake George in search of a passenger ship that will pick him up, the vast expanse of water symbolizes the
terrifying and solitary world of adulthood: “He was out in the world, and it seemed to him that he was alien here, and alone, and that he was being carried away into a void. . . . [T]he open water seemed to stretch without an end” (416-7). Jody’s panic increases as the waves intensify and his canoe starts taking on water, and he madly paddles back to the relative comfort of the shoreline.

Finally exhausted and weakened by hunger, Jody faints and is plucked from the lake by a passing government ship. They scoff at his plan to travel to Boston, and their patronizing dismissal of him as only a child conflicts with Jody’s notion that he has already entered the company of men. The captain tells him, “Well, if I was a scrawny little big-eyed booger like you, I’d stay home. Nobody but your folks’ll bother with a little ol’ shirt-tail boy like you. Swing him down to the dock, Joe” (420-1). And with that, Jody is lifted like a baby back onto solid ground. Chastened by his experiences, Jody heads for home, but he realizes that nothing will be the same again. Baxter’s Island is no longer an idyllic haven from the rest of the world, but a place where Jody must assume the responsibilities of his incapacitated father. Penny explains to his son that uncertainty and doubt--like that felt by Jody on the fluid currents of the river--are a permanent feature of life.

Most significant for Jody is his experience with real hunger, as he goes days with nothing to eat on his circular journey. His hunger connects his home to the world at large, disabusing him of his childhood conception that “Baxter’s Island was an island of plenty in a hungry sea” (142). He understands that Flag’s destruction of their food supply is a serious threat to their survival: “This was what his mother had meant when she had said, ‘We’ll all go hongry.’ He had laughed, for he had thought he had
known hunger, [but] . . . it had been only appetite. This was another thing” (418). Jody feels that the trial of his trip and his acceptance of his duty to return home confirms his entry into the adult world. But as his condescending treatment at the hands of the sailors shows, his status as child or adult also depends on external social constructions of those categories.

The close affinity he feels with Flag from the time of his dream about the helpless fawn introduces the reality of death to Jody’s idyllic world and exemplifies a literary tradition of associating children with animals. Noted critic of children’s literature Karin Lesnik-Oberstein, who traces the modern invention of this idea of the child as truly natural to John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, explains that the concepts of “child” and “nature” are related “through their joint construction as the essential, the unconstructed, spontaneous and uncontaminated.” The linking of children and animals in children’s and other literature reinforces the assumption that both the “child” and the “natural” are outside of language, history, and culture. Although Lesnik-Oberstein notes that children’s books participate in “a fundamental and crucial resistance” to the idea that the “child” and the “natural” are “constructed, variable and changeable discourses,” The Yearling explores the possibility that these categories are not necessarily any less socially constructed than gender roles. Setting up Jody and the deer as counterparts (a pair of yearlings), Rawlings demonstrates the mutability of Jody’s identity as a child and the fawn’s as a wild animal.

Jody’s transition to manhood is not effected by a single rite, but by his assumption of adult roles that require responsibility. As Penny recovers from the snake bite, Buck Forrester does most of the labor around the Baxter house. Jody
assists with some of the “man’s work” that must be done, but he also has time to revert to playing games with Flag. Thus, the circumstances of his society--basically, a one-family society in the remote wilderness--compel a repeated switching of roles from carefree child to adult laborer. Penny knows that childhood is not necessarily a natural state since “he himself had had no boyhood” (16). His strict father and poor family had necessitated that he work on his parents’ farm as soon as he could walk. Economic conditions precluded a “natural” childhood, and he therefore works to himself to the point of exhaustion to create a “proper” childhood for Jody. When Penny is incapacitated by rheumatism and an apparent hernia from the strain of his constant labor, Jody is forced to assume a more adult role. The boundary between child and adult is not definitively crossed through ritual hunting or the passing of a ceremonial birthday, but by a redefinition of one’s place and roles in a social group.

Both Jody and Flag are “betwixt and between” childhood and adulthood “like a person standin’ on the state line . . . leavin’ one and turnin’ into t’other” (380). That is, the passage from one state to the other is not a single, irreversible movement, but one that can be undone and repeated, like Flag jumping the fences meant to keep him out of the family’s crops. After Flag first destroys a crop of newly planted corn, Jody works tirelessly to raise the height of the split-rail fence to six feet in order to keep the yearling from destroying the food supply. Although the fences have been successful in keeping other animals out, Flag’s identity has been reconstructed by his inclusion in the family and he is “betwixt and between” a pet and a wild animal. Even after the fence has been raised, Flag playfully leaps the boundary at will and eats the neat rows of crops rather than forage in the forest as his ‘natural’ instinct should
compel. Ordered to shoot Flag, Jody makes a final appeal to Pa Forrester, who agrees that the deer must be shot. Thinking that “he had not made the matter clear,” Jody tries to invoke the ‘natural’ connection between animals and children to elicit a different response: “Supposin’ it was a yearlin’ you loved like you-all loved Fodderwing?” Pa Forrester’s response shows that rigid conceptions of love and naturalness have no place in this demanding wilderness setting: “Why, love’s got nothin’ to do with corn. You cain’t have a thing eatin’ the crops” (406).

The wilderness is not a foreign entity nor is it necessarily hostile; it is a home that can be unforgiving to all its residents. Jody’s childhood conception of Baxter’s Island is of a “fortress ringed around with hunger” (43) or a safe refuge from the perils of the outside world, similar to the pastoral ideal of a timeless middle state which combines the best of nature and culture. However, Rawlings equates this ideal with childish naivete as Jody comes to realize that his home is inseparable from the hunger, destruction, and death of the world at large. By consistently positing an interdependent, nonhierarchical model of nature, Rawlings shows that, despite its occasional harshness, this natural community provides for its members in ways that Depression-era American society may not. In *The Yearling*, wolves prey on the weakest animals, buzzards recycle the carcass of Flag’s mother, Penny takes honey from bee hives but leaves enough for “their own winter store” (181), and families find a use for every part of the animals they kill (274).

The wilderness need not be softened into an improved garden, but in Rawlings’ presentation, it retains the pastoral quality of authenticity in comparison to civilization. Social constructions are shown as artificial, limiting, and unnatural,
especially when imposed on the more ‘accurate’ natural model of wilderness. Rawlings does not employ a pastoral criticism of a fallen society, but she shows that life in an alternative society in the wilderness is not necessarily less complicated, less rewarding, or less interesting. She justifies its value, in part by positing it as more natural and more correct, and in doing so implicitly replicates the pastoral impulse to reform the larger, outside society. The artificiality and arbitrariness of the oppositions and hierarchies—sometimes symbolized by fences—makes them decidedly anti-natural in Rawlings’ view, and she consequently challenges the social stratification justified by these rigid dichotomies. The dissolution of these limiting structures allows for the possibility of a more fluid, egalitarian society based on relative, as opposed to absolute, values. Although Rawlings seems drawn to certain aspects of pastoralism, she ultimately revises the ideal of the middle landscape that sets humanity and nature at opposite poles and reinforces an alienated relationship with nature. Rawlings instead suggests that wilderness offers a natural model more accurate than the pastoral garden and more likely to reveal “what an ethical, sustainable, honorable human place in nature might actually look like.”

However, this shift of the pastoral site to the wilderness may have troubling implications in the context of contemporary environmental movements. The 1930s and 1940s were a period of growing environmental awareness for many writers, including Aldo Leopold whose posthumously published *Sand County Almanac* is considered “the bible of the ecology movement” of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Leopold and Rawlings contribute to a general shift in cultural thinking which has resulted in the concept of wilderness replacing that of the garden
as the pastoral ideal of a “natural” state, and therefore privileged position, from which to judge a corrupt, fallen society (a premise Faulkner challenges in *Go Down, Moses*).

While I have argued that Rawlings’ “environmental fiction” resists some key components of the pastoral tradition, it also contributes to a romantic conception which threatens to reinforce the mechanistic view of nature inherent in traditional pastoral modes. A consequence of such thinking, to give but one example, is the justification for the complete draining of Niagara Falls for five and half months in 1975 in order to determine the optimum amount of water to be allowed to flow over the falls, the proper placement of rocks and other hidden diversionary methods above the falls, and the best methods for enhancing the “natural” scenery by framing vistas of the falls from selected vantage points—all with the unironic goal of preserving the falls’ “naturalness” for future generations of tourists seeking to escape briefly the artificial realms of cities and suburbs for the ostensibly more authentic one of nature. 57

**End Notes**

1 Rawlings commented in a 1939 paper for the National Council of Teachers of English, titled “Regional Literature of the South,” that the term regional literature usually referred to “futile outpourings of bad writing whose only excuse is that they are regional, regionalism being at the moment a popular form of expression.” Quoted in Gordon Bigelow, *Frontier Eden: The Literary Career of Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1966), 71.

2 Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, *Cross Creek* (New York: Scribner’s, 1942), 3. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

3 Bigelow, 11.

4 Ibid., 70.


7 See Harrison’s introduction and Melvin Dixon who discusses, in *Ride Out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), how slaves (and later free blacks) were kept outside the plantation boundaries, excluded from the pastoral scene, and associated with chaotic, wild nature but not the improved garden.

8 Bigelow notes that Rawlings was “horrified” when someone once compared her characters to the “hideous” ones in *Tobacco Road* (Bigelow, 101). Moreover, the absence of food that signals estrangement from nature and a lack of spiritual sustenance in Caldwell’s work is contrasted by Rawlings’ frequent lush descriptions of preparing and eating food.

9 Bigelow, 7. These poems, collected in *The Poems of Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings: Songs of a Housewife*, Ed. Rodger L. Tarr (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1997), had titles like “This Morning’s Pancakes,” “Making the Beds,” and “Washings on the Line,” and the occasions for them were often suggested by loyal readers.

10 *Selected Letters*, 80; letter dated November 11, 1933.

11 Ibid., 37; letter dated March, 1930.

12 See *Pastoral in Antebellum Southern Romance* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1989), 10, where Bakker makes an interesting and often convincing argument that the earliest writers of Southern pastoral are more willing to engage in social criticism and confront historical and contemporary problems than other scholars like Louis D. Rubin, Jr. and Lucinda MacKethan have granted.

13 *Selected Letters*, 122; letter dated October 24, 1936.

14 Pells, 101. Thus Bigelow also overstates the case, and somewhat misses the point, when he claims that “while most of the action in *South Moon Under* takes place in the Roaring Twenties, almost nothing of that roar penetrates the silence of the scrub” (*Frontier Eden*, 109). As Pells suggests, the withdrawal from mainstream American
society and the refusal to suggest how to fix an apparently broken capitalist system may be a direct reaction and response to current social crises.

15 As Lucinda MacKethan says in *The Dream of Arcady: Place and Time in Southern Literature* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1980), “the pastoral quest is always basically a search for order” (10), a sentiment echoed by the narrator of *South Moon Under* who, after the fence is raised, comments: “The mark of order was on the Lantry land” (20).

16 See Merchant’s *The Death of Nature*, Westling’s *The Green Breast of the New World*, Kolodny’s *The Lay of the Land*, and Harrison’s *Female Pastoral*.

17 Standpoint theory makes a basic assumption that members of an oppressed group are in an epistemically privileged position to have a more immediate, thorough, and critical knowledge about the nature of their oppressions. Some standpoint theorists claim that this knowledge extends beyond the immediate situation to an understanding of other oppressed groups. For a discussion of the variety of standpoint theories and their differences and connections with ecofeminism, see Deborah Slicer, “Toward an Ecofeminist Standpoint Theory: Bodies as Grounds” in *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Theory, Interpretation, Pedagogy*, Eds. Greta Gaard and Patrick D. Murphy (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998).


19 Rawlings, *South Moon Under* (New York: Scribner’s, 1933), 1. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

20 In the first chapter of *Cross Creek*, Rawlings reveals her ambivalence towards the pastoral ideal of order. She recalls her initial desire for a white picket fence around her new home, but seems uncomfortable with the psychological separation that such a fence would bring, preferring the appearance of continuity with the surrounding landscape: “an elegant fence would bring to the Creek a wanton orderliness that is out of place” and “would interfere with the feeling one has inside the house of being a part of the grove” (9).

21 The association is quite similar to what Harrison denounces in the Southern pastoral tradition as a device for the continued marginalization of women, the symbolic representation of the female protagonist “as virginal or despoiled land” (8).

22 Ibid., 10-11.


24 Ibid., 99.
Marx describes how the counterforce to an idyllic vision “may impinge upon the pastoral landscape either from the side bordering upon intractable nature or the side facing advanced civilization.” Louise Westling and Nina Baym, among others, have shown how the American myth of the individual employs this structure to exclude women protagonists and values associated with social life by portraying a solitary male hero in conflict with these feminine forces as a universal archetype.

See The Role of Place in Literature (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1984). Lutwack goes on to astutely note that “all of the attributes of enclosed places are easily transferred to woman” (95-6).

 Appropriately, Lant and the others use their superior hunting and tracking skills, using the wilderness as cover to launch a campaign of harassment against their common enemy (141-6).

 The actions of the Streeters, the “Alabamy feller,” and, later, Cleve, illustrate McElvaine’s concept of acquisitive individualism invading the scrub. All are working against community interests and for personal profit, demonstrating that the “outside” world not only penetrates the scrub, but threatens to destroy its folk culture.

 Marx makes this same point in discussing how technology is assimilated into pastoralism. The ideal of the middle state, he says, is an illusion that actually fosters an allegiance to mechanism, or to only one part of a whole, one side of the binary equation.


 In a letter to Maxwell Perkins, Rawlings calls Kezzy a “harbor of refuge” for Lant and explains that Ardis is too much a part of “the civilized world he does not know” for Lant to trust her: “Everything about her, except her physical appeal for him, will chill the very marrow in his bones, and make it impossible for him to do anything but run from her and from his desire.” See Max and Marjorie: The Correspondence Between Maxwell E. Perkins and Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, Ed. Rodger L. Tarr (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1999), 58.

 Peggy Prenshaw has read this use of “We” as “commanding,” that is, as evidence of Rawlings’ growing mastery of her craft and her self-confidence as an artist. See “The Otherness of Cross Creek,” The Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings Journal of Florida Literature 4 (1992): 17-24.

Merchant, 193. Elsewhere in *The Death of Nature*, Merchant also claims that “capital and the market would assume the organic attributes of growth, strength, activity, pregnancy, weakness, decay, and collapse, obscuring and mystifying the new underlying social relations of production and reproduction that make economic growth and progress possible” (288).

Compare Rawlings’ abandoning her map, compass and motor in this scene to Ike McCaslin’s relinquishment of his gun and compass in order to find the bear Old Ben in *Go Down, Moses*. In both instances, an intuitive natural knowledge reveals what the implements of culture and technology cannot.

See Prenshaw, who says that in this section of the book (the last six chapters) Rawlings “most fully foregrounds the self.” She reads this strong ‘I’ as evidence of Rawlings having overcome the immanence of the everyday, her ability to “subordinat[e] the daily life” in order “to see and write about larger, transcendent patterns” (21). I would also add that Rawlings sometimes must subordinate the self to the otherness of nature in order to rediscover her subjective identity.

A prime example of McElvaine’s notion of “cooperative individualism” that the American middle class was attracted to during the Depression, this banding together to survive in a natural setting also suggests that a harsh environment need not be seen as hostile. In this case, the challenges of nature produce and foster the cooperative spirit of this community of individuals.

As becomes clear in the nonfictional *Cross Creek*, Rawlings fictional communities and her actual home are extremely similar. In many of her letters, especially those to Max Perkins, she mentions people and incidents that she plans to use in stories. For instance, a 1931 letter discusses illegal hunting and trapping, moonshiners’ troubles with the government, and the new fencing laws that have upset “the old-timers” (Max and Marjorie, 44).

Selected Letters, 224.


Selected Letters, 237-8. Elizabeth Silverthorne, in *Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings: Sojourner at Cross Creek* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook, 1988), relates an incident in 1953 when Rawlings wrote a scathing letter to the editor of the St. Augustine *Record* condemning the harsh treatment and near-arrest of a West Indian woman for swimming at a “white” beach and saying the matter disgraced the city’s reputation (338-9).
The system of slavery and the virtual servitude that followed, Rawlings says, have conditioned African-Americans to work because they are required to work and to view any amount of freedom as a chance “to escape for the moment the lowliness and the poverty and the puzzle of living,” thereby appearing irresponsible and undisciplined to whites (181).


Morris, in “Engendering Fictions: Rawlings and a Female Tradition of Southern Writing,” 27-39 in *The Journal of Florida Literature* 7 (1996), defines “woman’s story” in this context as one of “a woman striving to surpass narrow definitions of female self constituted through or in tension with marriage and motherhood to achieve a sense of self-possession or self-expansion,” a familiar pattern in Southern women’s texts in the years between the wars (29).


Morris, 29.


Silverthorne notes that Rawlings was very close to her own father, who died from a kidney infection when she was seventeen (12-14, 24-25).

Later in the novel, after seven days of constant rain that has destroyed most of their crops, Penny voices this sentiment, saying the only “good” result of the storm is “to remind a man to be humble, for there’s nary thing on earth he kin call his own” (236).

See Carol Anita Tarr, “In ‘Mystic Company’: The Master Storyteller in Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings’s *The Yearling,*” *The Journal of Florida Literature* 2 (1989-90): 23-34. Tarr also agrees that Jody’s rite of passage is not a consequence of killing Flag: “Jody does not suddenly become a man the instant he shoots his deer. Rather, he is slowly growing up all the way through the novel” (32).

universality of this relationship, noting that its prevalence in Anglo-American culture is not necessarily matched in other cultures. For a broader analysis of literary representations of children, see her full-length study, *Children’s Literature: Criticism and the Fictional Child* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994).

55 Ibid., 212.

56 Cronon, 81.

Chapter Three. “Dawn and Doom was in the branches”: Zora Neale Hurston and the Transformative Power of Nature

Like Rawlings, Zora Neale Hurston utilizes the frontier setting of rural Florida in a way that highlights conflicts between opposing forces. One such conflict is the clash of urban and rural lifestyles that was far more pronounced in Florida than in other Southern states during the early twentieth century, principally due to an astronomical increase in the state’s urban populace. In fact, by 1930 Florida was the first Southern state with a population over 50% urban, a benchmark not reached by Georgia, South Carolina, Alabama, and Mississippi until the 1960s or 1970s. This dramatic expansion of towns and cities inevitably led to the sort of urban/rural clashes described by Rawlings, where the growth of cities threatens to wipe out distinctive rural cultures. While Hurston’s fiction does not focus on the specifics of roads, fences, and property rights in the way that Rawlings’ does, both Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937) and Seraph on the Suwanee (1948) examine the general cultural anxiety that an inherently valuable and under-appreciated rural lifestyle is quickly vanishing forever. In these two novels in particular, Hurston uses this urban/rural clash to frame her examinations of related oppositions, such as culture/nature, male/female, and black/white. As in the works of Caldwell, Rawlings, and Faulkner, the physical terrain of the author’s homeland becomes a contested space in which these conflicts are played out and, occasionally, resolved.

In this chapter, I argue that Hurston uses a pear and a mulberry tree as symbols for the female protagonists of Their Eyes and Seraph, respectively, to recast the pastoral linkage of women and nature as one of active empowerment rather than passive subjugation. While these trees metaphorically reflect the growth and vitality
of Hurston’s heroines, the natural environment also has a material effect on the
development of vigorous, independent female identities. For both Janie Starks and
Arvay Meserve, the repressive limitations of man-made buildings is eventually
replaced by the boundless opportunities of wild nature. The frontier-like communities
that border the wilderness in both novels are, in Hurston’s representation of them,
more egalitarian and less rigidly hierarchical than the “civilized” towns. Hurston thus
aligns qualities of independence, equality, and fluidity with the natural and suggests
that these traits are nurtured by close contact with nature. Moreover, she attributes a
relative racial and class harmony to these outpost communities, implying that
immersion in nature can obviate artificial social divisions.

Like other Southern women authors of the early twentieth century, such as
Rawlings and Ellen Glasgow, Hurston does not categorically reject the association of
women and nature, but reconstructs that bond as empowering and active in contrast to
the passive identification with the tamed nature of the pastoral garden. In Their Eyes,
one important way that Hurston counters the pastoral ideal of the middle landscape is
by incorporating elements of Afro-Caribbean Vodou[4] that undermine the initial
separation of humans and nature on which the pastoral myth depends. Replacing the
polarized categories of culture/nature, male/female, and subject/object with a more
fluid, relative, and interdependent model, Hurston envisions a more egalitarian
society of communal values free from the ideology of dominance that characterizes
the masculine gaze on a feminized landscape of the male pastoral tradition. She also
suggests in her best-known novel that the acquisitive values of white-dominated
society fosters an alienating conception of nature as something distinctly “other,”
estranging people from a natural world regarded as little more than an amalgamation of commodities.

In the second novel I will discuss, *Seraph on the Suwanee*, Hurston’s focus on white characters allows her to concentrate more fully on the connections of the natural world to issues of gender and class. I argue that Hurston creates a “working-class pastoral” that appropriates many traditional pastoral elements while it also reconceives relationships between humans and nature as (potentially) mutually rewarding. The largely financial benefits to humans can easily upset the reciprocal balance and create a one-sided, exploitative relationship, but Jim Meserve, by and large, maintains this precarious equilibrium. Not restricted to farms and plantations, Hurston’s working-class pastoral is defined by Jim’s ability to profit from Florida’s abundant natural resources. Nature itself facilitates an improvement of social standing via avenues that are accessible to lower- or working-class people in ways that education and white-collar jobs often are not. Hurston also incorporates elements of female pastoral, as defined by Elizabeth Jane Harrison, in the story of Arvay Meserve’s struggles for self-knowledge and a mutually fulfilling relationship with her husband.

Although Hurston’s knowledge of Vodou has little direct bearing on *Seraph*, it surely influenced the composition of *Their Eyes* and especially the representations of nature in that novel. Hurston studied anthropology under Franz Boas and Ruth Benedict before collecting folklore in Florida, Louisiana, South Carolina, Alabama, Honduras, Jamaica, the Bahamas, and Haiti. From April of 1936 until March of 1937 Hurston traveled extensively in Jamaica and Haiti on a Guggenheim fellowship to
study Afro-Caribbean Vodou. *Tell My Horse* (1938) is the compelling account of her observations and first-hand experiences with this still widely-misunderstood religion. Although this account of her travels was written after her return to the U.S., Hurston composed *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in just seven weeks while living in Haiti. It is not surprising, then, that Hurston’s still burgeoning knowledge of Vodou is a major influence in the novel, particularly on her conception of human relationships with nature. Hurston employs this Vodou-influenced view of nature in *Their Eyes* in order to challenge and revise the traditionally limited and static gender and racial roles of the early twentieth-century South.

Of course, Vodou was only one of many strands of Hurston’s “complexly woven religious sensibility,” and her works reveal her interests in Christianity, Norse, Greek and Roman mythology, as well as Egyptian and other African religions. Although Vodou was perhaps no more significant to Hurston than any of the other religions she studied, it is clearly a significant influence on *Their Eyes*, particularly on Hurston’s portrait of the natural world. Much of her other work, including *Seraph on the Suwanee*, confirms that Hurston’s own brand of “Deism” has much in common with Vodou’s conception of nature. It is, therefore, perhaps more accurate to say that Hurston found the syncretism of religious beliefs which characterizes Vodou to coincide with her own eclectic spiritual views rather than that she adopted its tenets after her indoctrination. In this study, I will suggest the importance of recognizing a general Vodou aesthetic at work in *Their Eyes*, but also include Vodou as one of several modes Hurston employs as she encounters nature.
Nature/woman is subordinated to culture/man in the traditional pastoral equation, and this opposition installs males as the protectors of both the improved garden and the women of the plantation. Hurston’s Vodou-influenced conception of nature contributes to her revision of the male-dominated pastoral tradition in Southern literature by identifying her female protagonist with an active natural world and empowering her to protect herself. Particularly in the Reconstruction-era pastoral of a writer like Thomas Nelson Page, this notion of women as property extends to African-Americans as well. For example, in the story “Meh Lady,” Page employs a former slave narrator who longs for the “good old days” before the Civil War and who fondly recalls the Union army colonel who saves the estate and its defenseless residents by marrying the former plantation mistress. The white Southern woman is explicitly associated with the plantation land in the story, and thus both she and the ex-slave narrator remain property, debased objects used to reaffirm the dominant position of the white, male subject.

In *Their Eyes*, Hurston shows that the pastoral elevation of some people over others denies the humanity of those below. Although this attitude is a product of the predominantly white power structure in the South, Hurston depicts her black characters as equally susceptible to the lure of self-aggrandizement at the expense of others. Robert Hemenway summarizes the appeal of authority to someone like Janie’s second husband, Joe (Jody) Starks: “Whites had institutionalized such thinking, and black people were vulnerable to the philosophy because being on high like white folks seemed to represent security and power.” Janie’s grandmother, Nanny, is a former slave who wants this security and power for Janie and sees only two
possibilities for her granddaughter’s life: high or low. Nanny was forced to hide in the swamps at the end of the Civil War with her daughter and the child of her former master, Leafy, who is, years later, raped in the forest by her teacher. Nanny therefore understandably accepts the Manichean division of plantation and wilderness into high and low categories, and she aspires to “throw up a highway through the wilderness” so that Janie might “take a stand on high ground lak Ah dreamed.” Janie discovers, however, that the high ground, as symbolized by Logan Killicks’ sixty acres and Joe Starks’ “big house,” can be more threatening than wild nature and that the low ground of the Everglades is potentially liberating and empowering.

The portrait of Vodou that emerges from Hurston’s *Tell My Horse* is of a transformative, creative, and dynamic religion that challenges institutionalized binary hierarchies by embracing the intermingling or interpenetration of polarities. These polarities include oppositions such as man/woman, white/black, subject/object, and culture/nature which tend to be perpetuated by those occupying the privileged, first position, both in the colonial societies of the Caribbean and in the American South of the same era. Vodou offers an alternative to dualistic hierarchies that situate women alongside nature (and therefore below man and culture) through rituals “that locate the sacred within nature and within female sexuality.” Using *Tell My Horse* as a guide to Hurston’s understanding of Afro-Caribbean Vodou, I suggest there are two important themes from that work that are also central to *Their Eyes*: that the natural world can embody resistance to a dominate group while offering liberation (if only temporarily) to oppressed people, and that black women’s sexuality can be a source of pride and power.
The animistic conception of nature inherent in Vodou counters the mechanistic, Newtonian view endorsed by Christianity and its reductive opposition of human as active subject to nature as passive object, of humans as stewards of god’s garden. This ideological clash is actually quite tangible in Haiti, where the Catholic Church is often openly hostile towards Vodou and its mostly lower-class practitioners, although many actively participate in both religions. Accordingly, Vodouisants often mask their beliefs, creating a religion that operates largely behind the scenes and subverts the authority of Haiti’s ruling class minority: “As a religion that developed in the context of slavery and colonialism, voodoo marks a fluid boundary between domination and resistance and defines a zone of struggle between public and private discourses of dominant and subordinate groups.”

Hurston’s portrait of nature in Their Eyes works in a similar manner: subtly subverting the dominant white male culture of the South from the background of a story about a black woman’s search for a voice.

Numerous important Vodou ceremonies are held at sacred trees, rocks and springs, and some stones are kept in families for generations because they are believed to literally contain a lwa (or loa), one of many lesser Vodou gods. In Tell My Horse, Hurston describes one particularly festive ceremony that celebrates the spirits and gods who inhabit the heads of streams and the cascades and grottoes below them. The ceremony Tete l’eau, or head of the water, which venerates the source of a stream or spring, was witnessed first-hand by Hurston. She describes seeing hundreds of people disrobing and climbing through the “eternal mists” of the waterfall: “it was a moving sight to see these people turning from sordid things once each year to go
into an ecstasy of worship of the beautiful in water-forms. The nearby Catholic church seeks to prevent the ceremony, but Hurston sides with the masses and celebrates their transformation from “sordid things” to ecstatic worshipers, from colonial objects to full-fledged participants in a divine natural world.

In addition to this kind of sacralization of nature, Vodou also offers an alternative to the degradation of black women (which Hurston finds in Jamaica, Haiti, and the United States) through its acceptance, and even worship, of black women’s sexuality. Hurston witnesses another ceremony in which the Mambo, or priestess, is asked, “What is truth?” She answers, Hurston writes,

by throwing back her veil and revealing her sex organs. The ceremony means that this is the infinite, the ultimate truth. There is no mystery beyond the mysterious source of life. . . . It is considered the highest honor for all males participating to kiss her organ of creation, for Damballah, the god of gods, has permitted them to come face to face with the truth. (113-4)

The sexuality that is denigrated as base, bestial, or natural in a negative sense, both by colonial Caribbean society and the patriarchal culture of the American South, is reconfigured here as a site of worship for males, and Hurston embodies this idea in Janie, whose sexuality is a source of attraction and envy for nearly every male character in the novel.

Another interesting Vodou ritual with a more obvious connection to Their Eyes is performed at the site where a sacred palm tree once grew. Hurston relates the legend in Tell My Horse of a “beautiful, luminous virgin” who appears in the tree, sings a song, and disappears. People begin worshiping the tree in droves after reports of miraculous cures spread throughout Haiti. When the Catholic priest of the parish tries to chop down this rival shrine, the machete bounces off the tree, hits the priest in
the head, and fatally wounds him. The tree is later removed and replaced with a Catholic church. However, several churches burn to the ground on the site, including one destroyed by lightning, signifying nature’s role as active subject resisting the objectification inherent in the culture vs. nature equation. Trees, in general, are important symbols in Vodou, often as emblems of “the sexual and spiritual union of the primary male and female deities,” and Hurston employs this idea of the union or merging of opposites in the pear tree of Their Eyes that represents Janie’s resistance to the limiting racial and gender roles imposed upon her.

In the well-known pear tree scene of chapter two, Janie experiences a vision of communion in nature, and the blending of sexual and spiritual imagery recalls the Vodou ceremonies of Haiti:

She was stretched out on her back beneath the pear tree soaking in the alto chant of the visiting bees, the gold of the sun and the panting breath of the breeze when the inaudible voice of it all came to her. She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom, the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was marriage! She had been summoned to behold a revelation. Then Janie felt a pain remorseless sweet that left her limp and languid. (10-11)

Again, black, female sexuality is celebrated, even venerated in the pseudo-religious imagery, and some fundamental binary divisions are challenged. The distinction between subject and object, observer and participant, human and nature is blurred, if not erased, in the language of Hurston’s description. The “marriage” is not only between bee and bloom, but also between Janie and the tree. Both unions efface the gender oppositions normally associated with marriage, thereby offering the possibility of a truly egalitarian partnership in contrast to Janie’s grandmother’s conception of
marriage as a means to provide Janie with the security of property. As Nanny explains to her granddaughter, “’Tain’t Logan Killicks Ah wants you to have, baby, it’s protection” (14). Janie’s internal response is that “[t]he vision of Logan Killicks was desecrating the pear tree” (13).

While the pear tree is a metaphor for Janie’s inner nature, it also metonymically represents the entirety of the natural world, encompassing and conjoining seemingly contradictory terms: “Janie saw her life like a great tree in leaf with the things suffered, things enjoyed, things done and undone. Dawn and doom was in the branches” (8). Hurston’s syntax here suggests nature’s ability to interpolate binary constructions, moving from the identical noun/opposite verb structure of “things suffered, things enjoyed” to the single noun with a compound verb in “things done and undone” to the oddly appropriate compound subject/singular verb structure of “Dawn and doom was in the branches.” Indeed, before the end of chapter two Hurston shows nature as both a site of refuge (during Nanny’s flight to the swamp with Leafy) and of threat (when the teenage Leafy is raped in the forest by her teacher). This antithetical pairing is transferred to Janie’s body in the novel’s opening sequence, where Hurston describes her grapefruit-like buttocks and “pugnacious breasts trying to bore a hole in her shirt” (2). The imagery reemphasizes the reading of body as landscape (and vice versa) and again contains the potential of both sustenance and destruction. Thus, Hurston retains the association of the female body with landscape, but empowers both with an active, threatening aspect that counteracts the limited (and limiting) notion of land/woman as a field for the exercise of masculine power[5].
Janie forges an identity by moving freely between poles that are usually defined by the dominant culture as mutually exclusive, and much of the scholarship on this novel has concentrated on Janie’s dual character. Melvin Dixon, for example, argues that “Hurston replaces Nanny’s idea of social class conferring high or low status with Janie’s preferable and dynamic act of travel between the two.” Susan Edwards Meisenhelder similarly claims that Janie struggles with two identities, one drawn from the white world and “a more vigorous model of black womanhood she tries to forge for herself.” Lowe notes Hurston’s childhood fascination with Roman mythology and makes an extensive comparison of Janie and the two-faced Janus. Although Janie’s navigation and mediation of opposing forces has been amply described by various critics, it is important to emphasize Hurston’s knowledge of Vodou in order to recognize that she locates these principles of mediation, reconciliation, and transcendence in nature itself. In Hurston’s presentation, rigid dichotomies and hierarchies are therefore decidedly unnatural, with all the attendant implications of being artificial, immoral, and even antithetical to God’s creation.

Janie’s resistance to Nanny’s mutually exclusive options for an African-American woman’s life--either the high seat or “de mule uh de world” (14)--is inspired by the pear tree vision that serves as the paradigm by which she judges herself and her relationships. However, Vodou is but one of Hurston’s influences, and she was well aware that natural imagery also can be used to reinforce hierarchies and denigrate people. Nanny’s reference to black women as the mules of the world alludes to a historical association of blacks and mules. Hurston titled her collection
of African-American Southern folklore *Mules and Men* (1935), and Hemenway cogently rebuts the opinion that this title is derogatory and servile:

The protest impulse was not subordinated, but stylized so that it could survive. . . . The phrase meant not only that black people were treated as mules, but also that they were defiantly human—mules *and* men. The identification itself demonstrated how a negative relationship (slave : mule : beast of burden) could be transformed into a positive identity (beast of burden : mule : slave : man), with the content of the positive identification concealed from outside understanding.

Hemenway’s language recalls both the subversive nature of Haitian Vodou and the enabling process of female pastoral that changes women’s interaction with the land from “passive association” to “active cultivation.” Janie’s first husband, however, exhibits the negative side of this process, making her his mule even as he places her on the high seat.

Although Logan Killicks’ “often-mentioned sixty acres” constitute “protection” in Nanny’s eyes, they seem to Janie “like a stump in the middle of the woods where nobody had ever been” (20). This stunted, lifeless image of her marriage is an obvious counterpoint to Janie’s earlier vibrant bee-and-blossom image of marriage. “Logan Killicks,” she feels, “was desecrating the pear tree” (13), and although she waits “a bloom time, and a green time and an orange time” (23) the relationship fails to improve. Janie’s seasonal conception of time suggests her harmony with nature’s cadence, as does her apparent ability to understand the language of an animistic universe: “She knew things that nobody had ever told her. For instance, the words of the trees and the wind. She often spoke to falling seeds and said, ‘Ah hope you fall on soft ground,’ because she had heard seeds saying that to each other as they passed” (23-4). Janie’s hope for the seeds is also a hope for herself that foreshadows her
eventual landing on the “soft ground” of the muck. Logan’s purchase of a mule that “even uh woman kin handle” (26) is the final straw for her first marriage.

Although mules are obviously part of nature, Hurston represents Janie’s figuration as a mule as unnatural because it places her below her husband. Logan plans to have Janie plow his potato fields, giving lie to Nanny’s claim that her granddaughter can either sit on the high seat or toil as a mule of the world. With Logan she does both. His desire to elevate himself at his wife’s expense is brought home by his snide comment that Janie should respect him more because of his higher standing in society: “Youse powerful independent around here sometime considerin’ . . . youse born in a carriage ’thout no top to it, and yo’ mama and you bein’ born and raised in de white folks back-yard” (29). His order that Janie help him move a pile of manure sends her hurrying off with Jody Starks. She thinks he could be a “bee for her bloom,” but “the seat beside him” on his hired rig ominously portends their future: “With him on it, it sat like some high ruling chair” (31).

In her characterization of Jody, Hurston pointedly aligns him with white society and its emphasis on commodity, pitting him against the natural symbolism associated with Janie. Working for whites his entire life, Jody “had always wanted to be a big voice, but de white folks had all de sayso where he come from and everywhere else, exceptin’ dis place dat colored folks was buildin’ theirselves” (27). Eatonville appeals to Jody not as a place to escape the inequities and stratification of white society, but as a place where he can finally occupy the top rung of the hierarchy himself. He swoops into town, and within six weeks he has purchased five hundred acres of adjoining land to sell in parcels, organized the men to “chop out two roads” in the
forest, had himself proclaimed mayor, and built a store in the middle of town. This store--which bears more than a passing resemblance to the plantation commissary--is the “heart” of the town, according to Jody, and one of its first commodities is Janie, on display at the grand opening: “Jody told her to dress up and stand in the store all that evening. . . . She must look upon herself as the bell-cow, the other women were the gang” (39). This debased natural image divisively separates a silenced Janie, placing her above the other women in town with Jody over the entire herd.

Hurston emphasizes Janie’s separation and silence in Tony Taylor’s ceremonial welcoming speech and its linguistic juxtaposition of Jody’s property: “Brother Starks, we welcomes you and all dat you have seen fit tuh bring amonst us--yo’ belov-ed wife, yo’ store, yo’ land” (39). Significantly, when Janie is asked by the town folk to say a few words after her husband speaks, Jody silences her voice by asserting, “mah wife don’t know nothin’ ’bout no speech-makin’. Ah never married her for nothin’ lak dat. She’s uh woman and her place is in de home,” and Hurston immediately adds that Jody’s action “took the bloom off of things” in Janie’s mind (40-1). Although Jody would never allow Janie to plow in the fields, as this would signal a lack of affluence to others, he is content to have her toil wordlessly inside the store. Her enforced silence links Janie with mules in a different sense, one that Hurston introduces in the novel’s opening pages:

It was the time to hear things and talk. These sitters had been tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences all day long. Mules and other brutes had occupied their skins. But now, the sun and the bossman were gone, so the skins felt powerful and human. They became lords of sounds and lesser things. They passed nations through their mouths. (1-2)
Connecting silence and mules in this passage, Hurston suggests a return to humanity at the end of the workday. On the store porch in Eatonville, the townspeople are transformed from mules back into speaking subjects who feel “powerful and human,” recalling Hurston’s description of Haitian worshippers shedding their identities as “sordid things” in the ceremony *Tete l’eau*. Janie’s exclusion from the conversations on the porch keeps her in the realm of “sordid things” and mules, more passive object than speaking subject.

Jody’s class ambitions demand that he accumulate property and display his possessions. He buys a large desk similar to those of white businessmen in nearby Maitland and a gold spittoon “just like his bossman used to have in his bank up there in Atlanta” (44). The most prominent symbol of difference, one that “cowed the town,” is a huge house, painted “a gloaty, sparkly white,” that makes “[t]he rest of the town [look] like servants’ quarters surrounding the ‘big house’” (44). Even Jody’s physical appearance is described by Hurston as “[k]ind of portly like rich white folks” (32), a characteristic she also uses as a sign of unhealthy emulation of whites with the “puzzle-gutted” Otis Slemmons in “The Gilded Six-Bits” (1933). Hurston equates Jody’s pursuit of wealth with a dehumanizing effect on those around him. His elevation in status comes at the cost of positioning others as slaves and animals.

The incident with Matt Bonner’s mule illustrates how the same thinking that locates humans above merely corporeal nature can justify the subjugation of some humans, especially blacks and women, as natural. Jody purchases and then frees the underfed mule in an apparent act of magnanimity that Janie compares to Lincoln freeing the slaves. Hurston’s wry commentary on the continuing inferiority of
African-Americans following their emancipation also applies to Janie’s position in her marriage. Jody acquires Janie and frees her from working as Logan’s plow mule, only to recast her as a “free” mule by “building a high chair for her to sit in” (58). When the mule dies, Jody forbids Janie from attending the mock funeral that, ironically, confers as much or more dignity in death upon the mule as it ever had in life. Janie is barred from participating in the cycle of natural processes that ends and begins anew with a flock of talking buzzards mimicking the mock funeral before feasting on the carcass.22

After seven years of marriage, Janie “wasn't petal-open anymore” (67) with her husband, reflecting her alienation from the empowering aspects of nature and from her own inner nature, as it were. Hurston, in fact, cleverly unblends the connotations of human nature (as in an individual’s fundamental character) and Nature (as in the flora and fauna of the environment) that she joins in Janie’s original pear-tree vision:

She had no more blossomy openings dusting pollen over her man, neither any glistening young fruit where petals used to be. She found that she had a host of thoughts she had never expressed to him, and numerous emotions she had never let Jody know about. Things packed up and put away in parts of her heart where he could never find them. She was saving up feelings for some man she had never seen. She had an inside and an outside now and suddenly she knew how not to mix them. (68)

The inside/outside divergence parallels the high/low imagery and demonstrates how feminine nature can be reconstructed as an empowering identification. For Janie, it is only “the shadow of herself” that is managing the store and “prostrating itself before Jody,” while in her mind “she herself sat under a shady tree with the wind blowing through her hair and her clothes” (73). She protects the internal pear tree from being subsumed by her external cow/mule identity through this act of separation. Recalling
Trefzer’s description of Vodou as “a fluid boundary between domination and resistance,” Janie’s defense mechanism wards off Jody’s potentially indoctrinating view that “[s]omebody got to think for women and chillun and chickens and cows” (67) by countering with the positive associations of the pear tree: “She got so she received all things with the stolidness of the earth which soaks up urine and perfume with the same indifference” (73). This balancing strategy permits Janie to hold opposing forces in abeyance until a more egalitarian love allows her to fuse them again and re-pear the split.

After Janie’s famous verbal undressing of Jody in public hastens his impending death, she reclaims her voice and rediscovers the inner self she had hidden so long from her husband. When she later meets Vergible “Tea Cake” Woods, Janie also rediscovers her inner visions of the pear tree and egalitarian marriage. After years of oppression from Logan Killicks and Jody Starks, she literally becomes Janie Woods when she marries Tea Cake, who “could be a bee for her blossom—a pear tree blossom in the spring” (101). Although much has been made by critics of Tea Cake’s name (especially his obviously appropriate surname), the study of the influences of Vodou suggest other possible meanings. In the Haitian patois (as well as in other French-based dialects), the term ’ti is commonly used as an appellation meaning little. Short for petite, the word is often attached to the front of a name, to designate, for example, a son with the same given name as his father. Given that Hurston composed the novel while immersed in Haitian folk life, we might read Tea Cake as ’Ti Cake, which would be an appropriate partner for LilBit, Logan’s nickname for Janie (and Hurston’s own nickname). The name also approximates the Haitian ’ti cay, literally
little house, an image that fittingly contrasts with the “big house” and the sixty acre homestead that symbolize Janie’s unfulfilling marriages. When Janie and Tea Cake travel to “de muck” in the Everglades, the houses are small, but nature is big and wild, and Janie’s soul “crawl[s] out from its hiding place” (122).

The community of the muck replaces the limiting dualisms of the dominant society with a looser, more dynamic system of relations where men and women dress alike, work together, and equally participate in the singing, dancing, fighting and story telling that characterize the playful, less restrictive atmosphere enjoyed by the transient and ever-changing population. The relative lack of stratification of this frontier community in comparison to Eatonville is encapsulated in the transformation of the male-dominated store porch into the more inclusive doorstep of Tea Cake and Janie: “The men held big arguments here like they used to on the store porch. Only here, she could listen and laugh and even talk some herself if she wanted to. She got so she could tell big stories herself” (127-8). Janie can literally discover her own voice when surrounded by nature, but even in the muck the class divisions of Eatonville occasionally intrude.

At first, Janie does not go to work in the fields like the rest of the women, staying home instead to cook and clean. This stereotypical division of labor is noticed by the others who “generally assumed that she thought herself too good to work like the rest of the women” (127). This threat to community harmony is quelled when Janie joins the rest in bean picking and demonstrates her commonness by leading the “romping and playing they carried on behind the boss’s back” (127). The denim overalls that Janie wears to the fields are not only the uniform of the labor class, but
also an androgynous garment that signifies the abatement of culturally imposed
gender roles on the muck, similar to Tea Cake’s effort to help prepare supper after
Janie begins working alongside him. Thus, the home that might easily symbolize
gender-imposed confinement is reclaimed by Janie and becomes a symbol of equality
and shared responsibilities for men and women: both earn money outside of it, both
help complete domestic chores inside of it, and both participate in the playfulness of
the porch.

Immersion in the “soft ground” of the muck alleviates the class, gender, and
racial hierarchies of society, and this abatement is reflected in the nearly total absence
of the white owners of the fields from the text. Money is spent as quickly as it is
earned, and Jody’s acquisitiveness seems almost quaintly artificial and unimportant in
this atmosphere of “cooperative individualism,” to return to McElvaine’s categories.
However, the white bosses do still exist, as do the class, gender, and racial divisions
that are tempered and muted, but not eliminated, in natural surroundings. Mrs.
Turner, a self-loathing, light-skinned African-American woman who “can’t stand
black niggers” (135), personifies these cultural threats to this natural community—the
age-old threat of the city to the pastoral countryside. Her desire to “class off” from
those with darker skin seeks to imitate the hierarchy of the white world, or at least of
Eatonville. Mrs. Turner’s view of society is like “the pecking order in a chicken yard”
(138) with skin pigmentation the sole criterion of rank. Hurston pokes fun at Mrs.
Turner’s adoration of Janie’s light complexion and mocks her belief that “somehow
she and others through worship could attain her paradise—-a heaven of straight-haired,
thin-lipped, high-nose boned white seraphs” (139). Even though Tea Cake leads an
effort to boycott, and eventually vandalize, the Turners’ restaurant, Hurston’s narrative suggests that he does not forget her “altar” to “Caucasian characteristics” so easily as it may seem (139).

Tea Cake’s character seems to change gradually after the arrival of Mrs. Turner’s brother, a straight-haired unemployed carpenter, whom she desperately wants to fix up with Janie. Jealous of this imagined rival for his wife, Tea Cake beats Janie “to show he was boss,” and because “[b]eing able to whip her reassured him in possession” (140). This incident represents a significant and quite sudden shift in the language Hurston uses to describe Janie’s seemingly perfect mate. The “bee for her blossom” now seems more like Jody Starks in his desire for ownership of Janie, and, as the hurricane nears, Tea Cake also begins to resemble Jody in his imitation of the white power structure. Considering the influences of the extreme intraracial prejudice she encountered in Jamaica and the misogynistic cultures of both Jamaica and Haiti (to say nothing of the United States), Hurston is perhaps asserting that gender and racial divisions are more deeply-seated than those of class. The flattening of class stratification can be achieved with relatively equal wages (at least in the fictional community of the muck), but gender and racial animosities appear more persistent in Hurston’s presentation. In Tea Cake’s case, it is his jealousy and need to possess that is more troubling than the “two or three face slaps” to Janie (who, after all, assaults him as well). The impending storm seems to be Hurston’s response to this foreboding change in his character.

The hurricane that ravages the muck and the communities surrounding Lake Okeechobee is likely based on actual hurricanes of 1928, 1929, and 1935, and
Hurston’s description of the storm is extremely factual and highly symbolic. Destructive and creative powers are conjoined in the storm, and its effects transform Janie into a fully independent woman. As the storm approaches, Tea Cake refuses to leave “because de money’s too good on the muck” (148). He invests too much authority in the white bosses who remain behind and dismisses the notion that the scores of animals and groups of Seminoles fleeing the area is a signal to evacuate: “Dey don’t always know. Indians don’t know much uh nothin’ tuh tell de truth. Else dey’d own dis country still. De white folks ain’t gone nowhere. Dey oughta know if it’s dangerous” (148). But the hurricane reveals the limitations of white authority and the inability of Tea Cake to read properly nature’s signs.

The huge Lake Okechobee resembles an anthropomorphized God in Hurston’s description, sitting in judgment and enacting its vengeance as it rolls over everything in its path: “The monstropolous beast had left its bed. The two hundred miles an hour wind had loosed its chains. He seized hold of his dikes and ran forward until he met the quarters; uprooted them like grass and rushed on after his supposed-to-be conquerors” (153). As the lake bursts free, it converts the seemingly stable wall of man-made dikes into a fluid boundary and similarly collapses distinctions between life and death, humans and animals:

the wind and water had given life to lots of things that folks think of as dead and given death to so much that had been living . . . . They passed a dead man in a sitting position on a hummock, entirely surrounded by wild animals and snakes. Common danger made common friends. Nothing sought conquest over the other. (153, 156)

Racial differences, too, are blurred when Tea Cake and other men try unsuccessfully to distinguish white and black decomposing corpses for burial in segregated graves as
mandated by the white authorities’ futile and ridiculous attempt to maintain the societal divisions.

Before the storm is over, Tea Cake is bitten by a rabid dog while saving Janie, and Hurston describes “this strange thing in Tea Cake’s body” (173) in a manner reminiscent of Vodou possession rituals which confound even the fundamental dualism of self and other. The title of Tell My Horse comes from a familiar expression used in Haiti by an individual temporarily possessed by a lwa. The lwa is said to mount the person, who is then the deity’s horse (cheval), and the lwa speaks through the individual, who later has no recollection of what he or she has said or done while mounted. The phrase “Tell my horse” (Parlay cheval ou, in Hurston’s translation) is uttered before the lwa publicly describes the recent, often embarrassing, sins and/or misdeeds of the cheval.

The odd scene where Tea Cake is bitten by the rabid dog that is riding a cow through the flood waters suggests a slightly distorted, metaphorical version of these possession rituals. Janie, who has been both a “bell-cow” and a mule, seems clearly figured by the swimming cow, but what are we to make of the ferocious dog that attacks as Janie clings to the cow’s tail? The image of a “massive built dog . . . sitting on [the cow’s] shoulders and shivering and growling” (157) seems so intentionally striking and strange that Hurston must have been thinking of the horse and rider metaphor of Vodou possession, especially considering that possession is often foreshadowed by discomfort in the nape of the neck. The mad dog, then, represents the type of fiercely possessive love that has repeatedly assailed Janie’s identity and from which even Tea Cake has shown he is not immune. Tea Cake has already shown
his capacity for jealousy, possessiveness, and violence toward Janie, and the bite from the rabid dog literally transfers this malevolent spirit to him. When the full effects of the disease emerge a few weeks later back on the muck, Tea Cake grows increasingly irrational and suspicious, and Janie realizes, “Tea Cake was gone. Something else was looking out of his face” (172).

Janie still feels the reverberations of the hurricane when she shoots and kills the maddened Tea Cake in self-defense. Her trial by an all-white jury for killing Tea Cake is an interesting postscript to her trials during the hurricane. In effect, she is judged and acquitted both by Culture and Nature, signifying her success at mediating these two poles. Tea Cake, however, is convicted by both courts: he is punished by the hurricane for investing too much authority in the “wisdom” of white culture, and he is condemned by that same culture for fulfilling its stereotype of black men as irrational animals. The storm sets in motion these events that shatter Janie’s life, and its natural force also uproots the pear-tree that has been her totem. The disappearance from the text of the pervasive tree and blossom imagery following the hurricane signifies both and end and a new beginning as Janie transcends the pear-tree stage of her life. Through her bee-and-blossom relationship with Tea Cake, her vision of an egalitarian, reciprocal marriage has been fulfilled, and Janie now assumes a more active and creative identity as the teller of her own story. She keeps only a packet of seeds from their house to remind her of Tea Cake, signaling the potential rebirth of the tree in the transmission of her tale to her friend Pheoby and to the readers of Their Eyes Were Watching God.
Seraph on the Suwanee, Hurston’s much-maligned “white novel,” explores many of the same themes as Their Eyes, only from the perspective of white characters Jim and Arvay Meserve. This novel has been dismissed and disparaged by critics as a betrayal of her African-American roots and/or as a blatant, flawed attempt to cash in by appealing to a wider audience and even to Hollywood. Hemenway, for example, says that in writing this novel “Hurston largely turned her back on the source of her creativity . . . the celebration of black folklife,” resulting in “an unsuccessful work of art.” This assessment is echoed by the majority of criticism that has followed, exemplified by Mary Helen Washington’s judgment of the book as an “awkward and contrived novel, as vacuous as a soap opera.” Only recently have some critics begun to counter the prevailing view of Seraph on the Suwanee as a misguided, flawed effort of a writer in the decline of a brilliant career. Janet St. Clair, for one, feels that Hurston does not capitulate “to the antifeminist sentiment of the conservative postwar forties,” and she rightly chides those who ignore or condemn the rags-to-riches tale of Jim and Arvay Meserve: “Critics of Hurston should know her principles, processes, and publications well enough to avoid a facile dismissal of this novel.”

Indeed, as Meisenhelder points out, the many striking similarities between Seraph and Their Eyes should alert readers to the “subversive attack on the values of what she [Hurston] called ‘Anglo-Saxon’ civilization” masked as a traditional fairy tale of a poor white girl rescued by an upwardly mobile young suitor. Given the similar veiled criticism of white authority in Their Eyes, it is somewhat surprising that Seraph has so often been read as an unironic capitulation to the tastes of white publishers and a wider/whiter reading public. My own reading of the novel builds
upon the work of those critics who have pointed out its subversive aspects, but also
rejects the notion that the story is strictly a critique and satire of the dominant white
culture. Specifically, I argue that the nature imagery and the attitudes of Jim and
Arvay towards the natural world reveal Hurston’s complex and ambiguous feelings
about race, gender, class, and the destruction of nature, but that this ambiguity
dissipates over the course of Arvay’s quest for enlightenment and empowerment.

The vast majority of critical response to *Seraph* have conformed to an either/or
pattern: either the novel is a vacuous capitulation to white culture or it is a veiled
critique that has been misinterpreted as selling out. However, these polarized readings
are inconsistent with Hurston’s penchant for collapsing oppositions, as seen in *Their
Eyes*. Janie’s dual character, the dawn and doom in the branches of the pear tree, and
“the earth which soaks up urine and perfume with the same indifference” (73) all
exemplify the ambiguity that Hurston finds more natural than the artificial neatness of
binary oppositions. Thus, while at first glance the active, empowering natural world
of *Their Eyes* appears to have been replaced by a mechanistic, passive environment
exploited by Jim Meserve in *Seraph*, closer examination reveals a more ambivalent
portrait of the conversion of the Florida wilderness for human subsistence and profit.
As is the case in Rawlings’ *South Moon Under*, there is a precarious balance between
humans and nature in *Seraph on the Suwanee*, and the line between exploitation and
husbandry is not easily demarcated. Hurston presents Jim’s relationship with nature in
positive terms ultimately, creating what I call a “working-class pastoral” that affirms
the value of knowing nature through labor.
Hurston undoubtedly was thinking of Rawlings’ “cracker” fiction while writing this novel which she hoped would provide the popular success her fellow Floridian had attained. Rawlings had already proven the commercial viability of the subject matter of poor, rural Southern whites, but *Seraph* is not so much an imitation of Rawlings’ work as a signification on it. I do not want to suggest that Hurston was preoccupied with penning some sort of response to Rawlings’ writing, but to point out that the similarities of setting and characters, as well as the personal relationship of the two authors, warrants further examination of the relationship between *Seraph* and Rawlings’ texts. The opening paragraph of *Seraph*, in fact, provides an intriguing response to the opening of *Cross Creek*, published six years before Hurston’s novel. Rawlings indicates the location of her home by emphasizing its distance from human landmarks and its proximity to natural ones:

> Cross Creek is a bend in a country road, by land, and the flowing of Lochloosa Lake into Orange Lake, by water. We are four miles west of the small village of Island Grove, nine miles east of a turpentine still, and on the other sides we do not count distance at all, for the two lakes and the broad marshes create an infinite space between us and the horizon. (1)

Rawlings goes on in these opening pages to extol the remoteness of the Creek “from urban confusion,” implying a virtuousness of both the place and its people, whom she rather generously describes as “all individualists” (2).

Hurston’s opening offers a similar physical description of her town’s location, but depicts the environment as vitiated by human activity:

> Sawley, the town, is in west Florida, on the famous Suwanee River. It is flanked on the south by the curving course of the river . . . running swift and deep through the primitive forests, and reddened by the chemicals leached out of drinking roots. On the north, the town is flanked by cultivated fields planted to corn, cane potatoes, tobacco and small patches of cotton. . . . For the most part they were scratchy plantings, the people being mostly occupied
in the production of turpentine and lumber. The life of Sawley streamed out from the sawmill and the “teppentime ‘still.” Then too, there was ignorance and poverty, and the ever-present hookworm.

The emphasis here is on the commercial use-value of nature, and the ignorance and poverty of the citizens signify a mutually-debasing relationship with the environment. The “life of Sawley” comes from the sawmill and turpentine still, the mechanical instruments that convert nature into commodity, whereas for Rawlings, life emanates from the biota itself: “Every pine tree, every gallberry bush, every passion vine, every joree rustling in the underbrush, is vibrant” (6).

Both writers assert a bond between humanity and nature, but while Rawlings reverently proclaims "[t]here is of course an affinity between people and places” (2), Hurston offers a decidedly less rosy view: "The farms and the scanty flowers in front yards and in tin cans and buckets looked like the people. Trees and plants always look like the people they live with, somehow” (1). The absence of the animistic natural world portrayed in Their Eyes is indicative of a pastoral linking of female and passive nature. It is not clear in this early passage whether this mechanistic environment is a tool for a veiled critique of white culture and its treatment of nature or rather a sign of female submissiveness and evidence of Hurston’s growing conservatism in the post-war 1940s. By utilizing a seemingly traditional poor-girl-marries-rich-boy story that she claimed was “the favorite white theme,” Hurston introduces the indeterminacy and ambivalence that has led Meisenhelder to conclude that Hurston is criticizing white culture “from behind the trickster’s mask of praise,” while Alice Walker describes the same novel as “reactionary, static, shockingly misguided and timid.”
Hurston’s natural imagery in *Seraph* is one of the keys to recognizing the strategy of ambiguity at work in the novel. The opening description of Sawley quoted above, for example, may be said to show an exploited, diseased environment that mirrors the degeneracy of the “Anglo-Saxon” culture that controls the town. At the same time, it might be noted that the people of Sawley are not alienated from their environment, but actually immersed in the natural world and dependent on the resources of the land for both profit and survival. The mere existence of the turpentine and timber industries does not necessarily mean that Sawley’s white male power structure is subjugating and exploiting the environment and, by extension, women and African-Americans. Hurston’s tale is more complex than that, and as a story of the growth and transformation of both nature and people, the novel’s ambiguity and its resistance to being read in terms of either/or, black/white categories continue to grow through the course of the narrative.

The controlling symbol of *Their Eyes* is the pear tree, and in the opening chapter of *Seraph on the Suwanee* the narrator off-handedly notes the existence of pear trees at the Henson household, trees which “bore pears that were only good for preserving” (9). While this description seems to make a rather unfavorable comparison of Arvay to Janie, it emphasizes chiefly that the twenty-one-year-old Arvay is simply not yet ready to begin the journey of self-discovery that Janie initiates at age sixteen under the bursting buds and creamy blossoms of her pear tree. Arvay’s “temple” and “sacred place” is instead a mulberry tree still on the verge of blossoming with its “new green leaves, punctuated by tiny fuzzy things that looked
like green, stubby worms” (37). Under these boughs of nascent mulberries, Jim culminates his curious courtship with Arvay in an ambiguously described rape scene.

Just prior to the rape, Hurston includes a brief section detailing Jim’s work as an overseer in the turpentine camp. His job is to run the commissary (shades of Joe Starks) and total the accounts of the workers’ paychecks based on the number of trees pierced with a phallic “streaking iron” and drained of their valuable resource. This activity is explicitly tied to the rape that immediately follows by the advice Jim receives from his employee and “pet Negro” Joe Kelsey about how to ensure possession of Arvay: “Most women folks will love you plenty if you take and see to it that they do. . . . From the very first jump, get the bridle in they mouth and ride ’em hard and stop ’em short. They’s all alike, Boss. Take ’em and break ’em” (46). The equivocation of women, horses, and trees provides Jim with justification for his act, but Hurston’s depiction of the scene complicates any attempt to neatly categorize Arvay as passive victim.

Arvay’s initial response to the rape is to hold Jim tightly, hoping that he never leaves her, and this reaction has been troubling to many readers and critics. Meisenhelder, for example, suggests that Hurston is critiquing “the white world’s model of male sexuality” by portraying Arvay as an emblem of the debased woman produced by “Anglo-Saxon” culture. By “richly contrasting” this scene with the pear tree of Their Eyes, Meisenhelder says, “Hurston underscores the fact that, although Arvay may seem a Cinderella figure, she in fact becomes a glorified ‘spit cup’ in her marriage.” However, this reading glosses over important similarities with the pear
tree scene and cannot fully account for Arvay’s puzzling perception of her rape as cleansing and cathartic.

As I have already noted, the “tiny, fuzzy things” on the green leaves of the mulberry tree are not so much different from the “sister-calyxes” of the pear tree in kind as in degree: they are “young mulberries coming on” (37) and are not yet fully developed, like Arvay herself. Although Meisenhelder elsewhere points out several word-for-word parallels between *Seraph* and *Their Eyes*, she omits an important instance which establishes a continuity, rather than a contrast, between the women in these texts. At the masturbatory climax of the pear tree scene, “Janie felt a pain remorseless sweet” (11), while at the end of her forced encounter under the mulberry tree, “Arvay knew a pain remorseless sweet” (51). Surely this repetition is not accidental, and it implies an affinity between the two female protagonists that is (understandably) easy to miss or ignore. There is, no doubt, some irony in Hurston’s portrait of her often-annoying white heroine, but the echo of the phrase “pain remorseless sweet” suggests that she is again using natural imagery to undermine the types of polarizing concepts that produce either/or interpretations of the text.

While Jim’s actions are a clear-cut case of rape for modern readers, Hurston’s presentation of the events casts some doubt on whether her characters view this assault in the same way. Arvay, after fixing her clothes, hugs and kisses Jim until the two wind up off their feet again: “It seemed a great act of mercy when she found herself stretched on the ground again with Jim’s body weighing down upon her” (53). Jim also confuses the matter by whisking her straight to the courthouse to get married and offering an explanation of what has happened that muddles the meaning of the
word rape in this particular context: “Sure you was raped, and that ain’t all. You’re going to keep on getting raped . . . every day for the rest of your life” (57). Jim’s euphemism for marriage, in fact, is “rape in the first degree,” and Arvay couldn’t be happier to learn that they are to be married immediately. She even conceives of her rape as cathartic, the “cleansing of her sacred place” needed to expiate her guilt over her secret attraction to her sister’s husband, the Reverend Carl Middleton: “Her secret sin was forgiven and her soul set free! . . . She had paid under that mulberry tree” (57). These sorts of confounding passages are precisely what has led critics either to dismiss this novel as an anomaly in Hurston’s oeuvre or to conclude that every sentence is an ironic, subversive indictment of the book’s characters and culture.

Although the latter may seem more appealing to Hurston fans and scholars, I am arguing that either reaction misses Hurston’s emphasis on ambiguity and the inadequacy of binary oppositions, so often developed through her representation of the natural world. It seems unwarranted, for instance, to assert that female sexuality in the novel is characterized only by “passivity, receptivity, and loss of self” when, following the rape, Hurston writes that an “unknown power” takes hold of Arvay as she pulls Jim close to her: “She must eat him up, and absorb him within herself. Then he could never leave her again” (53-4). Arvay’s journey to wisdom and self-empowerment is more deliberate than Janie’s, but the similarities between the characters suggest that Hurston ultimately sees their trajectories as parallel. This idea is supported by the gradual dissipation of ambiguity over the course of the novel, illustrating the unification of Arvay’s divided mind, as well as her broken marriage.
Jim’s view of both nature and women mirrors that of Jody Starks, and, curiously, so do his words. Jody, as we have seen, dehumanizes women with statements like, “Somebody got to think for women and chillun and chickens and cows. I god, they sho don't think none themselves” (67). Jim offers his version of this idea, adding the stereotype of women as naturally subservient and emotional: “women folks were not given to thinking nohow. It was not in their makeup to do much thinking. That was what men were made for. Women were made to hover and to feel” (105). Hurston even has Jim tell Arvay, “I see one thing and can understand ten. You see ten things and can’t even understand one” (261), and this is surely an intentional reprise of Jody’s assessment of Janie in chapter six of Their Eyes: “When Ah see one thing Ah understands ten. You see ten things and don’t understand one” (67). Jim’s resemblance to Jody is unmistakable, and the actions of both men betray their words by revealing that they have very little understanding of their wives. Yet Hurston’s narrative voice is conspicuous by its absence at such misogynistic moments in Seraph. Janie’s plight is presented sympathetically, but Arvay is consistently portrayed as responsible for Jim’s dissatisfaction with their marriage.

This difference in presentation is actually a reflection of the characters’ images of themselves. Janie’s adolescent vision under the pear tree provides her with a powerful ideal of her true self, enabling her to endure an unfulfilling marriage by separating her interior and exterior lives: “She had an inside and an outside now and suddenly she knew how not to mix them” (68). Arvay, however, has no such awakening until much later in life and no positive self-image for much of the novel. She therefore accepts Jim’s characterization of himself as a victim and of herself as
an ignorant ingrate, “a hog under a acorn tree . . . never even looking up to see where
the acorns are coming from” (262). Arvay’s constant self-doubt stems from two main
sources: her guilt over having secretly loved her sister’s husband and her intransigent
embarrassment of her poor Cracker roots. The Meserves’ deformed first child, Earl, is
a manifestation of this guilt and shame--“the physical projection of her own repressed
‘Other’” according to John Lowe and “punishment for the way I used to be” (69)
according to Arvay herself. His birth intensifies Arvay’s desire to move away from
Sawley, but even in sunny Citrabelle there is a murky swamp to trouble her mind.

Soon after moving to the citrus-growing town of Citrabelle, Jim buys five
acres of land bordering “The Big Swamp . . . that formed the western barrier of the
town” (77) with money saved from picking oranges and from his days in the
turpentine camps. The swamp is terrifying to Arvay, as it represents her own tangled
psychic wilderness that she tried to leave behind in Sawley: “I don’t want no parts of
that awful place. It’s dark and haunted-looking and too big and strong to overcome.
It’s frightening! Like some big old varmint or something to eat you up” (80). Jim, on
the other hand, views this “finest stretch of muck outside the Everglades” (77) as a
feminine space where old-growth forest and sandy soil promise economic gain for
someone industrious enough to take advantage of its seemingly wasted fertility.

Clearing the swamp to plant fruit trees enables Jim to continue his economic
rise, one that is facilitated by Florida’s natural environment every step of the way. In
this sense, Hurston’s portrayal of nature is different from the other authors in this
study. For Caldwell, Rawlings, and Faulkner, reaping profits by exploiting natural
resources tends to be equated with destroying and abusing nature. Their focus is
generally on large industries (e.g., tenant farming and lumbering) that abuse the environment to the detriment of individuals struggling to live off the land. Hurston, however, in this novel, presents the natural world as a relatively egalitarian arena in which an individual like Jim Meserve can improve his family’s economic standing. There is, of course, some ambiguity in her representation of Jim’s relationship to nature, and she occasionally equates his misogyny towards Arvay with a rapacious attitude towards nature. Ultimately, though, Jim’s various enterprises provide the reader with something of a tour of Florida’s wonderfully diverse environment, creating the impression that Hurston is proudly displaying her home’s natural abundance and the economic possibilities it affords its citizens.

An interesting parallel to Jim’s relationship to the land is his relationship with the black residents of Citrabelle. Realizing that “since the colored men did all of the manual work, they were the ones who actually knew how things were done,” Jim frequents the “the jooks and gathering places in Colored Town,” hanging out, swapping stories, and buying “treats” when he first moves to town (74). He shrewdly utilizes the “underground system in Colored Town that the whites did not know about” (82) in order to complete the clearing of the swamp with cheap labor by providing a place and the supplies for a barbecue after the land is cleared. In just one weekend, the entire five-acre plot is slashed and burned and transformed into an orderly, pastoral grove of neat rows of “the very finest and the most money-making” citrus trees (83).

This endeavor is another instance where Jim’s behavior could be read as exploitative and oppressive: his success at subduing wild nature parallels his control
of both his wife and his African-American work force. To be sure, Jim profits from the deal, but so do the laborers, pickers whom Jim works beside in other groves, as do the black carpenters he hires to build his house. The men assure Jim that they are “only too glad to oblige him,” and only Arvay objects that they have stolen all the scrap wood after building the house (82). Jim explains to his wife that the wood is part of the deal that allows him to build their house for less than market value: “If I act like I don’t notice it, I got a lot of willing friends . . . All of ’em would feel hard towards me if I went around asking about those scraps of wood” (82). Hurston does not describe the exchange as one in which one party is the exploiter and the other the victim; rather, both parties are somewhere in between. Jim cultivates a mutually beneficial relationship with the black workers, and this reciprocity is mirrored in his decision to plant black-eye peas throughout the grove to benefit humans, animals and plants: “That crop served a three-fold purpose. It provided an enormous amount of additional food. . . . The cows could eat pea-vines for hay. It was a cover crop that added nitrate to the soil” (95).

It is nearly twenty years later when Jim is ready to undertake the project of clearing a large tract of the Big Swamp (the novel frequently skips years at a time between chapters). Describing the swamp as having “held the town from growing west long enough” (193), Jim appears to be an agent of culture that views nature antagonistically, as a challenge or obstacle to human progress. The reward for meeting this challenge and conquering nature is primarily financial, as Jim explains to his son-in-law, Hatton Howland, while persuading him to purchase the land, sell its timber, and fill in the swamp for future development. The bulk of profit, however, is
reserved for the white, male owners of the land, Jim and Hatton, rather than for those who work it. In the scenes on the muck in Their Eyes, Hurston is careful to point out the profits being turned by the black laborers, while the white bosses are virtually absent from the text itself. In Seraph, we see things from the other side, and the focus is on the profit from negotiating deeds, timber contracts, and development deals.

Although the focus may not be on the profits of the manual laborers, this does not mean that they do not benefit from their employment. It must be remembered that in Their Eyes the white landowners are still profiting handsomely from the labors of Janie, Tea Cake, and their coworkers, even though the bosses are not in the foreground of the story. The same holds true in reverse in Seraph, as Hurston provides subtle indications that Jim and Hatton are not simply exploiting the black workers even though the profits of the father and his son-in-law are the primary focus. As discussed above, Jim’s bargaining to clear his land and build his house is one example that he need not be reductively categorized as simply an abuser of nature and minorities, and another occurs when Joe Kelsey and his family move into a house on the Meserve grove. Briefly mentioned and easy to overlook, Jim forms a moonshining partnership with Joe that benefits both of them:

Jim, eager to accumulate and prosper as well as to help Joe out, had set Joe up in a whiskey still. . . . Joe could pay back the money that Jim had put out as he went along. All over a certain profit was to go to Jim after that. Both men considered that fair as Jim was to furnish the customers while Joe ran the still. (96)

Hurston later notes that Joe uses his profits to buy land and build a house for his family, which hardly seems to support a unilateral reading of “Jim’s effect on the black characters in the novel [as] . . . pernicious and insidious.”
Jim certainly has his share of negative qualities, too. Perhaps the most notable and disturbing are his disparaging opinion of women’s intellectual abilities and his profit-driven willingness to destroy the wilderness. These attitudes indicate that Hurston’s working-class pastoral retains some of the more conservative aspects of the traditional pastoral mode even as it modifies others. Accordingly, the men who actually clear the Big Swamp are obscured and even dehumanized through a seemingly odd association with both machines and nature:

As Jim had predicted, modern machinery and methods had cleared that swamp in an amazingly short time. Arvay, from her seat on the front porch, had watched the gangs of husky black roustabouts rumbling past in truck loads . . . [T]he horde of black men sang and chanted and swarmed and hacked, machinery rumbled and rattled, huge trucks grumbled and rolled until one day Arvay saw the sun setting behind the horizon of the world. (195)

This curious combination of natural and mechanical imagery actually seems quite logical when viewed in the context of Leo Marx’s machine-in-the-garden metaphor. As Marx explains in his seminal study of pastoral, the machine is, in fact, a necessary component of the pastoral garden because the ideal of the middle state is of nature improved, never nature for its own sake. Arvay’s role as passive observer recalls the “high seat” of Nanny’s restrictive ideal of womanhood from Their Eyes and aligns Arvay with a more passive version of the natural world than the Vodou-influenced environment of Hurston’s earlier novel. Gone are the hurricanes, lightning strikes, and other signs of nature’s resistance, replaced with a thoroughly dominated nature which reflects the oppression of women: “Arvay was surprised at finding herself feeling a sympathy with the swamp” (195).
Hurston’s depiction of the clearing of the swamp illustrates Carolyn Merchant’s contentions that the “removal of animistic, organic assumptions about the cosmos constitute[s] the death of nature” and that “the mechanical order [has] associated with it a framework of values based on power, fully compatible with the directions taken by commercial capitalism.”45 Indeed, the Meserves’ only daughter, Angeline, and her husband Hatton become rich as the swamp is filled with sand, “[r]aw, dark gashes made by the bulldozers” become streets, and sewer, water and electric lines are quickly installed (196). The centerpiece of the development is a new golf course, perhaps the ultimate symbol of exclusivity and of nature carefully contrived for the purpose of profit.

The entire development actually seems like an early version of a suburb, a category of place designed to achieve a utopian or pastoral middle-state through meticulous environmental planning. Hurston’s description of the young Howlands’ activities seems straight out of a John Cheever story: “Angie and Hatton played tennis and golf, went in swimming, canoed and motor-boated with the rest, and talked about getting sun-tanned” (197). However rosy this bucolic, bourgeois scene may appear the subtext of exploitation and stratification along class and racial lines is always present: “The Howland Development exerted a tremendous effect on Citrabelle and the surrounding country. It came along and stratified the town. The original line of the swamp gave accent like a railroad track. Those who belonged moved west” (197). Such passages seem to undermine Jim’s notions of value and progress that are elsewhere condoned by the text. One or the other of these contradictory impulses need not be given priority, however. They may be reconciled by crediting Hurston
with a more nuanced approach that acknowledges that the one group’s material advances may very well reinforce the class stratification that their new wealth helps them transcend. We should also remember that the text’s references to Colored Town and the white merchant class that profits from its residents imply that Citrabelle is not exactly a bastion of integration and financial equity before the construction of the Howland Development.

Thus, the destruction of the swamp has both positive and negative consequences that are inextricably linked. Such is the price of progress. Arvay’s sense that the Howland Development is “infinitely more threatening to her than the dark gloom of the swamp had been” (197) reflects her fears that her son-in-law will domesticate and shape her daughter just as he has the swamp—and just as Jim has done to her—making Angeline, in effect, little more than another showpiece of the Howland Development. But the swamp also represents the morass of Arvay’s psyche and her deep-seated feelings of guilt and shame from her past. Its development, then, also foreshadows her impending return to Sawley where she finally confronts those issues and returns to her mulberry tree to experience a self-empowering vision akin to Janie’s beneath the pear tree.

The association of the chaotic wilderness of the swamp with the feelings of inferiority Arvay has harbored since childhood suggests that Hurston does not conceive of the development project as entirely negative. The neo-pastoral image of the golf course implicitly contains an ideal of balance between opposing forces. Less natural than an undisturbed swamp yet less artificial than the buildings and paved streets of the town, the golf course has the potential both to alienate and to connect
people and nature. For Arvay, a new sleeping porch that Jim adds to the house has the same potential. Throughout the novel, Arvay is associated principally with the house, and her lack of an outside identity fosters her constant assumption that she is not worthy of her husband. Hurston implies that Arvay must go out into the world, into nature, in order to discover her inherent worth. The lack of solid walls on the sleeping porch both buffers her from, and joins her to, the outside world, permitting Arvay to venture outward safely and to begin sensing her intrinsic value:

As she went [into the house], the perfume from the flowers surged around her. The moon was rising, and some mocking-birds in a tangerine tree began to trill sleepily. The whip-poor-will was still sending out his lonesome call. Arvay paused in the door and looked back on the softly lighted porch. It was to her the most beautiful and perfect scene in all the world. She was as near to complete happiness as she had ever been in her life. The porch told her that she belonged.

(237)

The sleeping porch confirms that the rewards of the working-class pastoral ethos are largely items of bourgeois leisure, but Hurston does not, as we might expect, associate the rise to a middle-class lifestyle with an increase in modernist alienation.

Although there is a current of anti-materialism associated with Janie’s natural imagery in *Their Eyes*, Arvay’s new possessions actually have a liberating effect. The difference is that Janie has a strong self-image from nearly the beginning of the novel, and her pear-tree vision of herself is threatened by men’s attempts to make her into a possession. Jim, on the other hand, works to accumulate wealth and property in order to demonstrate his love for his family. “I never did like the idea of no child of mine being born on borrowed land,” he tells his wife after buying the five-acre parcel in Citrabelle (78). The novel’s narrative voice seems to confirm his motives by frequently suggesting that his desire to communicate his affection is the driving force
behind all of his labors: “Jim felt that he would stand on the mount of transfiguration when Arvay showed some appreciation of his love as expressed by what he was striving to do for her” (77). Her rise to material prosperity--symbolized by the addition of the sleeping porch--gradually begins to convince Arvay that she has value as an individual: “She had seen that kind of porches [sic] attached to houses of people, but of a class of folks whom she thought of as too high-toned for her to compare with. . . . She felt highly privileged to have it under her care, but she could not feel that she had any right to be there” (233-4).

Eventually, she begins to feel that the porch belongs to her: “It built Arvay up . . . It was a kind of a throne room.” In short, the permeable boundaries of the screened porch gently coax her outside and buttress the self-confidence she needs to fully confront the past that continues to stunt her development: “Just looking around her gave her courage. Out there, Arvay had the courage to visit the graveyard of years and dig up dates and examine them cheerfully. It was a long, long way from the turpentine woods to her sleeping porch” (234). Significantly, Arvay associates herself with natural imagery just after this encouraging episode, finally able to clarify the vague affinity she had earlier experienced with the swamp: “She felt like a dammed-up creek. Green scum was covering her over” (253). Although this stagnant and confined organic image reflects the current state of her own inner nature, it represents the tentative beginnings of self-awareness necessary to counter Jim’s most damning accusation, delivered in a fit of rage: “You’re my damn property” (216).

While Jim’s categorization of his wife leaves much to be desired from a feminist standpoint, Arvay’s failure to demonstrate that she is anything other than a
passive object is perhaps equally disappointing. Hurston seems to go out of her way
to create an infuriatingly docile heroine, including having Arvay repeatedly resolve in
her mind to leave Jim and, on one occasion, to commit suicide, only to change her
mind before actually doing anything. As Jim recognizes, she has considerable
difficulty thinking for herself: “She would follow her pride and go back home to her
mother. No, Jim was her husband and she would stay right where he put her. Back
and forth . . . always wondering what Jim wanted her to do” (270-1). This weakened
version of femininity accounts for the fact that Hurston does not associate Arvay with
any powerful natural symbols for the vast majority of the novel. In *Their Eyes* (and in
Rawlings’ work), the natural world is a source of empowerment for female
characters. Elizabeth Jane Harrison describes this kind of approach as “female
pastoral,” in which nature is “re-visioned as an enabling force for the woman
protagonist,” changing her interaction with the land “from passive association to
active cultivation or identification.” The predominantly pastoral landscape of
*Seraph* is devoid of the hurricanes, lightning strikes, and other signs of nature’s
power and resistance--at least for the first three-fourths of the book. More appropriate
for the objectified Arvay is Jim’s first shrimping boat, the *Arvay Henson*.

The use of his wife’s maiden name is actually quite telling, underscoring the
fact that she consistently views herself as an outsider in her own family: “Jim was a
Meserve. Angeline was a Meserve. Kenny was a Meserve, but so far as they were
concerned, she was still a Henson. Sort of a handmaiden around the house. She had a
married a Meserve and borned Meserves, but she was not one of them” (199). As
numerous critics have noted, the name Meserve implies that Jim demands that others
serve him. A more ambiguous reading, however, adds the possibility that the name means that Jim serves himself. Angeline and Kenny, like their father, possess a certain brashness and self-assuredness that ensures they will take care of their own needs and desires--serve themselves--before worrying about those of others. In this sense, Arvay is surely not a Meserve, but, as she says, a servant to the other members of her family. Her discovery of how to serve herself as well is signaled by her re-identification with the mulberry tree and coincides with a more visibly active natural world.

Arvay’s separation from her husband and brief return to Sawley are precipitated by Jim’s nearly fatal encounter with a rattlesnake, the first instance in which nature threatens to overwhelm him in the novel. In his typically child-like way, Jim calls Arvay to come and see him holding an eight-foot rattler, “like a little boy turning cartwheels in front of the house where his girl lived” (254). When the snake begins to wriggle free and constrict itself around Jim’s midsection, Arvay is paralyzed with fear and does nothing to help her husband, who is saved by Joe’s son Jeff an instant before the snake frees his head. For Jim, Arvay’s lack of action is significant not because he expects her to kill the snake and save him, but because her failure to understand his motives is emblematic of their entire relationship: “you never came to me and flung your arms around me and told me you appreciated the length I was willing to go for you” (264). While his knowledge of Arvay’s phobia of snakes may make his stunt appear selfish, his ensuing speech illuminates his wife’s selfish passivity and thoughtlessness:

I’m just as hungry as a dog for a knowing and a doing love. You love like a coward. Don’t take no steps at all. Just stand around and hope for things to
happen out right. Unthankful and unknowing like a hog under a acorn tree. Eating and grunting with your ears handing over your eyes, and never even looking up to see where the acorns are coming from. What satisfaction can I get out of that kind of a love, Arvay? Ain’t you never stopped to consider at all? (262)

The snake represents the risk inherent in *all* of Jim’s “hard scrambling” with nature, and his frustration stems from Arvay’s obliviousness that he has labored for her love. Unlike Jody Starks, whose construction of a town in the wilderness confines his wife and denies her a voice, Jim plants groves and drains swamps hoping to *give* Arvay a voice:

> All I ever wanted to hear from you was that you realized that I was doing out of love, and thought of you so high, that I wanted to see you pompied away up there. I never have seen you as a teppentime Cracker like you have thrown in my face time and again. I saw you like a king’s daughter out of a story-book, deserving and noble. . . . But never one time have I heard you mention that you understood all that. (263-4)

The case could certainly be made that Jim and Arvay both behave selfishly (and certainly neither is wholly admirable), but Hurston’s narrative offers nothing to refute the main thrust of Jim’s diatribe. The final chapters endorse Jim’s decision to stop “trying to free [Arvay’s] soul” (266) as they reveal that she can only do so herself.

After Jim heads for the coast, Arvay learns that her mother is on her deathbed and heads for home, jolted from her melancholic complacency by Jim’s insistence on a separation. Upon arriving in her home town, Arvay learns from her taxi driver that the saw mills and turpentine camps have been replaced by peanut farms, tourist camps, grocery stores, and a modern hotel. Carrying designer Mark Cross luggage, which Hurston notes costs “more than a turpentine worker ever handled in a year” (273), Arvay nostalgically elevates her previously shameful Cracker roots, commenting that “in the good old days, the folks in Sawley was good and kind and
neighborly [and] I'd hate to see all that done away with” (274). The driver’s
incredulous reply hints that Arvay’s return to her past will indeed be revelatory:
“Lady! You must not know this town too good. I moved here fifteen years ago and . .
. I ain't seen no more goodness and kindheartedness here than nowhere else. Such
another back-biting and carrying on you never seen. They hate like sin to take a
forward step” (274).

What shocks Arvay most, however, is the deplorable state of her sister’s
family and her childhood home. Practically Caldwellian in their squalor, Larraine is
dipping snuff on the crumbling front porch, Carl, whose face is “marred” and body
“shaped by making too many humble motions,” is working under the hood of “an
unbelievably battered old Model T,” the couple’s “mule-faced” daughters are mutely
peeping around corners, and mother Maria is wasting away inside a house “with the
strong odor of rat-urine over everything” (276). Surveying the town and her former
home, Arvay sees what her own fate would have been had she married Rev.
Middleton, and she realizes that Jim has made the difference between her life and
Larraine’s. This reappraisal of her position gives her new appreciation for her
husband, but, more importantly, it bolsters Arvay’s image of herself: “Maybe she was
not as bad off as she had thought she was. It made her feel to hold up her head and to
look upon herself” (298).

After Maria’s funeral, Carl and Larraine make a weak attempt to extort money
from Arvay, loot the house that Arvay now owns, and pile trash around the pear trees
in order to burn them. Displaying a newfound ability to see and understand herself
and the world, Arvay recognizes a symbolic significance in the landscape. The
mulberry tree, her “sacred symbol,” effects a vision of rebirth and vitality that recalls the creaming, frothing blossoms of Janie’s pear tree:

soon now . . . tender green leaves would push out of those tight little brown bumps; badges that the tree put on every spring to show that it was in the service of the sun. Fuzzy little green knots would appear. These would turn out to be juicy, sweet, purple berries before the first of May. But most of all, this tree would become a great, graceful green canopy rolling its majesty against the summer sky. Here had been her dreams since early girlhood. Here, in violent ecstasy, had begun her real life. (305)

This renewed vision of herself casts her family and past in a new light for Arvay, as well. She sees the decrepit house as the “monstropolous accumulation” of the sources of her long-festering feelings of guilt and shame. Confronting and naming them releases their hold on her, and she symbolically burns her former home with the trash meant to torch the trees:

Seeing it from the meaning of the tree it was no house at all. . . . It had soaked in so much of doing-without, of soul-starvation, of brutish vacancy of aim, of absent dreams, envy of trifles, ambitions for littleness, smothered cries and trampled love, that it was a sanctuary of tiny and sanctioned vices. . . . The physical sign of her disturbance was consuming down in flames, and she was under her tree of life. (306-7)

In her determined destruction of the house Arvay simultaneously reclaims the mulberry tree as her personal symbol, replaces her former passivity with decisive action, and refines her introspective vision, becoming conscious “for the first time in her life” of a feeling of “exultation . . . followed by a peaceful calm” (307).

The cessation of her inner turmoil, Arvay concludes, is due to the fact that she is “no longer divided in her mind” (307), and the narrative reflects this unification. The polarized perspectives of Jim and Arvay that sustain the text’s ambiguity early in the novel have largely given way, at this point, to a narrative voice that sanctions Arvay’s new vision of the world. Hurston’s linking of Arvay’s “tree of life” with
Janie’s empowering pear tree suggests that she intends both characters to be read similarly. Indeed, Hurston’s description of Arvay under the mulberry tree could easily be applied to either heroine: “the woman had triumphed, and with nothing more than her humble self, had won a vivid way of life with love” (306). Additionally, Arvay decides to turn her childhood home into a public park with the stipulation that her mulberry tree be preserved, similar to Janie’s bringing a pack of seeds home to plant and figuratively planting a seed in Pheoby with her story.

The park, with its neo-pastoral implications of nature improved and made orderly, is a fitting legacy for Arvay, who at this point exhibits the re-visioning and “active cultivation” of nature that characterize Harrison’s female pastoral. Even her creation of a park by burning her house seems an imitation of Jim’s clearing of the swamp for a golf course, at least in the sense that both house and swamp represent the guilt and fears of Arvay’s formerly divided mind. Her donation of her inherited land for the park also exemplifies the working-class pastoral Hurston develops through the novel. Certainly, Arvay would never have been financially secure enough to give away her family’s only property were it not for Jim’s successes at working the environment for profit. The upwardly mobile Meserve’s wealth thus allows the rat-infested house to permanently become a park rather than another grocery store, tourist camp, or highway in rapidly expanding Sawley. Perhaps the clearest indicator that we should read Arvay as a freshly empowered woman despite the pastoral landscapes around her is that, without knowing whether she and Jim will ever reconcile, she feels confident in her new-found knowledge of herself: “Arvay felt a piercing pain when she thought about her present terms with her husband. It could be that she had
stumbled and fumbled around until it was too late to take in the slack. If that was the case, she would never be really happy in her lifetime. But even so, she knew her way now and could see things as they were. That was some consolation” (308).

Arvay exercises her freedom of choice by reaffirming the value of her roles of wife and mother, vigorously pursuing a reunion with the husband she loves. Hurston makes a point to show her as more decisive, more considerate and simply more aware of the world and people around her. Arvay’s changed attitude surprises Jim, and when she asks to go out on the boats, he outfits her in “blue jeans that the fishermen wore, two blue shirts, and the tall rubber sea-boots” (323). This androgynous clothing, like the overalls Tea Cake gives Janie on the muck, signifies a new equality between husband and wife in a frontier-like setting. The racial egalitarianism of the shrimping community even surpasses that of the muck, where white bosses supervise work, intraracial prejudice abounds, and the neighboring Seminoles are mocked. Alfredo Corregio, the Meserve’s former Portuguese tenant, reappears as the captain of one of Jim’s boats, and “a husky Negro” commands another: “There were as many if not more colored captains than white. It was who could go out there and come back with the shrimp. And nobody thought anything about it. White and Negro captains were friendly together and compared notes. Some boats had mixed crews” (323). These lines are another illustration of the key difference between Hurston’s working-class pastoral and the nineteenth-century Southern pastoral of writers like Page and Simms: those who actually perform the labor profit from their skill and hard work, as the natural environment in Seraph is a leveling force.
As she does in *Their Eyes*, Hurston uses the boundary-erasing qualities of a community immersed in the natural world to parallel the ego-erasing love of her main characters. Arvay determines to accept Jim, despite his faults, because she knows that she is incomplete without him. Again, this sentiment closely resembles Janie’s devotion to Tea Cake even though he flirts with other women, gambles with her money, and even physically assaults her. Hurston effects the reunion of Arvay and Jim on the vastness of the ocean, with Jim piloting the *Arvay Henson* towards the open sea. Jim decides to challenge the elements and “cross the bar” out of the haven of the harbor before the water has risen to a safe level. In this obviously symbolic scene, Hurston provides a momentary glimpse of the powerful and destructive capabilities of nature which are absent from the novel until the snake incident which precipitates Arvay’s transformation: “Perhaps ten boat lengths ahead was a colossal boiling and tumbling, grumbling and rumbling of the sea that sent a white spray mounting . . . Havoc was there with her mouth wide open” (328). As Jim struggles to maintain control of the vessel, the Mate wraps himself around his captain’s leg, pleading Jim to turn around. This moment clearly is meant as a counterpoint to Jim’s battle with the rattler, and this time “Arvay saw and acted almost instinctively” (329), pulling the Mate away and allowing Jim to pilot the boat through the rough sea and into the calm waters of the Atlantic. Like the hurricane in *Their Eyes*, this natural threat is only temporary and serves to reveal the weaknesses of some characters and the strengths of others.

The exhilarating experience incites “new sensations for Arvay” as she feels “herself stretching and extending with her surroundings.” The fear that she had
experienced while crossing the bar was like a birth-pain” (331), and Arvay completes her rebirth in the gently undulating ocean that is more fitting for her new life than either the stagnant swamp or the “tumbling, grumbling and rumbling of the sea” (330). The feeling that she “just got home” (333) similarly substitutes a free-floating boat (the Arvay Henson, no less) for the confining walls of her former home in Sawley. Fulfilling Jim’s earlier wish that his wife recognize that all his labors are an expression of his love and devotion, Arvay tells him, “the notion just come to me that you took that awful chance [crossing the bar] so that I could see the sunrise out here on my first sight of the ocean” (331). Her homecoming is not just to Jim, but to herself, an “improved and changed” self who can now see through Jim’s rough talk to his inner feelings: “I ain’t near so dumb as I used to be. I can read your writing. Actions speak louder than words” (347-8). And Jim’s actions tell her, in “a moment of great revelation,” that she, too, has power in the relationship, that he “had his doubts about holding her as she had hers about him” (348).

The ocean makes a fitting setting for this vision of mutual power and reciprocal need. Its vastness and fluidity permits Hurston to portray the ocean as encompassing opposing forces in its oneness. Alternately placid and menacing, the sea appears dominated when the sailors are extracting shrimp or killing a shark, but it can also kill these men in an instant, as the fishermen constantly remind themselves with barroom tales of their departed comrades. As Jim says when Arvay mentions the beauty of the water’s constantly changing colors, “It’s pretty like you say, and then it can be ugly. It’s good and it’s bad. It’s something of everything on earth” (330). Arvay, too, is described in similar terms: “All that had happened to her, good or bad,
was a part of her own self and had come out of her” (349-50). Thus, the ocean appears as a decidedly feminine force in Hurston’s depiction. As Jim rests on Arvay’s bosom like a child returning “to the comfort of his mother,” the boat carrying them is similarly cradled by the maternal and eternal sea: “The Arvay Henson rode gently on the bosom of the Atlantic. It lifted and bowed in harmony with the wind and the sea. It was acting in submission to the infinite, and Arvay felt its peace. For the first time in her life, she acknowledged that that was the only way” (349).

Arvay’s decision to embrace the role of mother is, of course, her own choice, but her maternal impulse and her conviction that “[s]he was serving and meant to serve” (352) is a source of consternation for some critics. Hurston, however, defines her mothering metaphorically and metaphysically, in addition to literally, effecting a sense of a powerful, oceanic maternity:

Her father and Larraine had taken from her because they felt that she had something to take from and to give out of her fullness. Her mother had looked to her for dependence. Her children, and Jim and all. Her job was mothering. What more could any woman want and need? . . . Holy Mary, who had been blessed to mother Jesus, had been no better off than she was. (351)

This passage describes a creative and nurturing power that Arvay has recognized in herself, and this kind of service should not be confused with subservience. The revelation that Arvay arrives at independently is that she needs to be self-serving—a true Meserve—and then she can freely choose to offer service to others, a willful commitment to serve rather than a proscribed servitude.

Hurston also includes service in her description of Janie, a character who, unlike Arvay, is very rarely considered a mindless servant. After killing Tea Cake, “Janie held his head tightly to her breast and wept and thanked him wordlessly for
giving her the chance for loving service” (175). Perhaps because Janie is a strong, independent woman throughout her story and because her husband dies, it is easier to see in her case that service need not imply subjugation, but rather a mutually beneficial service to the self and others. Despite their differences, both of Hurston’s heroines appear remarkably similar at the ends of their respective stories: both have overcome damaging treatment from their families and husbands, are financially well-off, at peace with themselves, and content with their choices of commitment. Both are even identified with the working-class, and somewhat masculine, image of a fish-net: Janie pulls in the horizon “like a great fish-net” and drapes it over her shoulder (184), and Arvay is “going overboard with the drag and sweep the very bottom” (343).

It is, in fact, the natural imagery of both novels that is the key to understanding the similarities of their female protagonists. For both women, the outside, the natural world, represents the inside, their own inner natures. The most affirming visions of their inner natures are the pear and mulberry trees, and when these symbols are embraced and internalized, they foster a deeply rooted strength that is then projected back out to the world. That is, when Janie and Arvay learn to serve themselves, their trees blossom and provide nourishment for those they love. There is a neat symmetry in the internalization of outer nature and the externalization of inner nature, and this process is reflected in the legacies of Tea Cake’s seeds that Janie plants, the public park that Arvay creates, and the metaphorical seeds they both plant in the people closest to them. Though both are damaged by people, they find that nature re-pears the soul.
End Notes

1 Donald B. Dodd and Wynelle S. Dodd, *Historical Statistics of the South, 1790-1970* (University, Ala.: University of Alabama Press, 1973), 14-18, 34-36. During the 1920s, Florida’s urban population increased 114.9% and the rural population only 15.2%. With 51.7% of the total population living in urban areas by 1930, Florida far outpaced the rates of its regional neighbors Georgia (30.8%), South Carolina (21.3%), Alabama (28.1%) and Mississippi (16.9%).


3 Harrison argues that the landscape does not represent southern womanhood in female pastoral, but “is re-visioned as an enabling force for the woman protagonist. Her interaction with the land changes from passive association to active cultivation or identification” (10-11).


5 See Lowe’s “Seeing Beyond Seeing: Zora Neale Hurston’s Religion(s),” *The Southern Quarterly* 36 (Spring 1998): 77-87, for a more extensive appraisal of Hurston’s religious influences and beliefs.

6 Lowe notes that Hurston “was increasingly drawn to a form of Deism, if not agnosticism” (77) and that “she did not actively practice any set religion in her personal life” (85).

7 Rachel Stein, in *Shifting the Ground*, has demonstrated many of the important connections between Hurston’s natural world in *Their Eyes* and the principles of Vodou that Hurston discovered in the Caribbean. Similarly, Daphne Lamothe’s essay identifies some specific associations of Vodou deities with characters and events in *Their Eyes*. While I will be relying on these critics’ insights, as well as on some of the same ecofeminist approaches utilized by Stein in particular, I also examine Hurston’s ideas about nature within the context of the Southern pastoral tradition. Other

8 Hemenway, 237.

9 Zora Neale Hurston, Their Eyes Were Watching God. 1937. (New York: Perennial, 1990), 15-16. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

10 Or as Melvin Dixon puts it in Ride Out the Wilderness, “she perceives an irony about landscape that had eluded Nanny's vigilance: the lowlands can be high ground” (88).

11 Stein, 54. More broadly, Vodou effaces the fundamental division between humans and the physical world, a split reinforced by the Judeo-Christian separation of spirit and body. See also Lowe’s Jump at the Sun: Zora Neale Hurston’s Cosmic Comedy (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994) for more on Hurston’s treatment of this separation in Jonah’s Gourd Vine: “White-dominated society seeks to create a boundary between the body and soul, the sexual and the sacred” (97).

12 Annette Trefzer, “Possessing the Self: Caribbean Identities in Zora Neale Hurston’s Tell My Horse,” 299-312 in African American Review 34:2 (Summer 2000), 305.

13 Zora Neale Hurston, Tell My Horse (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1938), 234. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

14 Stein, 64.

15 Combinations of opposites abound in Haitian Vodou. The religion itself is referred to by scholars as syncretistic, a fusion of the officially sanctioned Catholic Church and the underground African religious traditions of the lower classes (although Desmangles argues that it is not technically syncretistic but symbiotic because the elements of Catholic and African religions coexist side-by-side but do not actually fuse [7-8]). Individual Vodou deities may have two or more personalities, often with nearly opposite characteristics. For example, the goddess Ezili includes the personae of Ezili Freda, an upper-class, light-skinned or mulatta love goddess and Ezili Danto, a working-class, dark-skinned goddess who represents motherhood and especially maternal rage (see Lamothe and Collins, who make extensive comparisons of Janie and Ezili). While such inverse personae may seem to reproduce the binary oppositions that I am claiming Hurston and Vodou transcend, “Vodouisants do not understand them to represent two distinct divine entities, the one symbolizing
beneficence and creativity and the other maleficence and destruction.” Instead, both personalities are understood to be attributes of the same divine being, and the opposition is “reconciled (or rather transcended),” as Desmangles says, by the vital force of Bondye (derived from the French *Bon Dieu*) the Godhead or creator of the universe (95-97).

16 Dixon, 87.


18 See *Jump at the Sun*, 157-197.

19 See Julie A. Haurykiewicz, “From Mules to Muliebrity: Speech and Silence in *Their Eyes Were Watching God,*” *Southern Literary Journal* 29:2 (Spring 1997) 45-60, for an extended analysis of Hurston’s use of mules as figures of both degradation and resistance.

20 Hemenway, 222.

21 This simultaneous use of positive natural imagery (the pear tree) and negative (the mule) is reminiscent of the nature-dwelling lwa of Vodou who may be coaxed to act benevolently and malevolently at different times.

22 Considering the trope of blacks and/or women as mules, Hurston perhaps intends for the buzzards who feed on the mule to represent whites and/or men.

23 For example, Meisenhelder says his “feminized” nickname promises a “sweeter” and gentler masculinity and that his surname suggests “a healthy black identity compared to the sterility implied in Joe’s” (68), and Lowe notes the connection to Virbius, King of the Woods, as well as parallels with Christ: “Tea (red, like blood) Cake (the body)” (199n5 and 204n30).

24 During her visit to Jamaica before going to Haiti, Hurston was struck by the extreme intraracial color consciousness of the islands black population. She lampoons the Jamaicans who trace their ancestry through white fathers while never mentioning their black mothers, saying the island is a place where roosters lay eggs. See chapter one of *Tell My Horse*.

25 See *Jump at the Sun*, 186-7, where Lowe argues that contemporary condemnations of Tea Cake’s violence overestimate Hurston’s intended significance of the incident and wrongly apply contemporary standards to a different culture.

26 Hurston lived through the 1929 storm while in Nassau, the Bahamas, and the 1928 hurricane ravaged Florida and destroyed the dikes of the actual Lake Okeechobee.
See Lowe, *Jump at the Sun* (202-3), and Anna Lillios, ““The Monstropolous Beast’: The Hurricane in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God,*” *The Southern Quarterly* 36:3 (Spring 1998): 89-93.

27 Interestingly, Hurston explains that this form of possession often results in the *cheval* ridiculing, insulting, or criticizing prominent officials or other persons with authority and social status. In this sense, possession is similar to Bakhtinian “carnivalesque” and other masked forms of social critique. While Hurston does not employ this aspect in Tea Cake’s “possession” episode, the hurricane does have a leveling effect, not only in its indiscriminate destruction, but also in its unmasking of white authority. One might even claim that the entire novel, or perhaps Hurston’s entire body of work, is a form of cleverly masked criticism and ridicule of various forms of authority and power. See *Tell My Horse*, pages 232-250, for more of Hurston’s experiences with possession rituals in Haiti.

28 Lowe notes the affinities between Janie and the Egyptian goddess Isis, who is associated with floods and whose symbol is the cow and details Hurston’s use of Isis in other work (195).

29 See Francis Huxley, *The Invisibles: Voodoo Gods and Haiti* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1966). Huxley explains that “the nape of the neck is important in voodoo: loa perch there when whispering secrets in your ear, a candle is stubbed out there during initiation, to seat the soul firmly in its place, and possession is often heralded by discomfort in that region” (126).

30 See also Thomas Cassidy, “Janie’s Rage: The Dog and the Storm in *Their Eyes Were Watching God,*” *CLA Journal* 36:3 (March 1993): 260-69. Cassidy reads the dog as a symbol of Janie’s sublimated rage, and also sees Tea Cake’s change in character as “an acceleration of forces already evident in his personality before the storm” (264).

31 Hemenway relates that Hurston was broke in Honduras while composing the novel and desperately needed money to facilitate an expedition to find a lost Mayan city (301-7).

32 Hemenway, 307, 314.


34 John Lowe argues that “removing race from her central field of interest made possible a more intense focus on gender but particularly class” (261). Janet St. Clair offers a more positive view of Arvay as a woman who “resists victimization” and “chooses the burden she will carry” in “The Courageous Undertow of Zora Neale

35 St. Clair, 39.

36 Hurston switched to Scribner’s, Rawlings’ publisher, in her quest for a wider audience and the novel is dedicated “To Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings and Mrs. Spessard L. Holland With Loving Admiration.”


38 She expresses this opinion in her review of Wright’s *Uncle Tom’s Children,* “Stories of Conflict.” *Saturday Review,* April 2, 1938, 32.

39 Meisenhelder, 96; Walker, Foreword to Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography,* xvi.

40 Meisenhelder, 102.

41 Ibid.

42 See Tate’s discussion of the white characters’ use of black vernacular, pp. 387-91.

43 *Jump at the Sun,* 294.

44 Meisenhelder, 113. I would point out that, in fact, Arvay is the one who more often comes across as intolerant and racist. She accuses Jim of thinking that “[e]ven niggers is better” than her family of “piney-woods Crackers” (126), and Hurston notes that her opinion of the Portuguese family that moves into the grove house is that “no foreigners were ever quite white to Arvay” (120).

45 See *The Death of Nature,* 193. Merchant also discusses how the draining of English fens negatively affected both the poor and the environment, making the poor poorer and the rich richer by reducing common lands which diminishes wildlife as a food source and a source of manure, thereby decreasing soil fertility and crop yields.

46 Harrison, 10-11.
47 Hurston’s poetic license in making the rattlesnake a constrictor suggests that she sympathizes with Jim and his belief that Arvay’s lack of understanding is squeezing the love from their marriage.

48 As Lowe notes of this scene, “the true psychological breakthrough here lies in Arvay’s understanding that all these years when she thought the mulberry tree was her ‘sign,’ the ramshackle cabin of her familial and personal past has ruled in its place” (*Jump at the Sun*, 325).

49 Hurston actually lived on a houseboat for about four years, beginning in 1943 (she even sailed from Florida to New York in 1944), and Hemenway demonstrates how she connected her boating experiences with freedom and racial integration: “the state of Florida had not gotten around to segregating boat yards, and Zora liked the way ‘all the other boat owners are very nice to me. Not a word about race’” (296).

50 See Lowe who connects this scene with Freud’s notions of ego expansion and the “oceanic feeling” (*Jump at the Sun*, 328).
Chapter Four. Hunting for the Wilderness: 
An Ecohistorical Approach to William Faulkner’s *Go Down, Moses*

William Faulkner once said that the South is “the only really authentic region in the United States, because a deep indestructible bond still exists between man and his environment.” Although the dynamics of this bond come under increased scrutiny and reappraisal in fiction of the Southern Renaissance period, the perception that it persists certainly contributes to the remarkable outpouring of great literature from the region. Despite the environmental problems of the era (or, indeed, perhaps because of them), Caldwell anticipates Faulkner’s notion of Southern authenticity in a 1933 letter to Milton Abernathy, editor of *Contempo* magazine, and connects it to increased literary production: “Listen, the South . . . is the place where the best writing is going to come from during the next several years. The rest of the country hasn’t any life. . . . A writer in the South has everything to gain, nothing to lose; therefore he can cut loose and write like a damn fool.” Faulkner would probably not hesitate to characterize himself as “a damn fool,” and his interrogations of the special relationships between human beings and the natural world in the South are the foundation upon which rests much of the best writing in the world, at that time or any other. Among his novels, the most relevant to this project are *Light in August* (1932), *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), and *Go Down, Moses* (1942), although one certainly could add several other works to that list. Since I cannot hope to cover all these highly complex novels here, I will instead concentrate on *Go Down, Moses* because it most directly confronts the issues of stewardship, wilderness, and the culture/nature opposition which Caldwell, Rawlings, and Hurston also explore to varying degrees.
“The Bear” has received vastly more critical attention than the other six sections of the novel, especially from critics examining Faulkner’s attitudes towards nature and wilderness. While this emphasis is certainly not misplaced--“The Bear” directly confronts the implications of opposing nature and culture--this approach often minimizes the importance of the natural environment in the novel’s other sections. My own reading argues that a closer investigation of the environmental history of Mississippi and of the South (what I am calling an ecohistorical approach) highlights the coherence of a seemingly fragmented work and refutes the notion that the physical environment is above all a symbolic cloak for race, class, or some other social issue. Of course, in the Faulknerian universe, where indeterminacy and ambiguity are the rule, there are always multiple layers of meaning. I hope to add another perspective by returning to the land, in a sense, by claiming that a sentence about trees may, in fact, be about actual trees, even as it simultaneously functions as a metaphor for, say, the realm of the subconscious or a prelapsarian ideal of communal brotherhood.

In order to define what I mean by ecohistorical and to demonstrate its potential value as a critical tool, I will borrow an example from Lawrence Buell’s “Faulkner and the Claims of the Natural World,” delivered as the opening lecture at the 1996 Faulkner Conference. Buell quotes the following passage from the opening chapter of Light in August which describes the world of Doane’s Mill from which Lena Grove has just come:

All the men in the village worked in the 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. But some of the machinery would be left, since new pieces could always be bought on the installment plan—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, untitled, gutting slowly into red and choked ravines beneath the long quiet rains of autumn and the galloping fury of vernal equinoaxes.

What this paragraph shows, according to Buell, is “the relation of forest history to social history.” Around the time of the publication of *Light in August* in the early 1930s, the cut-and-get-out phase of lumbering in the South was nearing the end of an ecologically devastating fifty-year boom, as Faulkner certainly would have known. If we understand the socio-economic realities of the timber industry in Mississippi, then we will have a social context in which to understand Lena, Byron Bunch, Lucas Burch, and the other characters who are directly and indirectly affected by the business of cutting trees. Or as Buell says, “All of these characters are what they are not just because of who they are but because of where they fit in the history of Mississippi lumbering.”

In response to Buell’s opening lecture, Donald Kartiganer writes “we find ourselves shocked, perhaps even irked” at Buell’s new perspective on this novel that everyone knows is about “race and community, sexuality and violence.” In short, Kartiganer’s response recognizes that the chief benefit of an ecocritical perspective may be simply to help see a work in a different light, perhaps adding another level of meaning to even the most-studied literary classics. By examining *Go Down, Moses* in the light of the environmental history of the South, and of Mississippi in particular, I hope to open fresh avenues for interpreting the novel as well as to suggest ways in which much of Faulkner’s other work might be explored.
Faulkner’s exploration of the issues of land ownership and destruction of wilderness in *Go Down, Moses* makes this work one of the most significant American novels to tackle environmental themes. Leonard Lutwack calls it “the most eloquent statement on behalf of the wilderness” in twentieth-century American literature, and John Elder describes it as a profound book that “depicts the shifting balance between man and nature in American history.” Annette Kolodny sees it as a critique of the American pastoral impulse that has traditionally feminized the land in order to justify its possession. Nevertheless, the novel is primarily about the humans who occupy the land, and Judith Bryant Wittenberg prudently cautions that to claim *Go Down, Moses* “is a protoecological work of fiction which, in significant ways, anticipates the outpouring of environmental concern that occurred about twenty years later would be, perhaps, to overstate the case.” Accordingly, my focus in this chapter is on the interaction between the human and environmental dramas being played out against the backdrop of “that doomed wilderness whose edges were being constantly and punily gnawed at by men with plows and axes who feared it because it was wilderness.”

Specifically, my approach is to examine the environmental history of the South, of Mississippi, and of Lafayette County--Faulkner’s home and the basis for his fictional Yoknapatawpha County--in the decades leading up to the publication of *Go Down, Moses* in 1942. Understanding the devastating ecological effects of widespread logging, in particular, provides a framework for interpreting this complex novel that spans over eighty years, from the 1850s to the 1940s. Exploring the interaction of humans and their environment--of culture and nature--leads to three
main conclusions about the importance of the natural environment in the novel. First, the pronounced depletion of the soil and devastation of the landscape in Mississippi, and Lafayette County in particular, would have been well known to Faulkner; consequently, he emphasizes the unintended, long-term and far-reaching consequences of actions in the human community which correlate to those in the biotic community, providing a metaphorical link between culture and nature. The second is that trees provide a material connection among the seven sections that make up *Go Down, Moses*, from the Big Woods sold for their lumber to the sawmill where Rider works in “Pantaloon in Black,” to Ike’s chosen profession of carpentry, and even to the paper sheets of the commissary ledgers containing the details of the McCaslin family history. The third conclusion is that, Faulkner utilizes the motif of the hunt to demonstrate a link between Ike’s attitude toward the wilderness and his renunciation of his inheritance, revealing that his actions, despite his intentions, make Ike complicit with both the destruction of the wilderness and the continuation of incest and miscegenation within his family.

Wittenberg notes that Faulkner’s treatment of humans’ relationship with nature connects *Go Down, Moses* with “a significant aspect of the cultural context, the growing discussion of environmentalism and ecology that was taking place during the 1930s and the 1940s.” She notes several works which appeared or reappeared in these decades as particularly important contributions to public environmental awareness, including Paul Sears’s *Deserts on the March*, George Perkins Marsh’s *Man and Nature*, Albert Schweitzer’s *My Life and Thought: An Autobiography*, John Muir’s journals, and Aldo Leopold’s *Sand County Almanac*, widely regarded as “the
bible of the ecology movement of the latter twentieth century.\[^{11}\] Buell also makes an explicit comparison of the connections between Faulkner and Leopold as voices of an emerging environmentalism, concluding that both writers “set in motion complex processes of ethical reconsideration whereby, in Faulkner, familiar hierarchies of gentry/subaltern and human/nonhuman were subjected to question in ways that intertwined them.”\[^{12}\] In short, the decades leading up to the composition and publication of *Go Down, Moses* were a time of growing awareness of environmental concerns on a national scale, and Faulkner’s novel grapples with these issues as they affected his own ecologically traumatized “postage stamp of native soil.”

Some background of the environmental history of Faulkner’s region is necessary in order to appreciate the intensity of the relationship between humans and nature in a state that in 1940 still had over 80% of its population living in rural areas.\[^{13}\] Additionally, the vitiated landscapes of Faulkner’s Mississippi offer compelling reasons why he incorporates environmental themes into a novel that appears to be primarily about race relations. The damage done to the land suggests a parallel between the wanton destruction of the environment and the harmful exploitation of African-Americans, a group of people historically and pejoratively associated with nature. The Mississippi of Faulkner’s lifetime was a state where most people’s lives were concretely and significantly affected by natural processes, primarily through the agricultural and timber industries. The activities of these industries also altered those same natural processes, often with disastrous results for those who depended on Mississippi’s air, land, and water for their livelihood, as
Faulkner was surely aware. As Don H. Doyle remarks in *Faulkner’s County: The Historical Roots of Yoknapatawpha*,

By the time Faulkner began writing about his native land in the 1920s, the evidence of destruction was everywhere to be seen. He grew up in a land torn apart by gullies that ran down the hillsides, with creeks and rivers clogged by quicksand sludge, a landscape also of denuded fields pocked with stumps left by the lumbermen who had cut their way through the woods like locusts.

Such devastated scenes were not unique to Mississippi; rather, they were indicative of the entire South in the first three decades of the twentieth century. Historian Albert Cowdrey paints a picture similar to Doyle’s but on a wider scale, presenting a harsh assessment of Southern culture’s effects on nature during this period:

As a theater of environmental disasters, the South of 1900-1930 offered instructive dramas. The boll weevil infestation that spread continuously during the period and the great flood that occurred towards its end were cooperative ventures, jointly produced by man and nature. But growing human intervention in nature on a grand scale had the most varied practical consequences.

The roots of these environmental problems are many, but the chief culprits undoubtedly are the indiscriminate logging practices that nearly wiped out Southern forests from 1880 to 1920, and the harmful agricultural methods of tenant farmers with no real incentives to work the land in ecologically responsible ways.

In *The Hamlet* (1940), Faulkner provides his own description of the desecrated landscape that echoes those of Doyle and Cowdrey above:

Chickasaw Indians had owned it, but after the Indians it had been cleared where possible for cultivation, and after the Civil War, forgotten save by small peripatetic sawmills which had vanished too now, their sites marked only by the mounds of rotting sawdust which were not only their gravestones but the monuments of people’s heedless greed. Now it was a region of scrubby second-growth pine and oak among which dogwood bloomed until it too was cut to make cotton spindles, and old fields . . . gutted and gullied by forty years of rain and frost and heat into plateaus choked with rank sedge and crumbling ravines striated red and white with alternate sand and clay.
The gullies and ravines referred to in this passage (also called “Mississippi canyons”) are created when fields that are left bare form a hard surface that sloughs off water in torrents which carry away huge amounts of topsoil, leaving gullies ten to twenty feet deep resembling “bleeding sores” that drain “the lifeblood of the land.” These were simply the most vivid signs of the destruction wrought by the single-crop tenancy system that employed Lucas Beauchamp and Rider, among others, in the Yoknapatawpha County of Go Down, Moses, as well as nearly two-thirds of all farmers in the actual Lafayette County of 1910. Even more dramatic and startling were the changes to the landscape and the environment produced by a virtual explosion in the lumber industry of Mississippi in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Although I will focus mainly on lumbering in Mississippi because of its obvious relevance to Go Down, Moses, the wholesale destruction of forests occurred across the South at approximately the same time. From 1881-1888 over five million acres of federal land were sold in “the five southern public land states,” 68% of those going to northern lumbermen and dealers. The vast numbers of trees that were cut, as well as the manner of their removal, had rippling effects throughout interdependent ecosystems, as Cowdrey explains:

[F]rom any point of view except that of immediate personal profit for a few, the South’s treatment of its forests in the Gilded Age was fundamentally in error . . . Not only were the best trees cut, the worst were left to reproduce. Destruction did not stop with the forest. The relationship between forests and soil, rivers, and wildlife amplified the losses, implying disruption of the linked systems which constituted the natural regimen of the landscape.
While Faulkner’s home of Lafayette County and the rest of northern Mississippi was a bit slower to jump on the deforestation bandwagon, the economies of some coastal counties were dominated by lumbering as early as 1860. An 1876 bill legalizing private sales of public lands with no limits on purchase size opened the door for lumbermen and speculators who, for the next twelve years, bought over 2.6 million acres of federal pineland in Mississippi at bargain rates as low as $1.25 per acre.23 Such developments were merely a precursor to the large-scale lumber production that spread throughout the state in the time of Faulkner’s childhood, a time described by Nollie Hickman as the end of “the pioneer phase of the lumber industry in Mississippi” and by Doyle as the “final desecration of the land . . . when lumber companies came into the hills of Lafayette County and cut huge swaths through the hardwood forests.”24 For example, in 1880 there were 295 sawmills statewide with a total capital investment of $1 million, growing to 338 mills with $3 million invested in 1890. By 1899, the figures had leaped to 608 sawmills and $10.8 million, and in 1909 the mushrooming totals were 1,647 mills and almost $40 million of investment capital.25 Combined with increasing saw speeds and the construction of “tramroads,” usually standard gauge rail lines, into previously inaccessible areas, the vast number of mills and their workers (many of whom were displaced tenant farmers eager for the steady wages) led to the near total destruction of the state’s virgin pine forests.

Even the largest mills were designed to last only 15-20 years, when the distance to move trees would become unprofitable. A more dramatic example of the consequences of this profit-driven approach is the wide use of “skidders” after 1900 in order to decrease costs. These steam-powered skidders used steel wire cables as
long as 1,000 feet or more which were unwound from drums on the tramroads and
attached to logs in the woods. As the revolving drums reeled in the cables, five to
fifteen logs were dragged to the track on each pull-in. One company was able to skid
all the logs on four acres at one setting, but these devices destroyed everything in
their path as they dragged trees across the ground. Hickman describes the devastating
results:

No trees or vegetation of any kind except coarse wire grass remained on the
skidder-logged hill and ridges. For miles and miles the landscape presented a
picture of bare open land that graphically illustrated the work of destruction
wrought by the economic activities of man. . . . Nor was the work of
destruction a temporary condition, for twenty-five years later the boundaries
between skidder-logged areas and those where other methods prevailed were
apparent even to the untutored eye.26

This barren wasteland is precisely the type of scenery that Ike would have viewed
during the train ride or the drive from Jefferson to the hunting grounds: “the land
across which there came now no scream of panther but instead the long hooting of
locomotives” (325). Indeed, James E. Fickle’s recent study, *Mississippi Forests and
Forestry*, shows “the symbiotic relationship between Mississippi’s lumber industry
and railroads.” The devastation of the landscape by the skidders, “which virtually
destroyed any prospects for natural reseeding of the cutover lands,” leads Fickle to
conclude that “[t]here has never been a more short-sighted or destructive method of
logging.”27

Although the cut-over acres were promoted as viable new farmland (mainly
by the lumber companies seeking to sell their now “worthless” property), most
conversion efforts were unsuccessful. For the majority of those who tried, “clearing
the land of stumps and attempting to grow crops on the thin pine soils brought only
hard work, disillusionment and tragic failure,” Hickman says, adding that, by 1920, “the once common belief that most of the cut-over land would one day be converted into prosperous farms was fast disappearing.” This development only added to the devastated quality of Mississippi’s land in Faulkner’s lifetime, but this was no overnight phenomenon, as any native would have been aware. A series of natural disasters seemingly beyond any human control included yellow fever epidemics in 1878-79 and in 1897-98, a decade of boll weevil infestation beginning in 1907, and a subsequent plague of ticks among the cattle brought in to replace the ruined cotton crops. Going back to the 1870s, state geologist and University of Mississippi professor Eugene Hilgard found “a wasteland of eroded fields, deep gullies, and silt-filled creeks” in the north central region of the state that includes Lafayette County, and he blamed the “rapacious, short-sighted strategy of its migratory inhabitants” who stripped the land of vegetation, wore out the soil and exposed it to erosion by planting only cotton and corn year after year, and then moved on to the next frontier.

Faulkner’s epic time scale and shifting chronology in the seven sections of Go Down, Moses help to reinforce the importance of the past in the living present. “Delta Autumn,” for example, and its revelation that Roth has had a child with the granddaughter of Tennie’s Jim, immediately follows “The Bear” which takes place some 55 years earlier and details Ike’s act of relinquishment that she blames for the continuing pattern of philandering, incest, and miscegenation in the McCaslin family: “You spoiled him . . . [w]hen you gave to his grandfather that land which didn’t belong to him” (343). To use a more natural idiom, the novel’s disjointed form
demonstrates that the seeds of both a ruined land and a vitiated family are planted many decades before by men blind to the long-term consequences of their actions.

L.Q.C. McCaslin would have been among the first wave of white settlers in Mississippi, as we know that he purchases Eunice in 1807 and fathers Tomy in 1810 while the official sale of most Chickasaw lands and that tribe’s mass exodus does not occur until 1837, the same year as the McCaslin patriarch’s death. The cotton farmers in this formative period of Mississippi agriculture closely resemble the lumbermen who would appear at the end of the century in their widespread and long-lasting environmental destruction in quest of immediate profits. John Hebron Moore describes the state’s agriculture in the first three decades of the nineteenth century as “extensive and exploitive [sic] rather than intensive in nature,” causing land erosion and soil exhaustion on small farms and large plantations alike. The lack of grass in cotton and corn fields kept in continuous cultivation, for example, denied the land protection from heavy rains, and, consequently, “top soil began to wash away almost as soon as newly cleared fields were put to use.” After just a few years of use, large ravines would form, the productivity of the soil would abate, and new land would be cleared to begin the cycle anew: “In retrospect, this unending process of clearing, cultivating, and destroying the fertility of the soil—a process which was one of the principal characteristics of agriculture of the Old South—resembled nothing so much as a cancerous growth spreading death and desolation across the face of the earth.”

While Moore’s language is perhaps a bit melodramatic, his assessment of planters, like the fictional Carothers McCaslin, who damaged the land for future generations of farmers is even harsher:
All too frequently, they regarded their soil as a cheap and expendable raw material which, when worked by slaves, could be converted easily into marketable produce. Furthermore, the relatively high price of labor caused farmers and planters to conserve labor and waste land—the cheaper item. Thus early Mississipians were almost unique in history: they were farmers largely devoid of that deep and abiding love for the land characteristic of agricultural peoples everywhere.\[4\]

A century later “old Carothers” is still a domineering and influential force in the lives of Ike, Lucas, Roth and McCaslin Edmonds (and, by extension, all of their families, as well) in much the same way that the rapacious treatment of the land by early settlers continues to impact Mississippi’s inhabitants well into the twentieth century, and even to the present day.

The environmental damage caused by Mississippi’s two largest industries, cotton and timber, produce a veritable wasteland that recalls the “frosty silence of the garden” in T.S. Eliot’s 1922 poem. A landscape of clear-cut forests, worn-out soil, and severely eroded fields provides Faulkner with his own “heap of broken images,” a symbolic and material legacy of the past that also reflects his declensionary view of Southern history. The critical probing and demystification of the past that are hallmarks of Southern modernism are played out in relation to the land in *Go Down, Moses*. The moral transgressions of the past reverberate in the present in the same way that exploitative environmental relationships continue to impact Mississippians decades later. In both cases, the full effects of irresponsible actions cannot be fully known for many years. Suggesting an interdependency both among humans and between nature and humanity, Faulkner does not condemn certain actions as bad or evil, but eschews an authoritative center of value by portraying the rippling consequences and effects of those actions through interconnected networks.
The convoluted McCaslin family tree is just such a system, where individual identities are chiefly derived from one’s relationships to others within the network. Lucas, for instance, who is considered black and therefore inferior by some standards of Southern society, can nonetheless be considered superior by other standards in relation to Zach Edmonds because Zach is “woman-made” and four generations removed from “old Carothers,” while Lucas is a direct male descendant. Additionally, the extended family metaphorically mirrors the particularities of the ravaged natural environment Faulkner grew up in, reflected in the McCaslin tree’s dying branches and “polluted” bloodlines (polluted, that is, in so far as they violate cultural taboos against incest and miscegenation). Amodeus “Buddy” McCaslin has no children, nor does his nephew Ike, ending the legitimate male line of descent. The illegitimate side of the family begins with Carothers’ affair with his slave Eunice, continues with his subsequent incestuous relationship with their daughter Tomey, and ends with the execution of Samuel Worsham “Butch” Beauchamp, although the child expected by Nat Beauchamp and George Wilkins does offer a rare hint of hope for the future. On the “woman-made” Edmonds side, the only descendant at the end of the novel is the son born from the intrafamilial, interracial coupling of Roth and his unnamed cousin, who is the granddaughter of Tennie’s Jim.

The network of the McCaslin-Beauchamp-Edmonds family is contained within the larger systems of Southern society and, moving out concentrically, a natural world that includes humanity. Collapsing the binary division of nature and culture in this way posits an actual, rather than only a metaphorical, connection between humans and their environment. Ike, himself, seems to assert the importance
of both links when he rails that “[t]his 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). In Ike’s mind, the people who occupy the land cannot be separated from the curse which lies on the land itself, and the reason for this is Ike’s conflation of the sins of owning people and owning private property. Yet there is also a more literal explanation of this curse from an ecological perspective.

The South’s dependency on slave labor largely arises from its fiscally expedient, but ecologically devastating, reliance on cotton. As Cowdrey explains in *This Land, This South*, in order to “fuel an expansion of the character and speed that occurred between 1790 and 1837, the South needed some commercial crop adapted to the climate, demanded by the overseas market, and suitable for production in circumstances ranging from the frontier farm to the great plantation.” Moreover, the costs of raising cotton favored wealthy planters who could afford to own large numbers of slaves, plant vast amounts of cotton, and fertilize their crops heavily. As we have seen in *Tobacco Road*, the inordinate amounts of fertilizer used in South helped deplete the soil’s fertility, yet Cowdrey also notes that the hot climate breaks down soil nutrients faster than in other regions of the country. The combination of this highly erosive, mediocre quality soil, and the short-sighted, destructive agricultural habits of the monocrop South reveals that, in one sense, there was indeed a curse on the land, and humans’ treatment of their environment only served to exacerbate its effects: “over time the South’s natural dower of soil . . . can only have imposed a constant, tenacious drag upon the growth and wealth of human societies so long as they drew the basis of their livelihood from the land.” Although low-quality
soil would not necessarily be a curse in the wider network of nature, within the smaller network of Southern society, which depends on the earth’s fertility for life and prosperity, it certainly would seem so. Thus, it would be more accurate to say that the people are the curse, not the land itself, and Ike’s insistence that the land is cursed is a bit of convenient fatalism that serves to mystify or project blame elsewhere.

If humans and the land are seen as part of the same natural network, it becomes evident that Ike’s figurative curse covering both is, in fact, a very real “constant, tenacious drag” on the entire system. Faulkner, too, seems to accept this premise that the human, plant, animal, and mineral realms are part of an encompassing network when he parenthetically interjects (parentheses themselves being a tool to join disparate strands of the same sentence) that the incoming and outgoing accounts in the commissary ledgers function as “two threads frail as truth and impalpable as equators yet cable-strong to bind for life them who made the cotton to the land their sweat fell on” (245). Having seen in his own time the deleterious results of humans’ assault on the Mississippi landscape, Faulkner juxtaposes the legacy of the South’s defeat in the Civil War that Ike inherits “as Noah’s grandchildren had inherited the Flood although they had not been there to see the deluge” (276) to the “dark and ravaged fatherland still prone and panting from its etherless operation” (284) which is the legacy of the South’s abuse of its natural resources.

Such techniques implicitly place humans inside the network of the natural world, rather than apart from it, by collapsing the distinction between material and metaphorical culture/nature connections. That is, the similarities Faulkner shows
between social and natural systems (e.g., that single events have far-reaching, long-
term consequences) exist in more than only a figurative sense because of the intimate,
if often unrecognized, bonds among human beings and their natural environments.
Without a Southern economy dependant on massive agricultural production, for
instance, there may have been no need for the clear-cutting of forests, the over-
fertilization of the soil, or even the existence of a huge slave population, thereby
eliminating the opportunity for the “original sin” of Carothers McCaslin which hangs
like a pall over the lives of every character in Go Down, Moses.

An important consequence of Faulkner’s portrayal of humans as enmeshed in
natural networks is that nature itself becomes an active participant, endowed with
agency in the theater of life, rather than only the terra nullius, or empty background,
against which meaningful human actions are played out. Although nature’s actions
unfold on a time scale of such vastness that it is often difficult to perceive it as
anything other than passive, Go Down, Moses covers a time span of over 100 years,
allowing Faulkner to range back to an era that precipitated the environmental
degradation of mid-twentieth-century Mississippi. There are several references to the
agency of nature, recalling Faulkner’s description of Absalom, Absalom! as a novel
about “a man who outraged the land, and the land then turned and destroyed the
man’s family.” In “The Fire and the Hearth,” for example, Lucas is hit in the face
by a crumbling Indian mound, “a blow not vicious so much as merely heavy-handed,

a sort of final admonitory pat from the spirit of darkness and solitude, the old earth,

perhaps the old ancestors themselves” (38). Ike, in “The Old People” intuits an
“unforgettable sense of the big woods [as] . . . profound, sentient, gigantic and
brooding,” then feels the “brooding, secret, tremendous, almost inattentive” wilderness (169-70) open up to allow him in before he watches it “not being conquered, destroyed, so much as retreating” (326) as an old man in “Delta Autumn.”

Despite these kinds of references, nature’s potential for action predominantly remains latent throughout the novel. There are no violent storms, floods, or earthquakes that punish humans and thereby reveal a hidden spiritual agency of an animistic natural world. Rather nature’s agency is felt as a material factor in the lives of those who live on the land, underscoring the symbiotic relationship of humans and their environment. The irresponsible use of forests and fields by earlier generations (along with wholly natural forces like climate and weather patterns) deteriorates the condition of the land, which, in turn, impacts the lives of later generations in numerous ways. Faulkner portrays the natural world mainly as a passive sphere because that is how the majority of the characters view it, a suggestion that this traditional, feminizing attitude toward nature is responsible for the ravaged woods and fields which are “the consequence and signature of [man’s] crime and guilt, and his punishment” (332).

Ike’s moral and legal language here is a reminder that nature does not judge human activity as good or bad. Instead, individuals like Ike later impose meanings of transgression and guilt on human behavior that has punished descendants who inherit not only a culture built on extracting value from the land, but also a depleted and ravaged environment in which to carry out that task. The assumption that nature is composed of lifeless particles--an idea that comes to dominate Western thought in the eighteenth century--sanctions virtually any commercial use of natural resources for
the advancement or profit of humankind and paves the way for large-scale destruction such as the soil damage initiated by ante-bellum farmers and the subsequent deforestation of Mississippi from 1880-1920. As the most visible sign of human beings’ wanton exploitation of their environment, the clear-cut forests of his homeland provide Faulkner a significant device for illustrating the connections between the human and natural worlds and for linking several of the stories of *Go Down, Moses*. Specifically, Faulkner sketches a parallel decline in the natural environment and the extended McCaslin family, describes how material links between humanity and nature exert reciprocal influences, and asserts that relationships with the natural world implicate relationships with women and blacks.

“Pantaloon in Black” has often been seen as having, at best, a tenuous connection to the other six stories of the novel. Few commentators, in fact, have gone very far beyond the observation of Cleanth Brooks that the tale of Rider and his dead wife Mannie “is tied to the story of the McCaslins merely by the fact that the hero rents his cabin from Carothers Edmonds and by the fact that Rider, too, on his wedding night, builds a fire on the hearth” just as Lucas does. Aside from these connections, those critics who discuss “Pantaloon in Black” tend to focus on its thematic links to the rest of the novel, particularly Rider’s emblematic racial and economic oppression and the lack of interracial understanding evidenced by the white sheriff’s misinterpretation of Rider’s grief. While critics of *Go Down, Moses* have focused understandably on the stories directly relating the McCaslin family saga, a case can be made that “Pantaloon in Black” has more direct ties to the novel’s other tales, as well as the thematic sort noted above.
Viewing the story from less of an anthropocentric perspective, we can recognize that the absence of recurring human characters from the other six stories does not necessarily diminish the relevance of “Pantaloon in Black” to the novel as a whole. The most tangible connection is that the sawmill where Rider works is the repository of the acres of tress that Ike pines for in “Delta Autumn.”\footnote{An institution of the ecologically-devastating, profit-driven system that denuded the Mississippi landscape in Faulkner’s lifetime, the sawmill illustrates the similar treatment of nature and of African-Americans at the hands of the dominant culture. Rider and the other black laborers seem little more than another natural resource to be exploited by the white bosses--so much grist for the mill, as it were--as the workers return a chunk of their pay to the nearby white bootlegger and to the mill’s night-watchman who runs a crooked dice game.\footnote{The sheriff’s deputy who relates Rider’s story to his wife estimates that the workers have been losing “a probably steady average ninety-nine percent” (151) of their pay in the craps game, a bit of hyperbole, no doubt, but enough of the truth to confirm the tight grip the mill culture has on its workers.}} The timber industry, in fact, had replaced tenant farming as the most readily available source of employment for rural laborers by the time of the action of “Pantaloon in Black,” around 1941.\footnote{In the preceding decade, Mississippi had seen its largest decrease ever in the total number of farms (this percentage would more than double in each of the next two decades). The simultaneous increases in total farm acreage and average acreage per farm signaled the belated arrival of huge, mechanized agriculture that caused the eviction of thousands of tenant farmers.\footnote{The various facets of the timber industry were there to offer work to the displaced}
farmers, although it seems the system of peonage continued, as Faulkner shows through Rider and Mannie’s continued dependence on the commissary store (133).

The lack of social progress for African-Americans and of interracial understanding shown in “Pantaloon” are symptoms of the curse on the South that Ike and Cass agree is real (284) and that Faulkner materially links to the mistreatment of the land itself. The environmental damage caused by the agriculture and timber industries in Mississippi is paralleled by the debilitating effects on African-Americans of a society supported by those industries. The economic foundation of Mississippi culture depends in many ways on dehumanized black laborers who are forced to work like beasts of burden in the most labor-intensive jobs of the cotton and timber industries46 and who are historically identified as closer to nature by the dominant white power structure. As the sheriff’s deputy who cannot comprehend Rider’s grief, indeed his very humanity, remarks to his wife: “Them damn niggers . . . They look like a man . . . [b]ut when it comes to normal human feelings and sentiments of human beings, they might just as well be a damn herd of wild buffaloes” (149-50). This characterization places blacks outside the understanding of (white) humans, making them fundamentally unknowable, exotic others. Such moments reveal the repercussions still being felt from the slave-based society of the old South which justified the peculiar institution by categorizing people of color as sub-human animals. Moreover, within the twin giants of Mississippi industry, blacks and nature are viewed in much the same way: as commodifiable objects whose treatment should be dictated primarily by profit margins.
Ike’s conception of wilderness exhibits the same process of mystification that constructs blacks as unknowable others, and Faulkner shows how this thinking significantly, if inadvertently, contributes to the eradication of that wilderness. Ike’s decision to become a carpenter (which he rationalizes as Christ-like) makes him quite literally a participant in the business of destroying virgin forests. More broadly, though, his veneration of the wilderness as a pristine counterpart to corrupted society (a premise often adopted by modern environmentalists) helps to lay the foundation for the death of that wilderness. As discussed in previous chapters, the concept of nature is historically a cultural construction for that which culture is not, and the idea of wilderness as nature in its purest state (i.e., least influenced by humans) reinscribes the dualistic thinking that polarizes nature and humanity. Returning to William Cronon’s provocative essay “The Trouble With Wilderness,” we can see that Ike McCaslin’s beliefs have much in common with “the quasi-religious values of modern environmentalism,” as Cronon puts it. Summarizing the “unexamined foundation” of wilderness which supports much of modern environmental thought, Cronon could just as easily be referring to Ike’s inner convictions about the Big Bottom:

“Wilderness is the natural, unfallen antithesis of an unnatural civilization that has lost its soul. . . . Most of all, it is the ultimate landscape of authenticity. . . . [I]t is the place where we can see the world as it really is, and so know ourselves as we really are–or ought to be.”

This landscape of authenticity described by Cronon recalls the closely related definitions of the pastoral ideal as described by Raymond Williams in England, Leo Marx in the United States, and Lucinda MacKethan in the American South. The
pastoral middle state is situated normally between the poles of wilderness and the city, or more generally, between nature and culture, and this site is used as a vantage point from which to criticize a contemporary social situation according to a purer and/or earlier set of standards. While the plantation or country estate is traditionally the setting for this pastoral critique, Faulkner moves the location to the heart of the wilderness. For Ike, the plantation is already hopelessly corrupted, so the terms of the pastoral equation are shifted over to make the wilderness the ideal state from which the ills of the plantation can be laid bare. That is, the idea of wilderness is substituted for the idea of the improved garden. However, Ike’s idea of wilderness as distinct from his family farm—as a purer place outside that culture—exemplifies Cronon’s contention that “the trouble with wilderness is that it quietly expresses and reproduces the very values its devotees seek to reject.” Defining wilderness as “the ultimate landscape of authenticity” places humans completely outside of the natural, as it makes wilderness the yardstick for judging civilization. Faulkner’s emphasis on the material interrelation of humans and their environment posits a network in which people are fundamentally part of nature. He additionally undermines Ike’s premise of an untainted wilderness by showing that, like the ideal of the pastoral garden, the notion of wilderness is a product of the culture that it ostensibly opposes.

Faulkner utilizes the motif of the hunt to demonstrate that the supposedly pure wilderness and corrupt civilization are not inimical sites but similarly constructed cultural categories. Although hunting has long been portrayed by American writers as a vehicle for personal and spiritual communion with nature, in *Go Down, Moses* hunting seems to occur as much in town and on the plantations as it does in the
wilderness of the forests. In the novel’s opening story “Was,” Faulkner links the hunt for Tomey’s Turl and the chase of the fox, dehumanizing Buck and Buddy’s half-brother by equating him with the quarry and by showing his affinity with the dogs sent to chase him. The dogs that Buck and Buddy release to chase Turl treat the runaway slave more as one of their own than as an object of pursuit, allowing him to lock them in a cabin and continue his flight to Warwick: “he and the dogs all went into the woods together, walking, like they were going home from a rabbit hunt” (14). Although this scene seems to align African-Americans and nature, it also subverts that equation. His white masters may view Turl as the quarry, but Faulkner suggests the slave is in control of this hunt as he manipulates his would-be pursuers to the Beauchamp estate where Buck is now pursued by Sophonsiba and from which Turl returns home with his future wife, Tennie.

This entire hunt is more cultural ritual than actual pursuit, with the participants even dressing up for the game, Tomey’s Turl in “his Sunday shirt . . . that he put on every time he ran away just as Uncle Buck put on the necktie each time he went to bring him back” (28). When Buck mistakenly climbs in bed with Sophonsiba, however, he enters the den of his quarry and becomes the hunted instead of the hunter, a reversal Faulkner employs throughout the novel. Hubert Beauchamp, desperate to have his sister catch her Buck, reiterates the rules of the game: “You come into bear-country of your own free will and accord. . . . You had to crawl into the den and lay down by the bear. And whether you did or didn’t know the bear was in it don’t make any difference” (21-2). The ensuing card game also mimics the hunt with first one player, then the other taking the lead through constant bluffing, raising,
and calling (while Turl ultimately controls the game as dealer). Each time that Faulkner repeats and revises the hunting scenario he reinforces its cultural and performative aspects rather than its naturalness.50

Lucas Beauchamp, for example, is involved in several of these hunting episodes, and each helps to undermine the seemingly fixed juxtaposition of hunter and quarry. He manages to survive when he marches into the “bear den” of Cass Edmonds’s bedroom intending to kill him, but two more comical incidents better illustrate how easily the roles of pursuer and pursued can be reversed. Seeking to have George Wilkins arrested for moonshining, Lucas hides his own still and alerts the sheriff to George’s illegal enterprise. George turns the tables, however, putting his still in Lucas’s backyard for the sheriff to find on his arrival. Similarly, the metal detector salesman thinks Lucas an easy mark, but is duped into renting his own machine from his intended target in pursuit of nonexistent treasure.

To return briefly to “Pantaloon in Black,” Rider’s actions following Mannie’s death mimic those of the hunters in “The Old People” and “The Bear” and further solidify hunting as a cultural production that occasionally (and incidentally) occurs in the wilderness. Rider encounters the ghost of his dead wife who quickly fades away, just as Ike sees the spirit of a buck that Walter Ewell has just killed “as if it were walking out of the very sound of the horn which related its death” (177). Rider next goes to buy a jug of whiskey before continuing on to the sawmill, echoing Ike and Boon’s comical trip to Memphis to buy alcohol for the hunting party. Finally, Rider purposely enters the lair of his prey, the watchman Birdsong who runs the crooked dice game, and challenges him there by exposing his cheating and slitting his throat
as Birdsong reaches for a concealed pistol. Ike also enters the bear’s den of his “own free will and accord,” but the bear allows him, even helps him, to leave unscathed.

Rider’s death even mirrors those of Old Ben and Sam Fathers, as all three effect a type of willed suicide. After killing Birdsong, Rider does not flee from the lynch mob; rather, they unexpectedly find him sleeping on his porch. Even when he rips the jail cell door off the wall, Rider yells, “It’s awright. Ah aint trying to git away” (153), as if he is trying to speed along his own execution in order to join his wife in death. Similarly, when Sam finds Lion’s tracks for the first time, there is “foreknowledge in Sam’s face” that this dog will be the instrument of his and Old Ben’s death: “And he was glad, he told himself. He was old. He had no children, no people, none of his blood anywhere above earth that he would ever meet again. . . . It was almost over now and he was glad” (206). Faulkner tells us three times that Ike “should have hated and feared Lion” (201, 204, 216), but Ike realizes that the bear’s death is inevitable “like the last act on a set stage” (216) and that Old Ben himself will want the chase to end: “That’s why it must be one of us. So it won’t be until the last day. When even he don’t want it to last any longer” (204). Lion, who is “like some natural force” (209), is a product of the same wilderness symbolized by Old Ben, yet is also the agent of its destruction. This irony, like the repeated reversal of hunter and hunted, subverts the fixed oppositions of the text without uniting them. Instead, Faulkner constantly collapses the juxtapositions that he sets up, but does not define a clear alternative position.

Walter J. Slatoff’s formalist study explores Faulkner’s “polar imagination,” which he defines as an inherent tendency to view the world as composed of pairs of
opposed entities. Slatoff compiles a lengthy catalogue of examples of this technique from virtually all of Faulkner’s major works and finds a syntactic and thematic emphasis on antitheses. Although Faulkner frequently “unites” these poles, Slatoff argues, the oppositions “remain in a state of deadlock where they can neither be separated nor reconciled.” Thus the mediating position between the poles is an unstable condition more often defined by what it is not than by its own characteristics. For example, Faulkner’s description of Lucas as “the composite of two races” suggests more of an uneasy truce than a fusion: “Instead of being at once the battleground and victim of the two strains, he was a vessel, durable, ancestryless, nonconductive, in which the toxin and its anti stalemated one another” (101). The repeated use of negative terms (describing something or someone by what they are not) is a hallmark of Faulkner’s style that automatically invokes its opposite state. Faulkner writes, for instance, that the bear, Old Ben, “didn’t walk into the woods,” which immediately conjures up its counterpoint of walking. Yet the bear’s actual movement falls somewhere in between these poles, paradoxically joining and opposing, while neither reconciling nor separating, the conditions of walking/not walking in an indeterminate state of movement without action: “It faded, sank back into the wilderness without motion” (200). The same process is at work as Faulkner shows wilderness to be a fluctuating combination of nature and culture.

Major de Spain’s pretext for going after Old Ben upon finding his colt slaughtered reveals that the wilderness is not, in fact, a place free from the strictures and ills of society, but rather a different setting where the same cultural rules apply: “It was Old Ben. . . . He has broken the rules. . . . He has killed mine and McCaslin’s
dogs, but that was all right. . . . But now he has come into my house and destroyed my property, out of season too. He broke the rules” (205). This anthropocentric view of nature extends human notions of property lines and proper behavior to animals in search of food in order to justify slaying the bear. Thus culture and nature are yoked together but held apart in this idea of wilderness where social norms of private property are imposed on land and unwitting wild animals. Ike’s version of wilderness turns out to be quite similar, even though he initially claims that Southern culture’s history of slave ownership precludes true possession of the wilderness “which was bigger and older than any recorded deed” or of the tamed land carved from it:

the tamed land which was to have been his heritage, the land which old Carothers McCaslin his grandfather had bought with white man’s money from the wild men whose grandfathers without guns hunted it, and tamed and ordered or believed he had tamed and ordered it for the reason that the human beings he held in bondage and in the power of life and death had removed the forest from it and in their sweat scratched the surface of it to a depth of perhaps fourteen inches in order to grow something out of it which had not been there before and which could be translated back into the money he who believed he had bought it had had to pay to get it and hold it and a reasonable profit too. (243-4)

The agricultural economy of the South contributes to its unnatural culture, in Ike’s view, as it parcels “oblongs and squares of earth” to individuals and violates God’s intention that humans “hold the earth mutual and intact in the common anonymity of brotherhood” (246).

As it turns out, Ike feels that the Southern (and American) relationship with nature is based on the wrong kind of possession, betraying the original American promise of “a new world where a nation of people could be founded in humility and pity and sufferance and pride of one to another” (247). Ike’s thinking conforms to a common version of the pastoral as he critiques contemporary society by a supposedly
purer set of standards. Now that the plantation (once the pastoral middle state) has become as hopelessly corrupted as the city, Ike sees hope in a further shift toward nature. Yet the very concept of the less-human wilderness as purer is a construction of the culture he seeks to flee. The act of repudiation of his tainted heritage, which leaves Ike “uncle to half a county and father to no one” (3), has repeatedly been denounced by critics as ineffectual or, more generously, noble but misguided. Roth Edmonds’s repetition of old Carothers’s incestuous miscegenation is read as a testament to the failure of Ike’s supposed withdrawal from society. What is less often mentioned is Faulkner’s concomitant portrayal of Ike as similarly complicit in both Roth’s actions and the destruction of the wilderness that he loves.

The McCaslin plantation signifies to Ike the ill-gotten profits of ownership of land and people, the sins he feels have cursed the South. Having learned to value and respect all life from Sam Fathers in the wilderness that “was his college” (201), Ike relinquishes his inheritance so that he will not profit from such egregious wrongdoing. His conviction that the American mission to redeem the sins of the Old World has failed leads him away from the farm and to the wilderness that signifies the initial promise and innocence of the New World, a place he also imagines as free from private ownership, “bigger and older than any recorded deed” (244). However, such a definition of wilderness places humans completely outside of the natural by making wilderness the yardstick for judging civilization. Cronon explains how this attitude reproduces the cultural values it supposedly rejects by leaving no place for humans to exist in wilderness: “The flight from history that is very nearly the core of wilderness represents the false hope of an escape from responsibility, the illusion that
we can somehow wipe clean the slate of our past and return to the tabula rasa that
supposedly existed before we began to leave our marks on the world.”52

During his conversation with Cass in part four of “The Bear,” Ike voices this
desire to turn back the clock and escape history and responsibility by denying that
anyone can own the land. Working backwards through time in his speech, Ike reveals
a longing for that imagined era of “the communal anonymity of brotherhood” prior to
notions of private property:

It was never mine to repudiate. It was never Father’s and Uncle Buddy’s to
bequeath me to repudiate because it was never Grandfather’s to bequeath
them to bequeath me to repudiate because it was never old Ikkemotubbe’s to
sell to Grandfather for bequeathment and repudiation. Because it was never
Ikkemotubbe’s fathers’ fathers’ to bequeath Ikkemotubbe to sell to
Grandfather or any man because on the instant when Ikkemotubbe discovered,
realised, that he could sell it for money, on that instant it ceased ever to have
been his forever, father to father to father, and the man who bought it bought
nothing. (245-6)

Ike thinks that legally forsaking his tainted heritage of the farm frees him from
responsibility for its harmful history. His claim that the land “was never mine to
repudiate” is a bit of sophistry to remove himself from this legacy and mask the fact
that he can never actually wipe the slate clean. His metaphysical objection to
ownership has no bearing on the material fact that, legally, possession will simply
pass to someone else. Ike’s ideal of wilderness allows him to reject the “tamed land”
of his grandfather and evade responsibility for his actions, but leaves him powerless
to effect any meaningful change and leaves the land in the hands of men like Major
de Spain who can profit from selling its forests.

Ironically, Ike still lives off the earnings of the farm, as he is forced to accept
a “loan” from Cass while struggling to earn a living as a carpenter. Faulkner
demonstrates the inefficacy of relinquishment here, echoing the earlier scene of Ike abandoning his gun, watch, and compass in order to see Old Ben. After relinquishing (a term Faulkner uses repeatedly in this section) the tools of civilization which taint him, but before Old Ben appears, Ike the experienced woodsman becomes hopelessly lost: “a child, alien and lost in the green and soaring gloom of the markless wilderness” (199). The footprints that materialize “out of thin air just one constant pace short of where he would lose them forever and be lost forever himself” (200) lead him back to his compass and watch, and only then can Ike see the bear. By appearing, Old Ben honors Ike’s relinquishment, as Dirk Kuyk, Jr. has argued, but by leading him back to the watch and compass

the Bear cancels the relinquishment, restores Ike to civilization, and puts him in his place. Without watch and compass Ike goes astray; relinquishment makes him lose his way. . . . To share the alien country of the Bear would require Ike to cross the gaps between himself and Sam, between Sam and Jobaker, and between Jobaker and the visionary deer. The Bear, by guiding him back . . . reveals the futility of relinquishment . . . [and] reinstitutes the hunt.53

What Kuyk calls “the alien country” is a mythic and spiritual wilderness that Faulkner associates with Sam and Jobaker, and that Ike employs as the counterforce to the farm in his reformulated pastoral equation. Ike desires a pastoral separation of the farm and the wilderness, but “wilderness” becomes an abstract idea for him while the farm is always a physical place he can legally reject. Somewhat ironically, his attempted separation allows the woods to be destroyed physically and the farm to be forever tainted as an idea. Although he wants to oppose the wilderness to the farm and the recent past of slavery and incest, his abstraction of “wilderness” makes it stand not for the present or the future, but for a mystical, eternal realm. This
imagined, timeless place leaves nowhere for Ike to make a living and conveniently excuses him from responsibility for both the farm and the actual woods.

This mystification of the wilderness also seems something of an evasive maneuver on Faulkner’s part. The spiritual realm presents an alternative to the separation of humans and nature, yet it is only a viable alternative if we accept the existence of invisible bears and vanishing deer inhabited by Native American spirits. This postmortem synthesis is as close as Faulkner comes to uniting the poles of humanity and nature, but, as Slatoff says, it “is only a fusion if we accept other paradoxes,” that in death, Sam and Lion are

not held fast in earth but free in earth and not in earth but of earth, myriad yet undiffused of every myriad part, leaf and twig and particle, air and sun and rain and dew and night, acorn oak and leaf and acorn again, dark and dawn and dark and dawn again in their immutable progression and, being myriad, one. (313)

If Faulkner avoids suggesting an alternative through such paradoxes, it is possibly not so much an evasion as an affirmation of irresolution and tension. As Toni Morrison has said, the novel “should have something in it that enlightens; something in it that opens the door and points the way. Something in it that suggests what the conflicts are, what the problems are. But it need not solve those problems because it is not a case study, it is not a recipe.” Thus, resolution and unity are generally temporary states for Faulkner, sometimes coexisting paradoxically with the more prevalent conditions of opposition and antithesis.

Faulkner’s language in the above passage emphasizes both the opposition between sun and rain, dark and dawn, or life and death, and their continuity, their fluid boundaries, and their cyclical patterns. This sense of the unity of “every myriad
part,” as well as Ike’s sense of losing himself in the wilderness, recall Rawlings’s epiphany in *Cross Creek*: “We were all one with the silent pulsing . . . the cycle of life, with birth and death merging one into the other in an imperceptible twilight and an insubstantial dawn . . . one’s own minute living a torn fragment of the larger cloth” (39). Yet Rawlings and Faulkner seem to realize what Ike does not: that such moments of understanding are only temporary. As with Faulkner’s stylistic antitheses, the gap between humans and nature may be bridged, but the prevailing condition is one of opposition. Rawlings’s subjective self may be subsumed briefly in “the cosmic life” (39), but only to return with a deeper knowledge of the boundaries and relationships between her self and the world. This same knowledge is the lesson that Old Ben suggests to Ike by returning him to his compass and watch. The one character who seems most easily able to cross the divide between humans and nature is Sam Fathers, the son of the Chickasaw chief Doom and his quadroon slave.

Originally named Had-Two-Fathers because “Doom pronounced a marriage between the pregnant quadroon and one of the slave men which he had just inherited” (160), Sam is also one of two father figures to the young Ike McCaslin. While Ike’s cousin Cass is the surrogate father who embodies the heritage and legacy of old Carothers and the family plantation, Sam “had been his spirit’s father if any had” (311), and Cass points out that this heritage also has a legacy: “And who inherited from Sam Fathers if not you?” (286). These two patrimonies mirror, and perhaps even precipitate, Ike’s cognitive separation of the “tamed land” of the farm from the “wild immortal spirit” (184) of the wilderness. Like Cooper’s Natty Bumppo, Sam is an expert woodsman who prefers the solitude of the forest to the restrictions of society.
Yet, as the Leatherstocking tales make clear, such trailblazing figures help, perhaps unwittingly, to extend the boundaries of the frontier and convert the wilderness into tamed land.

In many respects, however, this uninhabited wilderness has already been substantially imprinted by the hand of humanity. Fickle explains that

One of the enduring myths of American and Mississippi history is the idea that when Europeans first explored North America they were everywhere east of the Mississippi River confronted by a vast, unaltered, ‘virgin’ forest . . . and a corollary of this theory is that the Native Americans encountered by the early Europeans were somehow mystically in touch with ‘nature,’ leaving almost no impact on the land and its forests.\[55\]

In fact, Native American Mississippian culture “reached its peak between about 1200 and 1600 A.D.,” and by the time of European contact included towns, large-scale agriculture, and forest management that included logging and controlled burning.\[57\]

Whether Faulkner was familiar with this history or not, his Native American short stories, including “Red Leaves,” “A Courtship,” “Lo!” and “A Justice,” do not present a primitivist portrait of Sam Fathers’ ancestors. He describes a sophisticated society peopled not by noble savages living in mystical harmony with nature, but by hunters, farmers, traders, and slaveholders with the same desires and weaknesses as their white neighbors. Sam, therefore, can be an expert tracker, woodsman, and paternal mentor for Ike without having to be a supernatural guide to some ethereal world, or, as Richard Moreland has said, Cass’s and Ike’s visions of the deer “may well have had more to do with the mythic ritualization of their killing of those deer than with the immortality of the buck.”\[58\]

The enduring American cultural myth of “regeneration through violence,” famously analyzed by Richard Slotkin, is exposed in *Go Down, Moses*. Moreland
says, as “a deliberate obfuscation of its historical implications in terms of the exploitation and destruction of the wilderness, the land, the Indians, and blacks.”

Similarly, the myth that America’s forests were pristine and unbroken and inhabited by barely human savages effaces the history of Native American culture and its role in the transformation of the nation from wilderness to garden. Various strains of the pastoral tradition also follow this pattern of concealment by marginalizing laborers and slaves as either part of the landscape or as the gardeners of the garden. Ike’s abstraction and mystification of the idea of wilderness parallels these cultural responses to nature: by renouncing his family farm he seeks to obviate his responsibility for the destruction of the woods and to remain untainted while fantasizing the wilderness as a place of “tall unaxed trees and sightless brakes where the wild strong immortal game ran forever before the tireless belling immortal hounds” (337-8).

The Lacanian analysis of Ike’s choice of withdrawal over action provided by Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber in a recent article emphasizes the importance of repetition and of pursuit without attainment:

[F]or Ike, the wilderness embodies an unavailable yet longed-for wholeness and becomes what is desired (Lacan’s objet a) yet unattainable . . . the fantasy upon which the consistency of his being depends. . . . By identifying the woods as his lost object, Ike asserts himself as subject by associating with its positive and good characteristics. . . . In the wilderness, Ike is subject in that he is part of the good South or Eden as opposed to the South of the ledger.

Like the frozen scene on Keats’s Grecian Urn, which, as Schreiber says, “mirrors the function of the objet a, the signifier of the irretrievable lack,” the hunt allows Ike to sustain his ideal of the wilderness and his sense of self by retreating from the progress of history. As Sam Fathers points out, Ike twice sees Old Ben while holding his gun,
yet he does not shoot because “the yearly pageant-rite” (186) of hunting the bear is more important than the kill.

Faulkner’s response to a question about hunting further reveals the connections to the desire for Lacan’s lost object: “The hunt was simply a symbol of pursuit. . . . [It teaches] not only to pursue but to overtake and then to have the compassion not to destroy, to catch, to touch and then let go because tomorrow you can pursue again. . . . The pursuit is the thing, not the reward, not the gain.”64

Although Faulkner says that Ike “should have hated and feared Lion” as the harbinger of destruction for the wilderness, he pointedly does not say that Ike does hate and fear Lion. In Schreiber’s Lacanian reading, “Ike accepts the inevitable physical doom of the wilderness because he preserves the wilderness as objet a through his unchanging subjectivity.”65 Thus, even as Ike surveys the new planing mill in “shocked and grieved amazement,” his self-deception lets him maintain his idealized fantasy of wilderness and ignore his role in the impending destruction of the actual woods: “he . . . did not look any more, mounted the log-train caboose with his gun . . . and looked no more save toward the wall of wilderness ahead within which he would be able to hide himself from it once more anyway” (303-4).

Ike’s flight from responsibility fails because it depends on a false opposition of culture and nature, as William Cronon explains: “there is nothing natural about the concept of wilderness. It is entirely a creation of the culture that holds it dear, a product of the very history it seeks to deny.”66 Ike’s belief that the divide between wilderness and civilization is “as sharp as the demarcation of a doored wall” (170) is the basis of his moral denunciation of his society, as well as the reason for the failure
of his gesture. Although he does not cite Cronon’s work, David H. Evans applies a similar theory of wilderness as cultural construction to Ike’s actions: “If nature is always cultural, it does not offer a place of truth outside of culture, or a privileged perspective by which to comprehend and judge the evils and injustice of society. In fact, the very privilege accorded to nature is itself a cultural convention.”

However, Ike’s relinquishment of the McCaslin farm is not only misguided and ineffectual, but, as Faulkner shows via the symbolism of Ike’s profession as a carpenter, it also contributes to the destruction of the wilderness he reveres. Evans’ analysis of Ike’s negative judgment of Southern and American history illustrates Cronon’s contention that wilderness reproduces the very values its devotees seek to reject: “his denunciation of the crimes of American history in his jeremiad is ultimately a reinforcement of the essential providential assumptions of epistemological privilege and special election that have subtended that history from the beginning.” Of course, the trouble Cronon refers to is not from wild nature itself, but from the conceptual category of “wilderness” which, like the pastoral middle state, places human beings outside the natural world: “To the extent that we celebrate wilderness as the measure with which we judge civilization, we reproduce the dualism that sets humanity and nature at opposite poles.”

Ike’s reverence for the Big Woods merely reverses the hierarchy of the culture/nature opposition by privileging the latter, but does very little to slow the actual degradation of the landscape. Instead, Ike’s position allows him the luxury “to see the two of them—himself and the wilderness—as coevals... the two spans running out together,” and thus he can preserve the object of his affection in the abstract even
as he watches “it retreat year by year before the onslaught of axe and saw and log-
lines and then dynamite and tractor plows” (337). Faulkner supports the notion of
Ike’s responsibility for the destruction of the wilderness during his return to Sam’s
garden, “yet this time it was as though the train (and not only the train but himself. . .)
had brought with it into the doomed wilderness even before the actual axe the shadow
and portent of the new mill not even finished yet and the rails and ties which were not
even laid” (306). Just as he earlier refused to look at the sawmill, Ike again hides the
existence and purpose of the train from himself as soon as he disembarks: “Then it
was gone. It had not been. He could no longer hear it. The wilderness soared musing,
inattentive, myriad, eternal, green; older than any mill-shed, longer than any spur-
line” (307).

Ike can fantasize that the railroad was “harmless once” because he views his
own presence in the woods with the hunting party as harmless too. The close ties
between the railroad and timber industries in Mississippi suggest otherwise. The role
of railroads in opening previously inaccessible land to loggers parallels Ike’s
culpability in the clear-cutting of the hunting grounds. Imagining the wilderness as
“doomed” and Old Ben’s death as inevitable, and even self-willed, is a posture of
convenient fatalism that masks the fact that the members of the hunting party build
houses, fence land, raise livestock, depopulate the deer and other animals, and
facilitate the expansion of settlement and industry that had already brought
destruction to the landscapes of Mississippi.
This flashback to Ike’s last visit to the Big Woods before “the lumber company moved in and began to cut the timber” (301) comes just after the scene in which his wife offers her body in exchange for the McCaslin farm. Louise Westling argues that this “anachronistic juxtaposition” suggests that “feminine sexuality seems to lead to destruction of the Delta Eden” and disguises the blame of Major de Spain, who actually sells the land to the lumber company. This same formula, where “men are the agents of sin . . . but women . . . are to blame,” in Westling’s words, applies to the story of Sam Fathers, who was sold into slavery by his father, yet, we are told by Cass, was “betrayed through the black blood which his mother gave him . . . not willfully betrayed by his mother, but betrayed by her all the same” (162). Westling identifies this pattern as a “cultural habit of gendering the landscape as female” which she traces through a long line of male, American writers who “disguise and evade the responsibility of white men for the displacement of another people on the land and the ravishing of an existing ecosystem for their own gain.” However, she feels that Faulkner (and I would agree) breaks with this tradition as he “writes his way towards an understanding of this process in Go Down, Moses, and he comes very close to exposing it totally.” He accomplishes this task by revealing the failure of Ike’s relinquishment and by contrasting Ike’s attitudes towards the land and his wife with those of Lucas Beauchamp.

While Ike always thinks of the woods as “his mistress and his wife” (311), Lucas does not harbor such romantic and gendered conceptions of nature. Ike’s decision to forego the responsibilities of running the family plantation rests on his demarcation between the tainted natural world of the civilized farm and the ostensibly
purer nature of the wilderness. Despite his claims that Sam Fathers “had been his mentor . . . the wilderness . . . his college and the old male bear itself . . . his alma mater” (201-2), Ike seems unable to apply his knowledge to any practical ends, and he is unwilling to inherit the burden of working and running the farm. Again, I refer to Cronon’s essay for an explanation of the trouble with a fantasy of pristine nature, like Ike’s: “Only people whose relation to the land was already alienated could hold up wilderness as a model for human life in nature, for the romantic ideology of wilderness leaves precisely nowhere for human beings actually to make their living from the land.”

Lucas, on the other hand, exhibits a more material connection with nature as he works the land in order to extract its utilitarian value, trading a mule for the divining machine and digging for gold in the earth and Indian burial mounds. Faulkner tells us that Lucas develops his own intimate relationship with nature, but one that develops from his labor and physical contact with the land:

But it was his own field, though he neither owned it nor wanted to nor even needed to. He had been cultivating it for forty-five years . . . plowing and planting and working it when and how he saw fit. . . . He had been born on this land, twenty-five years before the Edmonds who now owned it. He had worked on it ever since he got big enough to hold a plow straight; he had hunted over every foot of it during his childhood and youth and his manhood too. (35-6)

The attitudes of both Lucas and Ike towards nature entail human costs, but while Ike is willing to sacrifice his relationship with his wife for his devotion to his wilderness ethic, Lucas changes his ways in order to save his marriage. The fire on the hearth is a powerful symbol of endurance, and Lucas gives up the divining machine when Molly threatens to divorce him in order to keep his home fire burning. His conciliatory
offering of a nickel-bag of candy to Molly exhibits more love and understanding than Ike’s entire marriage.

In contrasting these first cousins’ relationships with their wives and with nature, Faulkner postulates an equation similar to Caldwell’s in *God’s Little Acre*:
those who are alienated from the land are also alienated from their fellow humans. In Ike’s case this alienation is reflected in his similar attitudes towards nature, blacks, and women as fundamentally unknowable others. He likes to think of the wilderness in mystical terms, as an eternal realm where slain bucks are “forever immortal” (171) and he is merely a guest “and Sam Fathers’ voice the mouthpiece of the host,” a voice that can vouchsafe Ike’s passage into an alien world:

And as he talked about those old times and those dead and vanished men of another race . . . gradually to the boy those old times would cease to be old times and would become part of the boy’s present, not only as if they had happened yesterday but as if they were still happening, the men who walked through them actually walking in breath and air and casting an actual shadow on the earth they had not quitted . . . until at last it would seem to the boy that he himself had not come into existence yet, that none of his race nor the other subject race which his people had brought with them into the land had come here yet. (165)

Ike extends this fantasy of uncorrupted difference to Lucas and to the entire black race. Recalling his description of Old Ben as “its own ungendered progenitor” (202), Ike somewhat enviously imagines that Lucas escapes history by changing his name from Lucius and making it “no longer the white man’s but his own, by himself composed, himself selfprogenitive and nominate, by himself ancestored” (269). The notion that blacks are inherently different and therefore immune to the “curse” whites have brought to the land becomes clear in Ike’s essentialist definition of the black race: “They are better than we are. Stronger than we are. Their vices are vices aped
from white men . . . [and their virtues] they had . . . already from the old free fathers a longer time free than us because we have never been free” (281-2). Contained within his nostalgic images of blacks’ original freedom and a pre-European, prelapsarian wilderness is a subsequent decline, most clearly evident to the elder Ike of “Delta Autumn” in the vanishing woods and the lesser men of the modern hunting party.

The encounter with the unnamed granddaughter of Tennie’s Jim occurs, ironically enough, in the wilderness where Ike had supposedly learned about truth, honor, and humility. Upon meeting Roth’s mistress, Ike can only think that she has come to ambush his cousin (“You won’t jump him here.”), and he repeatedly asks, “What do you want? What do you expect?” (340, 342). But she wants nothing more than to see Roth again before her trip back home, and thus exposes Ike’s misguided thinking and “gives lie to the myth of women as castrators, entrappers, and betrayers.” The cycle of interracial, intrafamilial breeding continues, and Ike is once again trying to pay off the “black” side of his family, spouting platitudes like, “Go back North. Marry: a man in your own race. . . . You are young, handsome, almost white . . . Then you will forget all this, forget it ever happened, that he ever existed” (346). But Ike merely seems pathetic and bitter “in his huddle of blankets,” as she, standing over him, “blazed silently down at him” before delivering her withering assessment of Uncle Ike’s life: “‘Old man,’ she said, ‘have you lived so long and forgotten so much that you don’t remember anything you ever knew or felt or even heard about love?’” (346). This attack prompts Ike to link the environmental degradation that he sees all around him with a general cultural decay, blaming everyone but himself:
This Delta, he thought. This Delta. *This land which man has deswamped and
denuded and derivered in two generations so that white men can own
plantations and commute every night to Memphis and black men own
plantations and ride in jim crow cars to Chicago to live in millionaires’
mansions on Lakeshore Drive, where white men rent farms and live like
niggers and niggers crop on shares and live like animals . . . Chinese and
African and Aryan and Jew, all breed and spawn together until no man has
time to say which one is which nor cares . . . No wonder the ruined woods I
used to know don’t cry for retribution! he thought: The people who have
destroyed it will accomplish its revenge. (347)

Yet, as Faulkner has shown, Ike is implicated in the deterioration of both his family
and the landscape, and his nostalgic fantasy of races no longer (if ever) separate now
seems directly related to his conceptual separation of wilderness and civilization: both
mask his responsibility for the unintended destruction of what he has sought to
protect.

Ike also nostalgically remembers the beginning of his marriage as a time of
unity and mutual understanding with his unnamed wife: “they were married and it
was the new country, his heritage too as it was the heritage of all . . . his too because
each must share with another in order to come into it and in the sharing they become
one: for that while, one: for that little while at least, one: indivisible” (297). But open
association of her body and sexual gratification with the land of the plantation makes
“the chaste woman, the wife” seem different, her naked body “changed, altered” into
“the composite of all woman-flesh,” which Ike associates with mystical knowledge
beyond his relational capacity: “She already knows more than I with all the man-
listening in camps . . . They are born already bored with what a boy approaches only
at fourteen and fifteen with blundering and aghast trembling . . . She is lost. She was
born lost. We were all born lost” (299-300). Again we see the clear division in Ike’s
imagination between the corrupt, tamed land associated with actual women and the
concept of pure, immemorial wilderness as “his mistress and his wife,” but also his “alma mater,” a composite not of “woman-flesh” but of abstractions of the feminine, that offers sanctuary from reality and responsibility: “the wilderness closed behind his entrance as it had opened momentarily to accept him” (187).

This feminized wilderness, then, actually replaces his lost, fallen wife, allowing Ike to assume the role of Adam in a Southern Eden. Ike’s desire for absolution from guilt for his family’s and culture’s sins becomes a wish for a return to original innocence. Although Ike and his wife were “one: for that little while,” she becomes an Eve-like temptress by offering her body in exchange for the farm. If only the three symbols of the wilderness “Sam and Old Ben and the mongrel Lion were taintless and incorruptible” (183), then only Ike’s idea of wilderness can fulfill his need for an unfallen feminine counterpart. His wife (and all women, it seems) are born with a knowledge that precludes a return to the innocence of Eden. As I have been arguing, Ike’s idea of wilderness is a version of the pastoral garden, which, in the South, has even been made to accommodate the existence of slavery. Substituting wilderness for “the garden of the chattel,” as Lewis Simpson has called the Southern incarnation of the pastoral idea, allows Ike to recover an Edenic state prior to the sins of ownership that brought a curse to the land. However, Ike’s paradisiacal fantasy depends on a deceiving and willful nostalgia to suppress the knowledge that the garden is always/already irrecoverable. Ike’s mystification of women, blacks, and the mythic wilderness as ultimately unknowable, along with his refusal even to look at the sawmill, are manifestations of this self-deception. Instead of eating from the tree of knowledge, Ike stands idly by as the trees of Eden are clear-cut, the only way to
preserve his fantasy of innocence and, ironically, the only way to preserve his idea of timeless wilderness.

The cyclical recurrence of the sins of the past reveals that Ike’s renunciation of responsibility indirectly causes (or at least does not prevent) Roth’s incestuous union and refusal to acknowledge his child. By refusing to inherit the responsibility of the farm, Ike also forfeits the chance to have his own son (or daughter) and perhaps redress in future generations the ills he identifies in the present and past. His convenient fatalism of “the doomed wilderness” (185) ignores the regenerative power of nature and the possibility of revision through repetition. As Cass tells a young Ike after the boy has seen the spirit of the deer: “And the earth don’t want to just keep things, hoard them; it wants to use them again. Look at the seed, the acorns, at what happens even to carrion when you try to bury it: it refuses too, seethes and struggles too until it reaches light and air again, hunting the sun still” (179). The key trait in this struggle for future survival is endurance, a trait Faulkner identifies in three offspring of mixed heritage: the son of Roth and his cousin, the expected child of Natalie and George Wilkins, and the fyce that Ike saves from Old Ben. In a later interview, Faulkner calls the fyce the antithesis of the bear and explains that the dog “represents the creature who has coped with his environment and is still on top of it, you might say. That he has--instead of sticking with his breeding and becoming a decadent, degenerate creature, he has mixed himself up with the good stock where he picked and chose.” Running counter to Ike’s fears of miscegenation, then, is Faulkner’s belief that heterogeneous elements increase adaptability, which is essential for survival.
The children of the Beauchamp line of the family are most obviously like the admirable fyce, who Faulkner says elsewhere represents “the indomitable spirit of man,” and offer at least the possibility of change and revitalization in the “treeless,” “denuded and derivered” Southern wasteland. The cycles of destruction and renewal in Go Down, Moses reflect the tentative beginnings of ecological renewal in Mississippi just prior to, but especially after, the novel’s publication. After the heyday of the logging industry ended in the 1920s, there were sporadic efforts at reforestation, and by the late 1930s young forests were beginning to reappear on the Mississippi landscape. The New Deal also created the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) which planted trees on over 160,000 acres of worn-out farmland, mostly in the South. Abandoned farmland in north Mississippi even began to return to various forest types on its own, and the Forest Service planted over 600,000 acres of trees in Mississippi, including some 39 million young pine trees in Lafayette County alone from 1949 to 1959. Such efforts led the mayor of Oxford in 1959 to issue a proclamation calling the town “The Reforestation Capital of the World,” a claim that would have been unthinkable just thirty years earlier.

Even the timber companies sought to preserve the smallest trees and encourage reforestation through organizations like the Southern Pulpwood Conservation Association. The railroad industry leaders also realized that better long-term forest management was in their best interests, lest hundreds of miles of tracks built primarily to move logs to mills sit idle. Of course, the motives of the timber and railroad industries in encouraging reforestation are hardly altruistic, and their efforts are a reminder that the renewal of forests can easily engender a new period of
massive logging and environmental exploitation. For instance, a 1996 article in *Pulp & Paper* reports that “a switch from short-sighted cut-and-run policies of the beginning of the century to long-range forest planning and management” in Mississippi has helped replenish the state’s forests and revive the forest product industry to the point that timber is once again “the state’s most valuable economic commodity.” However, a recent *Audubon* article describes the continued use of skidders and other modern machinery in a sudden rise of logging in the South (especially in Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi) “with a determination not seen in this area since the cut-and-run logging days of the early 1900s,” and the timber industry’s own literature estimated in 1997 that the removal rate would exceed growth in the South in only ten more years.80 As these developments attest, Faulkner’s cyclical view of history in *Go Down, Moses* entails the potential for both recovery and renewed destruction: repetition with revision or an unaltered repetition of the past. Ike McCaslin, in his desire not to profit from his tainted heritage, disengages himself from the social processes that might create an alternative to the past, preferring to withdraw to the imagined, timeless Eden of the mind. He effectively removes his voice, as well as the natural ethos he inherits from Sam Fathers, from the discourse of the South and relinquishes even the possibility of his life mattering to anyone but himself.

End Notes


5 Ibid., 3.


10 Ibid., 52.

11 Ibid., 57-9.


13 Donald B. Dodd and Wynelle S. Dodd, *Historical Statistics of the South, 1790-1970* (University, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1973), 34-7. The approximately 1.75 million rural residents of Mississippi in 1940 were having increasing difficulty making their living from the land, as the number of farms fell nearly 7% statewide in the 1930s and 13.6% in the 1940s (34-5).

14 Charles S. Aiken, in “Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County: Geographical Fact Into Fiction,” *The Geographical Review* 67:1 (January 1977): 1-21, and “A Geographical Approach to William Faulkner’s ‘The Bear,’” *The Geographical Review* 71:4 (October 1981): 446-459, provides ample and compelling evidence that Faulkner closely based Jefferson and Yoknapatawpha County on the actual places of Oxford and Lafayette County. Aiken discusses Faulkner’s techniques for altering or revising the facts of the actual places, but he also demonstrates the amazing amount of specific similarities between the “actual” and the “apocryphal” (to use Faulkner’s terms), including the geographic formulation of the county, the locations of settlements,


16 Albert E. Cowdrey, This Land, This South: An Environmental History (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1983), 127.

17 Much like in Caldwell’s Georgia, there is ample blame to go around for the harmful effects of tenant farming. Often with half their crop pledged to the landlord in advance, the tenants, who often moved yearly, had more immediate worries than the long-term productivity of the soil they worked, while the land owners simply wanted the most cotton possible to recoup their yearly investments in the volatile cotton markets and to repay bank loans. Laws and regulations governing lumber companies helped produce a system similarly detrimental to the environment, especially in Mississippi. The state’s ever-increasing taxes on forest land led to rapid clear-cutting and immediate selling of cut-over land. Moreover, the timber was often security for debts of lumbermen, and mills constantly operated near maximum capacity so that payments could be met. See Nollie Hickman, “Mississippi Forests,” 212-232 in A History of Mississippi, Volume II, Ed. Richard McLemore (Hattiesburg: University and College Press of Mississippi, 1973), 221.


19 Doyle, 297-8.

20 Interestingly, Jack Temple Kirby notes in Rural Worlds Lost: The American South 1920-1960 (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1987) that while Southern tenant farmers were rarely related by blood or marriage to landlords, such relationships were common in the Midwest corn belt, a relatively healthy agricultural region compared to the ailing rural South: “The poor renter-relative ratios virtually define the limits of the South within such border states as Missourri, Oklahoma, and Texas” (3). For example, in the seven cotton- and corn-growing counties of extreme southeastern Missouri, only 8 percent of tenants were related to their landlords, compared to as high as 32.7 percent in the northern and western counties of the state, according to a 1941 U.S. Department of Agricultural Report (3-4).

21 Cowdrey, 112.

22 Ibid., 114.

23 Hickman, Mississippi Harvest: Lumbering in the Longleaf Pine Belt 1840-1915 (Montgomery: Paragon, 1962), 71-84. Other states were selling similar land at the time for $19 per acre (97), perhaps suggesting why Mississippi’s forests fell into the
hands of a few large syndicates which then could level hundreds of thousands of forest acres in a relatively short period.

24 Hickman, 153; Doyle, 299.

25 Hickman, 155. In 1908, when Faulkner was 11 years old, a report compiled by U.S. government foresters concluded that “more than half of the longleaf pineland of Mississippi had already been converted into stumps” (261).

26 Ibid., 165-6.

27 James E. Fickle, Mississippi Forests and Forestry (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2001), 77, 98, 66. Fickle’s book provides the best and most comprehensive analysis of the history of Mississippi’s forests to date.

28 Ibid., 264.


30 Ibid., 297.

31 Ibid., 50-1. Doyle explains that the 1837 sale was of collectively owned lands (some 4 million of a total 6.4 million acres) in the area that includes Oxford. The rest of the territory (often the best land) was allotted to individual heads of families who negotiated its sale themselves, as Ikkemotubbe does in Go Down, Moses (45-6).


33 Ibid., 38.

34 Ibid., 41-2.

35 Cowdrey, 71.

36 Ibid., 3. Regarding the dominance of cotton in the South, Cowdrey adds that “any system which covers too many fields with the same plant falls afoul of the ecological principle which states that the simplest systems are apt to be the most unstable” (79).

Rupert B. Vance makes a similar case for interdependence in *Human Geography of the South* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1932), suggesting some continuity in the Modernism of the South: “place conditions work, work conditions the family organization, and the family is the social unit which makes up society” (11). Also see the recent work of humanist geographers like Martyn Lee, who reminds us in “Relocating Location: Cultural Geography, the Specificity of Place and the City Habitus,” 126-141 in *Cultural Methodologies*, Ed. Jim McGuigan (London: Sage, 1997) that “space, when taken culturally, represents a relatively coherent and autonomous social domain which exercises a certain determinacy upon both the population and the social processes located upon its terrain” (127).

See Merchant’s *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* for a history of the mechanization of nature and the connections between women and nature in popular and scientific thought.


Although Buell mentions “Pantaloon” only briefly in “Faulkner and the Claims of the Natural World,” his comments on the history of logging and on the importance of Rider’s occupation (8) helped direct my approach to this chapter.

The bootlegger seems to be in cahoots, or at least quite friendly, with those in charge of the mill when he tries to sell Rider a pint instead of a gallon because, he says, it’s only Monday and he knows the mill will be running all week.

Kinney provides the most comprehensive chronology of the book (see Appendix I, 131-135), utilizing and supplementing Meredith Smith’s article “A Chronology of *Go Down, Moses.*” *Mississippi Quarterly* 36:3 (Summer 1983): 319-28.

Dodd and Dodd, 34. Kirby also notes that while tenancy rates steadily decline in the South from 1920-1959, the numbers drop “very rapidly” after 1935 (68).

See Fickle, 104-110, for more on racial divisions of labor in Mississippi lumbering.


Ibid., 80.


52 Cronon, 80.


54 Slatoff, 103.


56 Fickle, 3.

57 Ibid., 8.

58 Moreland, 177.

59 Ibid., 176. Moreland goes on to argue that Faulkner’s criticism of the myth does not stop with “an ironic acknowledgement of its obscured destructiveness (this will be the willfully ironic position represented by Ike’s relinquishment of his patrimony). . . . He represents both these innocent and ironic versions of the same myth as willfully reductive attempts to resolve a much more stubborn ambivalence of fear and desire.”


61 Faulkner himself describes Ike’s thoughts about his inheritance and legacy as, “This is rotten, I don’t like it, I can’t do anything about it, but at least I will not participate in it myself.” He goes on to opine that “[w]hat we need are people who will say, This is bad and I’m going to do something about it, I’m going to change it,” revealing that he views Ike’s repudiation as an ineffectual response to the tainted history of the McCaslins and the South as a whole. See Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner, eds. *Faulkner in the University* (Charlottesville, Va.: University of Virginia Press, 1959), 246.

63 Ibid., 487.

64 Gwynn and Blotner, 271.

65 Schreiber, 488.

66 Cronon, 79.

67 David H. Evans, “Taking the Place of Nature: ‘The Bear’ and the Incarnation of America,” 179-197 in Faulkner and the Natural World, 188. Evans further contends that Ike similarly constructs the past by inventing the “discovery” of old Carothers’s affairs with Eunice and their daughter, Tomasina.

68 Cronon, 80; Evans, 193-4. Evans also adds that “in passing judgment on Ike, readers replicate his own gesture, to the extent that they also imagine themselves to have the moral ‘high ground’ from which to discover the inherent value of Ike’s decision and to fit it into a moral historical pattern” (194).

69 Cronon, 81. The pastoral critique of the city from the country is similar because it privileges city/culture by making its goal reformation according to a supposedly more natural set of standards.

70 Westling, 122.

71 Ibid., 5, 116.

72 Cronon, 80.

73 Westling, 123.

74 Gwynn and Blotner, 37.

75 Ibid., 280.

76 Hickman, 265-6.

77 See Cowdrey, 160, who adds that “eight years of CCC work advanced state and national conservation by twenty-five to forty years.”

79 The Illinois Central Railroad helped design and manufacture a mechanical tree planter which they demonstrated throughout Mississippi in the 1950s, giving away blueprints of the machine at no cost to any interested parties. See Fickle, 185-194.

Conclusion. Return to Eden: The Current State of Pastoral

In his recent study *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River*, Richard White recounts the fascinating and often troubling history of human interaction with the Columbia River of the Pacific Northwest. In the Columbia Basin, a dozen dams have been built on the river and its tributaries, creating a vast power system that has never fulfilled its own goals. The development of the river “has largely destroyed a vast natural bounty of salmon and replaced it with an expensive and declining artificial system of hatcheries.” The Hanford Nuclear Reservation that was built on the river regularly released poisonous and carcinogenic elements, creating “a radioactive geography . . . by the intersection of weather, water, soils, plants, animals, markets, specific radionuclides, and our own bodies.”

Yet White’s purpose is not to denounce the development of the waterway he refers to as “a virtual river,” where the human and the natural, the mechanical and the organic, have merged to the point that they can no longer be separated: “We can’t treat the river as if it is simply nature and all dams, hatcheries, channels, pumps, cities, ranches, and pulp mills are ugly and unnecessary blotches on a still coherent natural system. These things are now part of the river itself.” Ultimately, White argues that the central insight offered by the history of the Columbia River is not “the need to leave nature alone,” but that “there is no clear line between us and nature.” The central insight of White’s book, which Leo Marx calls “a compelling microhistory of the encounter between the forces of technology and nature in America,” is that the separation between humans and nature exists to be crossed. Coming to terms with the reality and implications of the idea that humanity and
nature are inextricably bound within the same larger system is imperative for understanding our history and for plotting our future.

Throughout his book, White argues that the workers who helped create the organic machine of the river experienced an intimate bond with nature through labor (a notion often shunned in contemporary environmental movements). As I have suggested throughout this study, writers of the Southern Renaissance posit the same idea in their fiction. Surely part of their impetus for doing so was a distrust of abstract labor like cotton and stock brokering that seemed responsible for national financial calamities and gross class inequities. Yet another part of the appeal of knowing nature through work was perhaps the somewhat contradictory allure of reconfirming “the deep, indestructible bond between man and his environment,” to use Faulkner’s words, in order to establish a continuity with the Southern past, even while reinventing the idea of the South for the present and future. For it is not the wish to find Eden—a place of harmonic balance between nature and culture—that changes in Southern literature of the 1930s and 1940s. Rather, it is the notion of how to get there that changes in response to the specific social, historical, cultural, and ecological climates.

For each of the writers included in this study, knowing nature through work is a potential means for overcoming the apparent separation of the human and the natural. Caldwell’s Jeeter Lester is denied the chance to work the land by a combination of ecological, economic, and physiological factors, and the result is devastating, threatening even the humanity of the Lester family. Ty Ty Walden’s labor is not necessarily productive, but his obsessive digging at least keeps him
healthy and even happy. Will Thompson’s story suggests that Caldwell finds that any
type of labor can be positive because of the lack of available work in the Depression-
era South. Will finds the proper balance of nature and culture in the ivy-covered walls
of the cotton mill, forsaking the inherently solitary labor of farming the depleted land
in favor of the mill work that fosters a spirit of collective unity.

The abusive (to both land and people) agricultural system of the South seems
to have made Caldwell give up on the idea of productive labor in nature as a viable
future alternative, at least for small independent farmers. A recent article in the Baton
Rouge Advocate seems to bear out Caldwell’s vision. A profile of Louisiana farmers
reveals that shockingly little has changed in the last seventy years aside from the
amount of debt farmers are now forced to accumulate. George Lacour explains that he
started with a 200-acre farm that has grown to 5,000 acres, requiring him to borrow
about $1 million in advance: “In the South, the family farm has to be bigger . . . We
don’t make the yields that they [Midwestern farmers] make. . . . I never wanted to be
a 5,000-acre farmer. They’ve forced me into this position with the current farm
programs.” Roy Goode notes that he received 32 cents per pound for cotton in 1948,
while in 2001, prices dipped below the 30-cent level. Randy Dunham sums up the
predicament of a vicious debt cycle that rivals the sharecropping arrangements of an
erlier generation: “To get out is almost impossible. You’re trapped in the business.”

While Caldwell’s pessimistic view of farming is perhaps depressingly
accurate, Rawlings presents the wilderness of the scrub as outside of the market
forces that trap professional farmers. The subsistence farming of Lant and Penny
permits a diversified knowledge of nature through labor. Lant makes moonshine in
the forest and raises sunken logs from the river, while both men hunt and trap for food, rather than for sport or profit, in ways that stress a responsibility to an ecological network. Rawlings herself learned nature by hunting, running an orange grove, and growing small plots of food. She posits the interdependence of the human and the natural by linking Lant’s and Penny’s responsible relationships with their environment to their positive and healthy human relationships.

Hurston distinguishes between the labor that Janie is compelled to do by Logan Killicks and Jody Starks and the labor she chooses to do alongside Tea Cake. Portraying an intimate connection of inner and outer nature, Hurston suggests that Janie’s work for her first two husbands is too much like slave labor--forced rather than chosen--to be fulfilling. Like the former slaves (including Nanny), Janie associates Logan’s farm with bondage and the more wild space of the muck with freedom. Even though she works in agriculture on the muck, she actively chooses this labor in order to spend more time with Tea Cake, the “bee-man” who is good for her inner nature. In *Seraph on the Suwanee*, Hurston develops a working-class pastoral which reveals that knowing nature through labor can be financially rewarding as well.

Faulkner’s Ike McCaslin has no real working connection with nature because of his repudiation of his family farm. His only work is transforming the processed trees of the forest into buildings in town. Unlike the benefit of a sense of collective power that Will Thompson gets from labor similarly removed from direct contact with nature, Ike’s occupation symbolizes his alienation from everything: the land, his family, the society of the South, his wife, and himself. Ike’s hunting is more recreation and a quest for enlightenment than the necessary labor and way of life that
it is for Sam Fathers or Lant or Penny, a fact that ironically denies Ike the knowledge of nature he seeks. Lucas Beauchamp farms, makes moonshine, and digs for gold in nature, and his fire on the hearth signifies a healthy home life, in stark contrast to Ike’s cold, loveless, and childless marriage.

Despite the continuity between these authors’ positive portraits of knowing nature through work and Richard White’s similar endorsement in *The Organic Machine*, this idea meets fierce resistance in the popular notion of contemporary environmental movements that nature is best and purest when untouched by humans. As critic Glen Love argues, and as I have suggested in my reading of Rawlings’ work, wilderness has come to replace the pastoral middle ground “as the locus of stability and value, the seat of instruction. . . . Under the influence of ecological thought, wilderness has radicalized the pastoral experience.” This shift is due in some part to works like the ones examined in this study that reveal the traditional pastoral version of nature to be a simplified version of civilization. Thus, wilderness is posited as the site of “real” nature, and any signs of human influence are seen as artificial, debasing intrusions.

Particularly influential in this romantic, idealized conception of wilderness is the ubiquity of the modern version of the pastoral middle state: the suburbs. Although the suburbs were initially conceived of as a utopian blend of city and country life, as Robert Beuka argues, a powerful reactionary vision has emerged in American film and literature in the postwar era of suburbs as “interchangeable, placeless locales” peopled by “a soulless, conformist populace whose disturbing homogeneity reflected that of their landscape.” Just as the pastoral now “finds itself bearing the stigma of a
human-caused and increasingly serious despoliation of the physical environment,”
suburbs are increasingly seen in a similar light: as the place where they chop down
the trees and name the streets after them. This increased scrutiny and criticism of
suburbia as another instance of artificial, contrived nature only increases the appeal of
wilderness as the only “authentic” nature left, Ike McCaslin’s morally pure corrective
to a corrupt society.

While Love accurately describes the shift of the idea of wilderness from
“appealing but ultimately impossible alternative” to “the model of a complex
diversity and a new pattern for survival,” he does not discuss the possibility that
wilderness may become (indeed, is already becoming) the new pastoral site of a blend
of culture and nature, with the ironic intention of preserving its naturalness. When
knowing nature through work is decried out of hand, it “leaves precisely nowhere for
human beings to actually make their living from the land.” Thus, “wilderness” as the
categorical antithesis of civilization is itself a cultural construct that reproduces the
dualism that sets humanity and nature at opposite poles in the first place. Prohibiting
labor in supposedly untouched wilderness leaves tourism as the main interaction
available with the natural world, and tourists want something different from their
(suburban) home. Namely, they want a “wilderness” that conforms to notions of what
“authentic” nature—in all its beauty, splendor, and difference—should be.

The results of such thinking include the draining of Niagara Falls in 1975 in
order to better control the amount of water flowing over the falls, to place rocks and
other diversions that control water direction, and to enhance the “natural” scenery by
framing vistas of the falls from selected vantage points—all with the unironic goal of
preserving the falls’ “naturalness” for future tourists. Additionally, the National Park Service Organic Act mandates that the Park Service “conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein . . . [to] leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.” The goal, then, is not to develop parks that are more natural, but to manage them in such a way that they remain as close as possible to some prior state of existence (apparently that of 1916 when Congress created the Park Service). The attributes of complexity and change that make wilderness an appealing alternative to the static simplicity of the pastoral garden are replaced by increased human involvement in nature so that future generations will experience the same “pristine wilderness” as the previous ones.

What such developments show are the unintended consequences that may result from redefining the pastoral as Rawlings does in her celebration of wilderness. Faulkner, ahead of his time as usual, suggests through Ike McCaslin’s opposition of the wilderness to the farm the potential problems inherent in such a romantic conception of wilderness. In short, it threatens to reinscribe the pastoral values from which true wilderness supposedly frees us. The current idea of wilderness as valuable because of its difference has produced two schools of thought among environmentalists, approaches described by Evan Eisenberg as Planet Fetishers and Planet Managers. Eisenberg, who finds fault with both schools, describes Fetishers as dreaming of “returning to Eden [by] restoring a state of harmony in which wilderness reclaims the planet and man is lost in the foliage, a smart but self-effacing ape.” Managers, on the other hand, “dream of a man-made paradise, an earth managed by wise humans in its own best interest and, by happy chance, humankind’s as well.”
What unites these schools, and connects them with the issues, authors, and novels examined in this study, is the desire to return to a state of perfect balance with the world: Eden.

The dream of Eden is always a desire to go back: to return to a home from which we have been evicted. The essential paradox of this wish is that Eden exists only in the past and can only be regained in the future. Even more frustrating is the realization that it exists only in myth, even while it is still sought in reality. I suggest that the characters of every novel discussed in this study seek a place that provides a state of harmony, the defining feature of Eden, but that they end more or less where they began. The old tobacco road heads out to the world, but also leads back. Dude sees the world from behind the wheel of Sister Bessie’s car, but takes up the futile hopes of the departed Jeeter and accepts his place as home. The back and forth motion of *God’s Little Acre* ultimately returns the novel to where it began: the Walden farm where Ty Ty can only continue digging after the deaths of two sons and a son-in-law. Lant and Kezzy end *South Moon Under* seeing an image of their own family in a nest of squirrels and knowing that all of the scrub is a home that protects them from outside threats. Rawlings finds a renewed acceptance of her home at Cross Creek after experiencing a harmony with the river in the episodes of “Hyacinth Drift.” Her child hero Jody Baxter travels from home through the forest and on the river, only to return again with a deeper understanding of his obligations to the parents who make their house his home.

*Their Eyes* begins and ends in Janie’s home, and her personal narrative takes her through a succession of unfulfilling homes before she learns to accept herself and
the return to Eatonville. Arvay, who never feels she quite belongs in her parents’ home or her husband’s, finds self-acceptance and marital happiness only after burning one home, leaving the other, and joining Jim on his boat to forge a new home together. Only Ike McCaslin, who we last see lying alone and trembling in a tent, fails to find a home, not because he fails to find a responsible relationship with nature, but, as the scathing reproach of Roth’s mistress suggests, because he fails to create a selfless, healthy bond with other people: “Old man, have you lived so long and forgotten so much that you don’t remember anything you ever knew or felt or even heard about love?” (346). Even the dead in Go Down, Moses seem to find their way home: Sam and Lion return to the earth, Rider rejoins Mannie through his willed death, and Butch Beauchamp returns home to Mollie in a casket. The enduring symbol of home in the novel, though, is the eternal flame on the hearth of Lucas and Mollie, a tradition passed on to George and Nat, awaiting the birth of their first child. In each of the novels, the characters who find home in the end do so not necessarily in nature or wilderness, but quite often because of their experiences and relationships with the natural world, suggesting that perhaps the only attainable Eden is not a place in nature at all, but a state of mind.

End Notes


2 Ibid., 109.

3 One particularly interesting example is White’s defense of dam builders: “It is foolish to think that the danger and exhilaration of a man dangling from a cliff with a jackhammer somehow differs from that of rock climbers who also dangle from cliffs. We need to take the work and its intent seriously” (61).


7 Love, 204.

8 Ibid., 203.

9 Cronon, 80-1.


11 “Pest Management in the National Park Service.” National Park Service Natural Resource Fact Sheet. Updated Nov. 2, 1999: (1-3) <http://www1.nature.nps.gov/facts/ftipm.htm>

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Vita

Christopher Branimir Rieger was born in Washington, D. C., grew up in Greenwood, South Carolina, and is a 1989 graduate of Greenwood High School. He received a Bachelor of Arts degree from Emory University in 1993 and worked at a law firm in Irvine, California, for two years. He currently teaches courses in composition, business communication, and literature at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, where he received a Master of Arts degree in English in 1997. He will receive the degree of Doctor of Philosophy from LSU in May, 2002.