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*Go Down Moses*: The Bear

American Literature

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The Timelessness of the Woods

If you did not know how to play chess, but you were able to watch two people play against one another, you might come up with a few theories about how to play the game. However, your understanding would be vague and nebulous at best. As humans strive to learn about existence, time seems to surface as an enigma we can only theorize about. In a philosophical context, Immanuel Kant (among others) believed that time is neither an event nor a thing, and thus is not itself measurable. Other philosophers disagree with this sentiment, concluding that time is a dimension separate from events, in which events occur in sequence. Time in physics is defined by its measurement: time is what a clock reads. Anything that is regular and repeated - from the minute oscillations of particles to the earth's tendency to circle the sun - can be used to measure physical time. In the early twentieth century, Albert Einstein changed the way in which time is understood by claiming that space and time are inextricably linked, woven together into a mathematical fabric deemed spacetime. This new concept of fundamental elements of our universe is indeed a step ahead from the view of absolute time by Classical Mechanics, but we are likely far from grasping at the underlying essence of time and space.

In the very first section of the chapter of *Go Down Moses* entitled "The Bear," the watch and the annual hunting cycle maintained by Isaac illustrate the unnatural human construct of time that does not exist in the woods insofar as Isaac understands. Faulkner's eclectic group of hunters is said to convene yearly to hunt Old Ben, but the group's reason for doing so is largely ambiguous. Isaac states, "they were going not to hunt bear and deer but to keep yearly rendezvous with the bear which they did not even intend to kill" (185). This odd desire to hunt without killing is vaguely understood by the members of the group; it is unclear when the group as a whole comes to this realization. Despite expressing no good reason for doing so, Isaac accompanies the group's excursions, perpetuating this cycle. Unlike humanity, the natural world does not seem to propagate this bizarre tradition; Isaac does not note any time wherein Old Ben makes weekly (or any) ventures to the habitat of humans.

Once in the forest, Isaac is taken aback by the mystery and allure of the woods. On one occasion, Isaac notices with surprise "the gutted log where he had first seen the print [of the enormous warped two-toed foot]. It was almost completely crumbled now, healing with unbelievable speed" (190). This section of woods had completely evolved and changed in what seemed to Isaac to be an unreasonable amount of time, showing that nature continues regardless of how Isaac may measure or mentally predict the actions of nature over a period of time. There seems to be a clear dissonance between the way in which Isaac understands time and nature's complete disregard of human comprehension.

When Isaac ventures into the woods guided by Sam, Isaac's narration offers a point of view that is less tainted by past experience and Faulkner's modernist style augments Isaac's honesty. Isaac says that he understands the way that some animals feel in nature, saying that he possesses "a sense of his own fragility and impotence against the timeless woods" (190). The woods exist in a stark dichotomy between humanity (and its constructs) and the natural world. Although the group is clearly governed by a sense of time and schedule, the woods is portrayed as a looming obscurity of timelessness. Isaac continues to paint himself as an insignificant entity when he describes himself as "only a little different" (190) than "brute beasts" (190), and the usage of words such as fragility and impotence portray Isaac and humanity as unable to comprehend the complex natural world.

At the very end of the first section of "The Bear," Isaac leaves alone to navigate through the woods, to hunt the bear, and to exist with nature. Initially, this venture leads him to relinquish his gun in an attempt to lower himself to the natural level of Old Ben. After nine hours of wandering unsuccessfully using his compass and stopwatch, Isaac decides to relinquish "of his will, because of his need, in humility and peace and without regret... the watch and the compass" (197). The tools that Isaac leaves behind are directly symbolic of how humans navigate the universe. Isaac's careful triangulation through the three spatial dimensions with the compass and his deliberate navigation through the single temporal dimension with the stopwatch result in his utter acquiescence to nature. After nine hours of careful plotting through the woods, Isaac finds that these human methods are completely ineffective, and that perhaps the human way of thinking about the woods is not fully correct. Just after he surrenders his mortal instruments, he describes himself as "emerging suddenly into a little glade and the wilderness coalesced. It rushed, soundless, and solidified" (198). For many pages leading up to this event, Isaac describes himself as though he is in control of his movements in the context of the woods around him. When he relinquishes the human paradigm of the woods, the woods suddenly coalesce, solidify, and form about him, questioning if the control that Isaac and the hunters demonstrate is palpable. This marked difference in Isaac's perception is unmistakably correlated to his physical and mental relinquishment of human dogma and precedents.

In contrast with Isaac, Old Ben seems to be excluded from any kind of temporal pattern or rhythm at all, save the rendezvous perpetuated by the hunters. To Isaac's shock, Old Ben defies the way in which humans conceive of things moving through time and space: "[The bear] did not emerge, appear: it was just there, immobile, fixed in the green and windless noon's hot dappling, not as big as he dreamed it but as big as he had expected, bigger, dimensionless against the dappled obscurity, looking at him" (198). Instead of transitioning gradually through a series of slowly evolving physical states over time, Old Ben simply exists. To Isaac, Old Ben seems to control his position in space and time in the woods in a way that Isaac cannot even comprehend. While Isaac is watching the bear's appearance in the woods, he says, "then it was gone. It didn't 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" (198). As Old Ben confirms his incomprehensible ability to Isaac, the fish is said to move in a way that is likened to Old Ben's movement, furthering the aforementioned dichotomy between nature as a whole and flawed human axiom.

William Faulkner was certainly curious about the nature of time. Faulkner's style causes the reader to disentangle chronological developments from the linear progression through *Go Down Moses*. The reader is offered dense information in a *natural* manner devoid of many typical grammatical constructs. Oftentimes, offhand events are given without temporal context, leaving the reader to ascertain the context from subtle hints. Faulkner also emphasizes the importance of familial links from deep in the past, playing with characters long dead as though they existed in the story's present. If time were a stream, one might find Faulkner filling a bucket to water his garden.