

# FAULKNER'S RENEWAL OF THE FIGURE OF THE GRIZZLY BEAR IN THE AMERICAN WEST: FROM ANCESTOR TO POLITICAL SYMBOL

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## ABSTRACT

The role of the grizzly bear in many Native American tribes has had a tremendous cultural, spiritual and ecological significance, which was objected by the colonisers' anthropocentric conception of wildlife as an instrumental value to humans. Literature has been one of the main sources to find traces of this Native American conception of the grizzly bear as deity as well as the colonists' perspective of the nonhuman animal as threat to be tamed. In this article, I will analyse some folk tales and William Faulkner's "The Bear" (1942) in order to demonstrate the existence of this conception of the grizzly bear in the American West, as well as the importance of literature for its perpetuation.

KEY WORDS: Human-Animal Relationships, Hunting, American West, Bear Imaginary, Native American Folklore

LA RENOVACIÓN DE FAULKNER DE LA FIGURA DEL OSO PARDO EN EL OESTE AMERICANO: DE ANCESTRO A SÍMBOLO POLÍTICO

## RESUMEN

El papel del oso pardo en muchas tribus nativo americanas ha tenido una gran importancia cultural, espiritual y ecológica, lo que supuso un contraste con la concepción antropocéntrica de los colonizadores sobre la naturaleza entendida como un instrumento para beneficio humano. La literatura ha sido una de las fuentes principales a la hora de encontrar signos de este entendimiento del oso pardo como deidad por parte de los nativo americanos, así como de la perspectiva colonizadora sobre este animal no humano como una amenaza que debe ser domada. En este artículo, analizaré algunos cuentos populares y «El oso» de William Faulkner (1942) con el objetivo de demostrar la existencia de esta concepción del oso pardo en el oeste americano, además de la importancia de la literatura en su perpetuación.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Relaciones Humano-Animales, Caza, Oeste Americano, Imaginario sobre el Oso, Folklore Nativo Americano

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## INTRODUCTION

When it comes to worship towards nonhuman animals<sup>1</sup>, the powerful image of the bear should be highlighted, having persisted up to present times among a great number of cultures all around the world—the bears' charisma has always been “capable of invoking a range of emotional and behavioural responses from people across the world” (Hughes et al. 2020, 2). Despite the strikingly similar bear rituals and beliefs that are found in America, Europe and Asia, the shared perspectives on this nonhuman animal among a great number of Native American tribes stick out. The main reason behind this need for granting importance to the bear's worship is the high regard that many Native American tribes hold for him, for the bear even became a symbol of their own identity. This cultural symbol was deliberately targeted during colonialism; that is, believing Native American religious beliefs to be primitive, the bear was hunted in order to make use of the land and remove their main threat to tame it. This attitude led to the almost extinction of grizzly bears and their inclusion in the Endangered Species Act in 1973 (Chaney 2020, 9).

Two main reasons why the bear was such a significant creature to Native Americans are noticed. On the one hand, a great number of Native American tribes saw a clear resemblance between this creature and themselves—they were the only creatures that often “stand on their hind legs and, from time to time, walk upright” (Rockwell 2021, 2), as well as having paws “similar in structure to our hands” (Comba 2019, 150). In other words, these tribes saw a clear link between humans and bears due to their akin anatomy. These common physical traits constituted a highly meaningful aspect for them, for they traditionally made use of anthropomorphization of the world around them, assigning human motives to both nonhuman animals and inanimate objects.

On the other hand, as Joseph Epes Brown states, among Native American tribes it was believed that nonhuman animals had been on Earth before humans and, therefore, count with a divine origin which enables them to have certain proximity with the Great Spirit (2007, 38). However, due to this resemblance mentioned earlier, the bear was seen as the father of the human race and, consequently, the most appropriate connection to the Great Spirit.

Nevertheless, as time has gone by, due to colonialism, capitalism and technological advances, the bear has moved on to become not only a sacred being, but also “like people from way back who still lived free and wild in nature before they were constricted into settlements” (Storl 2018, 23). In other words, there is a new understanding of the bear as a reminder of this long lost natural past, influenced by these Native American beliefs. In fact, as Chaney asserts, “the presence of grizzlies

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<sup>1</sup> I have decided to use the terms “nonhuman animals” and “human animals,” even though this use of the terms may encourage the perpetuation of the binary relationship between both. The reason why I have chosen this option is because I aim at laying out the existence of this border, for in order to acknowledge this border, it is crucial to point at the factors that have created it.



draws many other people to the same landscape in hopes of experiencing some dream of authentic Nature” (2020, 7).

Literature may be one of the most useful sources in order to demonstrate and analyse this evolution—from his<sup>2</sup> depiction as a deity and protective parental figure in traditional Native American tales, the bear in contemporary American fiction has moved on to symbolise these long lost natural roots. Thus, the main objective of this article is to show the existence of this evolution through literature. In order to do so, I will analyse Native American folklore and its influence in William Faulkner’s “The Bear.”

## THE BEAR IN NATIVE AMERICAN FOLKLORE

In the essay “From Worship to Subjugation: Understanding Stories about Bears to Inform Conservation Efforts” (Hughes et al. 2020), the portrayal of bears throughout history and across geographic distribution is analysed. The study was based upon the idea that by looking at how this nonhuman animal has been depicted, his or her meaning in society would be able to be described, which may be a determinant factor to design conservation actions that match these beliefs. This way, the researchers were able to differentiate four themes in narrative texts in relation to the bear.

First, bears are usually presented as a symbol of kinship, in which they are depicted as ancestors due to their “human-like traits and behaviours” (Hughes et al. 2020, 2) and, as a consequence of this traditional bear worship that has been mentioned previously, it does not come as a surprise that this theme is the most common. Second, we find their utilitarian image, in which stories tend to depict bears’ main goal as fulfilling humans’ needs (Hughes et al. 2020, 6). Third, some stories show the threat bears may pose to humans (Hughes et al. 2020, 6); and, finally, the fourth constitutes a political representation of the bear as a symbol of power and national pride (Hughes et al. 2020, 6). What I defend here is that these traditional depictions of the bear—which, as a matter of fact, are also found in other cultures apart from the Native American—have evolved into a new conceptualisation more related to a political perspective of the bear as a symbol that fights against capitalism and culture. Thus, a great number of contemporary literary works, getting

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<sup>2</sup> It is important to keep in mind that I am treating nonhuman animals and human animals as equals. Hence, for instance, when not being referred to by the name “nonhuman animals,” the possessive pronouns such as “his” have been used instead of “its.” It must be taken into account that these notes only apply to what I have written and that quotes included by other authors may have opted for using other options. I want to also state that in these cases the bear is referred to using the masculine gender, for the bear characters in the literary work analysed are male and traditionally the bear deities were also considered to be male and, therefore, will be referred to as such in the following pages.



their inspiration from these traditional Native American tales, represent the bear as a symbol of these long lost human roots with nature.

As it has been mentioned earlier, one of the reasons for this admiration is the belief of the bear being the origin of the human race. One of the clearest examples of the perspective of bear as kin is found in the mythology of the Modocs of California. The legend asserts that, when the Chief of the Sky “grew tired of his home in the Above World,” he decided to walk down Mount Shasta from the sky and there he created a great number of creatures present in wildlife nowadays—the otter, the bird, the fish, the beaver and the grizzly bear. Nonetheless, it was to the latter to whom he granted the ability to talk and walk on two feet. After he made the decision of settling down on Earth, bringing his family down from the sky. One day, his little girl, while being alone in the woods, bumped into one of the grizzly bears, who brought her with him to his home. Being brought up by them, she got married with one of the grizzly bears and many children were brought into the world from this union, which was considered the origin of the human race. Hence, the Modocs see the grizzly bear as a parental figure, as an ancestor, addressing him as “Grandfather” (Erdoes and Ortiz 1984, 85-87).

Another example is found in the tale “The Girl Who Married the Bear,” which despite counting with many different versions across North America, the one belonging to the Indians of the southern Yukon may be worth highlighting. This tale narrates how a bear married a woman, taking her away from her family. At the beginning, the girl does not notice that her now husband is actually a bear, due to his human-like figure. When her family comes to take her back, the bear is killed, making the girl face a terrible dilemma—she has to choose her loyalties and decide between her husband and her own relatives. She makes her decision and ultimately kills her own family out of revenge, running away to the forest with her children and having started to become a bear herself. The bear is her kin now (Rockwell 2021, 116-121).

In Native American communities, it is not only the nonhuman animal’s strength and size that make bears one of the toughest creatures in the wild, but also their association with medicine. Due to bears’ endurance in a fight, being able to keep on with it in spite of injuries, Native Americans believed that these creatures were capable of healing themselves and, therefore, may possess knowledge to heal serious wounds. One of the best examples of the bear represented as utilitarian is the Pawnee’s tale “The Medicine Grizzly Bear,” which tells us about a bear that teaches a boy the secrets of the plants. The reason why the bear chooses this particular boy is due to the fact that he believes he is worthy of receiving the sacred knowledge of the plants. It is because of his worth that not only does the boy receive this wisdom but he also will always count with the bear as a spirit guide (Grinnell 2008, 737-744).

Considering women to be dangerous during their menstrual periods, most Native American tribes isolated them when showing signs of their first periods. The main reason behind this was the belief of their possessing menacing powers that would injure or contaminate the rest of the tribe. Nevertheless, a great number of tribes not only associated women with danger, but also considered them to be related to the figure of the female bear. In spite of the undoubtable admiration for



the bear that these tribes possessed, they were also conscious of the dangers that these nonhuman animals could entail due to their powerful physical characteristics which granted them with great strength. In fact, many tribes only hunted bears when necessary, always after asking for permission and in a ritualistic manner. This understanding of the creature as threatening was more linked to female bears, creating this sort of evil creature called the she-bear (Rockwell 2021, 14-17).

One example of this type of tale is found in the folklore of the Nez Percé. As Rockwell points out, “Wali’ms and the Grizzly-bear Women” tells us about five grizzly bear sisters who kidnap children, which therefore may have been used in order to scare children from the tribe (2021, 133). Another example is the tale “The Bear Woman with the Snapping Vagina” from the Yavapai, which tells about this boy who is told by his mother not to cut the doe that he hunts on the left side first. Despite his mothers’ instructions, he ends up doing it out of pure curiosity and, as a consequence of violating the human-animal relationships, he is made to marry a she-bear. This she-bear’s main characteristic is her obsession for insisting to have intercourse with the boy in order to injure him with the bear teeth that she has in her vagina. There is no doubt about the link between this she-bear figure and uncontrolled nature; that is, this character constitutes an animal metaphor of the feminine and the nature that must be controlled and feared (Rockwell 2021, 126-129).

In the essay “From Worship to Subjugation: Understanding Stories about Bears to Inform Conservation Efforts,” the authors assert that this category is related to “bears as a politicized actor” (2020, 5); that is, as propaganda of national and political pride. This is also linked to the image of the bear as a symbol in the environmental cause. In this way, it is not surprising to see how environmental activists have used the polar bear to protest—this was the case when in July 2011, 60 Greenpeace campaigners, some of which were dressed up as bears, protested against an oil and gas British company in Edinburgh due to their operations in the Arctic (Milmo 8 Jul 2011). In literature, this use of the image of the polar bear has become quite common in Young Adult and children’s fiction in recent years. In *The Last Bear* (2021), for instance, the author Hannah Gold tells us about April, a girl who has come to live on a remote island in the Arctic along with her father. There, she befriends a polar bear and both of them begin their journey to discover the secret parts of the island, along which they will together discover the diminishing species and disappearing ice caps of the Arctic.

In relation to this, it is not surprising to see how the bear has not only been represented as a symbol of this environmental cause, but also as a means of depicting this human long lost natural past. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, concerns around nature and animal conservation started to be widespread. In the case of the grizzly bear in the American West—and also in other areas of the American continent—, after being hunted for a long time due to the threat that it embodied in the colonialist cause in their westward expansion, concerns about their ultimate extinction appeared. Moreover, this portrayal started to be related to the rise in awareness about the indigenous situation, beginning a process of indigenization of the bear—clear similarities were seen between the decolonial movement in the



American West and the ones fighting for bear conservation, mainly due to the traditional religious beliefs that Native Americans held for the bear.

### FAULKNER'S "THE BEAR"

Providing a conclusion for the meaning of Faulkner's short story may constitute a challenge of great difficulty, for three versions of it have been published, each clearly laying out a different development of the events. The first version, entitled "Lion," was published in *Harper's Monthly Magazine* in 1935 and "it has a more humorous effect than the other two versions" (Brunauer 1974, 11). In this first-person narration, the little boy Quentin tells us about the story of Lion, a hunting dog, and Boon, a half-Indian man who, instead of taking care of his dog, seems to be owned by the animal. In this version, Old Ben, a well-known bear among the inhabitants of the territory, plays a minor character used to portray the relationship between the man and the dog—after the dog is attacked by the bear, Boon stabs and ultimately kills the animal in an attempt to save the dog. Some time later, Quentin tells the reader about Boon's mental state, describing a behaviour that may be that of a madman (Faulkner 1935, 185-200).

In the second version published in 1942 in *The Saturday Evening Post* and entitled "The Bear," the story starts to differ in many ways from the first one. As the change of title implies, the story does not focus on Lion, the dog, but rather on the figure of Old Ben. It narrates the story of how Quentin, over a period of years and with Sam Father's mentoring, attempts to trail the bear, "a huge and sage legendary bear who always defies capture" (Lydenberg 1952, 63). However, when he is given the chance to finally kill the creature, he does not shoot and, although the boy tries to understand why he did not do it, he finds himself unable to provide an answer for it (Faulkner 1942a, 19).

Finally, in the same year, Faulkner published a third version with the same title, "The Bear," in his short-story volume *Go Down, Moses*. The most important change that this version introduced was in relation to Sam Fathers, who becomes the boy's "spiritual father, guiding him at every step from childhood to adulthood" (Brunauer 1974, 13). Moreover, Sam seems to possess gifts that may be compared to those of the figure of the shaman, enabling the hunting group to ultimately achieve their goal. In fact, this is precisely another significant change in the previous version, since here Old Ben is finally killed by Boon, which, as it happens in "Lion," seems to drive him crazy (Faulkner 1942b, 163-191).

In the following pages, I discuss the depiction of the bear in William Faulkner's "The Bear," focusing on the second and third versions due to the importance that they grant to the bear character, Old Ben. Since my main objective is to demonstrate the existence of this political turn in the representation of bears in literature, I have decided to follow a thematic analysis. First, I analyse how the natural world is portrayed; second, I focus on the image of the bear; and, finally, I go through the animalising and deanimalising processes found throughout the story.



Thus, what I defend here is that all these literary processes contribute to creating this bear's symbolism.

Creating the binary opposition between culture and nature and representing culture as the desirable one has led the human race to separate itself from nature up to a point where human animals seem to have completely forgotten about their own natural past. But this craving for imposing culture's superiority and importance as the only way through which the human race is able to achieve this wholeness is precisely what makes them incomplete, making us forget about our own origins.

Faulkner represents this need to rejoin with this natural world by depicting the characters' desire to hunt the bear. As Segarra points out, hunting has been traditionally regarded as a means of rejoining with the animal spirit and nature (2022, 83). It does not come as a surprise therefore to see how in a great number of cultures and eras, hunting constituted a rite for the young in order to show their worth. Thus, nonhuman animals' slaughter was seen as the inevitable way to become a respectable adult. Faulkner succeeds in depicting this in his short story, telling us about how the main character begins attending these yearly gatherings with his father and his friends in order to hunt a bear that apparently is impossible to get hold of (Faulkner 1942a, 1-3).

In Faulkner's writing of the bear, I perceive a strong influence of the bear's traditional depictions. First, as it has been mentioned in the previous section, the abilities that the animal possesses constitute the main reason for bear worship and, overall, their doubtless strength. This respect for the animal is also depicted in the three versions of Faulkner's short story. In all these versions, the magnificent shape of the animal is highlighted, mentioning multiple times through the story his "crooked print, shaggy, huge ... 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" (Faulkner 1942a, 2).

Apart from his physical aptness, the bear's intelligence has also been highlighted in multiple cultures. As Brunauer points out, for Indians of the Montagnais-Naskapi, for example, "his [the bear's] soul-spirit knows especially when the hunters are on his trail and so he does what he thinks best to do in order to save himself" (1974, 21). In other words, this nonhuman animal is in fact considered superior to all beasts by virtue of his relentless intelligence (21). Faulkner also makes use of this intelligent image of the bear, by granting Old Ben with the ability to not be hunted; that is, the capability of avoiding the hunters' attempts to beat him. As a matter of fact, in the second version of the story, Sam Fathers—who has Indian roots, which would explain his understanding of the bear—even states that "he's smart. That's how come he has lived this long" (Faulkner 1942a, 7).

In this way, Faulkner depicts Old Ben as the king of all animals, including humans, as a creature able to survive all challenges of any creature attempting to hunt him, for it was "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" (Faulkner, 1942a, 2). The kid even asserts that this group of hunters do not actually gather every year with the objective of hunting the creature, but rather to "keep yearly rendezvous with



the bear” (Faulkner 1942a, 3), the creature that has earned himself a name, Old Ben. Old Ben is hence depicted as a sort of deity that is “absolved of mortality” (Faulkner 1942a, 10).

This god-like image may be the reason for the reluctance to kill the animal. In the second version, on the one hand, the boy develops his hunting skills in order to achieve his objective of ultimately killing Old Ben. Nonetheless, despite being given the opportunity to fulfil his ambition not only once, but twice, he makes the decision of letting him live (Faulkner 1942a, 17). One of the reasons for this decision may be that Ike realises that hunting a sacred animal as Old Ben may become a sort of rape, a violation of the wilderness and a divine entity. In fact, this reluctance to slaughter the animal is also present in the Indians of the Plains, who hesitate to kill the bear or eat him, for him being considered a noble creature (Brunauer 1974, 17). However, some tribes decide to kill the animal as a tribute. In these cases, “the reluctance to use a gun when hunting bears seems to have deep traditional roots” (Brunauer 1974, 25). In fact, in these territories, bear hunt is characterised by its strict ceremonialism (Hallowell 1926, 57). First, the location of the animal should be determined, which was often believed to come in a dream. There are clear signs of this in Faulkner’s short story: “the bear ... had run in his [the boy’s] listening and loomed in his dreams since before he could remember to the contrary” (Faulkner 1942a, 7). Hence, it was as if they were destined to run into each other and the bear, being a sacred divinity, was aware of it from the very first start, emerging in the boy’s dreams, foreseeing the future events.

After being located, they proceed to the slaughter. Even though the method may vary from tribe to tribe, the use of guns is generally avoided when hunting bears, which “seems to have deep traditional roots” (Brunauer 1974, 25). In both first and third versions, Old Ben is ultimately killed, but not with a gun—despite the fact that all hunters own one, the bear is killed with a knife in the end (Faulkner 1935; 1942b). Furthermore, in the second version, the boy makes the decision not to kill the bear on both occasions that he bumps into each other. The second time this happens, Ike’s father cannot believe that the boy has not been able to shoot him and asks him why he could not do it (Faulkner 1942a, 19). But the boy is also confused, he does not understand his decision either.

In this way, the political depiction of the bear is of great importance in order to understand Ike’s actions at the end of the story. On the one hand, for critics such as John Lydenberg, Faulkner’s depiction of the bear also acts as a symbol of the relationship between humans and nature, to the old life now lost (1952, 63). From this point of view, Old Ben’s death in the third version would symbolise man’s destruction of the wilderness. However, in the second edition, where the bear is not actually killed at the end, the bear constitutes a totem animal, the god who can never be bested by men with their hounds and guns. The short story would therefore be an attempt to portray man’s plight in a world impossible to control and fully grasp. Thus, their conquest of Old Ben becomes a violation of the wilderness and the Southern land.

In order to make them fit into this world where humans are understood as the centre, nonhuman animals are regarded from the perspective of the human,





imposing certain behaviours and characteristics among them. This way, they are stripped of their own animality, removing them from their own world and imposing some concepts that they probably are not even conscious about, which leads to us stealing “their spirits, [...] their very animality” (Malamud 2011, 14). This has precisely been one of the greatest problems when it comes to representing nonhuman animals in literature. This anthropocentrism has contributed to their portrayal as symbols and metaphors of human animal characters in the story and to grant them human personality traits and behaviour. In the case of the bear, one of the first deanimalising actions is undoubtedly the connection between both species’ physical appearance. In fact, as it has previously been mentioned, the physical similarity between humans and bears constituted one of the first reasons to regard this nonhuman animal as an old ancestor and, therefore, to spread his depiction as a deity among a great number of cultures.

Moreover, deanimalising processes of humans have also been common in a great number of stories. Despite the fact that it used to be a means of scaring peoples in the past—their connection to their own animality was more of a proof of their inexistent uniqueness—, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it became a way to represent freedom, that is, returning to our own origins.

Even though there is no doubt about the deanimalising process that the bear goes through due to the similarities with humans described in traditional Native American tales, Faulkner also includes two aspects that contribute to this phenomenon. On the one hand, the act of naming the animal may be highlighted. For affective bonds between human and nonhuman animals are made reality by giving a name to the latter, individualising and humanising them in order to make for the former group to grow more empathy for other species. As Segarra asserts, it was Vicky Hearne who highlighted the importance of the name given to nonhuman animals, since it has always been traditionally believed that without a name and somebody that can call you by it, a moral life cannot be reached (2022, 127). This is related to the conception of nonhuman animals as non-evolved and lacking reason due to their not belonging to society, culture and civilisation—from their perspective, the only reasonable aim in life. This point of view is related to the idea presented by Leonard Lawlor that asserts that naming the nonhuman animal would only work if they use the name that identifies them when they interact with those of their own kind, since using a human name would entail imposing humanity (Segarra 2022, 127).

Although in the first edition of the story the bear was a minor character and, therefore, did not have a name, Faulkner saw it necessary to change this in the other two versions. This is because he also sees the fact of having a name as honourable and positive, since human animals are the ones who are first in the hierarchy. Throughout the story, the bear that they are trying to hunt is depicted as a sort of deity and they mention the fact of having his own name, Old Ben, as the definite proof that demonstrates his value: “the tremendous bear [...] had earned itself a name, a definite designation like a living man” (Faulkner 1942a, 2). Faulkner even decides to show the bear’s divine soul and status above some humans by not



granting a name to some men: “[...] men myriad and nameless even to one another in the land where the old bear had earned a name” (Faulkner 1942a, 3).

On the other hand, the topic of communication must be brought up. Lucie Desblache’s concept of the animal’s silence puts forward the possibility of respecting nonhuman animals’ silence; being the absence of an articulated language not regarded as lacking, but rather as a characteristic of another species different from our own (Segarra 2022, 128). This respect for their silence is clearly portrayed by Faulkner. As it has been mentioned previously, Faulkner’s short story mainly depicts Old Ben as an immortal soul whose wisdom makes it impossible to hunt, symbolising, in this way, humans’ hopelessness when it comes to attempting to control nature. Hence, Old Ben’s lack of speech comes as more proof of his divine nature, for it increases his mysterious image.

This animalising process does not actually have to be noticeable in the physical realm, but rather as a psychological process in order to blend with nature itself. Taking this into account, although Faulkner does not actually portray an animalising process of the human, it is true that hunting may be also understood as such; that is, of returning to these natural roots long lost, recovering therefore this animal spirit that humans have traditionally refused to embrace. As Segarra points out, the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset defended the idea of hunting as a manifestation of species’ hierarchy (2022, 84). Moreover, the philosopher highlights the need to give the inferior creatures—nonhuman animals—the possibility to run away so that this activity does not become a killing (Segarra 2022, 84). Thus, from this perspective, hunting constitutes a process through which humans return to their animal condition and, later, they should leave their prey free in order to demonstrate this human supremacy.

This process is precisely the one that Faulkner narrates in the second version of the story—despite the great efforts of Ike to hunt Old Ben during all those years, in the end he decides not to kill him. In other words, he embraces this animality to later make his superiority clear. Nonetheless, in the third version of the story, Ike ends up killing Old Ben. In this version, he embraces this animality too much. This is related to the understanding of hunting as the ritual for the youth to demonstrate their manly worth whilst blending with their true nature (Segarra 2022, 83); that is to say, for Ike, killing Old Ben means leaving childhood behind and becoming a respectable adult.

## CONCLUSIONS

The main objective of this article has been to analyse how the portrayal of the bear in the American West has evolved from embodying the divine to constituting a symbol of humans’ lost natural roots. In spite of the fact that the literary work analysed has proved to be a great example of this political representation, it is also important to keep in mind that this evolution does not automatically erase the previous depictions of the bear, but rather we find some echoes of them as well in contemporary works.



In traditional Native American beliefs, the bear has undoubtedly constituted a figure of great importance—the grandfather of humankind, an old relative, the knowledgeable figure that can pass on the wisdom related to medicine. It has also been stated that in the majority of cases this worship came as a direct consequence of the similarities in behaviour and physical traits between bears and humans, as well as this nonhuman animals' strength and hunting expertise. Nonetheless, with Western colonialism, these Native American beliefs were not considered to be valuable. The figure of the bear in North America became hence an enemy of the colonial endeavour; on the one hand, due to the threat that a being with such characteristics may constitute in the attempt to control the land; and, on the other, owing to the colonialists' enterprise of suppressing means of pagan worship.

In the case of William Faulkner's "The Bear," we are introduced to this new portrayal of the bear as a political symbol. In the first one published in 1935, the bear does not have much importance, whereas in the next two versions published in 1942, the nonhuman animal becomes a significant character. Nonetheless, in all three versions, the bear is linked to a divine nature due to the impossibility to kill him. This way, in attempting to hunt him, the men are contending with wilderness itself—the bear becomes a symbol of their natural roots that they are also trying to control.

Despite the bear being portrayed as an immortal soul, the three versions of the story contain a different ending for the characters. In the first and third versions of the story, the nonhuman animal is ultimately killed by one of the characters. In both cases, the man seems to suffer from a mental affliction afterwards, which may be understood as the consequence of his sin; that is, "a punishment by the bear-like-god for not following the rules of bear sacrifice" (Brunauer 1974, 27). In other words, since the sacred ceremony of sacrifice was dishonoured—as traditional Native American beliefs state—and, with it, the bear-god, the nonhuman animal did not give his consent to be killed, which was a mandatory aspect during the sacrifice ceremony. In the second version, however, the boy Ike develops his hunting skills in order to achieve his objective of killing Old Ben (Faulkner 1942a, 1-3). Nonetheless, despite being given the opportunity to fulfil his ambition not only once, but twice, he makes the decision of letting him live. One of the reasons that critics have provided as explanation for this decision is that the boy realises that hunting a sacred animal as Old Ben may become a sort of rape, a violation of the wilderness and a divine entity (Lydenberg 1952, 63).

In conclusion, the American West seems to require the bear again, the old king of the wilderness, to remind them of that which was attempted to destroy once. Thus, the bear has returned to remind us of the possibility of respecting Native American beliefs as well as the importance of nature conservation in order to respect our own origins.

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