

Faulkner and Frazer: The Bear

New insights into Faulkner's story "The Bear" can perhaps be found in Frazer's accounts of bear sacrifices in primitive tribes. Otis B. Wheeler in his article on Faulkner's wilderness¹ has effectively shown how Sam Fathers, as one initiated in the forest, chooses to be the instrument of Old Ben's death. It is Sam who nurtures Lion and lays plans for the final hunt of the bear. Wheeler shows that Old Ben's sacrifice at the hands of Sam Fathers is not a wanton act. Ike McCaslin has also learned the true meaning of the hunt, a kind of priesthood assumed by the hunter for whom the death of the animal is a challenge, a challenge to put on that life he has taken and be worthy of it.

A look at Frazer's *The Golden Bough* assures us that we may perhaps go further with this theme. I do not imply that Faulkner had Frazer in mind when he wrote "The Bear," only that the principles underlined in Frazer rise deep from our common roots. For certain primitive tribes, Frazer tells us, the bear is a messenger whom they dispatch in death "with various commissions to the god of the forest."² A number of tribes hold bear festivals at which a bear that has been carefully nurtured, sometimes even suckled by a woman of the tribe, is sacrificed.

Sam Fathers, as one initiated in the ways of the forest, like the primitives in Frazer, spares the lives of those animals "which he has no pressing motive for killing."³ Modern man, however, marauds the wilderness. It is this pillage that Faulkner deplures. However, Faulkner's pessimism about man in general is modified by Sam Fathers, for not only is he worthy of Old Ben's role, but through Old Ben he sends a message to the god of the forest (as Frazer's primitives did.) Sam Fathers' message to the gods is a plea that the values nurtured by the forest will endure, a plea for riches of the spirit, not as with Frazer's tribes for physical riches, rare furs and good meat. A sense of "honor and pride and pity and justice and courage and love"⁴—these are the riches Sam asks the gods to bestow long after Old Ben and Lion are become dreams. The bear's paw, kept as a sacred thing by Frazer's tribes, in Faulkner's story is buried above Lion's bones in a round tin box once containing axle grease.⁵ Perhaps the bear, then, has accomplished his mission in becoming the agent enabling the wheel to turn smoothly, that is, enabling the virtues taught by the forest to survive and endure despite the plundering by man of this same forest.

Seen in the light of Frazer the romantic pessimism of Faulkner's story is less gloomy. As McCaslin tells the boy: "Truth doesn't change."⁶ If the bear is successful as an intermediary, then the story is consistent with Faulkner's often reiterated optimism that man will endure. "He is immortal . . . because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance."⁷

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¹Otis B. Wheeler, "Faulkner's Wilderness," *American Literature*, 31 (May 1959), 127-36.

²Sir James George Frazer, *The New Golden Bough*, ed. Theodor H. Gaster (New York: Criterion Books, 1959), p. 468.

³Frazer, p. 471.

⁴William Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses* (New York: The Modern Library, 1942), p. 297.

⁵Frazer, p. 469.

⁶Faulkner, p. 297.

⁷William Faulkner, Nobel Prize Speech, Stockholm, December 10, 1950. *Saturday Review Reader* (New York: Bantam, 1951), pp. 67-69.