

### **Cursed Inheritances**

In *Go Down, Moses*, William Faulkner represents many different problems of inheritance. Complicating this inheritance is the conflict between the inheritance of land and the inheritance of knowledge that affects how one views said land and even how one views family history. Though Isaac disinherits the family land and largely separates himself from society, it is his own inability to disinherit the family secrets that drives him to relative isolation. For McCaslin, accepting ownership of the land is something he feels compelled to do despite the fact that he shares much of Isaac's knowledge about family history and actually witnessed slavery directly.

As a child, Cass observes slavery firsthand under the tutelage of his uncles Buck and Buddy. It is his perspective which the reader sees in "Was." The events that occur here are later recounted to Isaac by Cass, which is illustrative of the fact that Isaac receives information about slavery and his own family secondhand. It is also clear that Cass was raised to think of the land as his, as General Compson later remarks in "The Bear" that Cass has "one foot straddled into a farm and the other foot straddled into a bank" (Faulkner 240). He observes injustice and hardship and reacts in a pragmatic manner, realizing that nothing is to be gained by refusal of the family land despite its marred history. This is nearly the opposite of Isaac's eventual reaction, which sets up the cousins as representatives of two very different ethical ideals.

It is clear that the relationship between Cass and Isaac is much different from that of typical cousins. Due to the age difference, McCaslin is "more his brother than his cousin and more his father than either" (158). Cass has clearly had a significant role in Isaac's upbringing in the absence of Isaac's own father. "McCaslin brought him for the first time to the camp, the big

woods,” just as Cass himself was brought to the woods to learn about hunting and the wilderness from Sam Fathers (184). Cass’s experience bears great resemblance to Isaac’s experience on the face of it, but Cass is not nearly as affected by the bear or seeing the mystical buck as is Isaac.

Isaac and McCaslin are both educated in nature by Sam Fathers, but for Isaac this contributes to his eventually refusal to accept the family land. He comes to believe that land cannot be owned; instead, land is something owned by God and shared by all. During his argument with McCaslin, he says the land “was never [his] to repudiate” (Faulkner 245). The importance of this moment is highlighted in the very first pages of the book, when Isaac is introduced as having given up his inheritance because “the earth was no man’s but all men’s” (4). It is here where a clear distinction is drawn between Isaac and McCaslin. They are “juxtaposed not against the wilderness but against the tamed land which was to have been [Isaac’s] heritage” (243).

Part of this juxtaposition results simply from an age difference. With regards to the turmoil following the Civil War, “McCaslin had actually seen it, and the boy even at almost eighty would never be able to distinguish certainly between what he had seen and what had been told him” (278). Because of his unique position, Isaac interprets nearly everything he sees and comes to his own conclusions about the past, whereas Cass is, from the beginning, more closely connected to his heritage. Though they both might have the same knowledge of the family secrets, Isaac has a clear, strong reaction, but it is not apparent that Cass reacts at all.

This potential for shared knowledge is realized through the presence of the ledgers. It can be inferred that Cass may have tried to prevent Isaac from discovering them, as Isaac “got the commissary key from McCaslin’s room after midnight while McCaslin was asleep” in order to read them (257). Isaac is always alone when he peruses the ledgers, as though he does not

want McCaslin to know what he has discovered. This leads the reader to believe that Cass is aware of the dark family secrets revealed in the old record books, as it makes sense that this would be a secret he would want hidden from a sixteen-year-old Isaac. It would seem, however, that Cass is eventually aware that Isaac has knowledge of the ledgers' content.

Isaac and Cass appear to have a mutual understanding of their shared knowledge of the history contained in the ledgers. The ledgers are referenced, albeit silently, several distinct times during their confrontation over the inheritance. Early on in the argument, the ledgers are mentioned as something neither Cass nor Isaac look towards, as though they are both familiar with the contents and thus do not need to pay them another glance (250). Later, "McCaslin did not even say Look but merely lifted one hand, not even pointing, not even specifically towards the shelf of ledgers but towards the desk" (279). This is finally connected to the land as a whole:

McCaslin merely lifted one hand, not even speaking and not even toward the ledgers: so that, as the stereopticon condenses into one instantaneous field the myriad minutia of its scope, so did that slight and rapid gesture establish in the small cramped and cluttered twilight room not only the ledgers but the whole plantation in its mazed and intricate entirety – the land, the fields and what they represented...that 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 still intact but enlarged, increased; brought still intact by McCaslin (284-285).

For both Cass and Isaac, the ledgers represent their entire family history, good and bad. This history is passed on in the very land itself, the ugliness living on through McCaslin and eventually his descendants. Cass seems to understand this history, to have an idea of exactly what information is contained in the ledgers, but if he does possess this knowledge it does not seem to affect him as it does Isaac. Accepting his heritage is what Cass sees as the ethical thing to do, not necessarily in spite of but perhaps because of his family history. The act of refusing the land for Isaac, however, represents his attempts to wash his hands of the family secrets.

Isaac attempts to renounce his inheritance by not accepting the family land, but he cannot disinherit his own family history. Though his beliefs about nature and property clearly play into his refusal of his inheritance, it is also clear that Isaac is strongly affected by his reading of the ledgers. Though Isaac knows “from his own observation and memory that there had already been some white in Tomey’s Terrel’s blood before his father gave him the rest of it,” he is stricken by the actual evidence of this (259). He is not able to make peace with his grandfather Carothers McCaslin’s horrific act of incest, but renouncing his inheritance does not erase this knowledge from his mind. The only thing his actions really accomplish is the elimination of the McCaslin surname from the plantation, as the family itself lives on through McCaslin Edmonds. This leads to the conclusion that, if this knowledge is shared by Cass, it is something he accepted and moved beyond, but this inherited secret proves to be the sticking point for Isaac.

Cass and Isaac’s different interpretations and reactions to family history are rooted in Cass’s observations at the end of “The Old People.” Isaac is shamed by the actions of his family members, and shame is the “one thing worse than not being alive” (179). Isaac absorbs the family history and personalizes it, and is then so horrified by it that he must escape it. Cass, however, seems to believe that even the darkest moments cannot be hidden – he points to “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” (179). History will persist without the consent of either Cass or Isaac, and Cass is resigned to his familial duty in order to have a say in how this occurs. As a descendant of Carothers McCaslin, Cass sees himself as tied to both the legacy of the family and of the land itself. Despite the efforts made by Isaac to stop progress, his repudiation of the land means that this is not up to him. Only those who control the land can play a role in shaping it, and Cass is able to accomplish this to a certain extent by providing a

house for Lucas and Mollie. It is Cass who is ultimately responsible for any progress, but unlike Isaac he does not necessarily see the perpetuation of the family line as shameful. Instead, he accepts his inheritance and does his best not to simply continue the family legacy but to improve it. In the end, however, because the family history is so tied to the land, Isaac cannot truly escape the legacy of the plantation or disinherit his family secrets, either. He is part of the curse of the South, which is something Cass appears to understand. Cass remarks, "I am what I am; I will be always what I was born and have always been" (286). They will always be connected to their family's former slaves, and though they might deny the truth in the end they must live with this knowledge.

Isaac and Cass's very different reactions to the inheritance of the land highlight the problem of inherited knowledge. Cass, as a childhood witness to slavery, is able to accept the family land despite its curse. In some ways, Cass accepts the land because it is cursed, because he knows he is forever tied to the history of the plantation and thus cannot ethically refuse what is rightfully his. Isaac, who obtains most of his knowledge about slavery from Cass and Sam Fathers and his reading of the ledgers, has a more detached view of the subject. By virtue of his generational removal from family history, Isaac is more burdened by both his inheritance of land and his inheritance of family secrets. The overarching legacy of slavery which frames the novel as a whole is highlighted by Isaac's reaction. It is, finally, the inherited curse which perhaps cannot be overcome, no matter how hard future generations may try.