

# Sentence Length and Complexity

In

Faulkner's *The Bear*

By

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# 1. Introduction

This paper describes two particular linguistic features as they occur in a particular literary text. This description might help a reader to understand and appreciate the literary significance of the text depending on its linguistic features. Modern methods of linguistic analysis can tackle the problem of giving a precise description of the literary language. However, any practical method of linguistic analysis must select some features for analysis and ignore others (Leech and Short, 1981:13).

It is clear, then, that linguistic analysis must be very selective: some studies concentrate on just one or two features, as it is the case in this paper, and others on a handful of features (see Carter, 1984:12). The question usually posed in this concern is : How are the features for analysis to be selected? It is assumed that stylistics investigates the relation between the writer's artistic achievement, and how it is achieved through language (Short, 1996: 3). This implies two criteria for the selection of stylistic features: *a literary criterion* and *a linguistic criterion* (Fowler, 1985: 21). But at which end does one start, the literary or the linguistic? Leech and Short (1981: 14) stresses that there is "a cyclic motion whereby linguistic observation stimulates or modifies literary insight, and whereby literary insight in its turn stimulates further linguistic observation."

Nevertheless, the literary considerations of the short story in question guided the researcher in selecting what features to be examined. Thus, the starting point is the literary considerations which are based upon the ability to respond to the story as a literary work (Birch, 1993: 88) and then the researcher moved on to observe any linguistic feature that might explain how the aesthetic effect is achieved through language-use.

The theory on which the method of description is based in this paper is Quirk and Greenbaum's grammatical theory related to *sentence complexity*. Leech and Short (1981) devised a practical method of analysis based on this theory to show how linguistic description can be used in stylistic analysis. However, they take for granted a set of linguistic categories which are supposed to be a common knowledge to those who have a basic familiarity with the workings of the English language (whether in literary or non-literary contexts).

## 2. A Method of Analysis

Generally speaking, Leech and Short (ibid) follow the terminology of grammar presented in Quirk and Greenbaum's *University Grammar of English*. Every analysis of style is an attempt to find the artistic principles underlying a writer's choice of language. Nevertheless, each writer has his own individual

qualities. So, the features which distinguish a writer's text are not necessarily important in another text by the same or a different writer (ibid: 47).

At any way, it is always useful to have a checklist of features which *may* or *may not* be significant in a given text. Therefore, it is always a matter of *maybe* when it comes to literary texts. The checklist suggested by Leech and Short (ibid.) constitutes a list of questions to be answered by a stylistician. The answers provide us with a range of data which *maybe* examined in relation to the literary effect of each passage.

The major goal of devising such a checklist is to enable the stylistician to collect data on a fairly systematic basis. However, Leech and Short (ibid:48) admit that such a checklist is far from being exhaustive. But it is rather a list of categories which are *likely* to yield stylistically relevant information.

The checklist comprises information about *four* kinds of categories:

1. lexical categories
2. grammatical categories
3. figures of speech
4. context and cohesion

Sentence complexity lies within the grammatical categories. Five questions are raised about such a kind of complexity:

1. Do sentences on the whole have a simple or a complex structure?
2. What is the average sentence length (in number of words)?
3. What is the ratio *dependent* to *independent* clauses?
4. Does complexity vary strikingly from one sentence to another ?
5. Is complexity mainly due to :coordination, subordination, or parataxis (juxtaposition of clauses or other equivalent structures)?

Leech and Short (ibid: 51) put significant *Notes* on the nature of the categories involved in their checklist, in one of them they stress that they follow the current grammatical theory and practice in treating as clauses what are traditionally called *participial gerund* and *infinitive constructions*.

They (Leech and Short) describe a paragraph taken from Joseph Conrad's novel (The Secret Sharer). Then, they score sentence length for each of the seven sentences of the paragraph to find out that the progression of sentence lengths in words is:

(66 – 59 – 61 – 88 – 61 – 44 – 18)

They tried to explain the possible effects of placing the shortest sentence in the end of a paragraph. Then, they described the nature of sentence complexity with general terms: "all sentences are quite complex . . . each one

is elaborated by coordination and subordination”. Again, they tried to explain the possible artistic justification behind such a structure: the structure might be used to “imitate the movement from the observer’s eye towards the distance” (ibid: 56). They have called such a use: “reaching out effect” which has been reflected fully throughout the structure of the first sentence.

They made up a long Table involving all the data they have tried to extract through their suggested checklist: within the grammatical data, they scored the number of the *independent clauses*, for example (10), and the number of *dependent clauses*, for example (28), and calculated the ratio of *dependent* to *independent clauses*, which is (2.8). However, under such shorthand data, this Table is devised for comparative stylistic analysis, that is why they have explored sentence complexity in three paragraphs by three different writers: Conrad, Lawrence, and James.

The question that should be raised by any stylistician must be this: should a writer use simple, one-clause sentence, or should he build his separate units into more complex sentence structures?

There is no general answer to this question, since different considerations will apply in different circumstances. But we can make the general point that complex sentences are to be preferred if the aim of the writer is to present us with a complex structure of ideas (Leech, 2001: 38). The complex form *gives* information, *subordinates* some ideas to others more complex, and *coordinates* those of equal weight. A succession of simple sentences, on the other hand, leaves only one of our three variables to play with: that of sequence. This succession represents a naïve narrative style in which there is no indication of the relationship between events (ibid: 41).

But the stylistician should be cautious in describing the type of sentence complexity or structure in narrative prose which is a quite different task from that carried out in grammar books. In the latter, the sentences are always ready-made and created for pedagogical purposes. In narrative prose, the situation is more difficult since there are always unpredictable stretch of linguistic units which they might be strung together in a quite simple style or in a quite complex and unreadable style. Thus the following three sentences are taken from Conrad’s “The Secret Agent”:

“She saw there an object. That object was the gallows. She was afraid of the gallows.”

What we have here is three simple sentences occur at the climatic point of the novel to depict a sequence of impressions. Thus, the brutal simplicity is reflected through a step-by-step revelation which would be dissipated in a complex sentence (Leech and Short: 57).

A more complex example is taken from Joseph Heller’s novel “Catch-22”:

“The system worked just fine for everybody, especially for Doc Daneeka, who found himself with all the time he needed to watch old Major de Coverley pitching horseshoes in his private horseshoe- pitching pit, still wearing the transparent eye patch . . .”

The sentence begins with the subject, verb, and complement of the main clause and then it dives into a chain-like structure of subordinate clauses (especially non-finite clauses), each dependent on its predecessor (ibid.). This kind of syntactic chaining reflects a chain of relationships between the characters involved in the novel. We might even have more exotic and unreadable examples of sentence complexity, but this lies far behind the scope of our paper.

### 3. Literary Considerations of Faulkner's "The Bear"

Widely anthologized and acclaimed as a masterpiece of modern American literature, William Faulkner's "The Bear" is considered among the best stories written in the twentieth century. "The Bear" appeared in its fullest form as a chapter in *Go Down, Moses* (1942), following revisions of earlier versions published as "Lion" in *Harper's Magazine* in December, 1935, and as "The Bear" in *Saturday Evening Post* in May, 1942. *Go Down, Moses*, which contains some of Faulkner's finest writing and is variously considered a novel or a short story collection, explores the dual themes of the gradual loss of the wilderness to frontier settlement and the racial tension arising from the exploitation of African Americans (Danner, 2010: 12).

The narrative spans five generations of the white and the black descendants of Lucius Quintus Carothers McCaslin, a Scotsman who purchased the family plantation in fictional Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi, from a Native American chief. Each chapter concerns the consequences of McCaslin's actions as they affect his descendants: primarily his abuse of the land, participation in slavery, and miscegenation, by which he sires a second, illegitimate family line that is unacknowledged and oppressed by his first family (ibid: 15-18).

Although the chapters do not follow a chronological pattern, share a common narrator, nor feature the same protagonists, each story coheres around the central themes of *Go Down, Moses*, and "The Bear" represents the emotional climax of the book. In it, McCaslin's grandson, Isaac ("Ike") McCaslin, confronts both his place in the natural world and the social responsibilities foisted on him by his Southern heritage (ibid.). Interpretations of "The Bear" have frequently diverged depending on whether critics approach the work as an independent story or as a chapter of the

novel, but most commentators agree that it is one of Faulkner's greatest literary achievements.

### 3.1 Plot and Major Characters

Set in the late nineteenth century after the Civil War, "The Bear" primarily recounts the adventure and exploits of an annual, late autumn hunting expedition in the wild lands of the Tallahatchie River region in mythical Yoknapatawpha County. Told from Ike's perspective in simple, straightforward language, the narrative is divided into five sections (Scholtmeijer, 1993: 21). The first three sections comprise an account of the pursuit of legendary Old Ben, a huge and elusive ancient bear with a mutilated paw. As the tale unfolds, the adolescent Ike learns to hunt under the guidance of expert tracker Sam Fathers, a noble huntsman who is the son of a Chickasaw Indian and an African slave (ibid.). Sam also trains a fierce, woodland dog called Lion, and together they track Old Ben. When the dog eventually engages the bear in a death-struggle in the third section, however, another part-Indian member of the hunting party, Boon Hogganbeck, enters the fray and slays Old Ben with a knife-jab to its heart. Simultaneously, Sam suffers a seizure and later dies; fatally wounded, the dog dies as well (Danner, 2010:22).

At this point, *the hunting narrative* breaks off, and a seemingly different one begins. Omitted from the version of "The Bear" that appears in *Big Woods* (1955), Faulkner's last story collection published during his lifetime, the fourth section is a lengthy, convoluted dialogue between Ike and his cousin Carothers ("Cass") Edmonds in which Ike repudiates his inheritance of the McCaslin plantation upon discovering miscegenation and incest in his family's history (ibid.). Written in a complicated, stream-of-consciousness style (for example, one long passage totaling more than eighteen-hundred words and spanning several pages incorporates quoted matter and several paragraphs yet contains no periods nor capitalization to indicate the start and end of sentences), the fourth section begins when Ike is twenty-one years old and outlines the social responsibilities and inherent guilt attached to his grandfather's legacy (ibid: 31). The final part of "The Bear" resumes *the hunting narrative*. When Ike returns two years later to the place where Lion, Old Ben, and Sam died, he experiences an emotional reverie on the immortality of all life. Afterward, he presses deeper into the woods and encounters Boon, who hysterically orders Ike to leave him alone beneath a tree swarming with squirrels (ibid.).

## 3.2 Major Themes

"The Bear" is at once so simple and so complex that it surrenders its meaning to the conscious mind only after repeated readings and much brooding," wrote Scholtmeijer (1993: 35). Indeed, Faulkner's story offers a concentrated exploration of themes that recur throughout his writings, including questions about proprietary rights to the land, the cultural implications of miscegenation, incest, and maltreatment of African Americans, and the moral problems associated with pride, humility, and guilt (ibid.). A principal theme of "The Bear" concerns Ike's attitude toward the land. On one level, Ike shares the Native American view that the land belongs to no one but instead exists for communal use—a lesson Sam teaches him. Ike also sincerely believes that the land itself has been cursed by slavery, especially when he learns that his grandfather impregnated one of his slaves and then sexually abused their daughter, driving the mother to suicide. For Ike, the only way to escape the curse—and the guilt that he sees as his heritage—is to relinquish the land bequeathed to him by his grandfather (Danner, 2010: 48).

Ike's decision illuminates the development of his moral character, which, for some critics, integrates the themes of the fourth section with narrative elements of the hunting story; in other words, "Ike's ritualistic initiation into the mythic world of nature by his participation in the hunt mirrors his coming-of-age into society via his discovery of the truth about his heritage" (ibid: 51). In addition, Ike's predilection for nature and his alarm at its progressive ruin by humans symbolically corresponds with the connection between Sam and Old Ben and the deaths of the animals, who embody the spirit of the wilderness (ibid.). The thematic patterns of "The Bear" extend beyond the hunting narrative to implicate multiple tensions that have defined American life, including the conflicts between the wilderness and civilization, Native American ethics and European exploitation, freedom and slavery, pagan values and Christian duties, innocence and knowledge of sin.

### 3.2.1 Femininity

Powerfully at odds in Faulkner's novel are the figurative constructions of femininity in the hunt versus the real women who occupy the space outside of it (Scholtmeijer, 1993: 69). Ike's initiation into the yearly ritual of the bear hunt resembles the tentative and fearful adolescent gestures toward sexual initiation: "Because he recognised ... fear as a boy, a youth, recognises the existence of love and passion and experience which is his heritage but not yet his patrimony, from entering by chance the presence or perhaps even merely the bedroom of a woman who has loved and been loved by many men.

So I will have to see him, he thought" (ibid:195). The figure of the prostitute to which the bear is compared sets forth the tone of aggression and antagonism with which Faulkner represents women in the story (ibid.). Like the bear, the prostitute occupies a space of male pursuit, excluding the domesticated propriety of marriage and its civilized trappings. The comparison of a female figure to an object of the hunt also sets up an antagonism between male and female experience that recurs throughout the story's problematic fourth section (ibid: 198). In the context of the hunt, however, such references to gender attempt to position a space for the feminine while excluding real women. For example, Boon's comic adoption of a feminine persona in relation to Lion sets up an erotic context intended to direct attention away from mating rituals to the less urgent, less potentially contrastive sphere of homosocial community (Shcoltmeijer, 1993: 137). As objects of erotic quests that threaten to place men in awkward subservience, women appear to be easily effaced in favor of the more vulnerable beastly prey of the hunt (ibid.).

Ike scorns Carothers's monetary gift to Terrel since it represents the "cheaper" alternative to acknowledging his blood ties to a black man. But if Ike acknowledges what Carothers cannot--the paternity of a black son--he remains unable to apply the same resentful sympathy toward Terrel's mother, Tomasina. Ike never imagines, for example, that Carothers's legacy represents a payment for his crime of incest. He never considers the reverse statement, "So I reckon that was cheaper than saying My daughter to a nigger." (12) Instead Ike attempts to cleanse his grandfather's violation of Tomasina by constructing an elaborate fantasy of desire and love of the old man toward the girl, finally retreating into feeble, repetitive denial: "His own daughter His own daughter. No No Not even him"

### **3.3 Critical Reception**

Opinion about the meaning of Ike's renunciation of his inheritance has diverged widely. Many critics have considered Ike's stance heroic, even Christlike, and consequently attribute value to the patient suffering exemplified by Ike; they have argued that his decision represents a noble sacrifice and serves as a means of expiation for his ancestors' guilt (Robinson, 1978:16). Other commentators, however, have pointed out that later in *Go Down, Moses* it is made known that the proprietary rights to the family plantation were not relinquished but merely transferred to Ike's cousin, Cass (ibid: 18). Some contend that Ike's later acceptance of a monthly stipend from his cousin's plantation consequently negates his original intention. Therefore, Ike's repudiation and his subsequent behavior signify a weak moral character and an escape from his social responsibilities.

Another significant area of critical contention surrounds the unusual fourth section, which seems to interrupt an otherwise unified hunting tale. Some scholars have claimed that this part illuminates Ike's moral development—a central theme of "The Bear"—and contains important analogies to thematic concerns in the rest of the story (Danner, 2010: 178). To other critics, however, the fourth section unnecessarily destroys narrative unity, especially if "The Bear" is judged as an independent story isolated from the context of *Go Down, Moses*. Despite the lack of consensus, commentators generally admire the complexity and emotionally moving style of this passage, conceding that its presence in "The Bear" largely accounts for the prominent place that the story assumes in Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha cycle (ibid.). "The Bear," then, is recognized not only as one of Faulkner's most impressive stories, but also as, in Robinson's words (1978: 22), "the greatest American hunting story of the twentieth century."

#### 4. The Stylistic Analysis

In the remainder of this paper, the researcher will investigate the sentence length and complexity throughout "The Bear". The procedure will be to divide the whole text into (40) paragraphs. For each paragraph, the total number of sentences and words will be scored and then the sentence length average will be easily figured out. The Table below shows the progression of sentence lengths in words throughout the (40) paragraphs scoring all the subsequent data:

(Table 4.1)

Paragraph Number	Total Number of Sentences	Total Number of Words	Sentence Length Average
1	3	94	31.3
2	1	96	96
3	3	220	73.3
4	6	199	33.1
5	6	140	23.3
6	3	158	52.6
7	1	147	147
8	4	137	34.2
9	3	162	54
10	3	147	49
11	1	163	163
12	6	102	17

13	7	122	17.4
14	9	163	18.1
15	5	178	35.6
16	8	133	16.6
17	1	101	101
18	2	93	46.5
19	5	120	24
20	4	184	46
21	7	170	24.2
22	4	157	39.2
23	4	119	29.7
24	5	52	10.4
25	3	47	15.6
26	8	183	22.8
27	5	121	24.2
28	6	171	28.5
29	6	176	29.3
30	3	107	35.6
31	6	151	25.1
32	2	41	20.5
33	7	102	14.5
34	4	50	12.5
35	3	124	41.3
36	3	255	85
37	7	105	15
38	5	283	56.6
39	4	126	31.5
40	7	205	22.7

It will be useful at this point to indicate how much variation there is when we look at sentence length average for each individual paragraph. The average sentence length is exceptionally high in (9) paragraphs: 2, 7, 11, 15, 17, 20, 22, 36, 38. However, the highest average has been scored by paragraph (11): 163. Figure (4.1) below shows how the diagram moves towards its highest peak in paragraph (11), and then goes back to its less variable movement with sub-peaks represented by the other (8) paragraphs:

Figure (4.1)

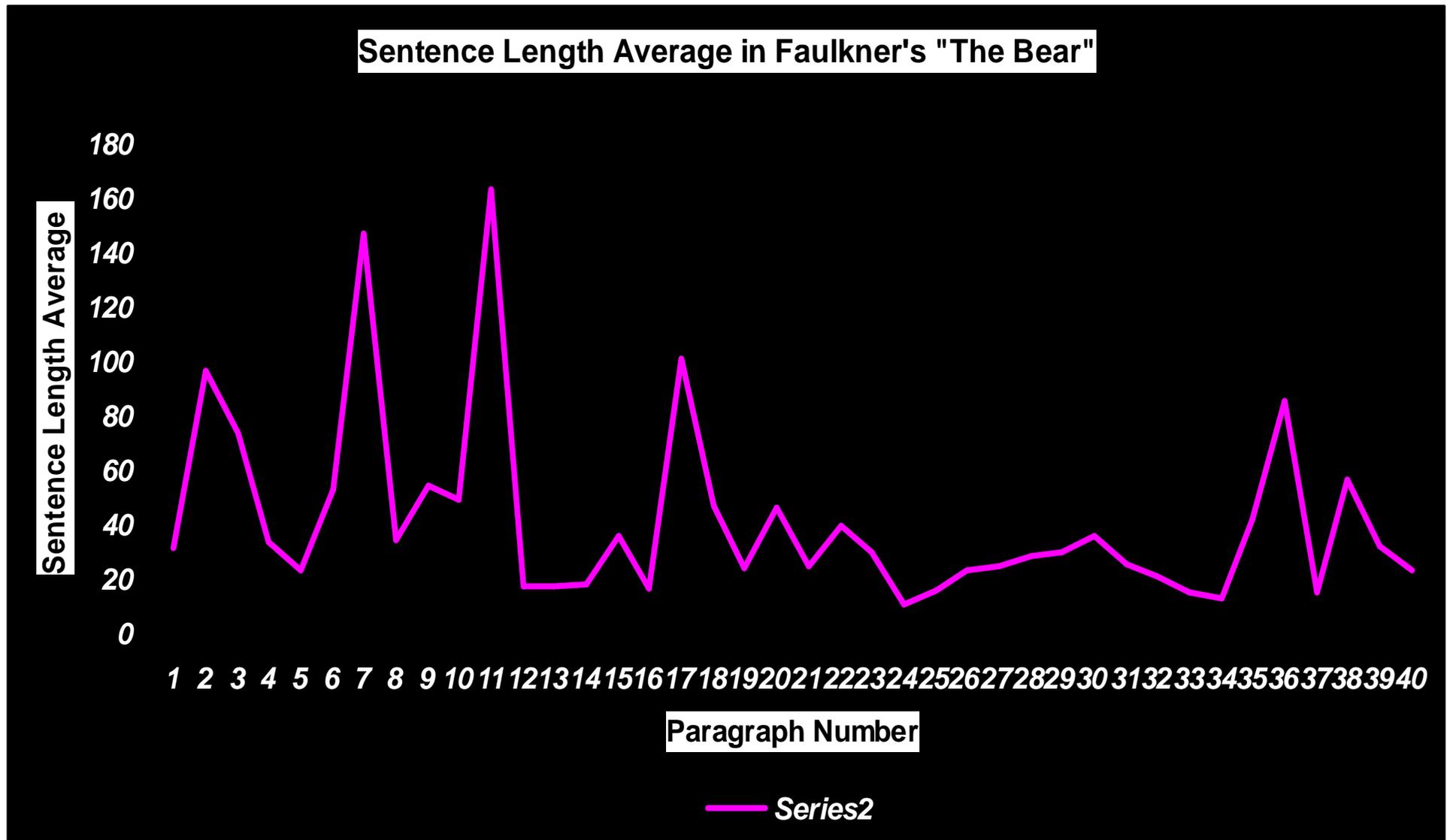
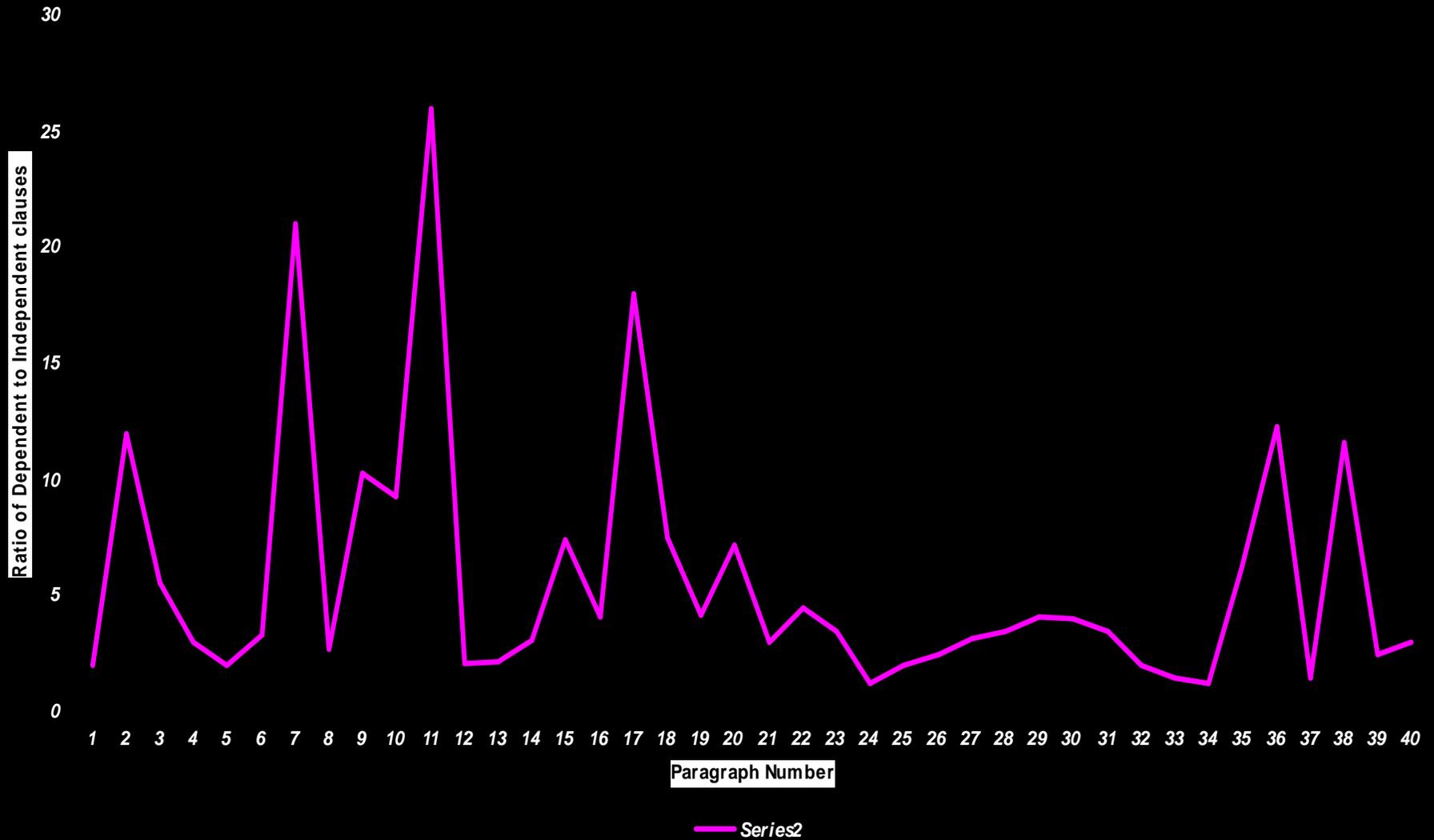


Table (4.2)

Paragraph Number	Independent Clauses Number	Dependent Clauses Number	Ratio of Dependent to Independent Clauses
1	3	6	2
2	1	12	12
3	3	17	5.6
4	6	18	3
5	6	12	2
6	3	10	3.3
7	1	21	21
8	4	11	2.7
9	3	31	10.3
10	3	28	9.3
11	1	26	26
12	6	13	2.1
13	7	16	2.2
14	9	28	3.1
15	5	37	7.4
16	8	33	4.1
17	1	18	18
18	2	15	7.5
19	5	21	4.2
20	4	29	7.2
21	7	21	3
22	4	18	4.5
23	4	14	3.5
24	5	6	1.2
25	3	6	2
26	8	20	2.5
27	5	16	3.2
28	6	21	3.5
29	6	25	4.1
30	3	12	4
31	6	21	3.5
32	2	4	2
33	7	11	1.5
34	4	5	1.2
35	3	19	6.3
36	3	37	12.3
37	7	11	1.5
38	5	58	11.6
39	4	10	2.5
40	7	21	3

As for sentence complexity, the same simple statistic procedures can be applied to score *the ratio of dependent to independent clauses* throughout the same number of the (40) paragraphs, as the Table above shows. What is interesting is the fact that the same paragraphs that scored the highest figures in *sentence length average* appear to be the most prominent ones in terms of the ratio of dependent to independent clauses. The diagram below shows the same pattern of peaks to be foregrounded against a background of less variable paragraphs.

# Sentence Complexity in Faulkner's "The Bear"



## 5. The Interpretative Significance of the Analysis

So far, the researcher has only examined the foregrounded paragraphs: 2, 7, 11, 15, 17, 20, 22, 36, 38, regardless of the rhetorical effect they may have on the whole text of the short story. Short (1996: 12) thinks that "nothing in a work of art is insignificant. But the matter in the foreground is more important than the rest." That is, some parts or elements remain more significant than others, and the foregrounded parts can be regarded as the most important of all. Consequently, for any interpretation to be adequate and reasonable, it should not ignore the most outstanding parts in the text under investigation.

But there should be something in common between these (9) paragraphs to be foregrounded in such a prominent way. The narrative in "The Bear" is divided into two different and struggling types: *hunting narrative* and *dialogical narrative*. All the (9) paragraphs belong to hunting narrative and involve a tough conflict between the major character in the story and the bear, between wilderness and civilization. As for paragraph (11), which scores the highest figures whether in *sentence length average* or in *sentence complexity*, it occupies such an outstanding position in the two diagrams above because it depicts a very critical stage in the plot of the whole story.

Nevertheless, interpretation is a very selective and subjective process, and this very subjectivity might be the major source of disagreement in respect of the adequacy of such interpretations. Hence, the interpretations suggested above are very far from being final, and it might happen that one can not find a good interpretative reason for the foregrounding, this area is still very controversial and heatedly disputed.

## 6. Conclusions

In analyzing the (40) paragraphs in terms of a selection of their sentence lengths and complexities, we have no doubt lost a great deal by isolating them from their literary context. However, there have been cross-connections between the (9) paragraphs foregrounded throughout the story. There has emerged a common literary focus on which the linguistic features of the paragraphs involved seem to converge. The discovery that the sentential aspect of Faulkner's style points towards a common literary purpose is something that can only be demonstrated through the details of stylistic analysis.

Faulkner has chosen to distinguish certain paragraphs of his short story by giving them an exceptional syntactic appearance. This appearance is stigmatized with statistically abnormal sentence length and complexity. This might be one of the techniques used by Faulkner to attract the reader's attention to the artistic significance of such paragraphs. The hunting narrative needs such syntactic complexities since it involves a sort of intensive series of actions that can not be

depicted unless one uses an intensive series of syntactic elements. Thus, *the syntactic intensive complexity of sentences reflects the intensive complexity of the dramatic line of actions*. Accordingly, Faulkner's sentential style proved to be useful in motivating certain literary-aesthetic purposes. It is a good help in reaching more systematic interpretations about literary texts, and it is ultimately a reasonable way of supporting certain critical comments and insights about the way some key literary meanings are made in fiction.

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# APPENDIX

## William Faulkner "The Bear" (1942)

He was ten. But it had already begun, long before that day when at last he wrote his age in two figures and he saw for the first time the camp where his father and Major de Spain and old General Compson and the others spent two weeks each November and two weeks again each June. He had already inherited then, without ever having seen it, the tremendous bear with one trap-ruined foot which, in an area almost a hundred miles deep, had earned itself a name, a definite designation like a living man.

He had listened to it for years: the long legend of corncribs rifled, of shotes and grown pigs and even calves carried bodily into the woods and devoured, of traps and deadfalls overthrown and dogs mangled and slain, and shotgun and even rifle charges delivered at point-blank range and with no more effect than so many peas blown through a tube by a boy—a corridor of wreckage and destruction beginning back before he was born, through which sped, not fast but rather with the ruthless and irresistible deliberation of a locomotive, the shaggy tremendous shape.

It ran in his knowledge before he ever saw it. It looked and towered in his dreams before he even saw the unaxed woods where it left its crooked print, shaggy, huge, red-eyed, not malevolent but just big—too big for the dogs which tried to bay it, for the horses which tried to ride it down, for the men and the bullets they fired into it, too big for the very country which was its constricting scope. He seemed to see it entire with a child's complete divination before he ever laid eyes on either—the doomed wilderness whose edges were being constantly and punily gnawed at by men with axes and plows who feared it because it was wilderness, men myriad and nameless even to one another in the land where the old bear had earned a name, through which ran not even a mortal animal but an anachronism,<sup>1</sup> indomitable<sup>2</sup> and invincible, out of an old dead time, a phantom, epitome and apotheosis<sup>3</sup> of the old wild life at which the puny humans swarmed and hacked in a fury of abhorrence and fear, like pygmies about the ankles of a drowsing elephant: the old bear solitary, indomitable and alone, widowed, childless, and absolved of mortality—old Priam<sup>4</sup> reft of his old wife and having outlived all his sons.

Until he was ten, each November he would watch the wagon containing the dogs and the bedding and food and guns and his father and Tennie's Jim, the Negro, and Sam Fathers, the Indian, son of a slave woman and a Chickasaw chief, depart on the road to town, to Jefferson, where Major de Spain and the others would join them. To the boy, at seven, eight, and nine, they were not going into the Big Bottom to hunt bear and deer, but to keep yearly rendezvous with the bear which they did not even intend to kill. Two weeks later they would return, with no trophy, no head and skin. He had not expected it. He had not even been afraid it would be in the wagon. He believed that even after he was ten and his father would let him go too, for those two weeks in November, he would merely make another one, along with his father and Major de Spain and General Compson and the others, the dogs which feared to bay at it and the rifles and shotguns which failed even to bleed it, in the yearly pageant of the old bear's furious immortality.

Then he heard the dogs. It was in the second week of his first time in the camp. He stood with Sam Fathers against a big oak [506] beside the faint crossing where they had stood each dawn for nine days now, hearing the dogs. He had heard them once before, one morning last week—a murmur, sourceless, echoing through the wet woods, swelling presently into separate voices which he could recognize and call by name. He had raised and cocked his gun as Sam told him and stood motionless again while the uproar, the invisible course, swept up and past and faded; it seemed to him that he

could actually see the deer, the buck, blond, smoke-colored, elongated with speed, fleeing, vanishing, the woods, the gray solitude, still ringing even when the cries of the dogs had died away.

"Now let the hammers down," Sam said.

"You knew they were not coming here too," he said.

"Yes," Sam said. "I want you to learn how to do when you didn't shoot. It's after the chance for the bear or the deer has done already come and gone that men and dogs get killed."

"Anyway," he said, "it was just a deer."

Then on the tenth morning he heard the dogs again. And he readied the too-long, [507] too-heavy gun as Sam had taught him, before Sam even spoke. But this time it was no deer, no ringing chorus of dogs running strong on a free scent, but a moiling<sup>5</sup> yapping an octave too high, with something more than indecision and even abjectness in it, not even moving very fast, taking a long time to pass completely out of hearing, leaving then somewhere in the air that echo, thin, slightly hysterical, abject, almost grieving, with no sense of a fleeing, unseen, smoke-colored, grass-eating shape ahead of it, and Sam, who had taught him first of all to cock the gun and take position where he could see everywhere and then never move again, had himself moved up beside him; he could hear Sam breathing at his shoulder, and he could see the arched curve of the old man's inhaling nostrils.

"Hah," Sam said. "Not even running. Walking."

"Old Ben!" the boy said. "But up here!" he cried. "Way up here!"

"He do it every year," Sam said. "Once. Maybe to see who in camp this time, if he can shoot or not. Whether we got the dog yet that can bay and hold him. He'll take them to the river, then he'll send them back home. We may as well go back too; see how they look when they come back to camp."

When they reached the camp the hounds were already there, ten of them crouching back under the kitchen, the boy and Sam squatting to peer back into the obscurity where they had huddled, quiet, the eyes luminous, glowing at them and vanishing, and no sound, only that effluvia<sup>6</sup> of something more than dog, stronger than dog and not just animal, just beast, because still there had been nothing in front of that abject and almost painful yapping save the solitude, the wilderness, so that when the eleventh hound came in at noon and with all the others watching—even Old Uncle Ash, who called himself first a cook—Sam daubed the tattered ear and the raked shoulder with turpentine and axle grease, to the boy, it was still no living creature, but the wilderness which, leaning for the moment down, had patted lightly once the hound's temerity.

"Just like a man," Sam said. "Just like folks. Put off as long as she could having to be brave, knowing all the time that sooner or later she would have to be brave to keep on living with herself, and knowing all the time beforehand what was going to happen to her when she done it."

That afternoon, himself on the one-eyed wagon mule which did not mind the smell of blood nor, as they told him, of bear, and with Sam on the other one, they rode for more than three hours through the rapid, shortening winter day. They followed no path, no trail even that he could see; almost at once they were in a country which he had never seen before. Then he knew why Sam had made him ride the mule which would not spook. The sound one stopped short and tried to whirl and bolt even as Sam got down, blowing its breath, jerking and wrenching at the rein, while Sam held it, coaxing it forward with his voice, since he could not risk tying it, drawing it forward while the boy got down from the marred one.

Then, standing beside Sam in the gloom of the dying afternoon, he looked down at the rotted overturned log, gutted and scored with claw marks and, in the wet earth beside it, the print of the

enormous warped two-toed foot. He knew now what he had smelled when he peered under the kitchen where the dogs huddled. He realized for the first time that the bear which had run in his listening and loomed in his dreams since before he could remember to the contrary, and which, therefore, must have existed in the listening and dreams of his father and Major de Spain and even old General Compson, too, before they began to remember in their turn, was a mortal animal, and that if they had departed for the [508] camp each November without any actual hope of bringing its trophy back, it was not because it could not be slain, but because so far they had had no actual hope to.

"Tomorrow," he said.

"We'll try tomorrow," Sam said. "We ain't got the dog yet."

"We've got eleven. They ran him this morning."

"It won't need but one," Sam said. "He ain't here. Maybe he ain't nowhere. The only other way will be for him to run by accident over somebody that has a gun."

"That wouldn't be me," the boy said. "It will be Walter or Major or—"

"It might," Sam said. "You watch close in the morning. Because he's smart. That's how come he has lived this long. If he gets hemmed up and has to pick out somebody to run over, he will pick out you."

"How?" the boy said. "How will he know—" He ceased. "You mean he already knows me, that I ain't never been here before, ain't had time to find out yet whether I—" He ceased again, looking at Sam, the old man whose face revealed nothing until it smiled. He said humbly, not even amazed, "It was me he was watching. I don't reckon he did need to come but once."

The next morning they left the camp three hours before daylight. They rode this time because it was too far to walk, even the dogs in the wagon; again the first gray light found him in a place which he had never seen before, where Sam had placed him and told him to stay and then departed. With the gun which was too big for him, which did not even belong to him, but to Major de Spain, and which he had fired only once—at a stump on the first day, to learn the recoil and how to reload it—he stood against a gum tree beside a little bayou whose black still water crept without movement out of a canebrake<sup>7</sup> and crossed a small clearing and into cane again, where invisible, a bird—the big woodpecker called Lord-to-God by Negroes—clattered at a dead limb.

It was a stand like any other, dissimilar only in incidentals to the one where he had stood each morning for ten days; a territory new to him, yet no less familiar than that other one which, after almost two weeks, he had come to believe he knew a little—the same solitude, the same loneliness through which human beings had merely passed without altering it, leaving no mark, no scar, which looked exactly as it must have looked when the first ancestor of Sam Fathers' Chickasaw predecessors crept into it and looked about, club or stone ax or bone arrow drawn and poised; different only because, squatting at the edge of the kitchen, he smelled the hounds huddled and cringing beneath it and saw the raked ear and shoulder of the one who, Sam said, had had to be brave in order to live with herself, and saw yesterday in the earth beside the gutted log the print of the living foot.

He heard no dogs at all. He never did hear them. He heard only the drumming of the woodpecker stop short off and knew that the bear was looking at him. He never saw it. He did not know whether it was in front of him or behind him. He did not move, holding the useless gun, which he had not even had warning to cock and which even now he did not cock, tasting in his saliva that taint as of brass which he knew now because he had smelled it when he peered under the kitchen at the huddled dogs.

Then it was gone. As abruptly as it had ceased, the woodpecker's dry, monotonous clatter set up again, and after a while he even believed he could hear the dogs—a murmur, scarce a sound even, which he had probably been hearing for some time before he ever remarked it, drifting into hearing and then out again, dying away. They came nowhere near him. If it was a bear they ran, it was another bear. It was Sam himself who came out of the cane and crossed the bayou, followed by [509] the injured bitch of yesterday. She was almost at heel, like a bird dog, making no sound. She came and crouched against his leg, trembling, staring off into the cane.

"I didn't see him," he said. "I didn't, Sam!"

"I know it," Sam said. "He done the looking. You didn't hear him neither, did you?"

"No," the boy said. "I—"

"He's smart," Sam said. "Too smart." He looked down at the hound, trembling faintly and steadily against the boy's knee. From the raked shoulder a few drops of fresh blood oozed and clung. "Too big. We ain't got the dog yet. But maybe someday. Maybe not next time. But someday."

*So I must see him, he thought. I must look at him.* Otherwise, it seemed to him that it would go on like this forever, as it had gone on with his father and Major de Spain, who was older than his father, and even with old General Compson, who had been old enough to be a brigade commander in 1865. Otherwise, it would go on so forever, next time and next time, after and after and after. It seemed to him that he could never see the two of them, himself and the bear, shadowy in the limbo<sup>8</sup> from which time emerged, becoming time; the old bear absolved of mortality and himself partaking, sharing a little of it, enough of it. And he knew now what he had smelled in the huddled dogs and tasted in his saliva. He recognized fear. *So I will have to see him, he thought, without dread or even hope. I will have to look at him.*

It was in June of the next year. He was eleven. They were in camp again, celebrating Major de Spain's and General Compson's birthdays. Although the one had been born in September and the other in the depth of winter and in another decade, they had met for two weeks to fish and shoot squirrels and turkeys and run coons and wildcats with the dogs at night. That is, he and Boon Hoggenback and the Negroes fished and shot squirrels and ran the coons and cats, because the proved hunters, not only Major de Spain and old General Compson, who spent those two weeks sitting in a rocking chair before a tremendous iron pot of Brunswick stew, stirring and tasting, with old Ash to quarrel with about how he was making it and Tennie's Jim to pour whiskey from the demijohn into the tin dipper from which he drank it, but even the boy's father and Walter Ewell, who were still young enough, scorned such, other than shooting the wild gobblers with pistols for wagers on their marksmanship.

Or, that is, his father and the others believed he was hunting squirrels. Until the third day, he thought that Sam Fathers believed that too. Each morning he would leave the camp right after breakfast. He had his own gun now, a Christmas present. He went back to the tree beside the bayou where he had stood that morning. Using the compass which old General Compson had given him, he ranged from that point; he was teaching himself to be a better-than-fair woodsman without knowing he was doing it. On the second day he even found the gutted log where he had first seen the crooked print. It was almost completely crumbled now, healing with unbelievable speed, a passionate and almost visible relinquishment,<sup>9</sup> back into the earth from which the tree had grown.

He ranged the summer woods now, green with gloom; if anything, actually dimmer than in November's gray dissolution, where, even at noon, the sun fell only in intermittent dappling upon the earth, which never completely dried out and which crawled with snakes—moccasins and water snakes and rattlers, themselves the color of the dappling gloom, so that he would not always see them until

they moved, returning later and later, first day, second day, passing in the twilight of the third evening the little log pen enclosing [510] the log stable where Sam was putting up the horses for the night.

"You ain't looked right yet," Sam said.

He stopped. For a moment he didn't answer. Then he said peacefully, in a peaceful rushing burst as when a boy's miniature dam in a little brook gives way, "All right. But how? I went to the bayou. I even found that log again. I—"

"I reckon that was all right. Likely he's been watching you. You never saw his foot?"

"I," the boy said—"I didn't—I never thought—"

"It's the gun," Sam said. He stood beside the fence motionless—the old man, the Indian, in the battered faded overalls and the five-cent straw hat which in the Negro's race had been the badge of his enslavement and was now the regalia of his freedom. The camp—the clearing, the house, the barn and its tiny lot with which Major de Spain in his turn had scratched punily and evanescently at the wilderness—faded in the dusk, back into the immemorial darkness of the woods. *The gun*, the boy thought. *The gun*.

"Be scared," Sam said. "You can't help that. But don't be afraid. Ain't nothing in the woods going to hurt you unless you corner it, or it smells that you are afraid. A bear or a deer, too, has got to be scared of a coward the same as a brave man has got to be."

*The gun*, the boy thought.

"You will have to choose," Sam said.

He left the camp before daylight, long before Uncle Ash would wake in his quilts on the kitchen floor and start the fire for breakfast. He had only the compass and a stick for snakes. He could go almost a mile before he would begin to need the compass. He say on a log, the invisible compass in his invisible hand, while the secret night sounds, fallen still at his movements, scurried again and then ceased for good, and the owls ceased and gave over to the waking of day birds, and he [511] could see the compass. Then he went fast yet still quietly; he was becoming better and better as a woodsman, still without having yet realized it.

He jumped a doe and a fawn at sunrise, walked them out of the bed, close enough to see them—the crash of undergrowth, the white scut, the fawn scudding behind her faster than he had believed it could run. He was hunting right, upwind, as Sam had taught him; not that it mattered now. He had left the gun; of his own will and relinquishment he had accepted not a gambit, not a choice, but a condition in which not only the bear's heretofore inviolable anonymity but all the old rules and balances of hunter and hunted had been abrogated.<sup>10</sup> He would not even be afraid, not even in the moment when the fear would take him completely—blood, skin, bowels, bones, memory from the long time before it became his memory—all save that thin, clear, immortal lucidity which alone differed him from this bear and from all other bear and deer he would ever kill in the humility and pride of his skill and endurance, to which Sam had spoken when he leaned in the twilight on the lot fence yesterday.

By noon he was far beyond the little bayou, farther into the new and alien country than he had ever been. He was traveling now not only by the old, heavy, biscuit-thick silver watch which had belonged to his grandfather. When he stopped at last, it was for the first time since he had risen from the log at dawn when he could see the compass. It was far enough. He had left the camp nine hours ago; nine hours from now, dark would have already been an hour old. But he didn't think that. He thought, *All right. Yes. But what?* and stood for a moment, alien and small in the green and topless solitude, answering his own question before it had formed and ceased. It was the watch, the compass, the stick—the three lifeless mechanicals with which for nine hours he had fended the wilderness off;

he hung the watch and compass carefully on a bush and leaned the stick beside them and relinquished completely to it.

He had not been going very fast for the last two or three hours. He went no faster now, since distance would not matter even if he could have gone fast. And he was trying to keep a bearing on the tree where he had left the compass, trying to complete a circle which would bring him back to it or at least intersect itself, since direction would not matter now either. But the tree was not there, and he did as Sam had schooled him—made the next circle in the opposite direction, so that the two patterns would bisect somewhere, but crossing no print of his own feet, finding the tree at last, but in the wrong place—no bush, no compass, no watch—and the tree not even the tree, because there was a down log beside it and he did what Sam Fathers had told him was the next thing and the last.

As he sat down on the log he saw the crooked print—the warped, tremendous, two-toed indentation which, even as he watched it, filled with water. As he looked up, the wilderness coalesced, solidified—the glade, the tree he sought, the bush, the watch and the compass glinting where a ray of sunshine touched them. Then he saw the bear. It did not emerge, appear; it was just there, immobile, solid, fixed in the hot dappling of the green and windless noon, not as big as he had dreamed it, but as big as he had expected it, bigger, dimensionless, against the dappled obscurity, looking at him where he sat quietly on the log and looked back at it.

Then it moved. It made no sound. It did not hurry. It crossed the glade, walking for an instant into the full glare of the sun; when it reached the other side, it stopped again and looked back at him across one shoulder while his quiet breathing inhaled and exhaled three times.

Then it was gone. It didn't walk into the woods, the undergrowth. It faded, sank back into the wilderness as he had watched a fish, a [512] huge old bass, sink and vanish into the dark depths of its pool without even any movement of its fins.

He thought, *It will be next fall*. But it was not next fall, nor the next nor the next. He was fourteen then. He had killed his buck, and Sam Fathers had marked his face with the hot blood, and in the next year he killed a bear. But even before that accolade he had become as competent in the woods as many grown men with the same experience; by his fourteenth year he was a better woodsman than most grown men with more. There was no territory within thirty miles of the camp that he did not know—bayou, ridge, brake, landmark, tree and path. He could have led anyone to any point in it without deviation, and brought them out again. He knew the game trails that even Sam Fathers did not know; in his thirteenth year he found a buck's bedding place, and unbeknown to his father he borrowed Walter Ewell's rifle and lay in wait at dawn and killed the buck when it walked back to the bed, as Sam had told him how the old Chickasaw fathers did.

But not the old bear, although by now he knew its footprints better than he did his own, and not only the crooked one. He could see any one of the three sound ones and distinguish it from any other, and not only by its size. There were other bears within these thirty miles which left tracks almost as large, but this was more than that. If Sam Fathers had been his mentor and the back-yard rabbits and squirrels at his home his kindergarten, then the wilderness the old bear ran was his college, the old male bear itself, so long unwed and childless as to have become its own ungendered progenitor,<sup>11</sup> was his alma mater. But he never saw it.

He could find the crooked print now almost whenever he liked, fifteen or ten or five miles, or sometimes nearer the camp than that. Twice while on stand during the three years he heard the dogs strike its trail by accident; on the second time they jumped it seemingly, the voices high, abject, almost human in hysteria, as on that first morning two years ago. But not the bear itself. He would remember that noon three years ago, the glade, himself and the bear fixed during that moment in the windless and dappled blaze, and it would seem to him that it had never happened, that he had dreamed that

too. But it had happened. They had looked at each other, they had emerged from the wilderness old as earth, synchronized to the instant by something more than the blood that that moved the flesh and bones which bore them, and touched, pledged something, affirmed something more lasting than the frail web of bones and flesh which any accident could obliterate.

Then he saw it again. Because of the very fact that he thought of nothing else, he had forgotten to look for it. He was still hunting with Walter Ewell's rifle. He saw it cross the end of a long blow-down, a corridor where a tornado had swept, rushing through rather than over the tangle of trunks and branches as a locomotive would have, faster than he had ever believed it could move, almost as fast as a deer even, because a deer would have spent most of that time in the air, faster than he could bring the rifle sights up with it. And now he knew what had been wrong during all the three years. He sat on a log, shaking and trembling as if he had never seen the woods before nor anything that ran them, wondering with incredulous amazement how he could have forgotten the very thing which Sam Fathers had told him and which the bear itself had proved the next day and had now returned after three years to reaffirm.

And now he knew what Sam Fathers had meant about the right dog, a dog in which size would mean less than nothing. So when he returned alone in April—school was out then, so that the sons of farmers could help with [513] the land's planting, and at last his father had granted him permission, on his promise to be back in four days—he had the dog. It was his own, a mongrel of the sort called by Negroes a fyce, a ratter, itself not much bigger than a rat and possessing that bravery which had long since stopped being courage and had become foolhardiness.

It did not take four days. Alone again, he found the trail on the first morning. It was not a stalk; it was an ambush. He timed the meeting almost as if it were an appointment with a human being. Himself holding the fyce muffled in a feed sack and Sam Fathers with two of the hounds on a piece of plowing rope, they lay down wind of the trail at dawn of the second morning. They were so close that the bear turned without even running, as if in surprised amazement at the shrill and frantic uproar of the released fyce, turning at bay against the trunk of a tree, on its hind feet; it seemed to the boy that it would never stop rising, taller and taller, and even the two hounds seemed to take a desperate and despairing courage from the fyce, following it as it went in.

Then he realized that the fyce was actually not going to stop. He flung, threw the gun away, and ran; when he overtook and grasped the frantically pin-wheeling little dog, it seemed to him that he was directly under the bear.

He could smell it, strong and hot and rank. Sprawling, he looked up to where it loomed and towered over him like a cloudburst and colored like a thunderclap, quite familiar, peacefully and even lucidly familiar, until he remembered: This was the way he had used to dream about it. Then it was gone. He didn't see it go. He knelt, holding the frantic fyce with both hands, hearing the abashed wailing of the hounds drawing farther and farther away, until Sam came up. He carried the gun. He laid it down quietly beside the boy and stood looking down at him.

"You've done seed him twice now with a gun in your hands," he said. "This time you couldn't have missed him."

The boy rose. He still held the fyce. Even in his arms and clear of the ground, it yapped frantically, straining and surging after the fading uproar of the two hounds like a tangle of wire springs. He was panting a little, but he was neither shaking nor trembling now.

"Neither could you!" he said. "You had the gun! Neither did you!"

"And you didn't shoot," his father said. "How close were you?"

**[514]** "I don't know, sir," he said. "There was a big wood tick inside his right hind leg. I saw that. But I didn't have the gun then."

"But you didn't shoot when you had the gun," his father said. "Why?"

But he didn't answer, and his father didn't wait for him to, rising and crossing the room, across the pelt of the bear which the boy had killed two years ago and the larger one which his father had killed before he was born, to the bookcase beneath the mounted head of the boy's first buck. It was the room which his father called the office, from which all the plantation business was transacted; in it for the fourteen years of his life he had heard the best of all talking. Major de Spain would be there and sometimes old General Compson, and Walter Ewell and Boon Hoggenback and Sam Fathers and Tennie's Jim, too, were hunters, knew the woods and what ran them.

He would hear it, not talking himself, but listening—the wilderness, the big woods, bigger and older than any recorded document of white man fatuous enough to believe he had bought any fragment of it or Indian ruthless enough to pretend that any fragment of it had been his to convey. It was of the men, not white nor black nor red, but men, hunters with the will and hardihood to endure and the humility and skill to survive, and the dogs and the bear and deer juxtaposed and relieved against it, ordered and compelled by and within the wilderness in the ancient and unremitting contest by the ancient and immitigable rules which voided all regrets and brooked no quarter, the voices quiet and weighty and deliberate for retrospection and recollection and exact remembering, while he squatted in the blazing firelight as Tennie's Jim squatted, who stirred only to put more wood on the fire and to pass the bottle from one glass to another. Because the bottle was always present, so that after a while it seemed to him that those fierce instants of heart and brain and courage and wiliness and speed were concentrated and distilled into that brown liquor which not women, not boys and children, but only hunters drank, drinking not of the blood they had spilled but some condensation of the wild immortal spirit, drinking it moderately, humbly even, not with the pagan's base hope of acquiring the virtues of cunning and strength and speed, but in salute to them.

His father returned with the book and sat down again and opened it. "Listen," he said. He read the five stanzas aloud, his voice quiet and deliberate in the room where there was no fire now because it was already spring. Then he looked up. The boy watched him. "All right," his father said. "Listen." He read again, but only the second stanza this time, to the end of it, the last two lines, and closed the book and put it on the table beside him. "She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss, forever wilt thou love, and she be fair,"<sup>12</sup> he said.

"He's talking about a girl," the boy said.

"He had to talk about something," his father said. Then he said, "He was talking about truth. Truth doesn't change. Truth is one thing. It covers all things which touch the heart—honor and pride and pity and justice and courage and love. Do you see now?"

He didn't know. Somehow it was simpler than that. There was an old bear, fierce and ruthless, not merely just to stay alive, but with the fierce pride of liberty and freedom, proud enough of the liberty and freedom to see it threatened without fear or even alarm; nay, who at times even seemed deliberately to put that freedom and liberty in jeopardy in order to savor them, to remind his old strong bones and flesh to keep supple and quick to defend and preserve them. There was an old man, son of a Negro slave and an Indian king, inheritor on the one side of the long chronicle of a people who had learned humility through suffering, and pride through the endurance which survived the suffering and injustice, and on the other side, the chronicle of a people **[515]** even longer in the land than the first, yet who no longer existed in the land at all save in the solitary brotherhood of an old Negro's alien blood and the wild and invincible spirit of an old bear. There was a boy who wished to learn humility and pride in order to become skillful and worthy in the woods, who suddenly found himself becoming so skillful so rapidly that he feared he would ever become worthy because he had not learned humility

and pride, although he had tried to, until one day and as suddenly he discovered that an old man who could not have defined either had led him, as though by the hand, to that point where an old bear and a little mongrel of a dog showed him that, by possessing one thing other, he would possess them both.

And a little dog, nameless and mongrel and many-fathered, grown, yet weighing less than six pounds, saying as if to itself, "I can't be dangerous, because there's nothing much smaller than I am; I can't be fierce, because they would call it just a noise; I can't be humble, because I'm already too close to the ground to genuflect;<sup>13</sup> I can't be proud, because I wouldn't be near enough to it for anyone to know who was casting the shadow, and I don't even know that I'm not going to heaven, because they have already decided that I don't possess an immortal soul. So all I can be is brave. But it's all right. I can be that, even if they still call it just noise."

That was all. It was simple, much simpler than somebody talking in a book about youth and a girl he would never need to grieve over, because he could never approach any nearer her and would never have to get any farther away. He had heard about a bear, and finally got big enough to trail it, and he trailed it four years and at last met it with a gun in his hands and he didn't shoot. Because a little dog—But he could have shot long before the little dog covered the twenty yards to where the bear waited, and Sam Fathers could have shot at any time during that interminable minute while Old Ben stood on his hind feet over them. He stopped. His father was watching him gravely across the spring-rife twilight of the room; when he spoke, his words were as quiet as the twilight, too, not loud, because they did not need to be because they would last. "Courage, and honor, and pride," his father said, "and pity, and love of justice and of liberty. They all touch the heart, and what the heart holds to becomes truth, as far as we know the truth. Do you see now?"

Sam, and Old Ben, and Nip, he thought. And himself too. He had been all right too. His father had said so. "Yes, sir," he said.

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