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CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS:
LEGAL, RACIAL, AND MORAL CODES IN *Go Down, Moses*
Thadious M. Davis*

In 1937, just a few years before Faulkner was to begin the stories compiling *Go Down, Moses* (1942), Bertram Doyle stated: "Tradition . . . assigns the Negro his place in the South, law defines it, sentiment supports it, custom and habit continue it, and prejudice maintains it in those instances where it seems to be breaking down." His conclusion is a linguistically balanced restatement of common knowledge. During the early 1930's, in preparation for her book *After Freedom: A Cultural Study of the Deep South* (1939), Hortense Powdermaker observed that in Indianola, Mississippi, whites believed that blacks were "innately inferior" and "by nature" fit only for servile employment; correspondingly, blacks understood that all aspects of their lives were affected by "the racial situation and the system with which it is interlocked," so that each black person within the community believed "that he must watch his behavior in the company of Whites, lest he give offense and suffer for it." Although Powdermaker spent two years completing field research in Mississippi, she, too, concludes the known: that law and custom confirmed the subservient place of blacks; that a system of swift punishment for real and imagined grievances either under the legal system or the racial codes controlled the lives of blacks and the thinking of whites.

Powdermaker, an anthropologist, and Doyle, a sociologist, reiterate a commonplace: the pervasive separate and lower place of blacks in Mississippi life during the same period in which Faulkner, as he revealed in letters to Robert Haas, had already written "four stories about niggers" and intended to "build onto [them] . . . write some more." By May 1, 1941, Faulkner had written a collection of stories which had become, he said, "a volume, collected short stories, general theme being relationship between white and Negro races here." Faulkner's collection already had the title, *Go Down, Moses*, as well as much of the material for inclusion. Yet, it was not until he expanded the stories "A Point of Law" and "Gold is not Always" into "The Fire and the Hearth," and added the fourth section of "The Bear," that he clarified the dominant vision of the work, a vision which differentiates it from just another novel about "race relations," and from

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even such distinguished novels as those by two other Mississippians, *Night Fire* (1946) by Edward Kimbrough and *The Voice at the Back Door* (1956) by Elizabeth Spencer.

Faulkner chose the interfamilial black-white relationships developed over a spectrum of time, from the pre-Civil War period to the World War II era, extending through three generations of whites and four of blacks. However, at the base of the novel and those relationships is the concept of property as it relates to human rights and to the rights of the individual. In part, Faulkner examines the strong belief in the right to property as a basic right, and his characters, both black and white, define self and others in terms of the right to property and the use of property, but readers define the moral core of the novel according to the characters' attitudes toward property. The ideological context inspiring Faulkner's novel stems mainly from the existence of chattel slavery in the South rather than from philosophical treatises on property. He employs property and the rights which arise from ownership of private property to underscore and to illuminate not only black-white relationships, but also fundamental questions about the value and meaning of the human being.¹ He frames his questions, what does it mean to be human and what are the responsibilities as well as the rights of the human being, from the perspective of the white southerner in a specified environment, who possesses, owns, inherits, and holds "property," and whose right to dispose of it as he chooses is protected by law.

In this discussion, I assume the primacy of four themes already delineated by other Faulkner critics: freedom, bondage or enslavement, the ritual hunt or search, and love.² My main focus of attention is to Faulkner's use of legal, racial, and moral codes in the thematic and structural design of *Go Down, Moses*. According to Faulkner's logic in the novel, these codes are all manifestations of or responses to "property" and its attendant "rights," and they are the cause of the complexities within the society he depicts.

Legal codes, those practices of both custom and statute constituting the authorities, interact with racial codes, those beliefs and attitudes regulating interpersonal conduct between whites and blacks, in defining the place of individuals within the society depicted in the novel. In *Go Down, Moses*, moral codes, those virtues, values, and ideals, often abstract and intuitive, operate on a higher level of awareness and authority with regard to the

1. Not surprisingly women are largely absent from the novel because they rarely own property in this world, though from a series of legislative acts women in Mississippi had their right to property protected by law.

2. See, for example, Lawrence Thompson, *William Faulkner: An Introduction and Interpretation* (1967), and Olga Vickery, *The Novels of William Faulkner: A Critical Interpretation* (1964).

meaning of the human being and intersect with legal and racial codes to define humanity in individual and societal terms. At the point of convergence, the three codes bring together both past and present experience — words, thoughts, and deeds — to create the ideological core of the work, and essentially its complexity. However, because the three codes also exist in diffusion throughout the text, they function to establish individual priorities within social mandates that form the separate patterns of meaning as well. Legal, racial, and moral codes, then, are all single keys to meaning, to the various motifs and themes, but together they assert a positive capacity to determine and modify thought as well as behavior, and thereby bring about social change. Nevertheless, only personal change occurs within the novel, because the dynamic realignment of values, attitudes, practices, and beliefs necessary for reformation in a static society takes place only as potential within a few isolated experiences.³

At the static center is Lucius Quintus Carothers McCaslin, old Carothers, who in the 1780's moved from Carolina with slaves, purchased land from a Chickasaw, and established a plantation. Similar to Thomas Sutpen in Faulkner's *Absalom! Absalom!* (1936), Carothers McCaslin dominates the narrative present though he has been dead for nearly one hundred years. His name is borrowed from Lucius Quintus Cincinnatus Lamar, the Mississippi lawyer, politician, and later justice of the United States Supreme Court, who began his career in 1849 after moving to Faulkner's hometown, Oxford. Much like Mr. Justice Lamar, the fictional L. Q. C. achieves influence and power, but his is primarily over his descendants, two of who provide the dual lens through which old Carothers assumes substance and meaning. The two are his grandsons, the white Isaac McCaslin and the black Lucas Beauchamp. Although both are entitled to a bequest from their grandfather on their twenty-first birthday, Ike renounces his patrimony, the McCaslin plantation, whereas Lucas asks for his inheritance, a thousand dollars. Their actions reflect their different attitudes towards Carothers, as well as their different degrees of removal from the actual experience of Carothers.

Born in 1874, Lucas has assimilated the experience of his grandfather as accomplishment and assertion of manhood. He shares with McCaslin (Cass) Edmonds, Carothers's nephew, the vision of an ancestor who,

3. My assumption is that the society in *Go Down, Moses* is *static* rather than *stable*.

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

Though his own father was one of Carothers's slaves, Lucas believes in the ethical right of ownership and in the principle of occupation making the right to property. He sees industry in acquiring land and power in holding it, yet he discounts both need for the land and labor performed on it. The latter, of course, applies most directly to the McCaslin blacks, as viable claims to property and ownership.

On his twenty-first birthday, then, Lucas asks for the money left for his father, Tomey's Turl, old Carothers McCaslin's son by his slave daughter. He declares: "I'm a man now. I can do what I want. I want to know that I can go when I decide to." The money provides him with the opportunity for choice; he can choose to stay or to leave the McCaslin plantation because money establishes his manhood in economic independence. However, his acceptance of the money as a legacy acknowledges old Carothers's right to property and to bequeathal of it. In asking for his inheritance, Lucas also asks that a contractual obligation be met. His understanding of rights is primarily in terms of the plantation as a business derived from acquisition, possession, and dispensation, which are protected by law.

"The Fire and the Hearth," the chapter introducing Lucas, relies upon both legal and business words and phrases, such as "interdict," "reprieve," "justice," "partnership," "recompense," "Law" (with a capital "L"), "revenue," "money," "competitor," and "business," all of which mark Lucas's conception of himself as a man cut from the same cloth as his grandfather. The main idea of the introductory section has to do with Lucas Beauchamp's attempts to entrap his competitor, George Wilkins, his daughter's suitor, just as five years before he had taken care of another competitor in the illegal business of running a still. That former competitor is at the present moment in the state penal farm at Parchman, thanks to Lucas who plots to have George suffer the same fate.

From the beginning, Lucas uses the law for revenge and for the control and elimination of his competition, which he accomplishes with the unwitting assistance of Roth Edmonds, the white owner of the land that Lucas has farmed for forty-five years. Thus, legal terms abound in the narrative introducing Lucas; moreover, much of the section uses the language of contracts law,

and several of the main ideas are related to contractual obligations, whether those obligations stem from the authority of "the Law" (again with a capital "L") or from that of the head of the family (Lucas himself), or from that of the plantation system.⁴

Lucas, whose values regarding competition and business and money have been shaped by the organization of the plantation, as well as by the conception of patrimony, operates within an ethics of business. His code of honor and of conduct stems from his belief in the necessity of manhood, the primacy of age, and the legitimacy of acquisition, all of which are partly formed out of the plantation system and partly out of Lucas's response to the place of blacks in the plantation world. For instance, he perceives his rights in terms of competition, as when in his youth he determined that he must kill his kinsman Zack Edmonds, the white man who had appropriated Lucas's wife to care for his motherless infant. Lucas tells Zack, "You tried to beat me. And you wont never, not even when I am hanging dead from the limb this time tomorrow with the coal oil still burning, you wont never." Lucas knows the immediate meaning of compensatory justice for blacks, but he knows also, that if he is to avail himself of justice, he must do so in the terms understood and practiced by whites, because only those demand respect. And Zack's response is a confirmation of Lucas's ability to circumvent the codes suppressing blacks and to use them to assert himself: "By God . . . I never thought to ever pass my oath to a nigger." In the next generation of McCaslin-Edmondses, Zack's son Roth recognizes the source of Lucas's power: *"He's more like old Carothers than all the rest of us put together He is both heir and prototype simultaneously of all the geography and climate and biology which sired old Carothers and all the rest of us and our kind"* (Faulkner's italics)

Much like his grandfather, Lucas capitalizes on the law and on social practice for power. When he recognizes that the offending George Wilkins might be useful to his search for gold he believes buried on the plantation, Lucas abandons his plan to send George to prison:

So George Wilkins was reprieved without knowing his . . . danger . . . [H]e even thought of taking George into partnership on a minor share basis to do the actual digging; indeed, not only to do the actual work but as a sort of justice, balance, libation to Chance and Fortune, since if it had not been for George, he would not have found the single [gold] coin.

4. Roth Edmonds as the representative of that system runs the business of the plantation and controls the commissary, both of which have contractual authority over the lives of black sharecroppers like Lucas.

Lucas's sense of justice extends mainly to what is fair to himself. In whatever arrangements he makes, and in whichever linguistic pattern he chooses, he reveals his concern for what he himself deserves due to his position as the oldest living McCaslin descendant living on the plantation, his wisdom about financial and business matters, and his position as head of the Beauchamp family. Therefore, he dismisses the thought of sharing with George.

[B]efore it even had time to become an idea. He, Lucas Beauchamp . . . who actually remembered Buck and Buddy [Old Carothers's twin sons] in the living flesh, older than Zack Edmonds even if Zack were still alive, almost as old as Old Isaac who in a sense, say what a man would, had turned apostate to his name and lineage by weakly relinquishing the land which was rightfully his to live in town on the charity of his great-nephew; — he, to share one jot, one penny of the money which old Buck and Buddy had buried almost a hundred years ago, with an interloper . . . whose very name was unknown in the country twenty-five years ago . . . Never. Let George take for his recompense the fact that he would not have to go to the penitentiary to which Roth Edmonds would probably have sent him even if the Law did not.

Although he may exaggerate his ability to turn situations to his best advantage, Lucas sees himself both as a worthy descendant of Old Carothers and as protected by that position despite his race. Within his limited situation, he negotiates power in the manner he associates with his ancestor.

At the same time, however, Lucas is aware that the plantation system represented by his grandfather entraps all blacks and negates his individual manhood. For example, he has to ask before depositing his inheritance: "Will the bank keep it for a black man same as for a white?" And after his confrontation with Zack, he poses an even more significant question, which renders in microcosm the place assigned to blacks and the prerogative assured whites: "How to God . . . can a black man ask a white man to please not lay down with his black wife? And if he could ask it, how to God can the white man promise that he wont?" Lucas understands the restrictions placed upon him by the racial codes of his society. He even admits that the "law" is "rich white lawyers and judges and marshalls talking to one another around their proud cigars, the haughty and powerful of the earth." Nonetheless, he still believes that as "the oldest living McCaslin descendant still living on the heredity land" he can circumvent racial restrictions by evoking his connection to Carothers McCaslin and his power over the land. Despite his belief, he cannot escape the truth of the historical condition and treatment of blacks in Mississippi, and its repercussions in his own life.

Although as early as June, 1818, in *Harry and Others v. Decker*

& *Hopkins*, (concerning a Petition for Freedom),⁵ the Supreme Court of Mississippi ruled that “slavery is condemned by reason and the laws of nature,”⁶ by 1821, the court had accepted the legality of slavery in Mississippi, while maintaining that slaves were “reasonable and accountable beings.”⁷ The court’s decision in *State v. Jones*,⁸ the case of a white man accused of murdering a slave not only condemned the murderer to death by hanging on July 27, 1821, but also established the legal rights of the slave in Mississippi;⁹ Justice Joshua G. Clark, the first chancellor of the state, wrote the decision:

Has the slave no rights, because he is deprived of his freedom? He is still a human being, and possesses all those rights, of which he is not deprived by the positive provisions of law, but in vain shall we look for any law passed by the enlightened and philanthropic legislature of this state, giving even to the master, much less to a stranger, power over the life of a slave. Such a statute would be worthy of the age of Draco and Caligula, and would be condemned by the unanimous voice of the people of this state, where, even cruelty to slaves . . . meets with universal reprobation.¹⁰

The slave, then, a “reasonable and accountable being,” was deprived of his freedom, but allowed “all those rights of which he is not deprived by the positive provision of law.” Unfortunately, under the “positive provision of law,” slaves were increasingly denied rights, because enslavement by its very nature forced them into a sub-category of human beings and made them vulnerable to legal encroachments upon their rights.

By 1860, the year of Lincoln’s election and one year after John Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry, some of the laws controlling slaves in Mississippi included prohibitions against marriages,¹¹ contact with free blacks,¹² defense or testimony against whites,¹³ learning to read or write,¹⁴ and leaving a plantation without a pass.¹⁵ These were added to numerous existing communally sanctioned customs as well as state and local laws, such as that forbidding the freeing of slaves by will.¹⁶ While chattel slavery in Mississippi neither existed technically after the January 1, 1863, Emancipation Proclamation nor existed legally after the thirteenth

5. 1 Miss. (1 Walker) 36 (1818).

6. *Id.* at 42.

7. *State v. Jones*, 1 Miss. (1 Walker) 83, 84 (1820).

8. *Id.* at 83.

9. *Id.* at 86.

10. *Id.* at 84-85.

11. Miss. REV. CODE ch. XI, art. 1 (1857).

12. *Id.* at ch. XXXIII, art. 51.

13. *Id.* at art. 62.

14. *Id.* at art. 51.

15. *Id.* at art. 45.

16. *Id.* at art. 9.

amendment to the Constitution, legislative attempts to deny blacks their freedom continued. The Black Code of 1865,¹⁷ for example, was as intent upon the denial of rights as earlier slave codes, such as those of 1857, had been. Although the 1865 codes granted some rights to blacks, such as the right to sue or be sued,¹⁸ to testify in state courts,¹⁹ to marry legally,²⁰ and to own personal property,²¹ these codes also attempted to restrict the liberties of freed blacks, and to deny them justice under the existing legal system. For example, young black children were subject to "binding out" as unpaid apprentices, with their former masters being allowed to choose them for service; or for example, any blacks without a job or home by January 1, 1866, were fined as vagrants, but the fine could be paid by hiring out, again with the former masters receiving preference for their services.²² In addition, blacks could not bear arms or own guns,²³ could not rent farm land,²⁴ and could not perform certain forms of work without a license.²⁵ Even though the vast majority of the Black Code was repealed in 1870,²⁶ the lasting result was that blacks were kept in a position of inferiority — socially, economically, and for the most part legally as well.

Despite Mississippi's ratification of the fourteenth and fifteenth amendments in 1870,²⁷ oppressive conditions continued and essentially prepared for a system of "Jim Crow" laws following the Mississippi Constitution of 1890. These laws defined the rights of blacks as different from those of whites, instituted racial codes which continued to stamp blacks as inferior and justified their exclusion from full access to justice and equality. Specifically after the 1883 United States Supreme Court ruled that the Civil Rights Act of 1875 was unconstitutional,²⁸ recreational, educational and public facilities became increasingly segregated by race between the late 1880's and the turn of the century. In 1890, the twenty-fifth anniversary of Appomattox, when 744,749 Mississippians were black and 544,851 white, the state enacted the 1890 Con-

17. There is no Black Code *per se*, but the statutes of 1865 dealing with the recently freed Negroes are known as such.

18. 1865 Miss. Laws ch. IV, § 1.

19. *Id.* at § 4.

20. *Id.* at § 3.

21. *Id.* at § 1.

22. *Id.* at ch. v, § 1.

23. *Id.* at ch. XXIII, § 1.

24. *Id.* at ch. IV, § 1.

25. *Id.* at § 5.

26. 1870 Miss. Laws ch. X, § 2.

27. *Id.* at chs. CCXCIV-CCXCV.

28. *United States v. Stanley*, 109 U.S. 3 (1883).

stitution, which stated in article III, section 5: "All political power is vested in, and derived from, the people; all government of right originates with the people, is founded upon their will only, and is instituted solely for the good of the whole."²⁹ Nevertheless, the constitution virtually dismissed blacks from any consideration in "the good of the whole" by its article XII, "Franchise." Called the "Mississippi Plan," the article introduced prerequisites for voting: proof of having paid taxes for the two-year period preceding an election;³⁰ residency requirements for the state and district;³¹ a uniform poll tax of two dollars;³² proof of never having been convicted of certain crimes³³ (e.g., bigamy, perjury, theft, and burglary); and an "understanding clause," which required the reading and interpreting of any designated section of the 1890 Constitution.³⁴ Moreover, section 245 of article XII provided, "Electors in municipal elections shall possess all the qualifications herein prescribed, and such additional qualifications as may be provided by law" ³⁵ This provision opened the way for further local restrictions against prospective black voters.

Upheld by the Mississippi Supreme Court in *Sproule v. Fredericks*,³⁶ and by the United States Supreme Court in *Williams v. Mississippi*,³⁷ two years after the Court made the "separate but equal" ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson*,³⁸ the "Mississippi Plan" not only avoided the fifteenth amendment, but also effectively disenfranchised blacks and re-established white supremacy, just as the *Forest Register*, a Mississippi newspaper, had proclaimed in its masthead for years: "A white man in a white man's place. A black man in a black man's place. Each according to the 'eternal fitness' of things." Although Justice John Marshall Harlan had dissented from the Supreme Court's 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* finding by stating: "Our Constitution is color-blind The arbitrary separation of citizens on the basis of race is a badge of servitude wholly inconsistent with the civil freedom and the equality before the law established by the Constitution,"³⁹ his position had little impact in Mississippi or elsewhere in the United States. From the 1890's

29. MISS. CONST. art. III, § 5.

30. *Id.* at art. XII, § 241 (1890, amended 1972).

31. *Id.*

32. *Id.*

33. *Id.*

34. *Id.* at art. XII, § 244 (1890, repealed 1975).

35. *Id.* at art. XII, § 245.

36. 69 Miss. 898, 11 So. 472 (1892).

37. 170 U.S. 213 (1898).

38. 163 U.S. 537 (1896).

39. *Id.* at 559, 562 (Harlan, J., dissenting).

through the early decades of the twentieth century that Faulkner depicts in *Go Down, Moses* blacks in the state were legally controlled by a caste position rather than slavery, and despite the fourteenth or fifteenth amendment, they existed in racial degradation and economic deprivation. This inferior position is the one from which Lucas Beauchamp would distance himself by claiming the model of his white grandfather's power and authority wrought from ownership.

Lucas is forced, however, to accept a different authority when his wife Molly threatens to divorce him because of his obsession with acquisition, with obtaining buried money from the land. Unlike Lucas, Molly believes that the land belongs to God who has the power of authority over it and that, therefore, it cannot belong to any human being: "Because God say, "What's rendered to My earth, it belongs to Me unto I resurrect it. And let him or her touch it and beware."'" Both in Molly's explanation and in the spiritual "*Go Down, Moses*" from which Faulkner took his title, there is a sense of God's power to seek retribution for transgressions against His will, His law. Though she speaks about the buried treasure, Molly also reminds Lucas that the land is defiled by human exploitation, and she draws him away from the egocentric and destructive ways of his grandfather. Ironically, however, she also causes him to abandon his hopes for a change in his condition, and to acquiesce to his subordinate place as a black on the McCaslin plantation.

Lucas is not ultimately free; his life has progressed in a certain prescribed way in spite of his efforts to make it otherwise, and at sixty-seven, he cannot change it, as he admits: "Man has got three score and ten years on this earth He can want a heap in that time and a heap of what he can want is due to come to him, if he just starts soon enough. I done waited too late to start.'" It is not within his power to remake his life and receive his share of the spoils of the earth. He and Molly and Roth will remain tied to one another as social creatures in a particular social world. The burden of their past is stronger than the possibilities for a reordered future. Lucas's acquiescence is finally to his legal union with Molly, to his moral responsibility toward her, and to his inherited place on the McCaslin-Edmonds plantation. His action signals a necessary renunciation of egocentric dreams, but the cost is his hope for a different future.

Lucas's white kinsman Isaac (Ike) McCaslin equates the experience of their grandfather with possession of the land and of

slaves. However, Ike's equation is a negative one. He reasons that when old Carothers bought the land, he

believed [that] 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 . . . in order to grow something . . . 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: and for which reason old Carothers McCaslin, knowing better, could raise his children, his descendants and heirs, to believe the land was his to hold and bequeath since the strong and ruthless man has a cynical foreknowledge of his own vanity and pride and strength and a contempt for all his get

Ike envisions his grandfather as a ruthless man who misappropriates the land and abuses human beings because he assumes the right to property, the plantation itself as well as its chattel slaves.

Born in 1867, Ike's personal history coincided with the difficult period of rebuilding and reconstructing the post-war South: "1874 the boy; 1888 the man, repudiated denied and free; 1895 and husband but no father, unwidowed but without a wife, and found long since that no man is ever free and probably could not bear it if he were" At twenty-one, Ike repudiates the plantation tradition of his grandfather by renouncing his birthright, ownership of the McCaslin land, because he believes that God

created man to be His overseer on earth and to hold suzerainty over the earth and the animals on it in His name, not to hold it for himself and his descendants inviolable title forever, generation after generation, to the oblongs and squares of the earth, but to hold the earth . . . 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.

He adopts his terms from the language of plantation life: God as master, man as overseer, earth and animals as dominated or controlled. Nevertheless, Ike acts in philosophical opposition to the ethics of keeping blacks in bondage, and in opposition to "the very race which for two hundred years had held them bondage and from which for another hundred years not even a bloody civil war would have set them completely free." As a result, he rejects ownership of any personal goods in order to free himself from even the smallest accumulation of property, which would be a reminder of his heritage. By divesting himself of ownership, Ike attempts to expiate the sins of his grandfather and the "whole plantation in its mazed and intricate entirety . . . the whole edifice intricate and complex and founded upon injustice and erected by ruthless rapacity and carried on even yet with at times downright savagery not only to human beings but to valuable animals too."

The point that Ike repeatedly considers is that his grandfather acts upon a belief that he has the right to do what he wishes with

his property. The key words in "Was," the chapter introducing Ike, are references to this recurrent concern: "bequestor," "inheritor," "title," "patent," "owned," "property," "will," and "land." But these words do not fully signify what old Carothers's proprietary right has encompassed: his begetting of a child upon his own slave daughter; his allotting a thousand dollar cash legacy to his slave son to be paid by his legitimate sons and heirs, the twins, Amodeus (Buddy) and Theophilus (Buck). Nor do they allow for the moral conclusion that Ike reaches: that Carothers values property, but not human life; that he finds dignity in possession, but not in the human beings possessed.

Isaac McCaslin discovers and verifies in reading the plantation ledgers the truth of his grandfather's values and power; he intuits and reasons the actual facts of use and ownership, and with these the superiority and dominance of his white relative over others. The ideal of natural rights in a natural world is not possible once the land has been held by the Chickasaw, occupied by them, and thus giving them possession and the right to assume ownership of it, until finally they sell the land to Carothers McCaslin. The ledgers, records of the plantation commissary, provide Ike with one truth about his grandfather's treatment of his chattel, his incestuous relationship with his daughter, which is a transgression of the natural law Ike espouses.

Perhaps even more significant is that he discovers that the ledgers themselves are not simply a record of purchases, expenditures, debits, and credits for the plantation, but that they are, in effect, an index to the codes of the land and the society: "strong as truth and impervious as evil and longer than life itself and reaching beyond record and patrimony." As an index, the ledgers contain the regulations, the rules, the contracts, and the customs of the plantation owners in regard to their property. Essentially, the evidence Ike needs to understand his heritage is in,

that chronicle . . . a whole land in miniature, which multiplied and compounded was the entire South, twenty-three years after surrender and twenty-four from emancipation — that slow trickle of molasses and meal and meat, of shoes and straw hats and overalls, of plowlines and collars and heel-bolts and buckheads and clevises, which returned each fall as cotton — the two threads frail as truth and impalpable as equators yet cable-strong to bind for life them who made cotton to the land their sweat fell on.

The phrase "threads frail as truth . . . yet cable-strong," recurrent especially in "The Bear," is suggestive of the language in Jeremy Bentham's discussion of law and property in *Principles of the Civil Code* (1802): "That which in the natural state was an almost invisible thread, in the social state becomes a cable.

Property and law are born together. Before laws were made there was no property; take away laws and property ceases."⁴⁰

Ike cannot accept the legacy of his grandfather, because he has a different conception of himself as a human being. He will respect the land and its inhabitants, but he will not accept ownership of the land, for unlike old Carothers, Ike acknowledges that harm has been done to others in the securing of his birthright:

[H]e couldn't speak even to McCaslin [his older first-cousin Cass], even to explain his repudiation, that for which to him too, even in the act of escaping (and maybe this was the reality and the truth of his need to escape) was heresy: so that in escaping he was taking more of that evil and unregenerate old man who could summon, because she was his property, a human being because she was old enough and female, to his widower's house and get a child on her and then dismiss her because she was of an inferior race

Whereas Carothers neither recognizes the wrong that he does nor admits responsibility for the damages he causes in the lives of his slaves, Ike can only acknowledge by repudiation; he cannot escape.

Though Sam Fathers, the black Indian who was himself sold by his father Ikkemotubbe, sets Ike free by teaching him the positive values of the natural world, Sam Fathers cannot provide a place for Ike in society. Though Cass Edmonds teaches Ike the practical realities of plantation life, Cass cannot join those practicalities to Ike's ideals. Buck and Buddy McCaslin, his father and uncle, show Ike by their example that they object to the treatment of slaves; that is, they quarter their slaves in the "big house," old Carothers's "tremendous abortive edifice scarcely yet out of embryo," and they refuse to secure the slaves at night, or to have slaves build a house for them and perform the household chores. Nevertheless, Buck and Buddy cannot show Ike how to change the plantation system. Ike cannot escape the complexities of ethical and moral conduct in a society whose laws reinforce the ruthless proprietorship of his grandfather and reduce his father's and uncle's circumvention of ownership to humorous eccentricity. The past with its living legacies combines with reason, intuition, and emotion in the present to destroy both innocence and simplicity and to deflate moral action and ideals. The reality is that the land is not, as Ike had supposed, "held and used in common and fed from and on and would continue to use in common without regard to color or titular ownership." The ledgers and Ike's experience,

40. 2 William Tait, *The Works of Jeremy Bentham* 297 (1843) (quoting J. Bentham, *Principles of the Civil Code* (1982)).

as well as that of his grandfather, deny the image of community and brotherhood without regard to race or ownership.

The land is divided and owned. The owners declare, as one Mississippi legislator did in 1840, that "the institution of domestic slavery . . . [is] not a curse, but a blessing, as the legitimate condition of the African race"; or as the Supreme Court of the United States did in the 1857 case of *Dred Scott v. Sandford*,⁴¹ that it is "fixed and universal in the civilized portion of the white race" that blacks have "no rights which the white man [is] bound to respect";⁴² or as another Mississippi legislator did in 1865, that

the negro exists for the special object of raising cotton, rice and sugar for the whites, and that it is illegitimate for him to indulge, like other people, in pursuit of his own happiness in his own way. Although it is admitted that he has ceased to be the property of a master, it is not admitted that he has the right to become his own master.

Against such division and ownership, Ike has only a broad social idealism. He has rejected emotional ties along with his inheritance. Unlike Lucas Beauchamp who loves Molly and accepts his responsibility toward her, Ike fails to respond to individuals. He forgets that even the custodians of the earth have an obligation to assume responsibility for their caretaking, just as in the system of ownership which he opposes and repudiates, owners must assume responsibility for their actions. While he may have followed Fonsiba, the daughter of Tomey's Turl, to Arkansas in order to give her a share of her father's inheritance, or traced Tennie's Jim to Tennessee to give him money as well, Ike does not understand that he can protect blacks neither with idealism alone nor with money alone, given the realities of their subjugation and oppression. Although his intention is to give his black kin their rightful share of the property left to them by their father's failure to accept a monetary legacy from his father, old Carothers, Ike does not recognize that his action replicates his grandfather's leaving a thousand dollars to Tomey's Turl, an act which Ike himself condemned: "*So I reckon that was cheaper than saying My son to a nigger . . .*" He acts out of a sense of compensatory justice, but the compensation or reparation is, as it was for his grandfather, only money. While Ike indeed feels a moral obligation to compensate for injustice, he does so with money, since property retains meaning for him. So central is his belief in the negative meaning of property that he cannot rid himself of measurement in terms of it. When Lucas goes to claim his inheritance from

41. 60 U.S. (19 How.) 393 (1856).

42. *Id.* at 407.

Ike, his request and his presence force Ike to reflect on his own situation: *"Fifty dollars a month. He knows that's all. That I reneged, cried calf-ropes, sold my birthright, betrayed my blood, for what he too calls not peace but obliteration, and a little food."* He suspects that despite his high ideals, his action has resulted in "obliteration." In effect, he brings no meaningful change into his environment because he has given up his opportunity to sustain contact with it.

The climax of the novel may be in the chapter "The Bear" with Ike's discovery of the extent of the moral transgression recorded in the plantation ledgers and with his resulting decision to act according to a higher moral law or authority, but the denouement occurs in "Go Down, Moses," the chapter in which the systems of law and the residue of property in the twentieth-century society come openly into play.

The spiritual, "Go Down, Moses," which lends its title directly to the chapter, identifies three levels of authority and sources of laws affecting the lives of human beings. The Lord speaks, "Go down, Moses,/ Way down in Egyptland/ Tell old Pharaoh/ To let my people go." His command to Moses evokes the highest authority, a transcendent spiritual and moral authority. Moses, his servant, is the human agent, a moral representative and a divinely-appointed leader. Pharaoh, ruler of the land and representative of the state, is both social law-maker and moral law-breaker.

The spiritual suggests the right of challenging his legal authority on the grounds of divine law and morality. The command of the Lord, which Moses executes, carries with it the weight of power ("Let my people go;/ If not I'll smite your first-born dead."), in which God in His wrath shall seek retributive justice and punish the enslavers. The commands bear as well the appeal of God's righteousness ("When Israel was in Egyptland/Oppressed so hard they could not stand/No more shall they in bondage toil/Let them come out with Egypt's spoil . . ."); through His grace He will share the benefits of society with the enslaved in a form of distributive justice. The spiritual affirms that there is a righteous and just morality displayed in God's justice and power, goodness and love, and that that morality will operate against harsh, unfair legal edicts. Whether it shall prevail is not addressed.

By means of its metaphorical core submerged in the novel, the spiritual reiterates the conflicting codes within Faulkner's work. It places in opposition an ideal standard and a legal standard for evaluating human actions. On the one hand, Moses's attempt to

lead the Israelites out of Egypt is right action not merely because it promotes an ideal, freedom rather than bondage as the right of human beings, whereas on the other hand, Pharaoh's attempt to maintain the enslavement may be considered appropriate action because it conforms to a civil law and the ethics of custom. Yet enslavement is morally objectionable. The rightness of the action or the goodness it achieves within the social order is overwhelmed by the harm done to the Israelites and is negated ultimately by the divine command, "Let my people go."

In the final chapter, Gavin Stevens, lawyer and representative of the legal system,⁴³ must confront the remainder of the old codes, both racial and moral, in his involvement with the burial of the outlaw, Samuel Worsham (Butch) Beauchamp. This burial must be done in accordance with the wishes of two old women who act not in response to the legal codes, but to moral codes, and ironically to one set of racial codes as well. As Miss Worsham says of Mollie, "Mollie's . . . parents belonged to my grandfather. Mollie and I were born in the same month. We grew up as sisters." Both the white woman and the black woman assume what the role of whites must continue to be in the lives of blacks — that is, paternalistic and, in part, moral response to the legacy of property. This culture, Faulkner concludes by his depiction of Mollie and Miss Worsham, has its limited but best hope in the women who function outside of the dominant male codes of property, position, and ownership.

The final alliance in the novel is primarily between these two females, Mollie Worsham Beauchamp and Miss Worsham. As a single older woman, who is also poor and without property, Miss Worsham is dependent upon blacks for her livelihood; she lives off the truck garden of Hamp, Mollie's brother. Her alliance with Mollie does not argue strongly for an alliance between the races that could move toward either social change or the common good, because Miss Worsham as a relic of the past is removed from the present-day social order. Granted that the lawyer, Gavin Stevens, and the editor of the newspaper, as well as some of the townspeople and presumably Roth Edmonds, cooperate in paying for the return of Butch Beauchamp's body from Chicago and for his burial, but in the final analysis, they act out of duty to codes of conduct, primarily respect for the elderly white woman; they act neither out of any faith or belief that attention to blacks is ethical behavior, nor out of a belief that the law has functioned

43. Molly Beauchamp, "Mollie" in this final chapter, refers to the legal system as "the Law."

to control and subordinate blacks. They fail to recognize that for blacks the law has not primarily been a means of achieving justice, and that the law is partly to blame for the condition of an "anti-social" black, such as Butch Beauchamp who was not "properly" socialized by the plantation system. In fact, the townspeople are mainly quite content to believe that somehow Butch is merely the bad son of a bad father, but not that the duality of legal, racial, and moral codes followed by their society and which persistently dehumanize blacks or undermine the ability of blacks to be or to do may be equally responsible for what Butch becomes.⁴⁴

By insisting that Roth Edmonds sold her Benjamin (Butch) into slavery, Mollie is only partly aware of the reality which faced a young black man in a society still enmeshed in the old ways. She herself is part of the traditional system as her and her brother Hamp's relationship with Miss Worsham suggests. The very fact that Mollie cannot be "Mrs. Beauchamp" or even "Miz Beauchamp," as her white counterpart is always "Miss Worsham," reinforces the kind of lack of respect for black people that the younger Butch may have been more keenly aware of. Though Faulkner concludes that the North was in the early 1940's no better than the South for a black youth because there Butch falls into crime and is electrocuted, whereas in the South he is given a proper burial, Faulkner does not and perhaps cannot, given the moral vision of the novel, address the lack of opportunity for manhood in the world into which Butch was born.

Unlike Lucas, who can claim direct descent from the anti-hero L.Q.C. McCaslin, old Carothers, who was strong enough to take the land and to hold it, Butch reaches majority at a point in the 1930's when the claim of white blood does not distinguish some blacks from other blacks. It might be argued that Lucas was a better man than his grandson Butch; yet it is apparent that, in the context of the narrative, he is a better man in part because he is McCaslin's grandson, not because of his blackness, which is only allowed the primacy of an older race, but not an equal one. It is improbable that the young man Butch Worsham Beauchamp, living not unlike his ancestors in earlier times on the McCaslin-Edmonds place and working on shares, could be anything other than entrapped and limited. When Butch, a victim of modern bondage to the land, commits crimes against the existing order, he breaks laws that are necessary for the common good. At the same time, his action of stealing from the plantation commissary may

44. This is not the subject taken up by Faulkner; it becomes the concern of another major writer from Mississippi, Richard Wright.

also be a form of rebellion against the existing codes and laws that deny him access to property and ownership which define manhood and that relegate him and his kind to their "place." Just as Butch's criminal activity cannot be condoned, neither can the paternal, restricting social order into which he is born be condoned. Importantly, his death not only externalizes what Miss Worsham labels as "our grief," the experience she shares with Mollie and Hamp and from which Gavin Stevens is excluded, but it also produces an opportunity for communal reflection and action which includes the conscious mourners as well as the rest of the society.

Ike, who has had the moral vision and the potential for effecting social change within the modern world of the denouement, is finally an old man truncated by the inflexibility of his society and his own rigidity. Right moral decisions have nonetheless negated his moral impact. He does not even appear as a reference in "Go Down, Moses." "There are good men everywhere, at all time," he tells his young kinsman Roth Edmonds in "Delta Autumn." "Most men are. Some are just unlucky, because most are a little better than their circumstances give them a chance to be." But Roth replies, "And you've lived almost eighty years . . . And that's what you've finally learned about the other animals you live among. I suppose the question to ask you is, where have you been all the time you were dead?" Ike is, in a sense, figuratively dead to his society, a condition which recalls the verse from the spiritual "Go Down, Moses": "Let my people go; If not I'll smite your first-born dead."

While the major virtues Ike espouses are, as he himself indicates, "pity and love of justice and of liberty," he does not act out of love, out of love of abstractions, which remain abstract even though moral. Thus, when a young black woman, who is a descendant of Tennie's Jim, Lucas's brother and the grandson of Ike's own grandfather, reveals that she is the mistress of Roth Edmonds and the mother of his son, she realizes that Ike cannot respond with love. She poses a crucial question: "Old man . . . have you lived so long and forgotten so much that you dont remember anything you ever knew or felt or even heard of love?" The answer, however, is not that Ike has forgotten, but rather that he has not loved. The major burden of his heritage, its codes and values, is the inability to love. "The way of love may be the only way to justice,"⁴⁵ Reinhold Neibuhr states in his 1960 introduc-

45. R. Neibuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (1960).

tion to *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932). Without love, Ike cannot attain the purity he seeks for himself, the justice he desires for blacks, or the differentiation he needs from his grandfather. He can forcefully resist evil in society only if he acts; passivity is no solution, because it cannot generate a social reformation. And within this novel, love becomes the most viable motivational force allowing individuals, such as Lucas and Mollie and Miss Worsham, to act according to "the dictates of the human heart," as Faulkner put it in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech. To be fully effective in his moral stance against the legal and racial codes enslaving whites as well as blacks, Ike must, like Moses in the spiritual, act and lead others to follow a higher authority in defiance of unjust laws. To renounce Pharaoh's authority but to leave the Israelites in bondage is not enough. Even limited actions such as those of Miss Worsham, Mollie, and Lucas argue for the necessity of the human being to act, and to do so according to a guiding moral authority that is higher than the cultural norm.

Unfortunately, when Ike recognizes that Roth's mistress is, in fact, black, not only does he once again offer money, but he also compounds his offense by advising her to go North and marry a black man: "That's the only salvation for you — for a while yet, maybe for a long while yet. We will have to wait." He concludes in a final admission of his helpless adherence to the racial codes of his time and place: "Get out of here! I can do nothing for you! Cant nobody do nothing for you!" Though he gives the woman a boon of property for her son, Ike does not believe in the equality of the races: "You are young, handsome, almost white; you could find a black man who would see in you what you saw in him, who would ask nothing of you and expect less and get even still less than that, if it's revenge you want." Implicit in his statement is the belief that Roth is the woman's superior because he is white and that the woman will be the superior of any black man because she is "almost white," and the even more invidious belief that what she saw in Roth was his whiteness, his race, just as any future black husband will see in her her almost-whiteness, the visible sign of her almost-escape from an inferior race. In one sense, property in the end is the property of blood; the right to humanity is defined once more according to possession. Ike has not been able to translate his strong moral convictions into social action, perhaps because the belief in property and ownership is too ingrained in his community or perhaps because his sense of individual justice, of renunciation and ex-

piation by withdrawal, leaves him unengaged, suspended, and isolated.

"A static being," Melvin Rader observes, "cannot be moral because he is not confronted by choice. It is the temporal and ongoing character of life that poses problems: our existence is charged with concern because we must look before and after."⁴⁶ In this last encounter between black and white descendants of L.Q.C. McCaslin, Ike has become as static as his grandfather or his society. His movement is inward and further away from the demands of living in the world: "the territory in which game still existed drawing yearly inwards as his life was drawing inward." He looks backward not only to a time before ownership and possession and property and law, but also to his own finest moment in the wilderness with Sam Fathers and the bear; however, he cannot go back, for Sam and the bear are dead, and the wilderness destroyed by a new generation of Carothers McCaslins. His memories and his models are not enough to foster new disciples; his truth and his experience will die with him and the disappearing wilderness. Ike's crying in the wilderness — not for what has been lost, but for the moment of potential reformation that he has been unable to sustain — will be to no avail. For him and for his generation, there is no ameliorating vision accompanied by action to untangle the knotty complexities of property and its problematical impact on white or black individuals.

46. M. Rader, *Ethics and Society: An Appraisal of Social Ideals* (1950).