Chapter I

THE PRIMAL CURSE
A reader will be able to appreciate Faulkner more fully if he discovers the basic mythic pattern under­lying his work. Faulkner's entire corpus is informed with the idea that the social history of his region is the result of the initial choice made by the white man in the deep South in the beginning of the Settlement. This begins with the white man's ownership of the big chunks of the virgin land and the subsequent introduction of chattel slavery in the region. This institution of slavery proves suicidal to the region, causes the civil war and paves the way for the decline of the Southern plantation aristocracy. Charles N. Milon correctly states Faulkner's position:

Throughout the body of Faulkner's stories, there is found a very definite social theory, predicated upon certain clearly articulated moral assumptions about the land and the people of his fictional world. The theory is one which seeks to understand the present through the detailed knowledge of the past and which tests the hypothesis that the present evils grew from the past evils. This
theory is of necessity historical because
the evils which beset the present grew
from man's attempt to possess the land, a
violation according to Faulkner of God's
intention.

This basic insight of Faulkner finds full expression in

The Bear - a long story which forms a part of Go Down,
Moses. The protagonist of this story Isaac McCaslin
(Ike) reads one day in the ledger of the plantation
commissary:

June 21th 1833 Drowned herself. 2

and a little later:

23 June 1833 Who in hell heard of a
nigger drowning himself. 3

This factual entry, normally of very little signi-

cance to the members of the plantation aristocracy,
prompts novitiate Isaac to brood over his family history.
He begins to think about the wider implications of the
event for his own family and the other families of the
region. His father and his uncle, both in their own

1. Charles H. Milon, Faulkner and the Negro, (University

2. Go Down, Moses and other stories, Penguin Books,
1970, p. 204. /All references to the text, here-
after, will be to this edition./

3. Ibid., p. 204.
hand-writing have recorded the event in the family ledger. This clearly indicates the importance of the event for them. But there was no clue left to ascertain the nature of their instant reactions. The thing which the whole county knew was known to Isaac too. After the death of Lucius Quintus Carothers McCaslin in 1837, his two sons, popularly known as Uncle Buck and Uncle Buddy, decided to live in a humble cottage leaving the larger plantation house to the negroes. This was certainly an act of denunciation. Isaac's father and uncle in their own way tried to right a wrong which constantly worried them. But the wrong which includes incest, miscegenation, segregation and inhuman brutal exploitation demands a spiritual initiative and benediction of a very high order. Ike fulfills his destiny when he completely repudiates his tainted legacy, the prime source of the white man's guilt and doom.

At the age of ten Ike for the first time goes to the big woods and participates in the bear hunt. Here, he comes to know very intimately Sam Fathers, 'taintless, uncorruptible, pure of heart and with the mind of a child, son of a Chickasaw chief and a negro slave'. He is only one generation removed from the natural world of the thick woods and its inmates. Sam Fathers
plays the role of a spiritual mentor for Ike. The hunting party includes, Major De Spain, General Compson, Ike's cousin Cass Edmonds and others from Jefferson. These pioneers and custodians of the old order hunt other bears and deer, but spare the Old Ben. Faulkner writes about the legendary bear:

*** man myriad and nameless even to one another in the land where the old bear had earned a name, and through which ran not even a mortal beast but an anachronism indomitable and invincible out of an old dead time, a phantom, epitome and apotheosis of the old wild life which the old puny humans swarmed and hacked at in a fury of abhorrence and fear like pygmies about the ankles of a drowsing elephant - the old bear, solitary, indomitable, and alone; widowed childless and absolved of mortality - Old Priam reft of his old wife and outlived all his sons.  

The hunting party from Jefferson comes to the forest not to hunt in the real sense but to keep yearly rendezvous with the bear which they did not intend to kill. Cass informs Ike:

Courage and honour and pride, and pity and love and justice and of liberty. They all touch the heart, and what the heart holds to becomes truth, as far as we know truth. Do you see now?

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4 Ibid., p. 147.
5 Ibid., p. 227.
The Old Ben represents all this and because of this the hunting party spares him. Ike is very keen to see the Trojan head of the forest. But tainted as he is, he is disappointed. Only when on the advice of Sam Fathers he rejects his hunter's equipment does he see the Old Ben.

Irving Malin writes:

In the wilderness Isaac McCaslin learns from Sam Fathers, his spiritual guide, that he must leave the cold abstractionism of his region. He must remove his watch, his compass, and his gun because he is in the presence of natural fertility. He is not a white man any longer. Class distinctions are lost—he is merely the hunter out of time (the watch) and space (the compass). Isaac learns that Old Ben, the bear, is the symbol of the wildness of life which must be tamed in order to gain inner balance and serenity...

Ordering of the spirit of psyche is necessary—not killing.6

Faulkner describes Ike's feeling when he sees the old bear for the first time thus:

Then he saw the bear. It did not emerge, appear; it was just there, immobile, fixed in the green and windless moon's hot dappling, not as big as he had dreamed it but as big as he had expected, bigger, dimensionless against the dappled obscurity, looking at him. Then it moved. It crossed the glade without haste, walking for an instant into the

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Sun's full glare and out of it, and stopped again and looked back at him across one shoulder. Then it was gone. It did not walk into the woods. It faded, sank back into the wilderness without motion as he had watched a fish a huge old bass, sink back into the dark depths of its pool and vanish without even any movement of its fins.\(^7\)

Later, Ike learns from Sam Fathers all about the big woods:

> It was of the man, not white nor black nor red but man, hunters, with the will and hardihood to endure and the humility and skill to survive.\(^8\)

Sam Fathers explains to Ike that the Old Ben, the head bear of the forest is the man and stands for pride, humility, fertility, continuity and the old South. Sam Fathers also singles him out to communicate to him his deeper understanding of the big woods through a symbolic act. At the age of thirteen when Ike kills his first buck Sam Fathers marks his forehead with the hot blood. In this way Sam Fathers performs a kind of baptism, a ritual of initiation into the manly, heroic possibilities of life. Ike as a young boy realizes its significance

\(^7\) Ibid., p. 159.

\(^8\) Ibid., p. 145.
for a hunter. The other hunters from the town partially know that Sam Fathers knows very clearly, and do not want to snap completely the bond between nature and man. Consequently, the old bear enjoys a kind of immortality. Year after year, hunters come to the forest and return home without Ben's hide or skin. This ritual they perform to renew their contact with the pure and the primitive sources of life. Occasionally, Sam Fathers used to repeat—"not now, but someday somebody will kill the head bear." He a young lad is too young to grasp fully the deeper implications of his cryptic utterances. When Lion, the fierce dog, clings to Old Ben's neck, and Boon's knife ultimately pierces Ben's heart, Ben dies. In the death of Old Ben and Lion, Sam Fathers sees more than the death of a bear and a dog. He clearly sees the end of an era, an order which was founded on mutual trust, love, pride, pity and endurance. He also visualizes:

It seemed to him that there was a fatality in it. It seemed to him that something, he did not know what, was beginning; had already begun. It was like the last act on a set stage. It was the beginning.
of the end of something, he didn't know what except that he would not grieve. He would be humble and proud that he had been found worthy to be a part of it too or even just to see it too.

Major De Spain's hunting party buries the dog and the bear in a corner of the thick woods, with great religious solemnity. With the death of the Old Ben, Sam Fathers has lost the will to live, as if he has lost his last kinsman and, dies of complete exhaustion. Ike broods over his quiet parting:

He was old. He had no children, no people, none of his blood anywhere above earth that he would ever meet again. And even if he were to, he could not have touched it, spoken to it, because for seventy years now he had had to be a negro. It was almost over now and he was glad. 10

For six years Ike had often the opportunity to listen to Sam Fathers. From his discourses, his life and his tragedy, and from his own experiences in the big woods Ike discovered the basic truths of the tragic human destiny. Sam Fathers, the grand old man of the county even for a moment was not accepted by the Southern community as a human being because his hairless -

9 Ibid., p. 172.

10 Ibid., p. 163.
copper-body had some drops of the negro blood in it. This was an intolerable human situation for Ike. For the accident of genetics became the sole criterion to determine the worth of an individual. Ike vehemently revolted against this mechanical categorization which was not based on merit, justice, honour, and human charity, but was founded on the arbitrary laws of man. From Sam Fathers, Ike also learnt to view nature as the source of all our 'moral being'. If this primal source is defiled even once, human life becomes a sink of ignominy. Man the greatest defiler of the source, is condemned eternally, if he does not care to renew his contact with the primordial sources of life. This Ike felt as a man; this he had to accomplish as a planter and a man.

As soon as Ike read the family record in the plantation commissary, he became conscious of the white man's guilt and the burden. He alone gained this insight because Sam Fathers had taught him to love and pity all the creatures of the good earth. In the company of Sam Fathers Ike also realized the true nature of the South's original sin and the punishment attendant upon it. The commissary ledger which was in a sense the authentic
'chronicle of the old South' revealed to him the presence of a crime which was not confined to his family only, but was a part of the white man's heritage in the South. He immediately realized that the source of the tragedy and defeat of the South was due to the original violation of natural laws for which the thunder-wielding God punished them with defeat and humiliation.

The founder of the McCaslin family Lucius Quintus Carothers McCaslin, grandfather of Ike, originally a man from Carolina came to Mississippi's Yoknapatawpha county, bought the land from the Chikasaw chief to establish his own Cavalier order in the deep South. Once, in New Orleans he bought a young negro slave Fumice. He was in intimate relation with this dark woman and when he discovered that she was pregnant, he married her to Thoneyus, a negro on the plantation. Fumice gave birth to a girl Thomasina. In prime of her youth Thomasina came to the large plantation house to manage its affairs. Here, her real white plantation father ordered her to his bed, which she could not refuse. Later, Fumice came to know about her daughter's pregnancy, became wild with rage and committed suicide on a Christmas Day by drowning herself in a creek. Thomasina died in child-birth.
Her son Turl got $1000 from the seducer and defiler of his mother's virgin bed.

This horrifying event took place decades before the Civil War in the South, at a time when South was not very far from the 'frontier stage'. Land was open to the pioneers. Here, they came to their promised land, acquired big chunks of it from the Red Indians and changed it into a garden of Eden. But at this stage these settlers, according to Faulkner committed the 'original sin'. They bought the land, became its owners, exploited it for their personal gain and deliberately worked against the very spirit of the first 'Covenant' which existed between man and his Maker. The land was given to man, not to men, red, white or black. It was given to him by his Maker with a definite purpose. Man had a right to till it, sow it, reap its harvest to support himself and his offsprings. But at no stage was he permitted by the Maker to exploit it or use it as an instrument of coercion. Faulkner very precisely describes the essence of the old religious creed:

Because He told in the Book how He created the earth, made it and looked at it and said it was all right, and
then He made man. He made the earth first and peopled it with dumb creatures, and then He created man to be His overseer on the earth and to hold suzerainty over the earth and the animals on it in His name, not to hold for himself and his descendants inviolable title for ever, generation after generation, to the 'oblongs and squares' of the earth, but to hold the earth mutual and intact in the communal anonymity of brotherhood, and all the fee He asked was pity and humility and sufferance and endurance and the sweat of his face for bread.11

But the white man in this new-found land forgot the sole commandment of his Maker who created the earth, filled it with feathers, beasts and the other creatures and finally made man the overseer of the whole creation. Man had no option before him but to obey the sole commandment. The violation of this commandment meant expulsion of man from the Edenic world of peace and perennial security.

But the white man in the South not only owned big chunks of land, and produced cotton to sell it for profit, but used it to enlarge the area of his influence, and more than that exploited the normal resources of the land to gratify his abnormal and unholy appetites. His aggressive attitude towards nature ultimately resulted in the disappearance of the filial bond between man and nature.

Separated from nature man indulged in all kinds of

11 Ibid., p. 196.
moral turpitudes. This ownership of the land, which was nothing but the rape of the virgin soil for the gratification of carnal desires brought the 'primal curse' on the land and its white settlers. The white settler who cleared the vast tracts of the green woods to exploit the natural and human resources ultimately became a victim of his own lust. He lost his sense of moral rectitude, sense of honour and pride and ignored all those finer virtues which served as the main props of the human order. He grew indifferent to the dictates of his conscience and sank lower in the moral scale.

Strangely enough, this moral sense did not desert the negro Eunice who committed suicide when she learnt that her daughter was pregnant by her own white father. This act of a negro woman shook the very foundation of Ike's moral being. His grand father, who tried to atone for the sins of incest and miscegenation by giving money to the child of Thomasina appeared to be a shameless brute before the negro slave in the eyes of Ike. This monetary compensation for a moral sin was a peculiar invention of the white men in the South. Ike realized that no amount of monetary compensation could restore the moral imbalance created by the white man's perversion.
Ike also maintains that as long as this basic distortion continued and the relation between man and nature was not restored to its primitive purity the real act of atonement could not be accomplished in the South.

Ike also discovers that this sin was not confined to his family only but was shared by the whole South. And this was the reason that after reading the family record he at once took the fateful decision to repudiate the family legacy, the prime source of corruption. Ike convinces himself that without this act of supreme sacrifice it was not possible for him to free the land from the 'primal curse' and save it from further degradation. Sitting in the plantation commissary before his cousin Cass Edmonds, Ike revealed his intention to repudiate the patrimony. Cass in the beginning was not sure that it was ever possible for a white man to repudiate the big plantation. But Ike's tone convinced him that he had taken the decision in all solemnity and would abide by it. Edmonds felt that this was nothing but an escape from responsibility. The way Ike proposed to live and gain his freedom would only prove a delusion. But Ike told him that he was already free and it was Sam Fathers who had made him free. Cass
I cannot repudiate it. It was never mine to repudiate. It was never father's and uncle Buddy's to bequeath me to repudiate because it was never grandfather's to bequeath me to repudiate because it was never Old Ikomotubbes to sell to grandfather for bequeathment and repudiation. Because it was never Ikomotubbes father's father's to bequeath Ikomotubbes to sell to grandfather or any man because on the instant when Ikomotubbes discovered, realized that he could sell it for money, on that instant it ceased even to have been his for ever, father to father to father, and the man who bought it bought nothing. 12

Ike explained to Cass that the land was given to man by his Maker in complete communal ownership. It was never given to him to be divided into squares and oblongs. But man ignored the original 'covenant' and exercised the legal title over the land. The result was corruption and violence. God, through a protracted and painful bloody Civil War once again desired to baptise His chosen people. But the cleansing was not effective enough to purify the people of the promised land. On the contrary

12 Ibid., pp. 195-96.
the Civil War exposed the moral deficiency of the white man before the negro. The white men displayed courage, adventure, pride and imagination in the conduct of the War, but ultimately lost it, because of the basic sickness somewhere at the foundation of this 'factual scheme'. Essentially, the Southern order was indifferent to basic human values.

Now, the problem before the new South is the problem of integration and spiritual regeneration. By rejecting the negro, South cannot gain its ante-bellum glory. Ike desires that South should learn from her apocalyptic history and from the tragic experiences of the negro, the basic old truths of human life. He strongly feels that the white man has to learn a lot from the negro, who is his moral superior and more humane.

The vices of the negroes are the vices aped from the white man. Their bondage to the white man has made them inculcate those vices in them and these could be easily rectified. But their virtues are all their own. They have love for their children, charity and endurance. Ike says:

Because they will endure. They are
better than we are. Stronger than we are. Their vices are vices aped from white men or that white men and bondage have taught them: improvidence, and intemperance and evasion - not laziness! evasion! of what white men had set them to, not for their apprehension or even comfort but his own. 13

The feeds that in the absence of these virtues the white man has become a soulless monster. In Faulkner's moral schema endurance in the greatest virtue and the negro has it in abundance. The indirectly suggests that for the restoration and the revival of the South it is necessary that the white man relearns the basic virtues of man in general and of the negro in particular. And to teach those virtues again to the white man, a Southerner alone could atone for the inherited guilt. As he is fully convinced that the land is under a curse, he observes:

... This whole land, the whole South, is cursed, and all of us who derive from it, whom it even suckled, white and black both, lie under the curse? Granted that my people brought the curse on to the land; may be for that reason their descendants alone cannot resist it, not combat it - may be just endure and out-last it until the curse is lifted. 14

13 Ibid., pp. 224-25.
14 Ibid., p. 212.
Hence, his decision to repudiate the tainted patrimony was the first right step to remove the cause. He feels that only after destroying the primal source of corruption can man earnestly expiate the ancestral sin and work for his salvation.

Determined to serve the Southern community and free the land from the 'primal curse', Ike, after relinquishing the big plantation takes up the job of Nazarene. This choice of Ike appears both real and symbolic to the people of the town. Ike, personally feels that what was good for Jesus is good for him also. The trade of a carpenter gives a man an opportunity to live by his hands alone, frees him from the unnatural exploitation of nature, the first miscalculation which becomes the source of all consequent miscalculations. Man's desire to dominate nature is both natural and sinful. Ike decides to free himself from this irritating strife of life. He thinks that his profession will liberate him from the cycle of action and reaction. He thinks that he has chosen this profession without the slightest taint of a false sense of humility or a sense of moral superiority. He realizes that from this trade he will learn the meaning of honest work and simple living. Consequently, he leaves the plantation house built by his grandfather, deserted by his father and his uncle
and comes to Jefferson to occupy a single room given by Major DeSpain. Here, with his partner who is a peculiar Civil War character, he starts his work as a carpenter. Later, he marries his partner's daughter only to become the uncle of the whole Yoknapatawpha county but father to none. His wife who dreamt of becoming a chatelaine, but 'ethically a prostitute' tried once to win him back to the old ways of the plantation aristocracy by a very crude display of her flesh, but he proved too strong for her carnal manipulations, and led a simple life of resignation and contemplation in a world of sound and fury.

Critics consider Ike as the mouth-piece of Faulkner, the saviour of the South and a saint of the modern times. They also discover in his career the enactment of the old Biblical pattern of guilt, expiation and atonement. They view him as a man who has achieved his 'spiritual majority' and who possesses a very high moral sense. They also view him as a man who has lost his effectiveness as a creative social agent after the repudiation of his patrimony. Michael Hillgate comments:

Ike has idealism on his side, but by his act of repudiation, of withdrawal,
he disqualifies himself from making any effective contribution to the developing historical situation. 15

There are still others who find the solution of South's problem in the life style of Isaac McCaslin. They feel that ultimately Ike accepts the virtues of the hunting community, which clearly indicates that he wants to work against the unnatural conflict between the mechanized way of life and the simple primitive bucolic life, represented by the town and the thick woods respectively. They maintain that ultimately Ike wants to liberate his Southern community from a life of sin, violence, crude sexuality and exploitation. But this is not so easy to achieve in life. Richard P. Adams writes:

To try to restore such an imaginary past condition is to try to destroy creation, which is not a condition or a state but a process. To deny the Fall then, is to deny life itself, and that in effect is what Ike does. 16

Reading the novel as a whole one feels that these

critics view him in a limited context or use his life to support their theoretical formulations. He as a matter of fact is neither a Southern saint nor a totally ineffective human being. Certainly, after reading The Bear when we read Delta Autumn we meet Ike who is now an old man and appears weak and infirm. This is the basic paradox involved in the act of repudiation. Man, in rejecting his legacy, rejects the total possibility of his being and unknowingly accepts a sterile life, denying the dynamic principle of life. Ike's choice fully reveals the true nature of this paradox. Even the most solemn act of repudiation involves an amount of denial of existence. Ike's desire to free himself from the inherited guilt and the racial injustice was genuine but it is also true that Ike has lost much in the process. This is the reason why it is difficult to accept W.E.B. Du Bois' statement fully:

The Bear is a canticle or chant relating the birth, the baptism, and the early trials of Isaac McCaslin of Yoknapatawpha county in Mississippi. We get, moreover, an incarnation, if not the incarnation. Or better, we get a reincarnation; and we
witness an act of atonement which may conceivably flower into a redemption. 17

R.W.B. Lewis claims too much for Ike. Ike's sacrifice has a very limited impact on the people of his region. And it is beyond their competence to accept his atonement which may take the form of redemption. But when a little later Lewis suggests that Ike defines a moral experience he sounds quite convincing:

He wants to define a moral experience of mythological proportions and of ambiguous reality; an aim that of necessity makes heavy demands on the reader. 18

It appears that Faulkner is not interested in presenting a permanent solution to the South's predicament through Ike; he only intends to dramatize a cultural situation of immense possibilities. Perhaps, Faulkner, more than any one else in the South was conscious of the fact that no simplistic approach could be found out to this most complicated problem created by man's greed to exploit both nature and man. Therefore no single approach can


18 Ibid., p. 211.
explain all the relevant facts which Faulkner has ingrained in this story of a bear hunt, religious initiation and atonement.

Faulkner himself gives different answers to different people. Sometimes he maintains that Ike succeeds in his life because he attains serenity—wisdom which is denied to a schoolman. Again he says that man ought to do something more than just repudiate. He should have been more affirmative instead of shunning people. Even one of the women characters remarks: "Old man, have you lived so long and forgotten so much that you don’t remember anything you ever known felt or even heard about love". This failure of Ike is one of the basic limitations of his life. Even then, Faulkner ultimately accepts him:

Perhaps what we need is a dedicated handful of pioneer-martyrs who between success and humility, are capable of choosing the second one.19

Undoubtedly, Ike is one of the pioneers of Faulkner who not only understands the tragic context of the deep South, but takes the first ever step to rectify a very

grievous wrong perpetrated by the white man. Volpe rightly expresses the true meaning of his repudiation:

In Go Down, Moses, and specially in The Reck Faulkner creates a local myth of trans-regional significance. What happened in the garden of Eden once, happens almost daily in the post-Tuscaran world of sin and death to every mortal generation. The apple-eating debacle takes a thousand forms and the resultant evil myriad unrecognisable guises. In Faulkner’s south it appears in the form of the ‘rape of the land’, and the evil takes the forms of incest, miscegenation and segregation. Faulkner through the myth of the ‘rape of the land’ suggests that every generation commits its own kind of the original sin, suffers from a ‘primal curse’ and struggles to liberate itself from sin and suffering.

becomes terribly conscious of the ancestral guilt which works against the 'design and the factual scheme' of the South. He relinquishes his stained patrimony not to restore the moral imbalance created by the white supremacist in the South, but to make them aware of the sinful state in which South has fallen without the hope of redemption. Faulkner, here, successfully depicts a modern dilemma which he faces in this century of 'bad faith' and 'troubled sleep'. John Arlott writes:

Faulkner seems to be conscious that in the absence of theology, he has been constructing a pseudo-demonology. He has exploited the myths of a romantic anthropology and of aristocracy, dreams in the blood, racial memory and the seductive paraphernalia waiting for the man who believes that the meaning of life is to be found in suffering.

In *Sartoris*, Faulkner, creates a legendary young romantic hero who represents all the hopes and aspirations and chivalric norms of the plantation aristocracy. In *Go Down, Moses*, he creates a cultural hero who takes upon himself the sins of his community and pays for its lapses by quiet suffering. He is a cultural hero who

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clearly stands as a landmark in the development of the cultural history of his people. He is not an individual but a cultural phenomenon whose presence in the community reminds the people of the basic cultural ethos of the people. His life is significant not because he allows them to live but makes them aware of their sinful existence. More than anything he stands for the tragic experience of his people. Cass Edmonds may seem right when he says that he is an escapist. He is right only in the sense that he knows only the hard facts of life. He is an escapist because he relinquishes his patrimony. But in a deeper sense Cass simply does not understand the real meaning of Ibsen's repudiation. A cultural hero's role is always ambiguous. He suffers and acts. He is a hero who really acts because he truly suffers. If Bayard is a glamorous romantic hero whom Faulkner conceived in his thirties, Ibe is his noble saviour whom he discovered in his forties. Thus The Bear unfolds the working of a mind which moves from a limited social context to a larger cultural situation. In The Bear, Faulkner's imagination gives form to an experience which invariably troubles a sensitive Southerner. He is an archetypal
character when only a nature Deulinor could have created, and who stands for all those profound values of a culture beset with sin and segregation. Thus, it becomes evident that Deulinor was not interested in creating a pseudo-histology but he was writing the cultural history of his proud people keeping in the centre a man who accepted a principle and rejected a contaminated patrimony to save his people from a curse.