

Typology and Subjectivity in Faulkner and *Beowulf*

Roughly 1000 years separate Faulkner from *Beowulf*. Within the discipline of English literature, little is further removed chronologically from Faulkner than *Beowulf*; and yet, as Michael Lapidge has observed, “many aspects of the *Beowulfian* narrative have closer analogues in the modern novel than in ancient epic.”¹ There is a particularly strong analogy of both form and content between *Beowulf* and those novels by Faulkner most deeply engaged with the Old Testament: *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) and *Go Down, Moses* (1941). Reading *Beowulf* and these novels together helps us identify and acknowledge the limitations of our ability to reimagine the original reception of *Beowulf*, which is pedagogically useful and critically suggestive. It also elucidates some of the implications of each writer’s integration of well-established traditions of typological signification into radically complex narrative structures.

Lapidge compares *Beowulf*’s technique of relating incomplete versions of an event through multiple perspectives to Faulkner’s method of narration in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and *As I Lay Dying* (1930).² As Britt Mize has demonstrated, shifting subjectivity is normal, perhaps even required, in Old English poetry; narratives are focalized through multiple characters, and even through animals and inanimate objects.³ However, in the sophistication of its combination of shifting subjectivity with shifting temporal positioning, *Beowulf* stands apart from other Old English texts, verse or prose. In the interlaced narrative of *Beowulf*, as in Faulkner’s novels, the strict logic of chronology is subordinated to the creation of meaning by juxtaposition. Lapidge finds no satisfactory classical or early medieval model for *Beowulf*’s narrative structure, and concludes that *Beowulf* is

experimental in its treatment of narrative and perspective in the same sense that Faulkner's novels are.

Absalom, Absalom! and *Go Down, Moses* have even more in common with *Beowulf*. They employ shifting subjectivities more fluidly than the earlier novels Lapidge cites, and their scope is more similar to that of *Beowulf*. All three take place largely within the lifetime of one long-lived man (Beowulf, Henry Sutpen, and Isaac McCaslin) but are concerned with sagas of inheritance and displacement that extend beyond his lifetime. All three texts embed their narratives within recent history while also developing connections with the Old Testament, especially Genesis and the books of Samuel.

Beowulf was written by a Christian in Anglo-Saxon England, but takes place in a pagan society in fifth- to sixth-century Scandinavia. *Beowulf*, like *Absalom, Absalom* and *Go Down, Moses*, depicts a past that has been rendered remote—but not altogether broken with—by significant social changes. Faulkner looks back across Reconstruction and Emancipation to portray slave-holders in the antebellum South. The *Beowulf* poet looks back across the Anglo-Saxons' Christianization, and further back across their migration from the regions in and around present-day Denmark. These Scandinavian pagans of the Migration Period are the *Beowulf* poet's cultural (if not literal) ancestors, just as the slaveholders Faulkner depicts are his.

The period during which Faulkner was writing was one of rapid social change, and some of his innovations can be understood in that context. John Niles and Leonard Neidorf have each argued that *Beowulf* too is the product of a period of social change—but Niles believes that the poem was written after the year 924, while Neidorf argues that it was written between 685 and 725.⁴ Looking back from the twenty-first century foreshortens

the distance and difference between the seventh century and the tenth, but they are not the same cultural context. The *terminus post quem* for the composition of *Beowulf* places it at a time when England was still actively undergoing the process of Christianization, but the *terminus ante quem* places it at a time when England had, apart from temporary disruption in parts of the Danelaw, been actively Christian for centuries. There is as much distance between the earliest and latest proposed dates as there is between Faulkner and the Mayflower. What *Beowulf* and Faulkner do definitively have in common in their cultural contexts is a migration myth (discussed further below). The Anglo-Saxons contextualized the cultural memory of their migration to England in terms of the Old Testament narrative of Exodus, understood typologically. From its inception, American literature did this as well.

Both the *Beowulf* poet and Faulkner rely heavily on intertextuality in constructing their ideal reader. Because many of Faulkner's characters appear in more than one of his works, a thorough depiction of a character in one novel can be brought to bear on a brief reference to that character in another novel. The *Beowulf* poet similarly depicts a world that does not end at the edges of the parchment. Andy Orchard counts over seventy named characters in *Beowulf*, of which roughly half occur only once.⁵ Many of these briefly-mentioned characters also appear in historical writing or the Icelandic sagas, so we can partially reconstruct *Beowulf*'s lost intertexts through these later sources, and occasionally through contemporary ones such as the poems *Deor*, *Widsith*, and *Waldere*.⁶

In the previous chapter in this volume, James Harding discusses an anachronism in *Absalom, Absalom!*: Thomas Sutpen is said to procure slaves from Haiti at a date long after the slave revolt that resulted in Haiti's transformation into an independent republic. He

argues that this anachronism is meaningful because it is deliberate—Haiti loomed too large in the cultural consciousness of the American South for this to be a mistake. The *Beowulf* poet may be doing something similar in the depiction of the dragon slayer, Sigemund (ll. 867a–897). Every source for this story apart from *Beowulf* attributes the killing of the dragon to Sigemund’s son Sigurðr. It is possible that *Beowulf* is the sole surviving evidence of a different tradition, but several critics have pointed out ways in which the shift from Sigurðr to Sigemund introduces and flags up motifs that recur throughout the poem (e.g., uncle-nephew relationships, since Sigemund travels with his “nephew” Fitela). They have also pointed out that Sigemund is a more morally dubious character than Sigurðr (Fitela is Sigemund’s son by his own sister, Signý), and so the comparison begins to look less like a compliment than a caution.⁷

Both Faulkner and the *Beowulf* poet place fictional, semi-mythical central characters among real places, people, and events with which they expect their readers to be familiar. Within a contemporary American cultural context, no research is required to establish the reality of Harvard University, William Tecumseh Sherman, or the 1940 census.⁸ Similarly, while Beowulf himself may be the poet’s invention—no certain reference to him exists in any other surviving texts of the period—he is set down in the middle of history.⁹ (I use “history” here to refer to events that medieval historians depict as having genuinely occurred rather than what modern historians consider factual, though there is substantial overlap between the two categories.) The poem alludes to figures of a deep past before the narrative present, such as Eormenric (l. 1201a), a fourth-century king of the Goths (whose existence is confirmed for modern historians by Roman sources, but who was probably known to the *Beowulf* poet through legends that later accrued to his name), as well as to

events that take place during Beowulf's lifetime, such as Hygelac's raid on the Franks (which Gregory of Tours' *Histori Francorum* dates to the year 520).¹⁰

Historical references in *Beowulf* have had to be explicated by careful research in part because stories that would have been familiar to early audiences of *Beowulf* are no longer remembered, but also because of the deliberately oblique way in which the *Beowulf* poet incorporates historical references into the narrative. Paul Dean aptly describes their effect: "As events and identities accumulate, come and go, and merge into a dizzying kaleidoscope, the poet rams home the lesson that history is both an enigma and a burden."¹¹ *Beowulf* is not a chronicle of the feud between the Swedes and Geats any more than *Absalom, Absalom!* or *Go Down, Moses* is a chronicle of the Civil War. Rather, both poem and novels deal with intersections of the intimate and the political, the historically specific and the archetypally universal.

This is exemplified by an episode in *Beowulf* that has an illuminating analogue in the penultimate chapter of *Absalom, Absalom!*. Just when it seems that Beowulf is about to confront the dragon and meet his end (the outcome is foreshadowed long before the fight begins), the action is put on hold while Beowulf tells a lengthy story about a fratricide that has analogies in Norse mythology (ll. 2426–2515).¹² Beowulf's grandfather Hrethel had three sons—Herebeald, Hæðcyn, and Hygelac. Herebeald, the eldest, should have been Hrethel's heir, but he was accidentally killed by Hæðcyn while they practiced archery. Hrethel subsequently died of grief and Hæðcyn died in battle, so Hygelac became king. Beowulf's account of this family tragedy is preceded by the narrator's account of two generations of conflict between the Geats and their neighbors in which fifteen distinct proper nouns appear in just forty-two lines (ll. 2354b–2396).

This has much in common with the climax of *Absalom, Absalom!*, in which Henry Sutpen encounters his father, Thomas Sutpen, in an army camp and learns from him that his half-brother Charles Bon (who intends to marry Henry's sister Judith) has black ancestry.¹³ This is where we finally see why and how Henry comes to the decision that he will kill Bon. The scene is played out in retrospect, and we perceive Henry's emotions and actions only through Quentin and Shreve's inferences, just as we hear the grief of King Hrethel expressed through Beowulf's mouth. Like the Herebeald episode in *Beowulf*, this scene is contextualized by references to real people and places—Sherman, Lee, Old Joe, Richmond, and Shiloh. Faulkner offers enough information that a reader with knowledge of the Civil War can place the confrontation between Henry and Bon in General Joseph E. Johnston's encampment near Smithfield, NC in March of 1865—a specific enough setting that it is tempting to cross-reference the novel with meteorological records to pin down the exact dawn when their conversation must have taken place. But these references do more than convey an impression of historical veracity—for readers who share something of Faulkner's cultural framework, these names also have affective connotations. The Civil War is no longer within living memory as it was in Faulkner's lifetime. Nevertheless, many Americans of my generation do have formative experiences relating to it: hearing the Gettysburg Address read each Memorial Day, learning "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" at school, encountering haunting language and images of the war through the Ken Burns documentary, visiting battlefields on family holidays, seeing and hearing myriad allusions to the Civil War in films and music. These have their cumulative effect. Names like Chamberlain, Jackson, Bull Run, and Missionary Ridge have a visceral emotive resonance even where their exact significance isn't remembered, and they evoke associated rhetoric of

“brother against brother” and “a house divided.”¹⁴ The invocation of Lee, Sherman, and Richmond just before Henry turns on his brother establishes thematic and affective links between the specific family trauma of *Absalom, Absalom!* and the wider national trauma of the Civil War that require no conscious analysis.

A reader of Faulkner for whom the names Sherman and Old Joe were ciphers, who didn't know that the scene takes place within days of Davis' flight from Richmond and Lee's surrender at Appomattox, who had no emotional investment in that surrender, would not only miss something of the wider atmosphere of desperation and reckoning in which the Sutpen family drama comes to a head but would not know that they had missed it. This, unfortunately, is what happens when we read *Beowulf* today—reading *Beowulf* with no prior knowledge of fifth-century Scandinavian dynasties is like reading Faulkner with no prior knowledge of the Civil War. Historical research can fill gaps in our understanding of the facts of, say, the Battle of Finnsburg, but precisely what affective connotations the name of Finn might have had for an Anglo-Saxon at the time *Beowulf* was written (whenever that may have been) can never be definitively reconstructed. However, conscious consideration of the effect of the familiar historical references in *Absalom, Absalom!* can help us imagine what we might be missing, in terms of literary effect, when we encounter unfamiliar historical references in *Beowulf*.

Informed imagination is an inevitable part of engaging with medieval texts. One of the most challenging things about teaching undergraduate students to deal with questions about authorial intent and contemporary reception of Anglo-Saxon literature is helping them unlearn anachronistic assumptions about Christianity and paganism. The poet explicitly condemns paganism (see ll. 183b–185), yet *Beowulf* is the longest, most

empathetic depiction of the tragic heroism of pagan characters in the Old English corpus. Critics in the twentieth century struggled to reconcile these facts—some claimed that *Beowulf* is a pagan poem and passages expressing Christian beliefs are later interpolations, while others claimed that *Beowulf* is actually an allegory for Christ.¹⁵ The current critical consensus is more nuanced, but these simple “solutions” still appeal to undergraduates who are in the earlier phases of intellectual development.¹⁶ This, along with the anachronistic assumptions about religion that students new to the study of the Early Medieval period inevitably bring with them, can make it difficult for them to understand how it is possible that the *Beowulf* poet can simultaneously romanticize and condemn the pagan past. By contrast, it is relatively easy for anyone passingly familiar with recent controversies about the Confederate flag and the legacy of American slavery to recognize Faulkner’s deep ambivalences about the era he depicts. The analogy between Faulkner and *Beowulf* can help the non-medievalist to understand the complexities of the latter.

Anglophone popular culture consistently misrepresents the most repressive and violent aspects of Early Modern culture—such as witch-burning and inquisitions—as “medieval.” In the history that is taught in British and American school systems, religion tends to receive the most attention when it is most closely linked to violence and oppression, as in the bloody conflicts between Catholics and Protestants and the rise of Puritanism. As a consequence, undergraduates with these cultural backgrounds tend to assume that medieval Christianity is puritanical and inquisitorial. When confronted with an Old English text that expresses a less-than-acetic appreciation of treasure or feasting, some students are able to quickly adjust their expectations, but others assert that the text must be “heretical”, “blasphemous” or “pagan”—even if the text in question is an explicitly

Christian and densely theological one like *The Dream of the Rood*. Students who cannot imagine a medieval Christian who is not either an aggressive ascetic or being repressed by one express confusion about how the *Beowulf* poet can write about pagan characters in apparently positive terms—or else conclude that the *Beowulf* poet is “secretly pagan.” This is unlikely—the idea of going through the motions of Christianity but silently adhering to paganism in one’s heart of hearts is predicated on an anachronistic view of religion. One of the legacies of Early Modern religious conflict that underlies modern secular multiculturalism is the concept of religion as a matter of individual conscience; in this context, religion is interior, subjective, and orthodox. Germanic paganism was likely almost entirely orthopraxic—based on common actions, not common beliefs.¹⁷ Anglo-Saxon Christianity was more orthodox than what it replaced, but Old English poets still tend to express characters’ religious identities in terms of actions (e.g., “he followed the Lord’s teaching”) rather than states of being (e.g., “he was a Christian”).

These issues of cultural distance form a large part of what prevents students from accepting that the *Beowulf* poet may be doing something more subtle than either entirely condemning or entirely identifying with the pagan past. The same students would be less likely to confine themselves to thinking about Faulkner in such simplistic terms because of the familiarity of the culture he comes from and the availability of biographical information, but also because of the post-Enlightenment prejudice that expects complexity of the “modern” and simplicity of the old. One can recognize that Faulkner’s ideas about race and gender are not free of prejudice without concluding that he is secretly on the side of the slave owners. Asking students to consider why Faulkner finds it necessary and worthwhile to write so extensively about an era he is deeply critical of, how the cultural legacies of that

era nevertheless shape his thinking (e.g., in his assumptions about race and gender), and what he is suggesting by drawing parallels with the patriarchs of the Old Testament could prepare them to apply exactly the same questions to *Beowulf* and so arrive at a more nuanced understanding of what the poet has achieved.

From this point, comparisons of *Beowulf* and Faulkner can be taken further, with an examination of their themes and narrative strategies. In both *Beowulf* and *Go Down, Moses*, foster-brothers turn on each other, women are used as bargaining chips to reinforce or repair relationships between men, and shadowy patriarchs loom in the background “back in the old time when men black and white were men.”¹⁸ *Beowulf* begins not with Beowulf but with Scyld Scefing, the founder of the Danish dynasty, who turns up alone in a boat as a child. This is presented as legend and hearsay, communal memory of kings *in geardagum* (in days of old, l. 1b). Similarly, Faulkner only offers glimpses of Old Carothers that are mediated by the impressions of descendants with no living memory of him and little interest in his origins before he arrived in Yoknapatawpha County. He is curiously unmoored from his own paternity—a fatherless patriarch, like Scyld Scefing.

Absalom, Absalom!, *Go Down, Moses*, and *Beowulf* explore disruptions of primogeniture. Thomas Sutpen intends for his favored son, Henry, to continue his dynasty, rather than his oldest son, Charles Bon. Isaac McCaslin and Lucas Beauchamp are two generations removed from Old Carothers by male lines, but Cass Edmonds, who is three generations removed by a female line, becomes established as the patriarch and landowner. Hygelac and Hrothgar are kings because of the tragic early deaths of their brothers.

Key objects in each text, such as the necklace of the Brosingas, and the locket Bon is carrying at his death, embody anxieties about inheritance and displacement.¹⁹ Concealed

treasures and empty vessels become locations for exploring inheritance gone awry. The silver cup full of gold coins which is concealed (and supposedly sealed) in “inscrutable burlap” throughout Isaac’s childhood, which represents his hope of an inheritance less morally tainted than the one he stands to receive from his father’s side, is replaced by a coffee tin stuffed with I.O.U.s.²⁰ After Lucas discovers a broken vessel and single gold coin inside a burial mound, he nearly ruins his own and his daughter’s marriages in a fruitless search for treasure he believes to have been buried by Uncle Buck and Uncle Buddy—his possession of it would represent a partial righting of the wrong of the line of inheritance passing to Cass Edmonds instead of to himself. In *Beowulf*, a slave who hopes to buy his lord’s mercy removes a golden cup from a burial mound; this awakens the dragon guarding the treasure. (It is difficult to determine whether this scene originally conveyed any judgment on the institution of slavery because the manuscript is so badly damaged at this point.) Beowulf defeats the dragon and gains its treasure, but at the cost of his life and the security of the Geats, who now expect to be killed or enslaved by neighboring tribes.

In these burial mounds, the theme of the displacement or premature death of brothers has a macrocosmic echo. The “Indian” mound in which Lucas intends to hide his still in “The Fire and the Hearth” was left by a people who, Faulkner says later, “had owned the land long before the white men ever saw it and who had vanished from it now with all their kind.”²¹ Likewise, the dragon’s mound in *Beowulf* is an artefact of a people who have been wiped out by war. *Ealle hie deað fornam* (death took them all, l. 2236b), and the solitary last survivor consigned their possessions to the earth while awaiting the same fate.²²

If *Go Down, Moses* can be said to have a central character, it is Isaac McCaslin, or “Uncle Ike”. The narrative present of *Go Down, Moses* is more or less Isaac’s lifetime, but the story told through reminiscence and inference begins long before Isaac’s birth, with the birth of Old Carothers almost a century before. Isaac scarcely features in the first of the seven discrete stories that make up the novel (he is mentioned in the prologue, but the action takes place before he is born) and does not appear in the last. *Beowulf* similarly begins and ends without Beowulf: we do not learn his name until 343 lines into the poem and he dies 337 lines before the end. The main action takes place in Beowulf’s youth and old age, but a substantial portion of the narrative deals with previous generations and events in the deeper legendary past—and also events (like the burning of Heorot) that have not happened yet, but will.

The fates of the descendants of Old Carothers are shown to the reader largely through Isaac’s perception of them, but he is frequently only an observer in these human dramas. He is an actor primarily when he is hunting. Beowulf is similarly defined in terms of his encounters with monsters in wild places. Hundreds of lines are spent on Beowulf’s confrontations with monsters. By contrast, the human battles and betrayals that result in Beowulf becoming king are alluded to only obliquely; the 50 years of Beowulf’s reign between Heardred’s death and the coming of the dragon are passed over in what Lapidge refers to as “one of the most stunning ellipses in the whole of English literature.”²³

The defining drama in Isaac’s youth is his hunting of the bear Old Ben. Old Ben is a giant of a bear, “an anachronism indomitable and invincible out of an old dead time,” who is impervious to “shotgun and even rifle shots delivered at point-blank range yet with no more effect than so many peas blown through a tube by a child.”²⁴ The defining drama of

Beowulf's youth is his killing of Grendel, a long-clawed humanoid monster descended from Cain—a literal Old Testament giant—who is impervious to weapons. Grendel's severed arm and Old Ben's crippled paw become important signifiers.

Isaac and Beowulf become differentiated from their respective societies by their proximity to these ancient and monstrous adversaries. On the surface, their encounters with Old Ben and Grendel mean they are able to engage in battles of less ambiguous morality than the inter-personal and inter-ethnic conflicts going on around them. However, although these episodes are not explicitly about ethnic identity or miscegenation, the unsettling affinity between the monstrous and the men who encounter it becomes a site for the exploration of themes of inheritance and the integrity of the self.

Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe has shown how Beowulf gains monstrous attributes and Grendel human ones as they approach one another.²⁵ A similar permeability is explored in *Go Down, Moses*. Although Faulkner at first suggests that race does not matter in the struggle with nature—the wilderness is a place where talk “was of the men, not white nor black nor red but men”—he makes much of the mixed Chickasaw heritage of Sam Fathers and Boon, the two men with the greatest affinity to the half-wild dog Lion, who brings down Old Ben.²⁶ They embody the permeability of boundaries, not only between races but between the human and the wild.

Approaching Old Ben, like defeating Grendel, requires a slippage of human identity. Isaac can only see Old Ben by abandoning his gun, compass and watch, and Boon can only kill him by trading his gun for a knife. Grendel, similarly, is only defeated because Beowulf meets him on his own terms, without weapons. (The resemblance between this fight and the one between Lion and Old Ben increases if we accept Carl Berkhout's philological

argument that the word *renweardas* (hall guardians, l. 770a), which is applied ironically to Beowulf and Grendel, actually means 'watchdogs' and invokes the metaphor of a dogfight.)²⁷ While men become more like the bear in following him, the bear also becomes man-like through his encounters with humans. By his frequent invasions of human spaces, he "had earned a name such as a human man could have worn and not been sorry." In his final moments he "took two or three steps toward the woods on its hind feet as a man would have walked."²⁸

In his solitude, Old Ben seems "its own ungendered progenitor."²⁹ Grendel, though he has a mother, seems not to have a father (l. 1355b). They seem to be cut off from inheritance, yet their enmity with humans is inherited: Grendel is the kin of Cain, descended from the biblical giants, and Old Ben is "compelled by and within the wilderness in the ancient and unremitting contest according to the ancient and immitigable rules."³⁰

Monstrous creatures and the men who come closest to them are set apart from normal patterns of procreation only to be re-entangled in issues of inheritance. The only father in either text to kill a monster is Sigemund, and there the poet conspicuously fails to attribute this deed to his son Sigurðr, and knowingly gestures towards the incestuous origin of his son Fitela. For the other men who come face-to-face with the monstrous, inheritance becomes established by death rather than birth. Beowulf fathers no children, but his young kinsman Wiglaf acquires authority by his presence at Beowulf's death. Boon and Sam Fathers are both of a bloodline that is "now drawing toward the end of its alien and irrevocable course, barren, since Sam Fathers had no children."³¹ Lion is mortally wounded in bringing down Old Ben. The coincidence of Sam's collapse and death with those of the bear and dog has a strong resemblance with Beowulf's final fight, where he and the dragon

deal one another mortal blows—though Sam did not strike a blow to Old Ben or Lion, he engineered both their ends by bringing Lion to a state of sufficient obedience to set him against Old Ben. Like Wiglaf in relation to Beowulf, Isaac becomes a sort of heir to Sam Fathers by his presence at his death—as his cousin Cass says to him, “and who inherited it from Sam Fathers, if not you? co-heir perhaps with Boon, if not of his life maybe, at least of his quitting it?”³²

Isaac is introduced in the very first sentence of *Go Down, Moses* as “uncle to half a county and father to no one.”³³ Beowulf’s most important relationships are also avuncular in more than one sense of the term. Beowulf was raised as a foster-son in the court of his grandfather Hrethel and his mother’s three brothers, Herebeald, Hæðcynn, and Hygelac. When we first meet Beowulf he is identified only as *Higelaces þegn* (Hygelac’s thane, l. 194b), and at Heorot he defines himself more frequently in terms of his uncle than his father. When Hrothgar offers to adopt Beowulf as a son in gratitude for his defeat of Grendel, Hrothgar’s wife Wealtheow steps in and asks Beowulf to act as a role model to Hrothgar’s young nephew and sons, attempting to cast him as an uncle who will act kindly towards her children rather than a rival heir who might compete with them. When Hygelac dies Beowulf is offered the throne but refuses it and supports his young cousin Heardred’s claim: he behaves towards him as an uncle might. Beowulf becomes lord of the Geats only after Heardred’s death (the result of a conflict between an uncle, Onela, and his brother’s sons). When Beowulf dies, it is Wiglaf—Beowulf’s sister’s son, Rolf Bremmer argues—who is at his side.³⁴ The relationship between mother’s brother and sister’s son was of particular importance in early Germanic societies; the mother’s brother was expected to act as a mentor to his nephew.³⁵ Bremmer has argued that in *Beowulf* “the bond between MoBr

[mother's brother] and SiSo [sister's son] functions [...] as a mirror to the bond between father's brother (=FaBr) and brother's son (=BrSo). The one is always positive, the other is troubled."³⁶

Go Down, Moses is primarily about brothers, but reading it alongside *Beowulf* calls attention to a prominent secondary thread of uncle-nephew relationships, especially those on the maternal side. The patriarchs who preceded Old Carothers (and Sutpen) in the region are Ikkemotubbe and his sister's son Issetibbeha. The people who join Samuel Beauchamp's maternal grandmother in mourning him in the final story are her siblings (by birth, upbringing, or marriage), including her brother. The transformation of the cup of coins put away as Isaac's inheritance by Hubert Beauchamp, his mother's brother, into a tin of I.O.U.s contributes to Isaac's growing pessimism regarding the social and economic structures of plantation life. Isaac's relationship to Uncle Buddy (his father's brother) receives less attention than his relationship to Hubert Beauchamp (his mother's brother). Cass, whose grandmother "was Uncle Buck's and Uncle Buddy's sister," has a much closer relationship to Uncle Buddy than Isaac does, and it is through Cass's eyes that we are introduced to him.³⁷ These relationships between nephews and maternal uncles cannot be described as "always positive" but they certainly are less antagonistic than Lucas' relationships with the descendants of Zack Edmonds, to whom he is in effect a paternal uncle.

This touching point might suggest new directions for criticism. The well-established critical tradition relating to uncle-nephew relationships in *Beowulf* prompts a closer look at uncle-nephew relationships in *Go Down, Moses*; finding similar patterns there might prompt us to reconsider received wisdom about the function of the motif within *Beowulf*. Where

evidence of the avunculate—a special role for a mother’s brother in relation to her sons—is observed in the practices (or fossilized in the language) of early European societies, the assumption is generally that it is a remnant of an earlier matrilineal organization of society. That explanation does not apply (except at great remove) to the society Faulkner depicts, nor does it entirely account for the consistency of the contrast between positive maternal and negative paternal uncle-nephew relationships in *Beowulf*. Rather it appears—in both texts—to be part of an understated but consistent subtext that contrasts the vanity and destructiveness of male ambition with the (temporarily successful but ultimately thwarted) efforts of mothers like Wealtheow and Aunt Mollie to cultivate peace.

The metaphor of descent by the distaff which Faulkner uses on the very first page of *Go Down, Moses* (and once again on p. 44) is striking because it is both uncommon and out of place—outside this novel it is almost exclusively employed with reference to European royalty and gentry. Within the context of a comparison with *Beowulf*, it brings to mind the concept of peace-weavers: noble women given in marriage to a member of a rival group in an attempt to repair relations (usually with tragic consequences). The metonym of cloth-making to refer to women has an implicit counterpart: a metonym of war to refer to men. (King Alfred’s will uses the metaphors of the “spindle-side” and the “spear-side” to talk about descent through male and female lines; the OED uses the same metaphors in defining “distaff.”³⁸) Since this figure of speech casts women as productive and men as destructive, it not only sets up an analogy between the land-owners of the Old South and the aristocrats of the Old World, it also encapsulates the book’s gender-roles—men hunt, threaten, and kill one another while women weave relationships together.

This is epitomized by the scene in *Beowulf* in which the marriage of Freawaru to Ingeld, intended to heal the enmity between the Heothobards and the Scyldings, turns tragic. An old Heothobard warrior goads a young one into attacking one of the Scyldings, saying:

Meaht ðu, min wine, mece gecnawan,
þone þin fæder to gefeohte bær
under heregriman hindeman siðe,
dyre iren, þær hyne Dene slogon?
[...]
Nu her þara banena byre nathwylces
frætwwum hremig on flet gæð,
morðres gylpe(ð), ond þone maðþum byreð,
þone þe ðu mid rihte rædan sceoldest.

[Can you, my friend, recognize the sword, the dear iron, that your father bore to the fight under battle-mask for the last time, where the Danes slew him? [...] Now here the son of one of the killers, I know not which, walks on the floor exulting with ornaments, boasts of murder, and bears that treasure which you by rights ought to have possession of. *Beowulf*, ll. 2047–2056.]

The feud is renewed. Sons suffer for the sins of their fathers, and violence is reenacted from generation to generation.

While both novelist and poet are depicting something like what they believe the reality of previous generations' lives to have been, it would be naïve to say that resemblances between Faulkner and *Beowulf* are predicated on an essential similarity between the American South in the nineteenth century and the North Sea Culture Zone in the Migration Period. The more immediate source of their similarities is the relationship each text has to the Old Testament.

Faulkner's Old Testament allusions are hard to miss: they are in the character's names, the dialogue, and the books' titles. These signals alert readers to expect resemblances between episodes in Faulkner's novels and episodes in Old Testament. *Go*

Down, Moses alludes to the figures of Ham, Isaac, Esau, Joseph, and Benjamin, and explores Genesis' theme of the rejected brother, as Eleanor Cook has previously discussed.³⁹

Beowulf's use of the Old Testament is less obvious. There are a small number of explicit references to figures such as Cain, but much of *Beowulf's* engagement with the Old Testament is subtle enough that critics once believed *Beowulf* to be a thoroughly pagan poem corrupted by Christian references inserted by later scribes.⁴⁰ The poet's engagement with biblical tradition is no longer in any doubt, however; Orchard has established firm parallels between *Beowulf* and King David (and also Nicanor of II Maccabees).⁴¹ Resemblances between the family stories in Faulkner and those in *Beowulf* might suggest places to look for further analogies between *Beowulf* and Genesis that have not yet been explored.

In depicting the Danes as monotheists whose poets perpetuate a folk-memory of the biblical account of creation (ll. 89b–98) but who turn to idol-worship in times of trouble (ll. 175–189), the *Beowulf* poet recasts the Anglo-Saxons' pagan ancestors as Old Testament Israelites, who knew about God and creation through the accounts of wise men such as Moses, but who turned to a golden calf in a time of crisis. *Beowulf's* equation of the Anglo-Saxons' ancestors with the Israelites corresponds with the Anglo-Saxons' self-conception as depicted in other texts of the period. They regarded their migration to England as analogous to the Exodus of the Israelites.⁴² Just as the migration to the Promised Land was followed (not immediately, but inevitably) by the fulfillment of the Law of Moses in the Law of Christ, so the migration of the Anglo-Saxons to England was followed (not immediately, but inevitably) by their conversion to Christianity. This analogy allowed for an amelioration of the Anglo-Saxons' ancestors—they were tragically ignorant of Christ, but

not of God. They were not irredeemable heathens, but a chosen people waiting for the Gospel to be revealed to them.

This has an obvious and strong parallel in the way writers from the Puritans onward expressed the American migration narrative; as Werner Sollors writes: “it is hardly an exaggeration to say that the exodus is one of America’s central themes.”⁴³ The dominant mode of reading the Old Testament in both Anglo-Saxon and early American culture was the typological. Typology can be thought of as a subset of the *sensus allegoricus*, but many readers, medieval and modern, use the terms interchangeably.⁴⁴ Cook argues that in order to fully understand the implications of Faulkner’s Old Testament allusions in *Go Down, Moses*, it is necessary to use a stricter definition of typology, in which Old Testament types predict New Testament anti-types. In the narrative of salvation history, it is only in the New Dispensation that Old Testament types are realized as the anti-types they gestured towards. The covenant between God and Abraham is fulfilled in the covenant between Christ and mankind. Cook argues that Isaac’s self-identification with Christ “introduces a radical and disquieting question. What happens to rejected brothers in specific figural typology under the new dispensation of the Nazarene?”⁴⁵ Her answer is that “Faulkner’s narrative seems to me to suggest a deep skepticism towards this orthodox typology, insofar as orthodox typology disregards rejected brothers.”⁴⁶ The *Beowulf* poet looks back across the great social upheavals of migration and conversion, from a privileged vantage point within the New Dispensation of Christendom. Faulkner looks around at the “laborers [...] still held in thrall ’65 or no” and concludes that if this is a New Dispensation, it looks all too like the Old.⁴⁷

Beowulf's use of typology also has a darker and more nuanced side that distinguishes it from its contemporary literature. In medieval hagiography, when a saint's actions resemble those of an Old Testament figure who is a type of Christ, what is ultimately conveyed by this post-figuration is that the saint is like Christ. In *Beowulf*, this mode of signification breaks down. If Beowulf resembles David and David resembles Christ, we expect Beowulf to resemble Christ. There are superficial likenesses, such as Beowulf's being one of a party of thirteen when he goes to meet the dragon, but comparing the results of Beowulf's self-sacrifice (treasure that cannot be used and a vacuum of power that will result in the death and diaspora of the Geats) to the results of Christ's self-sacrifice only makes Beowulf's sacrifice look pointless and tragic.⁴⁸ In her analysis of Faulkner's use of typology, Cook quotes A. C. Charity: "Biblical typology [...] is an analogy between actions. If we speak of men or even of things as 'types', we do so legitimately only in so far as we think of them as acting or as involved in actions."⁴⁹ This is as relevant to *Beowulf* as it is to Faulkner. Beowulf is like David in that both defeat giants, but David is like Christ in that both are shepherds persecuted by jealous authorities who become anointed kings. The failure of the dual premise "Beowulf equals David and David equals Christ" to support the conclusion "Beowulf equals Christ" serves to emphasize the gulf between those who *could* be saved *if* they knew of Christ's resurrection and those who are saved. In this way, *Beowulf's* gestures towards typology contribute to its sense of history—to the differentiation between us now, and those people then.

In *Beowulf*, *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Go Down, Moses*, events change in the telling as they are rehashed by different voices, or pieced together from fragmented, non-sequential allusions. In *Beowulf*, some events are related only before they happen, like the tragic

outcome of Freawaru's marriage, which is expressed only as Beowulf's prediction. Others become meaningful only in retrospect: the scop's recitation of the tale of Sigemund's dragon fight is distinctly unlike other attested versions of that narrative, but full of parallels to Beowulf's own encounter with a dragon nearly 2000 lines later.⁵⁰ What *Beowulf* and Faulkner's novels have in common, essentially, is an interest in the limitations of chronology—history is both too cyclical and too subjective to be linear.

This treatment of time becomes part of the characterization of each writer's subjects as being like the Israelites. In the analogies drawn between Beowulf and Sigemund, in the failure of the equation of Beowulf and Sutpen with David to result in their equation with Christ, the reiteration of Isaacs and Ishmaels in the generations descending from Old Carothers, in the way the treasure Beowulf gains from one mound is immediately buried with him in a new one meters away, and in the inescapability of old feuds (with men and with monsters), we see a failure of typology. The characters who come nearest to being Christ-figures fall short; Beowulf does his best *on þæm dæge þysses lifes* (on that day of this life, l. 790) but leaves no legacy. Isaac McCaslin emulates the Nazarene but largely fails to right injustice—he is not Christ but only, at best, the voice crying in the wilderness.

Within the Christian narrative of salvation history repeated events (like the martyrdom of saints) are evidence not of the cyclical nature of time but its linearity—these events enact in microcosm aspects of the meta-narrative of Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration. Both *Beowulf* and *Go Down, Moses* are set in societies that have not yet experienced Redemption—metaphorically in the case of the American South, literally in the case of the Geats and Scyldings who have not heard of Christ. Types generate types, but they are never resolved by anti-types. History repeats itself but is not redeemed or

fulfilled—at least not within the limits of the characters’ knowledge, which is bounded by their experience and cultural contexts. Both the *Beowulf* poet and Faulkner present us with a subjective perspective on typology. The forward progress of salvation history is visible only from a position within the New Dispensation; they show us how time and history are experienced in a context where that progress cannot be perceived.

The chronological and geographical distance between *Beowulf* and Faulkner is great, but the route between them via Exodus is short. Reading both together helps to elucidate some of the ways their complex narrative structures work to explore the role of subjectivity in the construction of personal and historical narratives. They are in conversation with the same biblical and exegetical tradition, which they apply to similar contemporary concerns about migration, colonization, and social change in a way that is both founded upon and radically unlike the conventional use of the typological tradition in their respective literary and cultural contexts.

¹ Michael Lapidge, “*Beowulf* and Perception,” *2000 Lectures and Memoirs: Proceedings of the British Academy* 111 (2000): 80.

² Lapidge, “*Beowulf* and Perception,” 75.

³ Britt Mize, *Traditional Subjectivities: the Old English Poetics of Mentality* (University of Toronto Press, 2013), especially pp. 16-17.

⁴ John Niles, "Beowulf as Ritualized Discourse," *Homo Narrans* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), pp. 120–145; Leonard Neidorf, "Germanic Legend, Scribal Errors, and Cultural Change," *The Dating of Beowulf: A Reassessment* ed. Leonard Neidorf. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2014, 37–57.

⁵ Andy Orchard, *A Critical Companion to Beowulf* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003), p. 169

⁶ See Orchard, *A Critical Companion*, p. 115.

⁷ On criticism of the Sigemund episode, see Orchard, *A Critical Companion*, pp. 105–110.

⁸ William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*, (New York: Vintage International, 1990), p. 141 (Harvard) and p. 278 (Sherman); *Go Down, Moses*, pp. 351–352 (Census). Quentin Compson attends Harvard. Sherman is mentioned in the scene in which Quentin and Shreve imagine Henry meeting his father in an army camp. The final story of *Go Down, Moses* (of the same title) begins with the census-taker's visit to the cell where Mollie Beauchamp's grandson Samuel is being held.

⁹ Though Daniel Anlezark has proposed a link between Beowulf and the "Wulf" of *Solomon and Saturn*. Daniel Anlezark, "All at Sea: Beowulf's Marvellous Swimming," *Myths, Legends, and Heroes: Essays on Old Norse and Old English Literature in Honour of John McKinnell*, ed. Daniel Anlezark, (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2011), pp. 225–241.

¹⁰ See Orchard, *A Critical Companion*, pp. 98–99 and 115, and also Roberta Frank, "The Beowulf Poet's Sense of History," *The Wisdom of Poetry: Essays in Early English Literature in Honor of Morton W. Bloomfield*, eds. Larry D. Benson and Siegfried Wenzel, (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1982), pp. 53–65.

¹¹ Paul Dean, "Beowulf and the Passing of Time: Part I," *English Studies* 75:3 (1994): 195.

¹² See Heather O'Donoghue "What has Baldr to do with Lamech? The Lethal Shot of a Blind Man in Old Norse Myth and Jewish Exegetical Traditions," *Medium Ævum* 72 (2003): 82–107.

¹³ Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*, pp. 276–287.

¹⁴ Erik J. Sundquist uses this phrase, "The House Divided," in the title of his book on Faulkner's oeuvre, and again in the title of the chapter on *Absalom, Absalom!*. Erik J. Sundquist, *Faulkner: The House Divided*, (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983).

¹⁵ Orchard, *A Critical Companion*, p. 131.

¹⁶ On students' preference for simple, received answers at the early stages of their intellectual development, see William G. Perry, *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years: A Scheme* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999).

¹⁷ See Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 191–192 and Gro Steinsland, *Norrøn Religion: Myter, Riter, Samfunn* (Oslo: Pax Forlag A/S, 2005), pp. 31–34.

¹⁸ Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses*, p. 37.

¹⁹ On the necklace of the Brosingas, see Orchard, *A Critical Companion*, pp. 114–116.

²⁰ Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses*, p. 290.

²¹ William Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses*, (New York: Vintage International, 1990), p. 159.

²² Quotations of *Beowulf* are from R.D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork, and John D. Niles, eds., *Klaeber's Beowulf* 4th edn. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008). Diacritics are omitted.

Translations are my own.

²³ Lapidge, "Beowulf and Perception," 74

²⁴ Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses*, p. 185.

²⁵ Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe, "Beowulf, Lines 702b-836: Transformations and the Limits of the Human," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 23:4 (1981): 484-493.

²⁶ Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses*, pp. 184, 159, 217.

²⁷ Carl T Berkhout, "Beowulf 770a: *reþe renweardas*," *Notes and Queries* 33:4 (1986), 433-434.

²⁸ Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses*, p. 221, 231.

²⁹ Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses*, p. 202.

³⁰ Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses*, p. 184. On Grendel's descent from Cain, see Andy Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf-Manuscript*, (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1995).

³¹ Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses*, p. 159.

³² Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses*, p. 286

³³ Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses*, p. 3.

³⁴ Rolf H. Bremmer, "The Importance of Kinship: Uncle and Nephew in Beowulf," *Amsterdamer Beilage zur ealteren Germanistik* 15 (1980): 36.

³⁵ On Indo-European peoples generally, see Jan Bremmer, "Avunculate and Fosterage," *Journal of Indo-European Studies* 14 (1976): 65-78. On the Anglo-Saxons in particular, see

Kathryn A. Lowe, "Never Say *Nefa* Again: Problems of Translation in Old English Charters," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 94:1 (1993): 27–35. On *Beowulf*, see Stephen O. Glosecki, "Beowulf and the Wills: Traces of Totemism?" *Philological Quarterly* 78 (1999): 14–47.

³⁶ Bremmer, "The Importance of Kinship," 36.

³⁷ Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses*, p. 7.

³⁸ *Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of King Alfred and other Contemporary Sources*, trans. Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge, p. 178; "distaff, n." OED Online. September 2015. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/55573?redirectedFrom=distaff> (accessed November 09, 2015).

³⁹ Eleanor Cook, "Faulkner, Typology, and Black History in *Go Down, Moses*," *Against Coersion: Games Poets Play* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 68. Sundquist and Cook both contextualize Faulkner's Old Testament allusions with reference to Mary Chestnut's famous critique of southern family structures: "Like the patriarchs of old our men live all in one house with their wives and their concubines, and the mulattoes one sees in every family exactly resemble the white children"; Chestnut prefaces the analogy with the comment: "God forgive us, but ours is a *monstrous* system." Cook, "Faulkner, Typology," Sundquist, *The House Divided*, p. 109; 61; *Mary Chestnut's Civil War*, ed. C. Van Woodward (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981), p. 29.

⁴⁰ See note 15, above.

⁴¹ Orchard, *A Critical Companion*, pp. 142–149.

⁴² See Nicholas Howe, *Migration and Mythmaking in Anglo-Saxon England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) and Paul Battles, "Genesis A and the Anglo-Saxon 'migration myth,'" *Anglo-Saxon England* 29 (2000): 43–66.

⁴³ Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 43; see also pp. 42–50.

⁴⁴ See Harry Caplan, "The Four Senses of Scriptural Interpretation and the Mediaeval Theory of Preaching," *Speculum* 4 (1929): 283.

⁴⁵ Cook, "Faulkner, Typology," 69.

⁴⁶ Cook, "Faulkner, Typology," 70. See also Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity*, pp. 53–54 on Faulkner's radical reworking of the conventional function of typology in American literature in *Light in August* (1932).

⁴⁷ Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses*, p. 244.

⁴⁸ See also Christine Rauer, *Beowulf and the Dragon* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000), pp. 52–87 on encounters with dragons in hagiographical literature.

⁴⁹ A.C. Charity, *Events and Their Afterlife*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966): 136.

⁵⁰ See Orchard, *A Critical Companion*, p. 109.

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