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“THE GHOST OF RAVISHMENT THAT LINGERS IN THE LAND”: THE  
BEGINNINGS OF ENVIRONMENTALISM IN *SERAPH ON THE SUWANEE*  
AND *GO DOWN, MOSES*

A Thesis  
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of English  
The University of Mississippi

by

ELISABETH WAGNER

December 2014

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## ABSTRACT

Zora Neale Hurston and William Faulkner are recognized for their environmental writing. However, few scholars have acknowledged the sophisticated environmentalism present in Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee* and Faulkner's fictional depiction of Lafayette County in *Go Down, Moses*. This thesis seeks to prove that Hurston and Faulkner were keenly aware of the ecological problems of their hometowns through a close reading of each book alongside the environmental history each book was based on, Eatonville, Florida and Lafayette County, Mississippi respectively. Each author's distinct regional environmental knowledge helped Hurston and Faulkner to see larger national and global problems with using land for economic profit.

## DEDICATION

For my past English teachers and for my family, with deep gratitude for the  
unwavering support and belief.

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## INTRODUCTION

Though Zora Neale Hurston and William Faulkner were born only 6 years apart in the 1890s, the two authors grew up in vastly different regions of the South. Hurston considered her hometown Eatonville, Florida while Faulkner hailed from Oxford, Mississippi. Eatonville is comprised of tropical and swampy wetlands while Oxford consists of loamy grasslands and forests. Despite the Hurston and Faulkner's geographical differences, ecocritics often compare the two. Both authors possessed a sophisticated, intimate knowledge of their hometowns and the surrounding countryside. However, Hurston and Faulkner are often compared not only for their detailed ecological knowledge of their distinct locales, but also for how the authors relate their environmental knowledge to social conditions in the South.

Used today, the word "environmental" brings along connotations of the political, such as climate change and endangered species. Mikko Saikku writes, "It is true that many, if not most, environmental historians [...] are admittedly sympathetic to numerous goals of the environmental movement" (11). However he also notes that to group together environmental activism and environmental history "overlooks the scholarly tradition of the discipline" and writes, "it is possible to study environmental history without a political agenda" (11, 12). My

study of Hurston and Faulkner will only briefly discuss our current understanding of environmentalism in its introduction and conclusion. Otherwise, I attempt to set present politics aside and examine the author's relationships to Florida and Mississippi in the early twentieth century.

Our contemporary understanding of the environment is often associated with, among other things, a concern for the health of the planet as a whole. For example, it is understood that certain problems like climate change will be felt globally if not fixed. In the early twentieth century, however, the South's relationship to the land was much less expansive than our concept of the environment today. The South was increasingly exporting resources, making it increasingly aware of and important to other parts of the globe. However, southerners were much more honed in on the local. Farmers felt the need to be invested in knowing local growing conditions in order to produce the maximum yield of crops to sell to make a profit. To Hurston and Faulkner, studying the land would've implied understanding the specifics of distinct regions of land, such as knowing the weather patterns and climate of Eatonville or Lafayette County, as opposed to the more sizable understanding of the environment we possess today. In their books, Hurston and Faulkner focus on this kind of detailed ecological knowledge of the local, contrary to our environmental concerns presently.

The time period that Hurston and Faulkner shared is another important factor in their critical comparison. In a literary movement called the Southern Renaissance, southern authors pushed back against the "moonlight and



magnolias” romanticism of southern books in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind* (1936) is one of the most famous and emblematic works of the era previous to the Southern Renaissance. The novel portrays antebellum plantation life nostalgically and ignores social realities of Reconstruction in the South. Mitchell’s work also pays little attention to the realistic details of the landscape and agriculture, painting land as a passive backdrop. Hurston and Faulkner, on the other hand, were part of the movement of southern authors who “critically interrogat[ed] and demythologize[ed] the past” (Rieger 4). Not by coincidence, I argue, these two authors also wrote about their local landscapes and social environments in an informed and realistic way, portraying the harsh truths of the South in the post-Reconstruction Era instead of longing for the past.

Critics praise both Hurston and Faulkner not only for their more truthful depictions of the South but also for their contributions to ecocriticism. Scholars such as Paul Outka study the land in Hurston’s work to explore its relationship African American art. Outka compares *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to a short story in Jean Toomer’s *Cane* called “Kabnis” and to Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. He claims that Hurston asks “harder” and “more dangerous” questions than Toomer and Twain such as, “what sort of African-American art might spring from an alliance with the Southern landscape? Is there an alternative to Kabnis’s misery and terror, or an outside to the raft of demeaning black rural stereotypes [...]?” (187). Rachel Stein studies a different approach to land in Hurston’s work, examining the relationship between land and

the plight of oppressed blacks. Stein acclaims Hurston's work in *Tell My Horse* and *Their Eyes* for her portrayal of black men and women using nature and folklore to "creatively and subversively redefin[e]" themselves in the face of oppression (54). Lastly, Christopher Rieger studies the land in Hurston as it relates to the pastoral. He notes that Hurston is "an indispensable part of the American and Southern canons" and uses *Their Eyes* and *Seraph on the Suwanee* to explore what he deems the "personal pastoral" (17).

*Go Down, Moses* has been recognized as Faulkner's greatest contribution to ecocriticism. Some ecocritics study *GDM* for the book's themes of property and ownership of the land, such as Thadious M. Davis who calls *GDM* one of "Faulkner's greatest fictional achievements (4)." Davis uses *GDM* as the central work in her study on property, law, and sport (4). Christopher Rieger uses *GDM* in a study of what he calls the postpastoral but also notes on the book's theme of property: "the issues of land ownership and destruction of wilderness in *Go Down, Moses* makes this work one of the most significant American novels to tackle environmental themes" (136). *GDM* ultimately deems "the issues of land ownership" as the cause for the "destruction of the wilderness," putting *GDM*'s insight on par with early environmentalists theories. Judith Bryant Wittenberg explores this idea, among others, in her essay about the beginnings of environmentalism present in *GDM*, which she notes is, "often sited as one of the most significant American novels - if not *the* most - that deals with wilderness and environmental themes" (51). Lastly, Mikko Saikku approaches *GDM* from a historical standpoint in his book on the environmental history of the Mississippi-

Yazoo Delta. Saikku's book is almost entirely historic but he does occasionally reference *GDM's* Delta stories and praises Faulkner for his "acute awareness of an immense process that had irreversibly transformed the natural and cultural landscape of his home state" (1). These are only some of the critics that have written praise and scholarship on Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*.

However, while scholars recognize Hurston and Faulkner's ecological and cultural dexterity, they have concentrated energy on too little of Hurston and Faulkner's material. In critical comparison of these two authors, scholars have focused almost exclusively on Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and the Delta in Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*. This thesis will seek to expand the ecocritical conversation surrounding Hurston and Faulkner by looking at other parts of their work deserving of attention: Hurston's often-neglected *Seraph on the Suwanee* and Faulkner's depiction of Lafayette County in *Go Down, Moses* as opposed to the Delta. This thesis will expand ecocritical comparative studies of Hurston and Faulkner, arguing that the two shared remarkably similar attitudes toward and knowledge of their vastly different environments in more ways than the field currently acknowledges.

The argument that I hope to ultimately prove in my study is that *Seraph on the Suwanee* and *Go Down, Moses* express concern for the way that the pursuit of profit and property harms both the landscape and people. Stein comes the closest to proving this in *Seraph*. However, her main focus is on the exploitation of people and she does not approach her argument with environmental history. Previous Faulkner scholars have made the claim that *GDM* voices these

concerns through assessments of *GDM*'s passages on the Delta and the McCaslin farm, as well as with comparison to historical knowledge of the Mississippi-Yazoo Delta. However, none approached this argument with the specific, local, environmental history of Lafayette County.

My first chapter focuses on Hurston's portrayal of Floridian landscape and agriculture in *Seraph on the Suwanee*. I begin by briefly reviewing popular descriptions of the novel and its characters in criticism. Although scholars consider *Seraph* one of Hurston's lesser novels, I use these negative conceptions as a springboard to explore more of what the novel has to offer. I argue that upon a closer look at the novel's well-informed portrayal of Floridian agriculture, such as the naval stores industry and the citrus industry, scholars should change some of their previous conceptions about the novel and engage with *Seraph* as a work worthy of serious ecocritical study.

*Seraph*'s characters are also portrayed in a different light than they have been thought of traditionally when readers look more closely at the relationships between humans, nature, and agriculture. Arvay, the main character, is often rebuked for her nervousness and mistrust, while her husband Jim is praised for his confidence and his work ethic. However, upon close consideration of each character's relationship to the land, Arvay should be given more credit and sympathy and Jim should not be held in such high regard. Arvay's gentleness toward and harmony with nature proves her to be a more thoughtful character than originally thought while Jim's abuse toward the land is indicative of his abuse towards Arvay.

My second chapter examines the portrayal of agriculture in Lafayette County (fictionalized as Yoknapatawpha) in Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*. Though usually thought of for its fictionalized depiction of the Mississippi-Yazoo Delta's wilderness, I argue that *GDM* also merits consideration for its representation of the change in agriculture in northern Mississippi. Once considered a new, rich frontier, inhabitants of northern Mississippi quickly wore out the landscape in numerous ways, affecting both their relationship with the land and social norms. The consequences of this change are captured in *Go Down, Moses* and the book provides an interesting narrative on agriculture's relationship to capitalism and oppression.

While Ike is still the main character I examine in my writing on Faulkner, I examine his relationship to the cotton fields and forests of northern Mississippi in a close environmental, historical light. By approaching Ike's character in this way, I further and more confidently ground theories that other critics have previously explored. When Ike's worry over his family's inheritance is examined alongside historical occurrences, the progressive connection he makes between capitalism, harm to the land, and agriculture becomes more believable.

One of the large points I hope to make in my chapters is a correlation between environmental awareness and social awareness, both historically and in literature. For this reason, I place a large focus on environmental history and its relationship to social change in both chapters. I examine shifting agricultural industries at a time when the South was notoriously undergoing social upheaval. This history not only informs readers of important biographical information about

the background of each author, but also serves as a guide to understanding Hurston and Faulkner's literature. After I thoroughly review history, I tease out a similar connection between environmental awareness and social awareness in *Seraph on the Suwanee* and *Go Down, Moses*.

## I. READING ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S *SERAPH ON THE SUWANEE* ALONGSIDE THE ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY OF FLORIDA

Many critics have written off Zora Neale Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee* as a failed novel. Elizabeth Binggeli writes, "For many Hurston readers, *Seraph* is a confused aberration amidst the author's otherwise distinguished and innovative work" (4). Binggeli explains away *Seraph* as Hurston's attempt to write a novel that would later become a studio production. She claims that Hurston was pandering to Hollywood's "crackerphilia," inspired by John Ford's *Tobacco Road* in 1941. However, while *Seraph* admittedly has its flaws, the novel merits a second look. *Seraph* finds its strength in the sophisticated environmental current running throughout the narrative. The novel is immersed in Hurston's obvious ecological knowledge and it takes a perceptive look at environmental concerns in Florida and the South.

A native Floridian, Hurston was knowledgeable concerning the state's various landscapes. Hurston considered Eatonville, Florida to be her hometown, where she spent the majority of her childhood. In 1904, Hurston's mother died and Hurston's father sent her to boarding school in Jacksonville for a brief stint before he stopped paying tuition. Practically orphaned, Hurston spent the next decade or so of her life living with siblings or neighbors and picking up odd jobs,

working in a doctor's office, as a waitress, and as a maid for the lead singer of a traveling repertoire company. Hurston lived in a wide range of places during this period of her life, including various regions of Florida and Tennessee, and traveling with the theatrical company as far as Virginia, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, and Massachusetts. She finished high school in Baltimore, started her B.A. at Howard University in DC, and finished it at Barnard College in New York City.

It was not until Hurston studied anthropology at Barnard that she felt she could look at her past and present surroundings with an objective eye. She noted that black folk culture was around her like "a magnificent shawl" but that it fit her "like a tight chemise" until she went to college and learned how to "stand off and look at my garment" (Boyd 115). In 1927 and 1928, Hurston got her chance to practice her new anthropological skills on her home state, receiving a fellowship and then employment to collect black folklore in the South. She visited Eatonville, Jacksonville, St. Augustine, Palatka, Polk County, Eu Gallie, and Miami, among other places. She even moved into the Everglades Cypress Lumber Company's living quarters in Loughman, Florida at one point of her sojourn.

The next significant amount of time Hurston spent in Florida was in 1939 doing anthropological research in Cross City, located in Suwanee County. There she was invited to interview turpentine workers, another experience that would affect her fiction. In 1943, Hurston bought a riverboat house that she used to travel up and down St. John and Halifax River, using Daytona Beach as her home base. She visited Eatonville, Sanford, and Winter Park. Hurston would



travel back to Florida constantly throughout her career, usually to collect folklore or write but also to visit friends and family. Hurston's exposure to the Floridian landscape was extensive and varied, helping to shape the environmental knowledge she imparts in *Seraph on the Suwanee*.

*Seraph on the Suwanee* details the lives of Arvay and Jim Meserve, two young, poor southerners who get married. At the start of the novel, Jim has no money but is confident, likable, and hardworking. Although "the fortunes of the War had wiped Jim's grand-father clean," Jim is a descendant of plantation family that once knew "the ease of the big estates" (*Seraph* 7). Arvay similarly has no money but she comes from a "white trash" family and is self-conscious and anxious. Published in 1948, *Seraph* is Hurston's first novel that focuses on white main characters. Critics have focused most heavily on the racial aspect of *Seraph* while largely ignoring other themes and they tend to favor Jim over Arvay. In *The Mississippi Quarterly*, for example, John C. Charles writes an article that depicts Jim as the confident face of Hurston's New South while finding Arvay and her people to represent ignorance and backwardness. However, these critical approaches ignore crucial aspects of Hurston's novel. A reading of *Seraph* that favors Jim ignores his abuse and exploitation of Arvay and oversimplifies Arvay's character. To favor Jim is to endorse chauvinism and assault and to condemn Arvay is to reduce her character based on her socioeconomic standing and her rural upbringing.

When looking at *Seraph* through an environmental lens, this truth becomes clear. Jim manages to raise his family from lower class to upper-middle

class through use of the land and sea, a feat not inherently unjust. However, Christopher Rieger writes about Jim's work:

Nature itself facilitates an improvement of social standing via avenues that are accessible to lower- or working-class people in ways that formal education and white-collar jobs often are not. However, the largely financial benefits to humans can easily change a mutually rewarding balance into a one-sided, exploitative relationship (93).

Jim's sexism and physical abuse of Arvay aligns with his anthropocentric mistreatment and exploitation of the land. In contrast, Arvay proves herself to be more perceptive, mindful, and intuitive than often thought when examined in an environmental light.

Jim and Arvay's characters represent tensions in the environmental history of Florida in the mid-twentieth century. By the time *Seraph* was published in 1948, the South was exhausted due to the scramble for natural resources. Numerous agricultural ventures had reached their peak production and then taken a dip because of irresponsible treatment of the land. Jim reflects the ambitious, exploitative agricultural workers who exhaust the landscape for profit while Arvay's character resonates with those who are cautious in their approach toward the land.

Jim first tries his hand at the naval stores industry, referred to as the "teppentime" industry in *Seraph* for one of the products of the naval stores industry, turpentine. James J. Miller, in his study of a region of northeast Florida surrounding and including St. Augustine, writes that the naval stores industry

moved continually southward—from North Carolina in 1850, to South Carolina in 1880, to Georgia in 1890, and finally to Florida—as the vast Southern coastal pine forest was gradually depleted (182).

The naval stores and turpentine industries depleted pines until they reached a coastal state. Florida was one of the last frontiers for eastern virgin pine forests, lending to a sense that there are limits to resources. Miller writes,

By 1932 the northeast pine forest had been completely cut over. In the entire state only three stands of virgin timber remained, all in the southern part of the peninsula. [...] A survey of timber operators throughout the state revealed that none replanted any of their timber tracts, nor did any make use of the state or federal forest service to advise them (182-184).

This passage highlights the almost complete exhaustion of virgin pine forests in Florida by the 1930s. The excerpt also demonstrates hasty profits and negligence through the decision not to replant cleared tracts of pine, a choice that would have benefitted both the forests and the timber operators. Finally, lumber companies declined to ask advice from the federal forest service, another gesture toward carelessness.

Though Hurston's earlier works do not explore the naval stores industry's destruction of pines, certain scenes do suggest that she sees the natural environment—and trees specifically—as resources for people suffering under injustice. Rachel Stein writes of two Hurston scenes that document freedom for minorities from oppressive societies. The first scene Stein explores is about a sacred palm tree from *Tell My Horse*, a non-fiction piece that documents

Hurston's study of voodoo rituals in Haiti and Jamaica in the 1930's. Stein writes on *Tell My Horse*, "Hurston sees the conjunction of racism, sexism, and classism in the social powerlessness of poor black women who are considered the dregs of Caribbean society" (Stein 56). In the palm tree scene, white, Catholic, Euro-colonial power oppresses black, Caribbean women. The second scene is the famous pear tree scene in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Stein connects the Caribbean to Janie's racist and sexist setting in Florida, writing, "black women are the 'mules of the world'" in both places (71). In both scenes, the dominant and oppressive societies treat black women as sexual objects and subhuman laborers. Through separate but comparable visions of a tree, Stein argues that black women overcome oppressive societal assumptions and experience sexual liberation.

In one story from *Tell My Horse*, Hurston writes about a palm tree that has become a national shrine with healing powers after a "luminous virgin lit in the fronds of a palm tree" and "sang a beautiful song" (230). The worship of this tree by the colonized challenges the Catholic idea that transcendence is reached after earthly existence and the "positive reevaluation of body and nature serves to contest the colonial denigration of black women" (Stein 62). The priest, whose dominance and church is threatened by the worship of the tree, cuts down the palm tree and builds a new church over the site. However, natural forces destroy several churches built on the site and the blackened ruin of the final church becomes a reborn shrine of bodily healing and worship. Stein argues that the

tree “heals and reaffirms the black bodies so despised by the colonial order” (Stein 64).

Stein also argues that the site of the palm tree is especially liberatory for Afro-Caribbean women, who take the ashes from the ruined church and ...anointed their faces and legs and their bare breasts. Some had ailing feet and legs, and they anointed them. Several women were rubbing their buttocks and thighs without any self-consciousness at all (*Tell My Horse* 230).

Women rub these ashes, which already represent rebellion against patriarchal colonial rule, over their naked bodies. Stein argues, “Unlike standard Christian asceticism, which abhors sexual pleasure, the ritual of the tree embraces female sexuality as a natural manifestation of spirit” (64). In a society that shames women’s sexuality, the sacred palm tree serves as a symbol of liberation for women especially.

Stein compares the oppression of black women in the Caribbean to Janie’s world in Florida. She argues that Hurston “further reinforces racial and gender boundaries” through Janie’s grandmother Nanny, who attempts to protect Janie. Nanny warns Janie that in their world, black women are used as either a “work ox or a brood sow” (*Their Eyes* 31). The pear tree allows Janie to free herself from the restrictions Nanny describes:

She was stretched out on her back beneath the pear tree soaking in the alto chant of the visiting bees, the gold of the sun and the panting breath of the breeze when the inaudible voice of it all came to her. She saw a

dust-bearing bee sink in to the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was a marriage! She had been summoned to behold a revelation. Then Janie felt a pain remorseless sweet that left her limp and languid (24).

On this scene, Stein writes,

In this passage the sexual is mingled with the sacred, the physical with the immaterial, the human with the natural, pain with pleasure, and gender division all but disappears in Janie's revelation of marriage. [...] Janie's vision of the pear tree gives her a sense of life's pleasure and fulfillment that counters Nanny's vision of inevitable degradation and drudgery. As in *Tell My Horse*, the tree vision affirms black women's erotic energy as vital source of life (74).

The pear tree scene provides an alternative to repressive societal norms, which compare a black woman to mules and cows. In Janie's pear tree vision, women's sexuality is spiritual and sensual instead of brutish and debased. Rieger writes on Janie's "marriage" to the pear tree:

Again, black, female, sexuality is celebrated, even venerated in the religious imagery, and some fundamental binary divisions are challenged. The distinctions between subject and object, observer and participant, human and nature are blurred, if not erased, in the language of Hurston's description (98).

Rieger goes on to write that Janie's marriage to the pear tree "efface[s] the gender oppositions normally associated with marriage, thereby offering the possibility of a truly egalitarian partnership" (98). This is the most egalitarian example of marriage in the novel, as even Tea Cake proves himself to be domineering by the end of *Their Eyes*. Trees in Hurston's earlier works serve as symbols of liberation from racial and sexual oppression and stereotypes, in addition to freedom from religious tyranny.

Trees were also an important liberatory symbol in Hurston's personal history. Like Janie's grandmother, Hurston's father limited his daughter in fear of white oppression. Hurston writes of her father, "He predicted dire things for me. The white folks were not going to stand for it. I was going to be hung before I got grown. Somebody was going to blow me down for my sassy tongue" (*Dust Tracks* 13). However, Boyd notes that during Hurston's childhood in Eatonville, "she became especially friendly with one tall tree" which she named "the loving pine" (42). Hurston says of the tree, "I used to take seat at the foot of that tree and play for hours without any other toys. We talked about everything in my world" (Boyd 42). Hurston's relationship with "the loving tree" was liberatory in that the brazen, often rebuked child was allowed to express herself freely without fear of punishment or judgment.

However, when Hurston visited workers in a turpentine camp in 1939, she had little reason to associate the pine forests with liberation. While she collected folklore from the workers, she also heard about the discriminatory hardships in the camp:

The white camp bosses regularly beat the workers, the turpentiners said, and they forced themselves on any woman they wanted. If the woman's husband dared protest, his surliness would earn him a beating—or even murder. Black bodies were often weighed down with cement, the laborers told Hurston, and dumped into the Gulf of Mexico (Boyd 323).

Although Hurston does not write about violence against blacks in the turpentine camp in *Seraph* (one black man even proves himself to be violent towards women), she does incorporate male oppression of women into her 1948 novel.

*Seraph on the Suwanee's* tree scene is a stark contrast to the pictures of liberty and sexual freedom represented in Hurston's earlier writing and aligns itself with Hurston's experience in the turpentine camp. Early in the novel before Jim and Arvay are married, Jim asks his worker Joe Kelsey for advice because he feels that "there seemed to be a hold-back to [Arvay's] love" (*Seraph* 45). Joe advises Jim,

"Most women folks will love you plenty if you take and see to it that they do. Make 'em knuckle under. From the very first jump, get the bridle in they mouth and ride 'em hard and stop 'em short. They's all alike, Boss.

Take 'em and break 'em" (46).

Joe speaks of women in a way that is reminiscent of the bestial portrayal of women's sexuality that Hurston overcomes in *Tell My Horse* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. He compares women to livestock and tells Jim that, like chattel, women can be controlled with force.



A couple of days later, Jim drives to Arvay's to pick her up for a buggy ride. Before they go, Jim says he would like to see where Arvay played as a child. Arvay takes him to a mulberry tree in the backyard, described as "a big leafy growth" that "rolled in the arms of the wind" where she played as a child (49). The tree is explained further:

[Arvay and Jim] stooped under the low-hanging willowly limbs and straightened up in the wide shady area under the tree. It was like a green cave under there, or like being inside a great big tent (49).

The mulberry tree is portrayed as uninhibited and free through the image of it blowing in the wind. However, its shielding branches also serve as a sanctuary or haven from the outside world. Jim has Arvay play under the tree like she would have as a child and she tells him,

"What I liked to do when I was under here playing by myself was to catch hold of two low limbs like this and play like I was in a swing, and lean way back and gaze into the top of the tree. It looks so cool-like and tender green away up there. And when the wind shakes the leaves some, you can see through to the sky" (50).

Descriptions of the tree are enveloped in serenity. Similar to Hurston, Arvay played under this tree in her childhood. Arvay feels safe under this tree and does not experience the anxiety and self-doubt that usually plague her. She is also allowed to be content in her own company, a privilege not usually allowed by her community who thinks that Arvay is "queer" for keeping to herself and that "marriage would straighten her out" (*Seraph* 6).

Jim, however, takes advantage of Arvay's vulnerable position and "took one hand from under her and tore her grip from the swinging limbs. In a fraction of a second she was snatched from the sky to the ground" (51). Although Arvay "held onto the limbs desperately" Jim rips her drawers and

...Arvay opened her mouth to scream, but no sound emerged. Her mouth was closed by Jim's passionate kisses, and in a moment more, despite her struggles, Arvay knew a pain remorseless sweet.

Not until Jim lay limp and motionless upon her body, did Arvay return to herself and begin to think, and with thinking, all her old feelings of defeat and inadequacy came back to her (51).

Jim figuratively wrenches Arvay from her haven of innocence and vulnerability when he rapes her underneath the mulberry tree. He takes Arvay's voice, confidence, and independence. Contrary to previous tree scenes in Hurston's writing, sexual oppression triumphs over female liberation. Arvay is sexually assaulted and treated as a "brood sow," a fate that Afro-Caribbean women and Janie find escape from in their relations with the arboreal world. Although Jim is generally thought of as a character that the novel looks upon favorably, in the mulberry tree scene Jim is Arvay's oppressor. This appears to be *Seraph on the Suwanee's* deliberate attempt to question Jim's character, as it reverses a familiar scene in Hurston's writing. And, if we apply Stein's argument in *Tell My Horse* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to Jim, this scene is critical of white, male, and colonial-Christian power.

Jim's use of force with Arvay is connected to his control over the land. In the chapter before Jim rapes Arvay, Jim oversees workers at the turpentine camp. In order to extract rosin, workers remove the bark from the pines and hack downward streaks into the surface in a v-shape to channel the rosin into containers. Jim says to a worker named Charlie, who is in the midst of this process and the best chipper on the camp, "Sink 'em in, there Charlie, sink 'em in! You ain't doing a thing but scratching that tree" (*Seraph* 45). After Jim rides away, he thinks, "He knew that he was too finicky with the man, and he knew that it was because he was not just satisfied with Arvay in a way. There seemed to be a hold-back to her love" (45). Jim takes out the frustration that he feels toward Arvay when he orders the violent defacing of a pine. Jim's order to "sink" Charlie's ax into the pine foreshadows the sexual abuse that Arvay will experience.

Although the novel clearly links sexual oppression to exploitation of the land, the aftermath of Jim's rape is less straightforward. Although most of the language in the mulberry tree scene is violent, Jim's penetration of Arvay is also described as a "pain remorseless sweet." Arvay expresses a loss of confidence after the rape but her biggest fear seems to be that Jim will dispose of her and she will be a ruined woman. The two ride off to the courthouse directly after to get married and Arvay's fears are set aside. Rieger suggests that this scene consists of both "a rape and a catharsis, at least in Arvay's twisted psyche" (116). He suggests that this scene and Jim's clearing of the swamp later in the book both "illustrate and strengthen Jim's control of his wife, but they also represent a

purging of Arvay's psyche, which contributes to her gradual awakening into self-awareness" (Rieger 116). Arvay, however, does not ever reach total self-awareness. By the end of the novel, Arvay reaches a new level of understanding but it concerns Jim, not herself.

Instead, this scene represents the degree to which male oppression is normalized and even valorized in this society. The same phrase, "a pain remorseless sweet," is used in *Their Eyes* to describe Janie's sexual liberation under the pear tree. Meisenhelder considers this similarity and writes that Hurston draws an affinity between the two scenes in order to, "underscor[e] the fact that, although Arvay may seem a Cinderella figure, she in fact becomes a glorified 'spit cup' in her marriage" (102). When Arvay accuses Jim of rape and says she should've yelled, Jim reinforces Meisenhelder's point with his reply:

"And it would not have done you a damn bit of good. Just a trashy waste of good time and breath. Sure you was raped, and that ain't all. You're going to keep on getting raped" (*Seraph* 57).

This response advocates the silencing of women and implies that to refuse rape from someone of better social standing is "trashy." It also normalizes rape as an acceptable form of marital intercourse. This reversal of previous tree scenes implies that Jim overpowers the tree's liberating powers, taking away Arvay's independence.

About a year after Jim and Arvay marry, they move from Sawley to "Citrabelle" where Jim works in the citrus industry. The citrus industry's difficulties occurred earlier than the exhaustion of pine, beginning with record temperature

lows in 1835. In what is referred to as “Cold Sunday,” a warm-spell of nearly 100 years was broken with a low of 7 degrees Fahrenheit, killing thousands of citrus trees. Then, in the 1840s and 50s, a parasitic insect *Lepidosaphes beckii* or purple scale afflicted trees throughout Florida. In December of 1894 and February of 1895, two freezes that occurred within a short time became known as the “big one” because of their devastating effect on citrus trees. The combined effect of the freezes wiped out entire orchards and encouraged the southward move of citrus growers. However, “by 1909, over two-thirds of the northern counties were still growing fewer oranges than twenty years before, while nearly three-fourths of the southern counties had increased production, dramatically in many cases” (Davis and Arsenault 183). In response to the freezes, planters gradually but continually moved to the southern part of the state. Although the industry ultimately thrived in production and overcame varying problems, growers first experienced devastating losses. Florida was well acquainted with the fickleness of the citrus industry and through various hardships, the state learned that profits made in agriculture could just as easily turn into losses.

Similarly, Hurston’s childhood taught her that abundant times could be fickle. Hurston reminisced on her childhood home in Eatonville as a place of bounty and ripeness, almost Edenic. In *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Hurston writes, “There were plenty of orange, grapefruit, tangerine, guavas and other fruits in our yard. We had a five-acre garden with things to eat growing in it, and so we were never hungry” (12). However, when her mother died, Hurston experienced abandonment from her father and poverty. On this time, she remarked, “There is

something about poverty that smells like death. Dead dreams dropping off the heart like leaves in a dry season and rotting around the feet" (*Dust Tracks* 87). Hurston, through metaphors of thriving or dying plants, recognized that bountiful times could end.

Arvey is skeptical when abundance seems too easy. When Jim and Arvey first move to Citrabelle, Arvey thinks,

Outside of the miles and miles of orange groves, the people raised nothing but vegetables to eat. Not a speck of cotton or tobacco, or the things she was used to seeing growing. Things had a picnicky, pleasy look that, while it was pretty, made Arvey wonder if folks were not taking things too easy down here. Heaven wasn't going to be any refreshment to folks if they got along with no more trouble than this (73).

Arvey questions the facility and bounty involved in the citrus industry. Unlike Hurston, Arvey is skeptical because she grew up surrounded by poverty and difficult work in the turpentine camps, not because she has had abundance taken away from her. John C. Charles uses this passage as an example of Arvey's ignorance. He writes,

This perception of general Southern poor-white squalor and benightedness is made manifest in Arvey and her family, whose ignorance is frequently shocking, on occasion amusing, and at times appalling. [...] At times Arvey's ignorance is intended to be funny, as when she complains about the higher standard of living in Citrabelle (21).

However, with knowledge of the numerous environmental setbacks in the citrus industry, Arvay is wise to be cautious. When read alongside the citrus industry's history, Charles's mockery of Arvay is based on nothing more than classist assumptions.

Charles writes that Hurston is "condescending" and "contemptuous" toward Arvay's people, the poor whites of Sawley, in other parts of his article as well. As evidence, Charles points to descriptions of Sawley on the opening page of *Seraph on the Suwanee*: "primitive forests" and "there was ignorance and poverty, and the ever-present hookworm" (1). However, a scornful tone is not obvious, especially considering the larger context of the opening page. The full sentence about primitive forests reads:

[Sawley] is flanked on the south by the curving course of the river which Stephen Foster made famous without ever having looked upon its water, running swift and deep through primitive forests, and reddened by the chemicals leached out of drinking roots (1).

If this excerpt is contemptuous of ignorance, the scorn is directed at Stephen Foster, a wealthy, white songwriter, for writing a song about the Suwanee River "without ever having looked upon its water." The piece is a minstrel song called "Old Folks at Home" in 1851, also known commonly as "Swanee River." Hurston condemns Foster for ignorance of the Suwanee River, which she then goes on to display her knowledge of. She shows special awareness of environmental problems affecting the river, such as "chemicals leached out of drinking roots." The "primitive forests" are hardly the focus of this sentence. In addition, at the

time Hurston was writing the novel in the mid-twentieth century, virgin forests would've been considered a rarity and a valuable resource that was near exhaustion. Rather than displaying scorn toward Sawley's people, this passage highlights natural elements of their town while recognizing the community's environmental problems.

Charles's other piece of evidence of Hurston's scorn toward poor whites in Sawley--the quote "there was ignorance and poverty, and the ever-present hookworm"--can also be considered more acutely with context: the passage goes on to say:

The farms and the scanty flowers in front yards and in tin cans and buckets looked like the people (1).

This picture is not one of scorn but of pity. This passage paints an image of the people of Sawley as stretched too thin or lacking vitality, highlighted by the "scanty flowers" and hookworm, a parasite that causes loss of iron and protein. Hurston displays Sawley as a place of difficulty: impoverished, diseased, and junky. Hurston underlines this point on the next page, noting,

But the people of Sawley also knew that while the Suwanee furnished free meat, it furnished plenty of mosquitoes and malaria too. If you wanted to stay on your feet, you bought your quinine every Saturday along with your groceries. Work was hard, pleasures few, and malaria and hookworm plentiful (2).

Hurston emphasizes more disease and the need for quinine to ward off malaria. This, in turn, helps residents of Sawley to "stay on [their] feet" only to have



difficult work and little pleasure to look forward to. In these passages, Hurston does not display contempt towards residents of Sawley but rather an awareness of their hardships, especially environmentally. Though Hurston may present the people of Sawley as impoverished and rural, they are not ignorant environmentally. Hurston imbues the residents with a knowledge of and proximity to the land while also understanding the various diseases and hardships that Sawley is capable of imposing on its residents.

John C. Charles's pictures of Jim and Arvay can also be reconsidered when looking through an ecocritical lens. Comparing Jim and Arvay, Charles writes:

Jim represents Hurston's New South ideal--he is irreverent, strong, ambitious, smart, generous, and fearless--Arvay and her "kind" represent his antithesis--they are fearful, racist, selfish, treacherous, cruel, and, above all, ignorant (21).

In some ways, what Charles writes is true. Jim is certainly strong and ambitious while Arvay is undeniably fearful and racist. However, *Seraph on the Suwanee* does not always portray Jim as superior to Arvay, especially in their treatment of the land. Jim's strength often proves to be too forceful and his ambition detrimental. Arvay's cautionary and fearful attitude, on the other hand, would have benefitted the land and those seeking resources from the land a great deal.

Jim's relationship with Arvay and with the land changes little throughout the novel. He continues to abuse Arvay, shoving her when they fight and verbally abusing her by exclaiming things like, "Where I made my big mistake was in not

starting you off with a good beating just as soon as I married you” (*Seraph* 215). Jim also continues to be economically successful through use of the natural world, going into real estate with his son and beginning a shrimping business. Like working in the turpentine camp, Jim uses force against the wilderness in order to succeed, such as when he clears the swamp on the property to be sold for real estate. Similarly, in a scene on the shrimping boat, Jim attempts to cross a bar that is too rough and has to overcome the force of the ocean to keep the ship from wrecking. Jim struggles with the wheel to keep the ship, fittingly named the *Arvay Henson*, on course:

His face was set and his jaw muscles bunched. With his feet braced far apart, Jim was fighting a battle with the wheel. Twisting his body halfway to the floor on the right, he brought the bow around and dead on course again” (329).

Jim’s abuse of Arvay is predictable when looking at his forceful behavior toward the land. He does not develop into the popular, likeable character described in criticism but remains chauvinistic and violent.

Arvay continues to align herself with nature but ultimately adopts Jim’s classist attitude and continues to endure his abuse. When Arvay travels back to Sawley, she feels tranquility under her old mulberry tree, which is described as a “sacred symbol” to Arvay and as something that “brought her back to the happiest and most consecrated moments of her lifetime” (*Seraph* 306). However, Arvay then pins her childhood home as the root of all of her troubles and places it in direct opposition to the harmony she feels with the mulberry tree: “But between

the tree and the world there stood that house. Now Arvay looked at it with scrutiny, and darkened. Seeing it from the meaning of the tree it was no house at all" (306).

Arvay's hatred for her family house is rooted in her hatred for her poor upbringing. She cathartically burns down the house, which she describes as ...soaked in so much of doing-without, of soul-starvation, of brutish vacancy of aim, of absent dreams, envy of trifles, ambitions for littleness, smothered cries and trampled love, that it was a sanctuary of tiny and sanctioned vices (*Seraph* 306).

Like Jim, Arvay's looks down upon "doing-without." Unlike Jim, Arvay's classist attitude comes from her self-consciousness about her poor family and her upbringing in Sawley.

Arvay proves these points further in the context of her community in Sawley. She wishes to share her harmonious relationship with nature with her community by turning the site of the burned down house into a "play and pleasure park" (*Seraph* 309). She says it will be a place "all given over to pretty flowers and somewhere for folks to set down and rest" (*Seraph* 309). However, soon after this announcement, when a neighbor asks Arvay if she will ever live near Sawley again, Arvay replies,

"Miss Hessian, my husband come along and took me off from that place and planned and fixed bigger things for me to enjoy. Looks like I ought to have sense enough to appreciate what he's done, and still trying to do for me, and not always pulling back here" (*Seraph* 309).

Arvay's opposite relationship with nature from Jim does not extend into the two's similar socioeconomic views. However, in this case Arvay not only passes judgment self-consciously on herself but also deems her former friends and town as lesser because of their socioeconomic standing.

Arvay does not stay to oversee the construction of the park because the burning of her family home empowers her to seek out Jim from a temporary separation in their marriage. She leaves a former neighbor who she and others trust to take care of the park. Arvay then returns to Jim on his shrimping boat, witnessing his rough handling of the *Arvay Henson* and mastery of the ocean with awe instead of her usual caution or fear. *Seraph* ends with a dubious reconciliation between Arvay and Jim, in which Jim's rough language indicates that their relationship will continue to be abusive.

In this scene, Arvay is forced to choose between either Jim, his abusive treatment of her, and his forceful, profit-driven use of the land or between her relationship with Sawley, nature, and her own self-worth. Arvay chooses to return to Jim, to admire his power over the environment, and to adopt his classist attitude toward her former town. Arvay does not become an advocate for abused land or for herself. However, she does not merit the detrimental categorization critics have made for her in scholarship, especially considering that she is a victim of domestic abuse.

Upon reconsideration of *Seraph on the Suwanee* and its two main characters, none fit the molds carved for them in criticism. Hurston's novel redeems itself through the author's obvious environmental knowledge of Florida.

*Seraph* possesses impressive ecological insight, progressively linking agriculture and desire for profit to the detrimental state of the health of the land in the early twentieth century and to the abuse of the oppressed. When revisited, especially in this light, *Seraph* tells a tale of exploitation and bigotry instead of confidence and determination. It is only with this understanding that criticism can move forward and examine the novel's complicated relationship to oppression in Hurston's portrayal of mid-twentieth Florida.

## II. READING WILLIAM FAULKNER'S *GO DOWN, MOSES* ALONGSIDE THE ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY OF LAFAYETTE COUNTY

Like Zora Neale Hurston, William Faulkner developed a nuanced understanding of local environmental problems in his home state. While Hurston specialized in northeast Florida, Faulkner was an expert on two areas of Mississippi in particular: Lafayette County (where he grew up) and the Delta. Also like Hurston, Faulkner writes about the exploitation of the specific local lands in later novels, especially as tied to the exploitation of a minority. However, a major distinction between Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee* and Faulkner's later novels is that Faulkner has been given credit for his attention to environmental themes. While Hurston's 1948 novel has been called an aberration in her writing career, critics have praised Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses* in particular as its author's largest contribution to ecocriticism,

However, although *GDM* has been recognized for its sophisticated ecological insight, most critics have focused on the history of the Delta in ecocriticism if they focus on environmental history at all. Thadious M. Davis's *Games of Property*, for example, spotlights the relationship between the land and property, law, and games in *GDM* through a reading of the South's legal history as opposed to its environmental history. Christopher Rieger's *Clear-Cutting Eden*

focuses southern pastoral literature and defines *GDM* as postpastoral with historical attention given to the Mississippi-Yazoo Delta. Two essays from Linda Wagner-Martin's *New Essays on Go Down, Moses*, by Judith Wittenberg and John T. Matthews most closely resemble my grounding of *GDM* in Lafayette County and the Delta's environmental history. However, Wittenberg and Matthews use a larger scope than I and write about *GDM* through a national and southern lens, respectively. While I will also consider national and southern environmental trends, this chapter strives to uncover how Faulkner's deep understanding of one region of Mississippi in particular, Lafayette County, influenced his 1942 work, *Go Down, Moses*.

Mississippi's environmental history relevant to Faulkner in the mid-twentieth century begins with a national shift in the cotton industry in the early nineteenth century. The cotton industry was growing but continuously farming the same crop for decades exhausted the soil. As a result, the cotton industry became migratory. Don H. Doyle writes,

In the older eastern states the repeated planting of cotton and the reckless disregard for erosion and soil depletion left behind a scarred swath of ruined, infertile fields as the cotton frontier advanced into the piedmont (58).

Davis notes that the farmer's most common solution to the exhausted soil was to "simply to move westerly, buy a new plantation, and repeat the process again after the profits had been secured" (126). In the 1830s, the demand for cotton led planters to move from exhausted lands in South Carolina and Georgia to settle

new lands such as northern areas in Mississippi, including Faulkner's Lafayette County. The movement to fresh land opened new frontiers for the cotton industry. In unsettled areas such as Mississippi, land was cheap and plentiful.

A decade later in north Mississippi in the 1840s, excitement over new and cheap land settled into more realistic plans for development. Doyle writes that "those who profited amid the renewed prosperity, especially the larger cotton planters and merchants and professionals in town" were "imbued with a faith in progress and improvement" (88). However, like the land before, this frontier would too become unhealthy through damaging agricultural practices. This was especially true in northern Mississippi, which possessed "delicate loess soil" in its less hilly regions (Doyle 89). Mississippi's loess soil was a soft, dusty soil windblown from northern glaciers centuries earlier. Doyle notes that the soil was "loosely packed and free of stones," making the land "remarkably easy to clear of trees and bush" and especially susceptible to exhaustion and erosion (75). Complaints were made about soil exhaustion and erosion as early as the 1850s in Lafayette County.

Northern Mississippi, recently considered frontier, underwent considerable damage due to the "rapacious, shortsighted strategy of its migratory inhabitants":

Most settlers saw the land as an expendable resource, which they willingly exploited before moving on to Texas or the next frontier, leaving behind an exhausted, ruined land (Doyle 297).



Farmers approached their agricultural practices with an attitude of frontier opportunism, declining to think about long-term effects of farming practices and instead moving to new land when they had exhausted theirs.

Agricultural growth halted in Lafayette County during the Civil War, further destroying Mississippi's land. Eugene Hilgard, Mississippi's State Geologist from 1858-1873 and a University of Mississippi chemistry professor, notes that the majority of the harm done to the landscape was not due to the war or to nature, although both played a part. Instead, the damaged land was overwhelmingly due again to shortsighted farming practices. In Lafayette County, according to Hilgard, previously cultivated fields were left unplanted and exposed to the elements during the war. The exposed fields formed a hard top layer, which prevented a normal amount of permeation of rain into the ground and caused severe amounts of runoff. This created "massive gullies ten to twenty feet deep" (Doyle 297). The gullies contained red sand, making them look like "enormous bleeding sores across the land" according to Doyle and referred to as the "encroachment of the red washes" by Hilgard (297, 6). Neglect during the Civil War escalated north Mississippi's deterioration and made the poor condition of the land even more dramatically visible. Hilgard notes a Texan visitor's impression of Mississippi's landscape:

"I don't see how you Mississippi people make a living—either your land is miserably poor, or you have abused it awfully. Why, the whole country along that railroad looks like a turkey gobbler that has been pulled through a briar bush by the tail" (6).

Mississippi's poor environmental health was visible even for visitors with eyes untrained in Mississippi's landscape.

After the Civil War, the prominence of planters and yeoman farmers fell and tenant farming became the most common form of agriculture, a system in which larger tracts of land were broken up into small parcels to be farmed by individual families on credit. The tenant system was notoriously exploitative and, many have argued, closely resembled antebellum plantation slavery. However, logistical differences between antebellum agriculture (plantations and yeoman farming) and postbellum agriculture (tenant farming) intensified the harmful agrarian practices already taking place throughout the South. Landowners that rented the land to tenants demanded maximum and immediate yields from the already exhausted land in order to "recoup their yearly investments in the volatile cotton markets and to repay bank loans" (Rieger 138). Tenant farmers, caught in impossible cycles of debt to those they rented land from, worked to gain as much as they could from the land each season, as demanded by landowners. In the decades following the Civil War, the effects of tenant farming on northern Mississippi's land were exacerbated further by population growth, expansion of acres being farmed, and more large estates being broken up into parcels for tenant farmers.

Other aspects of tenant farming besides needing maximum yields and expansion harmed the land as well:

Most farmers in Lafayette County worked land they did not own. Because they moved frequently from one tenant farm to another every year or two, they exploited the land without regard to the future (Doyle 298).

Like the frontier opportunists of earlier decades, tenant farmers treated the land as an expendable resource because of the migratory nature of tenant farming. Once again, land was considered for its short-term benefits and not for long-term agricultural practices. In addition, because the tenant farmer had to “grow cotton to get credit, and to work land with an inelastic force (his family), the farmer planted less food, which the merchant then obligingly sold him at a goodly markup” (Cowdrey 107). This further decreased diversity in southern agriculture, creating a monoculture of cotton which devastated the soil even further and endangered the cotton crop to problems that could sweep the unvaried landscape, as proven later by the boll-weevil. Of course, as Rieger notes, tenant farmers had “more immediate worries than the long-term productivity of the soil they worked” (138). However, the system proved to be even more detrimental to the land than previous agricultural systems.

Another environmental blow was delivered to northern Mississippi in the decades surrounding Faulkner’s birth in 1897, when lumber companies arrived in Lafayette County. Doyle writes,

The final desecration of the land came during William Faulkner’s early life, when lumber companies came into the hills of Lafayette County and cut huge swaths through the hardwood forests (299).

Previous to the Civil War, forests were mainly cut to clear land for agriculture in the South. Hickman, who focuses on pines, writes of early Mississippians,

To them the trees as such had no value except as wood for their crude houses, furniture, fences, and plows. The pines with their long taproots represented major obstacles to clearing the few acres of farmland upon which the settlers were dependent for subsistent crops (Hickman 15).

Before technological advances in the lumber industry, forests were considered an obstacle to farmland. Lack of transportation made selling cut lumber unfeasible and limited the industry heavily, as the only way to transport trees felled for lumber before the railroad was to float logs on rivers. It was not until decades later, when advances in the railroad and saws were made, that forests became an “unexpected source of income” (Doyle 299).

Developments in transportation and logging were made in the second half of the nineteenth century, depleting the country’s northeastern forests and causing the national lumber industry to delve into the South. After the Civil War, loggers flocked to the region for the land’s possession of “great uncut hardwood forests and about twice as much pine timber as the rest of the country combined” (Cowdrey 112). The industry boomed in Mississippi from 1880 to 1920. In Lafayette County, a history of the Mississippi county reports,

[I]n the period 1915-1925 the timber in Lafayette County was cut off hundreds acres of land leaving it without cover. Initially, white oak timber was cut to make staves for whiskey barrels. The Lucas E. Moore Stave

Company in Columbus, MS brought Yugoslav stave makers into the county to manufacture the staves by hand. The Prohibition Law, passed in 1918, stopped this but most of the white oak timber had already been lost. Then after World War I there was an unusual demand from 1920 to 1928 for oak ties to rebuild the railroad's railbed, neglected for many years previously. Great forests of red oak and post oak were cut and made into cross ties. [...] Lastly came the "peckerwood" sawmills, powered by a tractor, which produced millions of board feet of pine lumber for the True Hixon Lumber Company. Pine lumber was in great demand for new houses built in the roaring twenties (22).

In Lafayette County, lumber industries arrived in Faulkner's young adulthood, first seeking oak for whiskey barrels, then oak for railroads, and finally pine for lumber companies. This history details the expansive reach of foresters, to whom, by 1918, "most of the white oak timber had already been lost." The history further notes that "great forests of red oak and post oak were cut" and "millions of board feet of pine lumber" were made from the expansive tracts of pine cut by foresters. The lumber industry swept through Lafayette during Faulkner's youth and young adulthood, taking much of the county's forests with it.

This time is described as a "virtual explosion in the lumber industry" because of the swiftness of lumbermen's clearing and the violent means used to harvest forests:

Combined with increasing saw speeds and the construction of "tramroads," usually standard-gauge rail lines, into previously inaccessible

areas, the vast number of mills and their workers (many of whom were displaced tenant farmers eager for the steady wages) led to the near-total destruction of the [Mississippi's] virgin pine forests (Rieger 139).

The lumber industry entered Mississippi with the intent of making the maximum immediate profit without regard to regrowth of forests. They were armed with the means to clear and transport timber quickly through improved saws and rail lines. Rieger describes the use of "skidders" after 1900, which were another technological advancement in clearing used to cut costs:

These steam-powered skidders used steel-wire cables a thousand feet or more in length, which were unwound from drums on the tramroads and attached to logs in the woods. As the revolving drums reeled in the cables, five to fifteen logs were dragged to the track on each pull-in, but these devices also destroyed everything in their path as they dragged trees across the ground (139).

Hickman notes that skidders left behind "no trees or vegetation of any kind except coarse wire grass" and that the destruction was not temporary as "twenty-five years later the boundaries between skidder-logged areas and those where other methods prevailed were apparent even to the untutored eye" (Hickman 165-166). Deforestation was violent and swift, aided by advances in technology.

The last change in the Lafayette's landscape relevant to *Go Down, Moses* was the dam built to control the Little Tallahatchie River in northwest Lafayette County. The building of this dam was one of many governmental responses in a long history of agricultural struggle with the naturally flooding landscape along

the Mississippi River and its tributaries. The most famous example is the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927, in which the government's overuse of levees combined with heavy rainfall resulted in massive flooding. The flood caused vast amounts of damage to 10 states and Congress replied to this disaster by passing the Flood Control Act of 1928, which attempted to better control the Mississippi.

In 1932 and 1933, floods devastated the "hill tributaries of the Tallahatchie, Coldwater, Yocona, and Yalobusha Rivers" (Saikku 163). Congress responded with the Flood Control Act of 1936, which promised a comprehensive flood control plan in the region. Construction began on damming the Little Tallahatchie River and other rivers in the mid-1930s, which did control flooding for farmers. However, "the projects permanently inundated large areas of bottomland hardwood forest along the tributaries" in the process (Saikku 164). The Little Tallahatchie's dam became northwestern Lafayette County's Sardis Reservoir.

Agriculture, the lumber industry, and flood control in Lafayette County imparted dramatic visible changes on the land. Harm done to the environment was obvious from an aesthetic standpoint. When Hilgard gave his Address on Progressive Agriculture and Industrial Education, decades before Faulkner was born in 1872, he noted that "to demonstrate the necessity of a serious change" in agriculture "might seem superfluous" (5). Hilgard expresses the obviousness of the environmental problem in Mississippi, although he notes that there are "too many" farmers "who, though in general admitting this, fail to appreciate the pressing necessity, and the extent of the change required" (5).

Faulkner would've been aware of the environmental degradation in Lafayette County, if only because it was so dramatically visible. Doyle writes, By the time Faulkner began writing about his native land in the 1920s, the evidence of destruction was everywhere to be seen. He grew up in a land torn apart by gullies that ran down the hillsides, with creeks and rivers clogged by quicksand sludge, a landscape also of denuded fields pocked with stumps left by the lumbermen who had cut their way through the woods like locusts (300).

Evidence of the environmental harm committed by various agricultural industries glared at Lafayette County residents, whether it be the “gullies that ran down the hillsides” or the “denuded fields pocked with stumps left behind by the lumbermen.” Faulkner spent time in many of the areas of Lafayette that underwent change, such as trips with friends in his youth “out to the Tallahatchie and up into the wilds in boats; sleeping in tents, waited on by Negro servants, the men would hunt and fish all day” (Blotner 73). However, although Faulkner is famous for his fictional yet realistic depiction of Mississippi in his work, in his early writing, he did not portray the destruction visible in Mississippi's landscape.

Similar to Hurston's, the beginning of Faulkner's writing career took a more positive look at his local landscape than the author's later novels. However, Hurston's visions of nature in her earlier works, *Tell My Horse* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, are expressions of liberation for black women from clearly established oppressive forces. While Hurston's early visions of nature are more hopeful than her later novel, they are grounded in a reality of suppressive white



partriarchies present in Florida and Haiti. The pear tree in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is portrayed as Jamie's escapist, ethereal, and imaginative vision of sexual liberation from a white, southern society that oppressed African Americans and women while the mythical tree in *Tell My Horse* serves as a victorious anecdote of Afro-Caribbean women over an oppressive, white, Catholic patriarchy. Both are fantasies of liberation grounded in the negative, oppressive social reality of each setting.

Faulkner's early writing about the landscape, on the other hand, is not rooted in the oppressive reality of Mississippi, environmentally or socially. The positive descriptions of the land in Faulkner's earlier works are due to romantic and naïve visions of the South without complexity devoted to the area's particular social and environmental problems. One of Faulkner's first novels, published in 1929, focuses on the decay of an aristocratic southern family following World War I. However, the issues he depicts in *Sartoris* were not prevalent to Mississippi at the time. For example, historically the decline of the planter aristocracy occurred directly after the Civil War when most lost their land and their wealth, not following World War I. This unrealistic depiction of Mississippi is also imbued in Faulkner's overly positive depictions in the landscape. The following passage is *Sartoris*'s first depiction of northern Mississippi:

...Beyond the bordering gums and locusts and massed vines, fields new-broken or being broken spread on toward patches of woodland newly green and splashed with dogwood and judas trees. Behind laborious plows viscid shards of new-turned earth glinted damply in the sun.

This was upland country, lying in tilted slopes against the unbroken blue of the hills, but soon the road descended sheerly into a valley of good broad fields richly somnolent in the levelling afternoon, and presently they drove upon Bayard's own land, and from time to time a plowman lifted his hand to the passing carriage (15).

This description is a far cry from the reality of Mississippi's landscape following World War I. Faulkner writes of fields "new-broken," "viscid shards of new-turned earth," and "a valley of good broad fields richly somnolent" when the cotton fields of Lafayette County surrounding him were exhausted and ugly from being tilled for decades. He writes of "patches of woodland" and "dogwood and judas trees" at a time when most of Mississippi's forests had been cut down by the lumber industry. This passage hardly represents the unavoidable "wasteland of eroded fields, deep gullies, and silt-filled creeks" of Lafayette County's landscape in the early twentieth century (Doyle 297).

The passage also misrepresents agricultural laborers. Faulkner creates a picture of idealized rusticity with the "plowman" who "lifted his hand to the passing carriage." This image blends the laborer into the landscape and depicts a harmonious and easy relationship between the laborer and the land. It too portrays an amiable relationship between worker and landowner through a friendly wave. Historically, farmers were at odds with their landscape, every year trying to squeeze a profitable harvest out of rundown fields. In addition, Mississippi's fields were full of poor tenant farmers, exploited by their landowners who were also suffering economically. However, *Sartoris* sweeps these

agricultural realities under the rug in order to depict a harmonious and romantic relationship between humans and the land.

In 1925, Sherwood Anderson was worried that Faulkner was becoming too influenced by modernists such as Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Eliot, and Stein. Anderson told Faulkner: "Don't read the work of anyone else," encouraging Faulkner to ignore other current writers and focus on what he knew (Blotner 129). Although *Sartoris* took place in Mississippi, it was not until Faulkner's subsequent novels that Faulkner would take Anderson's advice and write more accurately about the South. Faulkner published *As I Lay Dying* in 1930, which centers on a more honest portrayal of the northern Mississippi's land through Faulkner's fictional county Yoknapatawpha. *As I Lay Dying* is more accurate in its portrayal of Lafayette County because it records the influence that the landscape has over its inhabitants as opposed to portraying a harmonious, romanticized relationship between humans and the land.

In *As I Lay Dying*, the Bundrens attempt to cross a dangerously flooded river in order to get to Jefferson to bury the matriarch of the family, Addie. The river is imbued with dangerous power, described as being "dimpled monstrously into fading swirls travelling along the surface for an instant, silent, impermanent and profoundly significant" (*As I Lay*). Indeed, Cash and Darl get thrown off course crossing the river when a log, "surged up out of the water" and "rears in a long sluggish lunge between us" (*As I Lay*). The river is an active, powerful, and dangerous force in *As I Lay Dying* as opposed to the pleasant landscape in

*Sartoris*. It causes a pair of mules to drown and Cash to break his leg. However, the Bundrens do make it across the river alive and with Addie's casket.

In 1938, Faulkner purchased Greenfield Farm after selling the film rights to *The Unvanquished*. The farm was in Lafayette County and was used for both agriculture and livestock. Perhaps coincidentally, although I'd like to suggest otherwise, Faulkner began writing more literal landscapes after this purchase and he gave land a stronger, more influential role in his novels. In 1940, Faulkner published *The Hamlet*, which depicts a drastically different Mississippi landscape from *Sartoris* and Faulkner's other early novels:

Chickasaw Indians had owned it but after the Indians it had been cleared where possible for cultivation, and after the Civil War, forgotten save by small peripatetic sawmills which had vanished too now, their sites marked only the mounds of rotting sawdust which were not only their gravestones but the monuments of a people's heedless greed. Now it was a region of scrubby second-growth pine and oak among which dogwood bloomed until it too was cut to make cotton spindles, and old fields where not even a trace of furrow showed any more, gutted and gullied by forty years of rain and frost and heat into plateaus choked with rank sedge and briers loved of rabbits and quail coveys, and crumbling ravines striated red and white with alternate sand and clay (190).

This passage possesses a vastly different tone than Faulkner's two earlier novels discussed above. While *Sartoris* focuses on abundance, *The Hamlet* emphasizes exhaustion. The vibrant dogwood trees in *Sartoris* now "bloo[m] until [they] too

w[ere] cut to make cotton spindles.” *The Hamlet* also disposes of *Sartoris*’s harmonious relationship between humans, noting that the “rotting sawdust” of sawmills represents “monuments of a people’s heedless greed.” It is also more grittily realistic than *As I Lay Dying*, which portrays nature with exaggerated power. *The Hamlet* is a more accurate depiction of Mississippi’s environment: “a landscape also of denuded fields pocked with stumps left by the lumbermen who had cut their way through the woods like locusts.”

In the late 1930s and early 1940s, Faulkner wrote stories that would eventually make up *Go Down, Moses*. He began with stories that focused on race and used blacks as the main characters, such as “Go Down, Moses” and “Pantaloon in Black.” Later, after a hunting trip in the Delta with the Stones in 1940, Faulkner began writing *Go Down, Moses*’s hunting stories such as “Delta Autumn.” The book’s stories, written at various times, reflect the large span of environmental themes it encompasses.

In his novels, Faulkner more or less follows environmental trends in Lafayette County historically, though generally Faulkner is a few decades behind. *Sartoris*, like many frontier opportunists who first settled Oxford, denies human destruction of the land. *As I Lay Dying* recognizes the powerful influence that land has on humans. *The Hamlet* admits the reality of the damage done to the land by its inhabitants, similar to citizens of Lafayette during the height of environmental destruction, who were forced to recognize their ruin of the land either aesthetically or because crops were not growing. *Go Down, Moses* follows

the historic pattern its author thus far traced and resonates with the aftermath of the peak of environmental destruction in Lafayette County.

Around the turn of the century, inhabitants of Lafayette County already had reason for morose attitudes toward their environment due to the gutted landscape and increasingly infertile fields. However, attitudes grew even darker as new events occurred: exodus from Lafayette County, yellow fever, and pest infestations. *GDM* accordingly resounds the “ghost of ravishment that lingers in the land” (*Faulkner in the University* 43). Faulkner imbues a sense of expiration, death, and decay in his portrayal of north Mississippi in *GDM* that reflected historical truths of Lafayette County.

A significant amount of Lafayette’s white and African-American population left north Mississippi in the 1880s, a trend that continued into the 1900s. White families left due to exhausted land and poor agricultural prospects. Most commonly, whites moved to Texas for fresher, healthier fields. African-Americans, however, left largely because of disparity and violence. Black exodus occurred more locally to areas like the Delta and Memphis on the new railroad lines until black emigration eventually grew into the Great Migration.

Despite this great exodus, Lafayette County’s population remained steady as cheap land attracted newcomers to replace those who left. However, remaining residents paid little attention to this fact and instead focused on the vast number of departures. Exodus so consumed the county that the editor of the *Oxford Eagle* entreated residents not to move:

“Stay where you are. Help rebuild the waste places; be encouraged by the happy prospects and prepare yourselves for the participation in the bountiful and sure harvests. You are living in one of the fairest, if not the fairest, countries on the globe. A land good to be born in, is good to live and die in. Stay where you are” (*Oxford Eagle* Feb. 9<sup>th</sup>, 1888).

Lafayette was regarded as a place past its prime, so drained of vitality that the paper desperately entreated people to stay. Despite stability in numbers, feelings of abandonment and barrenness pervaded Lafayette.

Lafayette County also became increasingly associated with lack of life because, as Doyle writes, “northern Mississippi became a notorious place to die in during the late nineteenth century” (303). Specifically, yellow fever struck northern Mississippi twice in the 1870s and twice in the 1890s. The disease largely affected whites as it was brought over from Africa and African-Americans had sufficient immunity from the disease. Yellow fever killed its victims swiftly and with little warning, causing the stomach to hemorrhage and resulting in violent heaving and convulsions. Victims vomited dried blood from the hemorrhage, which was black in appearance. Doyle notes that the color of vomit and those that the disease afflicted “must have caused some to wonder what sins this affliction was punishing” (304).

Infestation continued in 1914, this time harming north Mississippi’s crops. The boll weevil, a small beetle that feeds on cotton buds and flowers, struck the area and destroyed vast amounts of cotton crops. Because of this, many agriculturalists switched to cattle farming. However, soon after many made this

switch, a tick infestation affected the developing cattle and dairy industry. Land once fertile and rich proved increasingly hostile to agricultural growth.

Faulkner imbues this sense of death and decline in *GDM*. In “The Old People,” as the hunting group leaves the woods of northwest Yoknapatawpha (Faulkner’s fictional version of Lafayette County), the narration describes their journey:

Then they would emerge, they would be out of it, the line as sharp as the demarcation of a doored wall. Suddenly skeleton cotton- and corn-fields would flow away on either hand, gaunt and motionless beneath the gray rain (170).

In the aftermath of environmental destruction, Faulkner depicts the already dead cotton and cornfields. Mississippi’s fields become a sort of cemetery, skeletal and lacking vitality, echoing the literal death of crops in many of Mississippi’s overworked fields but also the morbidity present in northern Mississippi through exodus, disease, and infestation.

However, soon even the woods where Ike hunts as a boy, thinly separated from the gloomy fields mentioned above, are destroyed in northwest Yoknapatawpha,

Most of that was gone now. Now a man drove two hundred miles from Jefferson before he found wilderness to hunt in. Now the land lay open from the cradling hills on the East to the rampart of levee on the West, standing horseman-tall with cotton for the world’s looms (*GDM* 324).



Faulkner echoes the deforestation in Lafayette County in Yoknapatawpha, as well as the flooding of the hardwood forests in northwest Lafayette through the creation of the Sardis Reservoir. It is noted that deforestation and the dam pave the way for north Mississippi's cotton industry.

*GDM* continues to portray the "ghost of ravishment" in northern Mississippi by delving into philosophical stances on agriculture, economics, and possession. Ike McCaslin or "Uncle Ike" is considered *GDM*'s protagonist and he is Faulkner's main vehicle for exploring philosophical stances toward the land. Ike also serves as a contrast to the more traditional, anthropocentric characters in *GDM*, illuminating various possible mindsets toward the environment during the time Faulkner wrote *GDM*.

Ike's attitude toward land is formed and complicated by the history of his family and their plantation. Ike discovers this history at the age of sixteen through old plantation ledgers, books used for recording transactions on the farm, especially the buying and selling of property. As Ike flips through the "yellowed pages scrawled in fading ink" recorded by his grandfather, father, and uncle, he discovers a family history that shocks and horrifies him (250). In particular, Ike is aghast when he discovers that his grandfather rapes his daughter Toney, who is a slave born to Eunice after Ike's grandfather also raped her. After this incestuous act, Toney gives birth to Toney's Turl, causing Eunice to drown herself. Ike is horrified by this history and it causes him to feel immense guilt toward his family and African-Americans.

The purpose of a plantation ledger is to record a history of ownership, property, and material wealth, all of which Ike becomes averse to after reading the ledger. Although Ike initially rejects other content in the ledger (the abuse of slaves), he additionally dismisses material possessions and ownership of the land because of the close association between the two, linked in Ike's mind through the ledger. He is described as a man who,

in all his life had owned but one object more than he could wear and carry in his pockets and his hands at one time, [...] who owned no property and never desired to since the earth was no man's but all men's (3-4).

Ike's beliefs about ownership affect his relationship with land. He refuses his inheritance of his family farm on his twenty-first birthday and lives for hunting trips to the wilderness of Mississippi, where he feels that the land is, for the most part, free.

Ike, perhaps unconsciously, makes a connection between ownership and the land that is ahead of his time. Ike sees a relationship between the acquisition of material or wealth and abuse that others, like Ike's cousin McCaslin, do not. When Ike repudiates his inheritance, McCaslin says:

"Relinquish," McCaslin said. "Relinquish. You, the direct male descendent of him who saw the opportunity and took it, bought the land, took the land, got 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 to for his descendants' ease and security and pride to perpetuate his name and accomplishments" (245).

McCaslin possesses a more traditional concept of the land as it relates to wealth, deeming property an asset to financial security. McCaslin also considers land more valuable when it is "cleared" of "wilderness," although Mississippi's virgin land was much more valuable than the exhausted soil of established plantations.

McCaslin's attitude toward land brings to mind Hilgard's statements on farmers when he remarked,

It might seem superfluous to demonstrate the necessity of a serious change in our agricultural habits and practices. Yet there are too many who, though in general admitting this, fail to appreciate the pressing necessity, and the extent of the change required (5).

McCaslin, like many residents of northern Mississippi, was slow to recognize that his use of the land and clearing of the wilderness would decrease the "security" found in the ownership of land, even when the evidence surrounded them.

However, Ike's relationship with the environment is by no means perfect. He stumbles upon the connection between the acquisition of material wealth and land abuse. He holds his relationship to the wilderness in high regard, believing himself to be a sort of priest of the woods and does little to change the faults he sees in the South's agriculture industry. But despite Ike's faults, he does possess a more perceptive and nuanced view of the land, labor relations, and wealth.

Ike considers ownership of the land "cursed" and thinks,

[T]he land, the fields and what they represented in terms of cotton ginned and sold, the men and women whom they fed and clothed and even paid a little cash money at Christmas-time in return for the labor which planted and raised and picked and ginned the cotton, the machinery and mules and gear with which they raised it and their cost and upkeep and replacement—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 to the human beings but the valuable animals too, yet solvent and efficient and, more than that: not only still intact but enlarged, increased; brought still intact by McCaslin (*GDM* 285).

Ike's repudiation of his inheritance ruminates on the farm's field labor. The McCaslin farm almost certainly employs the tenant system, as it describes the workers as "the men and women whom they fed and clothed and even paid a little cash money at Christmas time" in exchange for farm labor. The excerpt notes the tenant system's "injustice" and "savagery" and demonstrates for one of the first times in Faulkner's writing an awareness that humans exploiting the land inflict harmful not only on their environment but also on other humans and even animals. However, *GDM* also acknowledges that the system is "solvent," "efficient," and "intact" and provides no alternative. Although Ike refuses to participate, *GDM* portrays a bleak picture of agricultural laborers bound to the land in a system of inequality.

The passage also reveals the tenant system's economic consequences. It is a construction created by the economically advantaged for the purpose of

keeping their wealth “not only intact but enlarged, increased” through the exploitation of the workers, animals, and the environment. Fields, for example, are only important to McCaslin for “what they represented in terms of cotton ginned and sold.” These profits are contrasted with the economic state of agricultural laborers, who depend on landowners to be “fed and clothed and even paid a little cash money at Christmas-time.” They are exploited by those with more money and caught in cycles of debt and dependence. This portrait of laborers is vastly more developed than *Sartoris*’s “plowman” who “lifted his hand to the passing carriage” (15). As Faulkner delved into environmental detail and complexity, he also created a more sophisticated picture of laborers’ relationship to the land.

*GDM* does not provide an alternative to this picture of abuse and exploitation and the land and Ike’s story remains static. Although Ike is firm in his beliefs, he does not change societal attitudes toward ownership, racism, or abuse of the land and laborers. However, although *GDM* does not imagine an alternative toward the early twentieth century cycles of exploitation, it proves itself perceptive in recognizing the connection between seeking profit and property and the mistreatment of laborers and a detrimental impact on the health of the land.

## CONCLUSION

I started this thesis questioning the absence of ecocritical readings involving pairings of Zora Neale Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee* and William Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses* alongside the specific environmental histories involved in each book. Through an exploration of the worlds that Hurston and Faulkner grew up in, largely Eatonville, Florida (among a couple other Florida locations) and Mississippi's Lafayette County, I hope to have further ground claims of *Seraph* and *GDM*'s important contributions to ecocriticism as well as the beginnings of the environmentalist movement.

Hurston and Faulkner's predecessors in southern writing depicted and longed for easy, fruitful antebellum years that only existed in the romanticized fiction that they wrote. Authors of the Southern Renaissance such as Hurston and Faulkner faced the harsh ecological and social reality of their present and contributed more commendable books, such as *Seraph* and *GDM*, paving the way for southern literature. In addition, these authors introduced some of the first agriculturally related environmentalist theories that depict the harmful ecological consequences of blindly pursuing profit from the land. As well, *Seraph* and *GDM* indicate the negative social consequences that often follow the relentless pursuit of profit.

Looking forward, while I argued for the analysis of very specific regional environmental histories, I think inclusion of a larger time span and more southern literature would prove a fascinating and worthwhile study. I would still encourage studying history closely alongside this proposed additional southern literature, as I think it reveals more than an analysis without background could. In addition, I think it would be intriguing to see how southern literature changes as the environmental history of specific locales evolves after the argument I proposed in this study. Besides the topic simply being interesting, the expansion of this topic would enlarge the relatively new field of ecocriticism. As well, and importantly for all humans as opposed to just literary ones, an increase in our understanding of the way that the environment informs culture and vice versa is crucial at a time when humanity needs to change its treatment of the environment.

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