Three Famous Short Novels Study Guide

Three Famous Short Novels by William Faulkner

BOOKRAGS

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Spotted Horses, Pages 3 - 36 Summary

Flem Snopes and Buck Hipps, a Texan, ride into a Mississippi town towing a large herd of horses behind a wagon. The horses are incredibly wild, even violent, and as such have to be restrained with barbed wire. The wound on Hipps' ear—which he has covered in black axle grease—bears testimony to their wily natures. He has brought the horses into town in order to sell them and, as such, is eager to convince his potential customers that the horses can be easily tamed and broken. He tries to corroborate his claim by approaching one of the horses but instead it lashes its hoof at him and slices his vest in two. Hipps and Flem take the horses into a pen and let them loose with a pair of wire cutters. The horses gallop madly around the interior, running in every direction and often crashing futilely into the fences. A boy comes back, the son of Eck Snopes, looking for his father who, he is informed, is back at the wagon the horses came in on.

The men of the town, meanwhile, speculate about who owns the horses. It seems natural to assume that Hipps owns them, but they wonder why Flem Snopes, a local, rode in with them. Ratliff in particular is suspicious of the whole affair and suspects that a scam is in the works. He asks, almost rhetorically, who would buy the horses given the shady circumstances—and given how wild the horses are—but the silence of those around him make it clear that there is no shortage of potential buyers. One men mentions an acquaintance who bought horses from Texas once and never had a problem with them: They were not the strongest horses, but they were cheap. Ratliff's suspicions are unallayed and he wonders if Eck Snopes—who is among those Ratliff is talking to—has something to do with the brewing scam, too, for he noticed Eck and his son, Wallstreet, helping Hipps water the horses. Eck remains silent and provides no information to fuel Ratliff's theories.

The next morning Hipps is preparing to auction off the horses. He wants to put them in the barn first to feed them and enlists the help of some of the men in the town. They are naturally a little apprehensive; though most of the horses are ponies, they are still strong enough to injure or even kill a man and they certainly seem disposed to do so. Nevertheless, the men manage to drive them into the barn, lashing them with wooden posts and whips. Eck, who is helping Hipps, is annoyed that his son, Wallstreet, has disobeyed him and come along, but the curious little boy, it seems, cannot be deterred. Hipps is disappointed to discover that there is no hay around to feed them with and settles for shelled corn instead. He goes into the barn by himself and begins to fill the trough when the horses inexplicably get upset and storm through the barn's door. The men go running to the wagon for protection. Wallstreet is nearly trampled in the process and earns himself a lashing from his father.

Ever the marketer, Hipps downplays the horses' wild dispositions and tries to get the auction started. One of the men in the crowd, Freeman, asks sarcastically if he is waiting for Flem to return. Hipps asks why he would be waiting for him and then turns to

Eck. He asks him if he is ready to get the auction started, but Eck says no, he is not interested in buying such an untamed horse. He tries to reassure his skeptical crowd that the horses really are not so bad and, at the very least, they could be easily tamed. After some heckling from the crowd, Hipps gets the auction started by giving Eck a horse, so long as he promises to start bidding for the next horse. He reluctantly accepts and offers two dollars, a sum which does not at all please Hipps—he was hoping for something more along the lines of ten or fifteen dollars—but which he accepts nonetheless. Meanwhile, a man named Henry and his wife arrive. They are evidently quite broke, with only five dollars to their name. Henry, however, is for some reason eager to get a horse and bids three dollars on it. His wife is horrified and begs Hipps not to listen to him, but the auction proceeds. Eck bids, in turn, four dollars, and Henry bids their entire five dollar savings. Eck remains quiet and Hipps awards the horse to Henry who, however, will need to wait until the auction is over to take his animal.

The auction continues and all but two of the horses have been sold, most in the range of ten dollars. Henry is anxious to get his horse and decides that he does not want to wait any longer. Hipps tells him that he is free to take his horse and go, but he has to do it on his own; it is not Hipps' horse anymore. Henry goes in by himself with a bit of rope and chases the horse around. His wife follows him, suspecting that he will need whatever help he can get. Henry is utterly unsuccessful and his wife's pleas finally reach Hipps' conscience. He tries to give Henry the money back, but he refuses and demands on getting his horse even, he says, if he has to shoot it. Hipps gives the five dollar note to Henry's wife, but this only makes Henry angrier. He grabs the note from his wife and forces Hipps to take it again. He gives the note to Flem and tells the wife to get it from him later.

Hipps swaps his remaining three horses—the two that were not sold and the one he took back from Henry—for a buggy and decides to leave town, his business completed. He says he is not going directly back to Texas but is going to take a visit up north to some of the larger cities. He gets directions to nearby Jefferson and goes on his way.

Spotted Horses, Pages 3 - 36 Analysis

The most dominant theme so far in this short novel is the question of trust. Most of the men in the town seem almost incredibly trustworthy of this Texan entrepreneur whom they have just met and will not, in all likelihood, ever see again. They have all the evidence they could possibly need to conclude that these horses are irredeemably wild and, even if they express their doubts about their ability to be tamed initially, they wind up buying or trading for every single one of them. The sole skeptic is Ratliff who senses a scam from the beginning. It is possible his suspicion is largely based on some prejudice against the Snopes family, for the two main players in his hypothetical conspiracy are Flem and Eck Snopes. Indeed, Ratliff does seem somewhat justified in his doubts, for it is not at all clear why Flem and Eck would be helping out Hipps—what is in it for them? It is a reasonable question, but one that is never answered. One might think that the Snopes' silence on this question should be a cause of no little concern for the rest of the town, but they seem to almost immediately forget about it.

The story is also probably a critical analysis of marketing. As the narrator notes, many of the men in the town are first-time horse-owners. Most of them do not have a great deal of money, some indeed have almost nothing, like Henry and his wife. It is implied that most of them of farmers. The question that ought to develop in the readers mind is why any of these men need to spend their scarce, hard-earned money on a horse when they, seemingly, have been getting along fine without them for quite awhile? The question is especially salient in Henry's case: How could a horse possibly be with the last five dollars he has to his name? These difficulties all parallel criticisms many have made about marketing and capitalism in general, namely, that entrepreneurs, like Hipps, prey upon the weak-minded and desperate in order to sell them things that they do not really need. Their goods are presented implicitly as means of saving an unhappy life and, as such, it is no surprise that Henry would be so desperate to get a horse, even if he does not know what he will do with (or even how he is going to take it).

Spotted Horses, Pages 36 - 63

Spotted Horses, Pages 36 - 63 Summary

Hipps gone, the men now turn to the unpleasant business of wrangling their houses so they can take them home. They gather up ropes, planks of wood, and nearly anything else they can find and head into the corral. Wallstreet, who learned nothing from last time, follows the crowd in, despite several admonishments from his father. The horses, predictably, are not willing to go without a fight. They kick and buck and, as the men's efforts intensify, break out into a full stampede. Henry, who still believes he is entitled to one of the horses, is trampled and breaks his leg. Wallstreet once again finds himself among the melee but, somehow, comes out completely unscathed. Unfortunately, someone left the corral's gate open and the horses charge through it and rampage across the town. Eck's horse, the one given to him by Hipps, runs into one of the houses directly across from the pen. The woman of the house, Mrs. Littlejohn, cracks it over the head with a washing board and sends it directly back out the door. Eck and Wallstreet have followed it in and it leaps over the boy on its way out, once again leaving him miraculously uninjured.

They follow the horse up the road where Tull has the misfortune to be driving his wagon. The horses crashes into his mules and jumps into the wagon, severely injuring Tull and terrifying his wife. Before it is run off by Tull's kicks and punches, it wounds the mules and damages the wagon. Eck arrives much too late and asks where the horse went but Tull seems to be in no mood to help him out.

Meanwhile, Ratliff is trying to assert some control over the situation. The wounded Henry is taken into Mrs. Littlejohn's house and his broken leg is being tended to. Ratliff sends off the crowd of onlookers, sarcastically telling them to go buy something else that will kill them. He heads out to find Will Varner, the town's doctor. Varner asks what is happening and if the horses have been caught, but Ratliff informs him that they have all gotten away except for Eck's. Varner suggests that maybe the horses are still worth it, considering all of the exercise they are providing to their new owners.

Some time later, Ratliff is at the store talking with some men about what happened, sharing their various encounters with the wild horses. Ratliff brings up the subject of the supposed scam again and asks Flem who really owned the horses. Flem, however, confessed ignorance and says that he does not know anything other than what everyone else knows. Ratliff mentions that there will probably a few lawsuits as a result of the stampede, especially from Tull who in addition to his injury lost some valuable property. Henry, too, is in a difficult situation since he will not be able to plant their crop. Elsewhere, Henry's wife is asking whether Flem will really give her the money like Hipps promised. People are doubtful but suggest that it is worth a try anyway. Not expecting much, she goes to the store where Flem and the rest are and asks Flem for the money. He looks at her for awhile but before telling her that Hipps has her money, an obvious lie considering how many people saw Hipps give him the money. She does not protest and

just leaves. On her way out, Flem stops her and gives a sack of grain worth a nickel, one hundredth of what he really owes her.

One of the men's son is caught stealing candy while the men are preoccupied with discussing the recent events. His father, Jody, catches him and brings him before the storekeeper who gives him a verbal lashing. The boy is let ago and someone asks about the horse Eck caught. Unfortunately, the horse did not survive. They strung up a rope to catch it, but the horse just rushed into it at full speed, breaking its neck.

Spotted Horses, Pages 36 - 63 Analysis

It would probably not be excessive to read this chapter as an extended metaphor for the chaos unleashed by unrestricted capitalism. After Hipps, the Texan entrepreneur, has left, his pockets full of cash, the town is quickly thrown into madness. The horses, paid for by the few dollars the men could scrounge up, rampage around the town, destroying houses, killing mules, and even injuring a few people in the process. None of the horses are captured alive; only the horse that Eck received for free from Hipps is captured, but with a broken neck. The fact that the horses escape and spread their violence into the world abroad may be a suggestion of the far-reaching implications of economic injustice.

One might wonder if the horses' escape was not foreseen by Hipps. Perhaps it is part of his scam to sell people horses which he know will escape so that he can catch them later and sell them to more unsuspecting victims. At the very least, it is not incredibly honest for him to sell people horses which he knows will be utterly useless to them. Flem's true nature, too, is revealed in this chapter. His coldness towards Henry's wife exceeds even Hipps', who at least was willing to refund her money. His act of kindness to her is almost insulting; a five cent bag of grain is hardly any consolation for losing her only five dollars, the fruit of long hours of work.

Spotted Horses, Pages 63 - 76

Spotted Horses, Pages 63 - 76 Summary

As Ratliff predicted, lawsuits are drawn up against the Snopeses', suggesting that Flem was responsible for the chaos caused in the town generally and that Eck is responsible for the damage caused to Tull directly. The judge is not terribly receptive to the charges against Flem. As dishonest a man as he may be, there seems to be little evidence that he owned the horses or had any part in it. He is more interested in the suggestion that he stole five dollars from Henry's wife, but the case is irretrievably sunk when one of Snopes' kin swears under oath that he saw Flem give the money back to Hipps.

The judge then turns to the question of Eck's responsibility for Tull's injury. Eck seems resigned to the fact that he will owe Tull some money and the judge seems to agree with him until he discovers that the horse which caused the damage was given to him for free. He cites an obscure, nuanced law which states that the ownership of a commodity is not transferred unless there is the exchange of some money or a written agreement. As it turns out, all Tull is entitled to is the animal that caused the damage, the horse whose body has probably largely decomposed. Understandably, Tull is utterly dissatisfied with this outcome.

Spotted Horses, Pages 63 - 76 Analysis

Though the role of courts is supposed to be to right injustices, they utterly fail to do anything to resolve the economic injustice inflicted by Hipps (and others) upon the community. Flem, though certainly guilty of at least theft, is acquitted of any charges by the combination of lack of evidence and most likely perjured testimony from his kinsman which, for some reason, the judge accepts uncritically. Eck even seems willing to repair the damage his horse caused but once again the law prevents justice from being served. Some obscure technicality regarding the definition of ownership clears Eck of any responsibility and rewards the injured party only with a rotting horse carcass.

The Old Man, Pages 77 - 113

The Old Man, Pages 77 - 113 Summary

Two convicts are whiling away their time in a Mississippi plantation where the prisoners are forced work rather than reside in prison cells. The first, a tall, relatively young man has been there eight years, since he was nineteen. He is full of resentment because he feels that he is not entirely responsible for his crime. He was convicted of robbing a train but claims that he was misled and unduly influenced by the various paperback novels he read as a young child, which romanticized such robberies and, moreover, made them seem very easy. He did not actually kill anyone nor did the robbery even last very long; he was arrested as soon as he stepped foot into the part of the train where the passengers' possessions were kept.

The second convict is an old, fat man who was sentenced to a prison term of over one hundred years. No one else on the plantation knows what he is serving time for, and perhaps no one in the world knows except the lawyers involved in his prosecution. What is known is that he was in a stolen vehicle with a woman and another man. While in this vehicle, a gas station attendant was shot and killed. The other man got away and, as a result, was charged with the crimes. The prosecutors were willing to deal with him, though, and gave him the choice with being charged under the Mann act for transporting a woman over state lines or with manslaughter. The first offense was surely the less serious offense—and, as such, would carry the lighter sentence—but as it was a federal crime, he would be forced to pass back through the federal courthouse he was being held out which would carry with it the unpleasant experience of also passing by the enraged woman he was arrested with. Therefore, he decided to take the manslaughter conviction which carried a heavier sentence but also allowed him to pass out the back of the courthouse and avoid the wrath of his female accomplice.

As the story opens, rain has been pouring down heavily for the past few days, overflowing the levees and creating massive floods. As the floods are beginning to threaten the plantation, the prisoners are rounded up, loaded into a truck, and driven off. The prisoners do not know where they or going and do not ask. They arrive at a train station and are packed into a tiny car where they pass several hours in the musty, dark interior. They finally arrive at an army camp set up, apparently, for refugees from the flood. As they are herded through the camp, the tall convict finally takes notice of a sound which has been in the background the entire time. He wonders for awhile what it might be and even asks one of the black men in the camp, who tells him, cryptically, that it is the "Old Man." As he is herded along, he finally realizes that the sound is the roaring of the river. For the past eight years of his life, he has lived directly by the river, but on the other side of it and, thus, it is a new experience for him, a moment of considerable reflection as he considers how confined his existence has been.

The tall convict and the old, fat convict are told to paddle a boat down the river to pick up some woman refugee. The old man protests that he does not know how to paddle

but the tall convict confidently says that he does. The guard does not really care if they can paddle or not and sends them on their way. The experiment does not go well at all and before long the fat convict is back with the prison officials. Evidently, they lost control over their boat and it went spiraling out of control. He grabbed a low-hanging branch and saved himself but, he says, his partner drowned.

In reality, the tall convict does not drown, though he is tossed around the boat and into the water with such force as to open a rather serious wound in his head. The current takes him around the flooded lake several times and he finally happens upon the woman he was initially sent to rescue, both relieved that he has finally come and annoyed that it has taken him so long. She is a pretty woman, about his age, and, judging from her swollen belly, she is rather late into a pregnancy. The woman, evidently, does not know that he is a convict. She gets in the boat and the two set out, though they are not sure where exactly they are going. Night falls and they are still paddling aimlessly in the water when they discover that they are riding on top of a massive wave.

The Old Man, Pages 77 - 113 Analysis

One of the most striking features of this story is the dehumanization of the inmates. It is not coincidental that the two featured convicts in the story are ones with whom the reader can at least have some sympathy. The tall convict is certainly guilty of a violent crime.

of his crime (insofar as it was inspired by reading novels that glorified bandits) make it seem more excusable. The old man may not actually be guilty of any cream and the narrator indicates that it was probably the other man in the car that killed the attendant. In any case, his sentence of 199 years seems to far exceed anything he might have done. Thus, at least somewhat favorably disposed towards these two, the reader is likely to feel a bit of sadness over how miserably resigned they and their fellow inmates seem to fate. When they leave the plantation, they show no concern or curiosity over where they are going. They just go where the guards tell them and do not question them. They are so accustomed to their lack of freedom that they do not even try to assert it anymore. Their dehumanization is only exacerbated by how cruelly they are treated by the guards, who look on them as something subhuman, not worthy of anything except sharp, unconditional orders.

Another aspect of the prisoner's dehumanization is their sense of confinement. Their entire world consists solely of their plantation and most, especially the tall convict, have seemed to lost any concept of a world outside. Thus, it is shocking to him and almost puzzling when he sees and hears the river from the other side. It is almost as if the reality of where he is—namely, some place other than the plantation—does not strike him until he can find some point of reference to which he can relate it: the river.

The Old Man, Pages 113 - 148

The Old Man, Pages 113 - 148 Summary

The wave was another pulse of the flood, probably caused by some levee overflowing nearby. They manage to escape without injury or even, it seems, any serious danger. From this point on, the story is narrated with alternating interjections from the fat convict, to whom the tall convict is telling the story after he returned eight weeks later. The tall convict says that his only goal while in the boat was to get the woman somewhere safe and to do everything the "right way," that is, to turn himself in whenever he could.

The continue drifting down the flooded river. The tall convict no longer has to row, or at least chooses not, but simply steers the boat, though he does not seem to really know either where they or where they are going. They pass by a large boat and are greeted by a gruff man holding a shotgun. He tells them they can come into the boat but the tall convict is only willing to do so if he can bring his boat aboard, too. The gruff man, confused and a little annoyed by this request, tells him that there is no room for a boat. A woman on the boat gives them some provisions and sends them on their way. The convict is a bit disturbed by one of the provisions: a bottle of condensed milk, food for the woman's future child. It is a reminder of her pregnancy, a fact which he is desperate to erase from his mind.

As they continue to drift, they eventually wind up leaving Mississippi and drift across the Louisiana border. They come to a small town where, the tall convict hopes, his pregnant passenger will find some help. As he steers the boat close to the shore, he is pleased to see a group of men in khaki uniforms: law enforcement officers, evidently. He gets out and runs toward them, eager to turn himself in. Inferring that he is an escaped convict from his clothing, and perhaps reacting a bit rashly, they open fire on him. He dives down to avoid the bullets and manages to crawl back to the boat; the town, obviously, is no longer an option. They continue downstream.

They see another spot of dry land—though no civilization in sight—and he tries to hurry her to for she is entering into labor. It is too late, though, and the baby is born while still in the boat. He helps her to shore and she asks if he has a knife so she can cut the umbilical cord. Of course, he has nothing, so he cannot help her. In lieu of this, they use a sharp edge of a tin can to sever the cord. The convict is horrified by the entire event and tries to think of the baby in the same terms as he thinks of a snake, just another animal.

They get up early the next day to continue their journey but as they start off, he realizes that he lost his oar. He dives off the boat and swims back to their small island, which was really an Indian mound which just happens to be tall enough to stick out of the flood waters. They spend six days there camping under a tree. The convict catches whatever

game he can find—rabbits, possums, and even snakes. While they are there, he finds a suitable tree branch to whittle into an improvised but effective oar for the skiff.

They get back into the boat and continue downstream. They encounter a steamboat and a man on-board hails them through a megaphone. He offers to have them come up, but once again the convict is only willing to do so if they will let him bring his boat. They agree, though reluctantly, but the convict misunderstands where they are going. Aside from a Red Cross official, apparently everyone else on the boat speaks, at best, very broken English; they are French-speaking Cajuns. The convict, however, does not realize this and has no idea what language they are speaking or where they are from. The red cross official, a doctor, offers him a glass of whiskey which he urges him to drink. The convict is reluctant to do so but finally yields. It winds up throwing him into a drunken fury and he winds up starting a fight with a large group of men on board, a fight which, unsurprisingly, he loses. When he comes to, the doctor is standing over him. Given how much he has been bleeding, the doctor raises the possibility that he is a hemophiliac. (The tall convict and the fat convict do not know what this means and think that the doctor is calling him a "hermaphrodite" instead.)

He has lunch with the woman and they discuss where they are going. They begin to doubt that they are really headed back home, given how no one speaks English. They are rather surprised when they wind up in Carnavaron, a city even further south into Louisiana, for they thought they were headed up north. He talks to the doctor again before he lives. He has figured out by now that he is a convict and asks him what he did. He explains the whole story about the train robbery and the doctor, seemingly, is not troubled, but even a bit amused. He asks if he has learned from his mistakes and if he will not do better robbing a train next time. The doctor tries to give him a wad of money to survive with before he leaves, though it is left unclear whether he takes it.

The Old Man, Pages 113 - 148 Analysis

Why exactly the convict is so terrified by the fact that his fellow passenger is pregnant is not clear, though it may be that her pregnancy is a symbol of the life he was never able to have on account of his incarceration. Perhaps the only way that he can cope with his loss of liberty is by repressing all of his normal, human desires for love and family life. The fact that she is a reminder of what he is missing is only made worse by the circumstances, for it seems that he would not have a great deal of escaping if he wanted to. The opportunity for freedom is troubling to him because he feels that he has already lost the chance for a normal life; there is nothing left for him in the world and so he would just as soon go back to prison. It would be incorrect to think that his lack of desire to escape is caused by any sense of guilt or justice, for his crime, as has been discussed, was not a particularly violent or egregious one and he does not seem to have a great deal of anguish over having committed it.

The Old Man, Pages 148 - 184

The Old Man, Pages 148 - 184 Summary

The convict and the woman get off the boat—seemingly in the middle of nowhere—and the convict drags the rather heavy boat behind them. As they walk across the Louisiana bayou, they reach a house which is raised several feet off the ground with stilts. A Cajun man lives there and, though they cannot communicate (the Cajun only speaks French) they come to a sort of agreement to stay there. The convict resolves to help the man out with whatever it is that he does and heads off with him in a boat through a swamp. They find an alligator, though the convict does not know it by sight, and the convict is rather surprised when the man lunges at it with a knife. The animal struggles and even lashes the convict with his tail, but the Cajun continues to drive the knife into the animal's hide and kills it. They carry the hide back to the house. When they return them, the Cajun—through signals and ostentation—reveals that one can also kill an alligator with a rifle, a somewhat surprising development since it seems like that would be much easier and less dangerous. They agree (again, without speech) to split everything they catch and they head out each day for the next week hunting alligators. The convict had forgotten how nice it is to earn money for his work and welcomes his feeling of accomplishment.

They accumulate a fair amount of alligator hides, the value of which the convict is completely ignorant of, but the operation seems to be coming to the end. The Cajun tries to communicate something to them—his gesticulations seem to indicate some large explosion—but all they are able to definitely ascertain is that he is going to leave and that they have to, also. The convict figures that they will figure out whatever it is he was trying to say when they need to know it. They leave and encounter the same steamboat they met before. One of the men on the boat—who seemed not to speak English before—calls out to him, this time speaking perfect English, and tells him to get on board. The levee, he says, is being dynamited soon and will cause another flood. They go to an armory which has been cleared out for refuges. There, the convict finds a deputy and turns himself in and tells him, as if it meant anything to him, that the boat is nearby and that he found the woman he was ordered to find.

He winds up at the penitentiary where a governor's assistant and warden are trying to determine what exactly to do with him. Since he was declared dead he is no longer technically obliged to serve his sentence which would mean that he would be set free. As this is a politically inconvenient outcome, they decide to give him ten more years for attempted escape, despite the obvious fact which the warden even points out that he turned himself in. They tell the convict of this but it does not seem to terribly trouble. More strangely, they decide to let the convict take himself back up the river and return to his prison.

On his way back, he stops at a refuge camp where he meets a woman whom he begins to fancy. They have sex, at least a few times, and he begins to contemplate, for the first time, trying to escape. However, he decides against it and winds up moving on and

turns himself in. His lover comes to visit him while he is in jail and they keep in touch through the mail and even plan to get married when he is released. The extension of his sentence, which at first he was almost indifferent towards, becomes excruciating now that he knows what is on the other side.

The Old Man, Pages 148 - 184 Analysis

The failure of the justice system has already been mentioned in regard to the story's opening. The two convicts have been sentenced to prison terms which seem far excessive given the nature of their crimes; indeed, whether the fat convict is guilty of anything is questionable. The failure of the law is also a major theme of "Spotted Horses," in which the judge is unable to rectify an obvious economic and legal injustice because of some technicalities in the legal books. The end of this story, however, brings the failure of the justice system to a new level; political forces, embodied by the governor's assistant, completely pervert it. The tall convict is unquestionably an honest man who tried to turn himself in as soon as possible. The warden and the assistant know this and yet they decide to sentence him without trial to ten more years in jail simply because it would be politically inexpedient to release him.

At first, the tall convict is indifferent towards this; he supposes that he has nothing to live for anyway, the chance of a normal life far behind him. However, the new sentence becomes unbearable when he falls in love with a woman on his way back for he realizes both what he has been missing and sees that it is finally within his grasps. His brief and troubled time outside of the walls of his penitentiary gave him a glimpse of the outside world, a far more expansive world view than he ever could have had before. It seems that some of the dehumanizing effects of incarceration had begun to peel away, a fact which should be a good thing, but really brings him a completely new misery.

The Bear, Pages 185 - 218

The Bear, Pages 185 - 218 Summary

As the story opens, the main character, an unnamed boy, is sixteen. He has been hunting for six years. He recalls being seven years old, desperate to accompany the men, forced to wait patiently until he is ten. His first hunting trip is everything he imagined it to be. He expects nothing; he does not even dare to hope that he will see the hunting dogs chase anything. The men do not wind up catching anything—they rarely do—but there is a sighting of the bear named Old Ben. Old Ben is almost legendary in the woods. He has proven to be impossible to take down; some even claim that he is not injured even when shot at point blank. There is a Old Ben sighting on the boy's first trip, but he does not see him himself. Sam, an Indian and a kind of mentor to the boy, tells him that Old Ben was probably watching him, scoping out the newcomer. He warns that he might be Old Ben's next target because he is obviously the weakest of the group.

They go back again next year. The boy goes out by himself, hoping to find Old Ben, not to kill him—he is only eleven and could hardly aspire to such an enormous feat—but only to see him. His attempt is futile, though, and eventually Sam finds him and tells him his mistake: He is carrying a gun. Old Ben, he says, is too smart to be seen by someone holding a gun. Therefore, the boy goes out again the next day unarmed with only a compass. He wanders through the woods, much further than he had gone before. He feels a bit scared but reassures himself by recalling advice Sam gave him. He stumbles upon the bear, not realizing his presence until he is only a few yards away from him. The bear does not seem to notice him, or, if he does, he does not seem to care. He is massive, bigger than the boy could have imagined. He stands still, too scared to make a move or a noise, until the bear gets up and moves on.

The boy's hunting skills grow rapidly, the result of a combination of natural skill and dedication. He is thirteen now and he and his hunting party have not made any progress toward killing Old Ben, though the bear has constantly occupied his thoughts. He is able to identify the bear's tracks very easily, even his normal feet (one of the bear's feet was crushed in a bear trap some years back). One summer they take a small dog named Lion—a dog which, the narrator remarks, the boy "should have hated" (203)—on the hunt. They are desperate to raise a dog which they think can be a match for Old Ben; none of the dogs, so far, have been up to the task and they believe that is the cause of their perpetual failure. While they are walking Lion and some of the other dogs through the woods they accidentally run into Old Ben. Lion shows a tremendous amount of spirit and rushes at the bear but is plucked up by the boy before it reaches him. The bear, only a few feet away now, rises up on its hind legs before vanishing into the woods.

Some time later Major de Spain, one of the hunters, loses a newly-born colt. The men are perplexed as to what could have taken it, given that its mother, a powerful mare, would have been right there. Some speculate that it was a panther and others that Old

Ben must have come by and taken it. Sam seems to know the answer and the boy realizes what it was only years later: Lion. Sam is keeping Lion in a confined space in a shed and shows him to the boy and the other men. He is a fierce creature and when they put the remains of the colt by the door, he lunges violently, but vainly, at it. In order to tame him—or at least to make him respect his commands—Sam deprives the dog of food and water for weeks and then gradually allows him to start drinking again. In this way, he teaches the dog who is in charge.

They take the dog out hunting and Sam's training has worked. The dog has lost nothing of its ferocity but it is more discriminate with its violence. It does not lash out at people, but rather seems to ignore them; indeed, its attitude towards the entire world seems to be one of resigned indifference. Sam wants the dog kept in a cage with the rest, but Boon, another hunter, lets the dog sleep in his bed with him. Boon takes the dog hunting the next day and claims to have seen Old Ben, but nothing came of it; the dog chased for miles to no avail. They have more success the next trip. Lion manages to keep Old Ben at bay while the other dogs, encouraged by Lion's boldness, join him. A few of the men ride up and start shooting at the bear—a few shots even hitting him and drawing blood—but the bear manages to get away nonetheless. Boon, who squandered several close-range shots, does not let Lion sleep in his room anymore, feeling that he is not worthy.

The Bear, Pages 185 - 218 Analysis

A curious feature of this story is how little information is revealed about the main character, the boy. He does not, for example, seem to possess a name (a similar anonymity was employed in "The Old Man") nor is any information given about his family life. The boy's father, if he has a father, does not seem to accompany the men on the hunting trip and nothing is known about where the boy lives or what he does when he is not hunting.

To understand why Faulkner would make his character so one-dimensional, at least in one respect, one must understand the purpose of the story. It is a coming-of-age story and, indeed, a very typical coming-of-age story in many ways. The boy is learning how to be a man by engaging in the very typically masculine sport of hunting. Indeed Faulkner even makes this rather explicit when he writes: "If Sam Fathers had been his mentor and the backyard rabbits and squirrels his kindergarten, then the wilderness the old bear ran was his college and the old male bear itself, so long unwifed and childless as to have become its own ungendered progenitor, was his alma mater" (203). Implicit in this statement is the notion that real, kinetic experience is the only way one can really grow and mature for the maturation Faulkner refers to is not qualified. He is not merely concerned with becoming a better hunter or a better outdoorsman; rather, the boy is becoming a better man and a better person in general through his experiences in the wood. The reason nothing else is mentioned about the boy's life is because, relatively speaking, nothing else is important about his life: All of his important life lessons are learned in the woods.

Of course, Faulkner is trying to make a general point here; he is trying to convince the reader of the superiority of an active, outdoors life, a life that is in touch with nature. Therefore, he keeps the boy anonymous and, thereby, makes him represent every boy and therefore every man. There is nothing about the boy which could easily distinguish from any of Faulkner's readers, at least any of his male readers, and therefore the reader is invited to see himself in the boy.

The Bear, Pages 218 - 244

The Bear, Pages 218 - 244 Summary

The men and the now sixteen-year-old boy—whose name is finally revealed to be "Ike" in this chapter—continue their annual attempts to take down the bear. Failure, it seems, is inevitable, despite Lion's heroics. The men are bored on one trip, and perhaps a bit discouraged, and take to drinking whiskey to pass the time. When they run out, they send Boon and Ike to go get some more. (Ike's role in the trip, the narrator explains, is to make sure Boon does not drink everything he buys before he gets back.) The whiskey run is successful, though during the trip Ike acts very coldly towards Boon, whom he does not seem to respect a great deal.

They go out again to hunt Old Ben. As always, Lion is the dog who is hottest on his trail and manages to trap the bear again. The two animals fight viciously for sometime while the men catch up. Boon, not trusting his accuracy with a firearm, dives on the bears back with a knife and plunges the blade into it's heart. After some struggle, the bear rises up and then collapses to the ground, dead. There were casualties, however. Lion was severely and fatally maimed during the encounter and Sam, inexplicably, is lying in the mud, face-down and unconscious. They take him back to a camp and retrieve a doctor who concludes that he just "quit"—sometimes old people, he explains, just decide to give up for a few days, but usually they change their minds. He dies within a few days, a tragedy that the boy has some premonition of and thus decides to miss a few more days of skill. Boon and the boy start burying the corpse and Boon fights with McCaslin when he arrives and wants to see the corpse. McCaslin senses what happened and asked Boon if he killed Sam out of mercy and says he would have done the same thing. Boon says nothing.

The Bear, Pages 218 - 244 Analysis

The emotional impact of Old Ben's death is perhaps not what the reader might have expected. For those who live in the immediate area, who lost crops and livestock to the bear's hunger, it is a moment of vindication and justice. They visit the bear's body almost like a victim's family watches the murder be executed. In a way, the whole scene is almost unbelievable. A bear certainly could be a major annoyance and even a danger to the surrounding community, but Old Ben seems almost like a mythical creature, far more powerful than any other bear in existence.

Whatever joy or pride the hunters could have in the bear's death is overshadowed by the losses they incur in the fight, particularly Sam's eventual death. The tragedy highlights a certain pointlessness about the hunt. The men themselves had no real purpose for killing their bear. He lived too far away to be a nuisance to them at home and the way the men talk about hunting almost seems like they are talking about a game—when Major de Spain mistakenly believes Old Ben killed his colt, for example,

he bemoans that the bear has "broken the rules" (207). Yet, this game claimed the life of the man who was in many ways the head of the group and who was especially important to Ike.

The Bear, Pages 244 - 301

The Bear, Pages 244 - 301 Summary

Ike is now twenty-one and has inherited the title to a significant amount of land which he would share with his cousin, McCaslin. He decides, however, to relinquish his rights to the land because he wants to break the pattern which, he claims, has brought a curse upon the south. The curse came with the white man's arrival in America and seems to be centered around the idea of ownership. Before white men arrived in the Americas, the natives had no concept of owning land, let alone buying and selling it. These were notions imported from the West which soon came to dominate America. The natives bought into these concepts too and some of them, like the Indian chiefs, profited greatly from selling land that they actually never owned. Land ownership is a foolish concept because it almost sets man up as God; God gave man sovereignty over the land to rule it in his stead, a relationship which implies that man's possession of his land is conditional and tenuous. Ike realizes this absurdity and, thus, decides to break the paradigm and repudiate any possible claim to the land.

This obsession with ownership, unfortunately, was not restricted to land; it was extended to people also, particularly African slaves. Though all of America was guilty of the sin of slavery for sometime, nowhere were people more obstinate in the South. Emancipation did not come until a blood Civil War and, even then, it had little more than a theoretical impact. Blacks were still economically inferior and southern governments did everything in their power to oppress them. Ike and McCaslin use the ledgers kept on the plantation, records of everything that went on, to survey the shameful history of their land. It records how slaves were bought and sold, how slaves were dismissed because of their lack of useful skills, how a black slave was impregnated and abandoned by the baby's father, a white slave-owner. It is impossible for Ike and McCaslin to separate themselves from this history, even though both were born long after slavery was abolished and took no direct part in it. They are descendants of the race responsible for so much misery and are, therefore, obligated to do what they can to heal it.

The Bear, Pages 244 - 301 Analysis

The tone and style of this chapter stands in stark contrast to the chapters before and after it. The first three chapters were a simple narrative of a boy becoming a man through hunting. Though they unmistakably bear the marks of Faulkner's style and sensibilities, they might fairly be called rather conventional. The fourth chapter is anything but. Faulkner discards the rules of grammar and punctuation and engages in an associative free play in which one thought evolves subtly into the next. This chapter in particular exhibits Faulkner's debt to the modernist literary school. Though hardly an organized movement, modernism might be justly characterized as a reaction against prevalent literary forms that preceded it, particularly Romanticism and Realism. Writers of these two schools generally believed that there was a certain, almost infallible

connection between the author and the reader such that the author could convey not only what he was imagining, but what reality is itself. Modernists believe that such a link is illusory and see grammatical conventions as one of the pillars of said illusion: Adherence to the strict technical norms of language can almost make the language seem mathematical, as objective as the Pythagorean theorem. Modernists are interested in destroying this notion and, thus, an occasional strategy is to flaunt grammar and punctuation. The result of such unbounded language is that meaning becomes unclear and the reader is forced to, so to speak, fill in the gaps left by the author. The author, then, surrenders his claim to be communicating some pure truth to his reader; the reader is now as much of an artist as is the writer.

Though certainly the style of the chapter alone makes it difficult for a casual reader to understand, the difficulty is only aggravated by the fact that Faulkner explicitly said that this chapter was meant to be read only in connection with the larger story of which "The Bear" is only a part. The larger story, unfortunately, is not printed in this volume. However, the chapter is not without value, as it is an excellent and very direct elaboration of Ike's—and, vicariously, Faulkner's—views about Southern history and the topic of racism.

The Bear, Pages 301 - 316

The Bear, Pages 301 - 316 Summary

Ike goes back to the camp one more time. Major de Spain has decided to sell the land to a lumber company which will cut down all of the trees, but there is enough time for at least one more hunt. Major de Spain himself has decided not to go but he tells them they are more than welcome to use the land while it is still his. He decides that he is only go to take Boon with him and rides off to go find him. He rides through the woods and is almost able to forget about the world but his reverie is intruded upon by the blast of a locomotive's horn. A little further on, he runs into Ash. Ash was on the hunt when Ike killed his first book and remembers with spite how Ike had blood smeared on his face in honor of his accomplishment. Unwilling to be outdone by a boy much younger than him, he went out into the forest with a gun intent on killing something, anything. He found a bear but was unable to do anything to it; he could not even fire his gun correctly. He left in shame with nothing to show for his effort. Ike continues to ride out into the forest and hears the sound of of metal beating against metal. He searches around for the sound for some time and eventually finds Boon sitting at the base of a tree. He is frantically trying to load and assemble his gun in order to kill the squirrels which are swarming around in the trees above. He yells at Ike to not take any of his squirrels.

The Bear, Pages 301 - 316 Analysis

The final chapter puts the themes established in the fourth chapter into a more tangible form. The destruction talked about in the fourth chapter was largely metaphorical; it is the spiritual and economic destruction of peoples and cultures. Here, the destruction is quite literal: The woods in which Ike became a man and learned virtue are being destroyed for the sake of the same economic forces which led to slavery and oppression in the 19th century and has now taken what is, in some ways, an even more barbaric form, for now it directly attacks the earth which gives its life.

Characters

Buck Hippsappears in Spotted Horses

Buck Hipps is a Texan salesman who brings in the lot of wild Texan horses to the small, agrarian Mississippi town in which "Spotted Horses" is set. His status as an outsider immediately arouses the suspicion of the town but their suspicions are overwhelmed by his persuasive, shrewd marketing skills. Despite the fact that his horses are clearly untamed and maybe even untameable—a fact which the horses frequently confirm with their behavior—he manages to convince the town to buy up every single one of his horses. He leaves town without helping anyone retrieve his horse and thereby avoids any involvement in the chaos that follows as a result.

Hipps represents the worst aspects of market capitalism. He offers a product which is not only unnecessary—many of the people in the town have never owned a horse and have no apparent need for one, like Henry Armstid—but actually downright dangerous. Through slick and deceitful rhetoric and calculated incentives, like offering Eck a horse for free if he starts the bidding, he is able to profit handsomely and sell off every single one of his horses. When the horses stampede through the city, wrecking houses and injuring two men, he is long gone, unable to be held accountable for his dishonesty. It would seem only natural that his injustice would be corrected, at least somewhat, by the legal system; such, after all, is the ostensible purpose of having laws and courts in the first place. However, the law, too, is either unable or unwilling to do anything about economic justice and finds itself always opposed to the interest of the common man.

Ike McCaslinappears in The Bear

When "The Bear" opens, Ike McCaslin is a very young boy of only about seven years. He watches eagerly each summer as the adults pile into their wagons to go off to hunt, wanting impatiently for his tenth birthday so that he can join them. The day finally comes and he is initiated into the masculine world of hunting for sport. Hunting is integral to Ike's maturation. From the time that he takes down his first deer—on occasion of which he is anointed with its blood in a quasi-religious rite of passage—he learns not only how to fire a gun or how to track animals, but how to be a man and live virtuously. He is able to learn this virtue because he is living in an eminently natural way; man was made not to own the world but to live among it. Thus, when he grows older and inherits a significant piece of property, he declines.

Land ownership is one of many symptoms of a moral disease brought to America by the white man. It is motivated by the same spirit which led man to enslave other men, a badge of shame on Southern history which will disappear only after a long penance and a true commitment to abandon the capitalistic impulses which were at its roots. Unfortunately, such a commitment seems far off: The woods in which Ike hunted throughout his youth are sold to a lumber company to be sawed down.

Eck Snopesappears in Spotted Horses

Eck Snopes is one of the men who buys a horse from Buck Hipps. He is accused by Ratliff of colluding with Hipps. Hipps gives him a horse to get the auction started and it winds up injuring Tull and ruining his wagon. Eck is ready to pay to compensate Tull for the damage but the judge, citing an obscure technicality in the law, absolves him of any responsibility.

Flem Snopesappears in Spotted Horses

Flem Snopes is Buck Hipps' helper and, as such, arouses the suspicion of the community, particularly Ratliff. Hipps gives him five dollars to return to the desperately poor Mrs. Armstid but he keeps it for himself.

Ratliffappears in Spotted Horses

Ratliff is the only member of the community who sticks to his suspicions about Hipps' and the Snopes'.

Henry Armstidappears in Spotted Horses

Henry Armstid is a very poor farmer who uses his family's last five dollars to buy one of Hipps' horses.

Mrs. Armstidappears in Spotted Horses

Mrs. Armstid is Henry Armstid's wife. She pleads with her husband and the community in general to stop him from buying a horse. Eventually, Hipps is moved by her desperation and refunds her money. He gives it to Flem Snopes who, he says, will give it to her, but he Flem does not make good on the promise, keeping the money instead.

Tall Convictappears in The Old Man

The tall convict—he is never named—is in prison for robbing a train. His boat goes out of control while he is trying to rescue people in a flood and he winds up on an eight week adventure with a pregnant woman trying desperately to get back to jail. He is sentenced to ten more years in prison for attempting to escape. The sentence is at first indifferent to him, for he believes he has nothing to live for, but when he falls in love, the prospect of being away from his future wife for ten years becomes intolerable.

Fat Convictappears in The Old Man

The fact convict is imprisoned for manslaughter, a crime which he almost certainly did not commit. He accompanies the tall convict on the boat to save flood refuges but, when the skiff starts to go out of control, he grabs a low-hanging branch to escape.

Pregnant Womanappears in The Old Man

On his adventure down the Mississippi River, the tall convict is accompanied by a woman in the very late stages of pregnancy. She gives birth while they are still trying to find refuge. She is a loathsome sight to the tall convict insofar as she represents the normal life that, he thinks, is unattainable to him as a result of his imprisonment.

Sam Fathersappears in The Bear

Sam Fathers is the part-Black, part-American Indian man who is Ike McCaslin's mentor in the woods. When they finally manage to kill Old Ben he falls unconscious, perhaps as a result of shock or excitement (for he is, at that point, in his seventies) and requests to be killed not long after.

Old Benappears in The Bear

Old Ben is a particularly ferocious bear who stalks through the woods Ike McCaslins hunts in. He eludes being slain for years but is finally taken down when Lion, an exceptionally fierce dog, holds his attention while Boon jumps on his back and stabs him.

Objects/Places

Mississippiappears in Spotted Horses, The Old Man, The Bear

All of the stories take place in Mississippi, Faulkner's home state.

Armstid's Five Dollarsappears in Spotted Horses

Henry Armstid tries to buy one of Buck Hipps' horses with his last five dollars.

Tull's Wagonappears in Spotted Horses

Eck's horse destroys Tull's wagon.

State Farmappears in The Old Man

The story's two main characters are convicts serving their time on a state-run plantation.

Action Novelsappears in The Old Man

The tall convict is enticed into trying to rob a train by reading romanticized accounts of the lives of famous train robbers like Jesse James.

The Old Man / Mississippi Riverappears in The Old Man

The Mississippi River—referred to in the story as "The Old Man"—floods and the tall convict winds up floating all the way down into Louisiana on it.

Louisianaappears in The Old Man

The tall convict winds up in Louisiana while he drifts down the Mississippi River.

The Woodsappears in The Bear

The Woods are a kind of proving ground for Ike.

Old Ben's Footappears in The Bear

Old Ben is characterized by his mutilated foot which was once caught in a bear trap.

Slaveryappears in The Bear

Slavery is, according to Ike, the cause of a Divine curse upon the South.

Themes

The Inefficacy of Law

Both in "Spotted Horses" and "The Old Man" Faulkner emphasizes how broken and ineffective the legal system is. The purpose of any legal system, and especially the American legal system, is to correct injustices and restore balance to society. The injustice committed in "Spotted Horses" is primarily economic. The shrewd Buck Hipps is able to convince the gullible people in a small Mississippi agrarian community to be his wild, dangerous horses and leaves before he can be held accountable for all the damage he knows they will cause. The horses wind up running amok all over town, injuring two people and damaging property. The injured parties appeal to the legal system to correct these wrongs, but the judge declares that he can do nothing. He cannot hold Flem Snopes accountable for the sale of the horses because there is no evidence that he owned them or colluded with Buck Hipps; the testimony of several people in the community does not seem to be sufficient. Yet, when considering the charge against Flem that he stole five dollars from Mrs. Armstid he is only too willing to accept the perjured testimony of one of Flem's kinsmen. Eck Snopes, whose responsibility seems so clear that he does not even dispute it, is even absolved of any liability because the judge discovers that an obscure provision of property law applies to the situation.

The political nature of law is explored in "The Old Man." The tall convict is perhaps excessively scrupulous in his desire to do things in the "right way" (116), even lugging around the heavy boat with him everywhere he goes. When he finally is able to surrender to the authorities they sentence him to ten more years in prison for attempted escape. Though the parties involved know that he did not try to escape they decide to charge—and convict him, without a trial—because they would otherwise have to let him go free.

The Destructive Effects of Capitalism

"Spotted Horses" and "The Bear" both examine the destructive effects of completely unregulated capitalism. In "Spotted Horses," Buck Hipps is able to seduce the gullible Mississippi community into spending their hard-earned, scarce money on his horses—horses which they do not need and prove to be actually destructive. Perhaps typifying a capitalist mindset, Hipps makes sure he is long gone when the horses break out into chaos. They resist any attempt to be cowed and run wild through the streets, injuring two men and damaging property before escaping out in the wilderness, lost to the men forever.

The destructive nature of capitalism is the dominant theme in the difficult fourth chapter of "The Bear." As Faulkner envisions it—through the voice of Ike—before Westerns arrived in America, Native Americans lived in a natural, organic relationship with the

land. There was no concept of ownership until the white man arrived and this concept was only too appealing to Indian chiefs who found they could sell land they never imagined they owned in the first place. This same capitalistic impulse motivated the dismal chapter of human history in which man believed he could own other men. It took nothing short of a Civil War to officially put an end to slavery and, even then, Southern governments do whatever they can to continue to oppress blacks.

The Dehumanization of Incarceration

A principal theme of "The Old Man" is how prison has robbed the tall convict, and symbolically all convicts, of their humanity. This is probably especially true in the tall convict's because of the young age at which he entered prison (eighteen). The lack of humanity is first seen when the prisoners are being driven to the refugee camp. They are packed tightly into a truck and hauled like lumber to a train station. At no point during this transportation does any convict ask where they are going or why; they simply accept their fate without question or even concern, as if they do not really care what happens to them.

When the tall convict winds up in the boat with the pregnant woman he is repulsed by her body. He knows almost nothing about her, not even if she is married, but assumes that she is. He cannot stand to look at her because she is a visible reminder of what he has missed out on while he has been in prison. It is impossible for him to have a normal life, to have a wife and a family. What is even worse is that he has given up hope for ever having such a life, even when he gets out of prison. To cope with such despair he is forced to repress those quite human desires but his repression breaks down when confronted with the pregnant woman, a visible reminder of normal human life.

He is finally able to overcome his repression when he meets a woman in a refugee camp. They have sex and become quite fond of one another. He finally realizes that happy, normal, human life is open to him—and yet, it is very distant. He has to go back to prison for ten years, a sentence which he first regarded with indifference but now anticipates with dread and pain, realizing what is waiting for him on the outside.

Style

Point of View

All three of the stories are told from the third-person perspective, however the exact style of narration differs in each. "Spotted Horses" is the most conventional and straightforward in this regard. The narrator is completely impersonal and objective. The narration does not exclusively follow any one character and shifts between various vantage points in order to convey the story.

"The Old Man" employs a more complex narrative style. The account of the tall convict's adventure down the flooded river is interleaved with bits of conversation with the fat convict, whom he is telling the tale after he has returned to prison. This style of alternating narration has two effects. First, the reader knows how the adventure will end before the story has been fully told. It is even mentioned that he received more time in prison for attempted escape. This knowledge colors the rest of the story and makes the tall convict scrupulous intention to turn himself in seem all the more tragic. As the reader sees him hauling the heavy boat over long distances he knows that all of his work is in vain. Interspersing dialogue with the fat convict also allows the characters to comment on and explain what is happening. Often, their comments do more to illuminate their personalities and backgrounds than the events themselves. For example, when the tall convict mentions that the doctor said he was hemophiliac they both confuse the term with "hermaphrodite," both exposing their lack of education and allowing for a moment of comic relief.

The narration in "The Bear" almost exclusively follows Ike and, indeed, the connection between the narrator and Ike is so strong that he is often referred to in the text simply as "he" without any attempt to clarify who the referent is. It is important for the reader to keep this in mind in order to avoid confusion about who is doing what. Despite Ike's prominence in the narrative, Faulkner curiously decides not to name him until chapter three, about forty pages into the 132-page story. The purpose of this is probably to establish Ike as a kind of everyman, or more accurately, an "everyboy." He is meant to embody a natural way of life and particularly a natural way of maturing and becoming adult: Virtue and manhood are best learned, Faulkner believes, in the bosom of nature. This lesson applies to all people, at least to all men, and thus Ike is kept anonymous in order to make him represent not some specific childhood, but all childhoods.

Setting

All three of the stories take place in Mississippi. "The Old Man" is exceptional because part of it takes place in Louisiana; the other two stories do not cross state boundaries. Faulkner chose to write about Mississippi in large part, certainly, because he was born there, but the choice has a significance which is more than biographical. Faulkner is intensely interested in the history and culture of the South and, particularly, the

persistence of that culture into the 20th century. "Spotted Horses" is an examination of the injurious effects of capitalism upon small communities, a story which could be seen to symbolize the destruction of rural life in favor of more efficient, urban living.

"The Bear", and particularly its fourth chapter, is the most intense examination of Southern culture. It is important to realize that while Faulkner certainly loves his home, he is far from uncritical of it. Indeed, Ike, whose views may be taken to be equivalent to Faulkner's, even talks about how the South has been cursed as a result of its long attachment to slavery. He sees slavery as a symptom of the same capitalistic spirit which has torn man away from living in a natural way with the rest of the world; it is this same spirit which led man to the belief that he could own land, a belief which Ike rejects by refusing to take possession of the land left to him in a will.

Language and Meaning

Faulkner's writing is notorious for the way it consciously flaunts many stylistic and grammatical conventions. This is seen throughout these three stories. For example, in "The Old Man," Faulkner inserts parenthetical bits of dialogue between the tall convict and the fat convict and, in the middle of a sentence. Often, the dialogue will cover multiple paragraphs and sometimes will be quite lengthy and, yet, when the parenthesis is over, Faulkner resumes the interrupted sentence exactly where he left off. An example of this—and there are many others—can be found on page 141.

The fourth chapter of "The Bear" is the most intense example of this. Ike's conversation with his cousin is presented as a free-form, associative stream of consciousness. What is being said and what is being narrated is unclear and sentences are often entirely ungrammatical. Punctuation and capitalization are used inconsistently.

While Faulkner's experimental style can often be confusing and perhaps even frustrating, it is important to understand the literary and historical background from which it is derived. Faulkner is widely considered to have been heavily influenced by the modernist movement. The modernists objected to the pervasive believe that there was a kind of intimate connection between writer and reader, such that the writer could directly convey his state of mind and intentions to the reader, or at least to the particularly attentive reader. Art, on this account, is an almost spiritual connection. Such a view is mainly associated with Romantics and Realists. The modernists deny that any such connection can be achieved and, moreover, they deny that the writer of a text (or the painter of a piece of art, the composer of a song, and so on) is the sole artist. Rather, they believe, art occurs at the nexus of writer, text, and reader and, as such, the meaning a reader brings to a piece of art is as important as the meaning the author intends in it.

Modernist writers, then, are eager to eliminate the illusion of objectivity in expression. One might think a crucial pillar of this objectivity is grammar. There is a certain similarity between writing in a technically correct way and describing a mathematically precise equation. Grammar and punctuation bind together a statement and give it an air of

authority or at least correctness. It is no wonder, then, that modernists frequently discard these conventions and write in a style that is free of grammatical restriction. The result is a text with an obviously unclear meaning; the reader is forced to "fill in the gaps" left by the author and create a meaning which is only suggested, and not determined, by the text.

Structure

This collection contains three stories, "Spotted Horses," "The Old Man," and "The Bear." The three stories were not intended to be collected together by Faulkner, but were published independently or in their own collections in 1931, 1939, and 1942 respectively. The internal structure of each story varies. "Spotted Horses" is divided into two chapters, the first narrating the sale of the horses and the ensuing chaos and the second narrating the inefficacious trial. "The Old Man" is not divided into chapters though there are occasionally breaks in the text indicating distinct sections. "The Bear" is divided into five chapters, generally dividing according to logical breaks in the story, for example, between two parts of the story which are separated by some significant length of time.

Though the stories do not represent an enormous portion of Faulkner's literary career—his first story was published in 1919 and he wrote his last story in 1964—there is a noticeable evolution in his style. For the most part, there is a trend towards more stylistic experimentation. "Spotted Horses" is very conventional in terms of structure and style. "The Old Man" toys with a more complicated narrative structure which interleaves conversations between the tall convict and the fat convict with the depiction of the tall convict's adventures on the river. "The Bear" is by far the most experimental of the three texts. The fourth chapter in particular makes heavy use of the modernist, stream-of-consciousness techniques which many readers associate with Faulkner.

Quotes

"'All right. You folks can buy them critters if you want to. But me, I'd just as soon buy a tiger or a rattlesnake. And if Flem Snopes offered me either one of them, I would be afraid to touch it for fear it would turn out to be a painted dog or a piece of garden hose when I went up to to take possession of it. . . .'" (13)

"A quarter of a mile further one, the road gashed pallid and moony between the moony shadows of the bordering trees, the horse still galloping, galloping its shadow into the dust, the road descending now toward the creek and the bridge." (42)

"Save for the clerk in the background, they were the only two standing, and now, in juxtaposition, you could see the resemblance between them—a resemblance intangible, indefinite, not in figure, speech, dress, intelligence; certainly not in morals. Yet it was there, but with this birdgeless difference, this hallmark of his fate upon him: he would become an old man; Ratliff, too: but an old man who at about sixty-five would be caught and married by a creature not yet seventeen probably, who would for the rest of his life continue to take revenge upon him for her whole sex; Ratliff, never." (60)

"Perhaps they watched the approach of the disaster with that same amazed and incredulous hope of the slaves—the lions and bears and elephants, the grooms and bathmen and pastry-cooks—who watched the mounting flames of Rome from Ahenobarbus' gardens." (82-83)

"Then the road vanished. There was no perceptible slant to it yet it had slipped abruptly beneath the brown surface with no ripple, no ridgy demarcation, like a flat thin blade slipped obliquely into flesh by a delicate hand, annealed into the water without disturbance, as if it had existed so for years, had been built that way." (86)

"He [the tall convict] wanted so little. He wanted nothing for himself. He just wanted to get rid of the woman, the belly, and he was trying to do that in the right way, not for himself, but for her. He could put her back into another tree at any time—" (116)

"All in the world I wanted was just to surrender; thinking of it, remembering it but without heat now, without passion now and briefer than an epitaph: No. I tried that once. They shot at me." (146)

"'All right. Just call it a new train robbery. Tell him it happened yesterday, tell him he robbed another train while he was gone and just forgot it. He couldn't help himself. Besides, he wont care. He'd just as lief be here as out. . . '" (175)

"If Sam Fathers had been his mentor and the backyard rabbits and squirrels his kindergarten, then the wilderness the old bear ran was his college and the old male bear itself, so long unwifed and childless as to have become its own ungendered progenitor, was his alma mater." (203)

"Then the dog looked at him. It moved its head and looked at him across the trivial uproar of the hounds, out of the yellow eyes as depthless as Boon's, as free as Boon's of meanness or generosity or gentleness or viciousness. They were just cold and sleepy. Then it blinked, and he knew it was not looking at him and never had been, without even bothering to turn its head away." (229)

"not against the wilderness but against the land, not in pursuit and lust but in relinquishment, and in the commissary as it should have been, not the heart perhaps but certainly the solar-plexus of the repudiated and relinquished: the square, galleried, wooden building squatting like a portent above the fields whose laborers it still held in thrall '65 or no and placarded over with advertisements for snuff and curs for chills and salves and potions manufactured and sold by white men to bleach the pigment and straighten the hair of Negroes that they might resemble the very race which for two hundred years had held them in bondage [. . .]" (245)

"That having Himself created them He could have known no more of hope than He could have pride and grief but He didn't hope He just waited because He had made them: not just because He had set them alive and in motion but because had already worried with them so long: worried with them so long because He had seen how in individual cases they were capable of anything any height or depth remembered in mazed incomprehension out of heaven where hell was created too and so He must admitted them or else admit His equal somewhere so be longer God and therefore must accept responsibility for what He Himself had done in order to live with Himself in His lonely and paramount heaven." (271)

Topics for Discussion

In "Spotted Horses," what exactly does Ratliff suspect Flem Snopes and the Texan of trying to do?

In "Spotted Horses," why does Henry so badly want to buy a horse?

In "Spotted Horses," what is the significance of the fact that the trial is conducted in a different venue?

In "The Old Man," why are none of the characters given any names?

Compare the depictions of justice and law in "Spotted Horses" and "The Old Man."

"The Bear" resembles other coming-of-age stories in many ways, especially its setting. In what ways does it differ?

Ike, the name of the main character in "The Bear," is short for Isaac, the name of a Biblical figure who is referenced in the story. What is the significance of this name? Is there a symbolic relationship between the two?