

FICTIONAL SOURCES ON CHANGE PROCESSES:
AN EXAMPLE FROM *THE YEARLING*

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Historical geographers are interested in attributes of people and place as they evolve through time. The interaction of people with their environment generates cultural changes which are reflected in the landscape. Since this embodies evolution, there has to be in historical geography a discussion of process as a means of explaining change in place through time. Fictional literature, the novel for example, aids the historical geographer to ascertain change processes. The value of fictional sources lies in their subjectivity, their ability to transcend empiricism by offering an explanation of human phenomena from a humanistic point of view, a view that reflects the novelist's perception of the real world as he or she experiences it.

The value of applying novels as a means of gaining a personable insight into the spatial evolution of a particular region is enhanced when used within the framework of a spatial construct. Yi-Fu Tuan's construct of three landscapes in the United States (Urban, Middle, and Wilderness) is useful in drawing out the spatial relevance of fictional literature.¹ Tuan described the Jeffersonian ideal, which romanticized the Middle Landscape, i.e., the farmland which lay outside the towns yet removed from the savagery of "the Wilderness." The Urban and Wilderness landscapes were profane while the Middle Landscape was Edenic. As population grew, both Urban and Middle Landscapes expanded at the expense of the Wilderness, which lost its image of profane wasteland, and became romanticized in its own right as the last refuge of Nature's beauties and verities. On the eve of the twentieth century Americans in all sectors felt the dominance of the city, which was still regarded as profane, and sensed that Wilderness was no longer a threatening force; rather it was itself being threatened. The dynamics transforming these three landscapes was the interaction of the processes of technological innovations, human migration, cultural diffusion, social mobility, resource evaluation, spatial interdependence and regional development.

The setting of *The Yearling*, forest lands of northern Florida at the end of the last century, may be considered part of the structured Middle Landscape. Properly, the locale is the interface between the expanding Middle and the retreating Wilderness Landscape. This image is evident in the following:

Penny Baxter was either a brave man or a crazy one to leave the common way of life and take his bride into the very heart of the wild Florida scrub, populous with bears and wolves and panthers. It had been understandable for the Forresters to go there, for the growing family of great burly quarrelsome males needed all the room in the county, and freedom from any hindrance. But who could hinder Penny Baxter?

It was not hindrance--But in the towns and villages, in farming sections where neighbors were not too far apart, men's minds and actions and property overlapped. There were intrusions on the individual spirit. There were friendliness and mutual help in time of trouble, true, but there were bickerings and watchfulness, one man suspicious of another. He had grown from under the sternness of his father into a world less direct, less honest, in its harshness, and therefore more disturbing.²

This passage plays well to the geographical processes of cultural diffusion and technological innovation. The apparent change in the towns and villages of Penny Baxter's world was a result of the city's expanding dominance.

Moreover, whether he realizes it or not, Penny Baxter behaves in similar ways to those whom he avoided by moving into the Florida scrub. A particular example is his trading of a worthless hunting dog to Lem Forrester for a new shotgun. Although he tells Lem the dog is useless, his intent to deceive is obvious. Penny admits this to his son, Jody: "My words was straight, but my intentions was crooked as the Ocklawaha River."³

Man competing with nature for superiority in the Wilderness is an important theme in Rawlings' novel. Penny was unable to kill the great bear Old Slewfoot because his antiquated rifle had backfired in his face. After a successful trade with Lem Forrester he had a new weapon that would give him the edge over Old Slewfoot and an undomesticated wilderness.

Lem went to the wall and took down from its nails a gun. It was a London Fine Twist. The double barrels shone. The stock was walnut, warm and glowing. The twin hammers were jaunty. The fittings were chased and intricate. Lem swung it to his shoulder, sighted it. He handed it to Penny.

'Right from England. No more muzzle-loaden. Fill your own shell-cases easy as spittin. Stick your shells in--breecch her--cock her--Bam! Bam! Two shots. Shoots as true as a eagle flies.'

It was the killing of Baxter's brood sow by Old Slewfoot that incurred Penny's wrath. How would Old Slewfoot fare in his struggle with Penny Baxter for spatial supremacy in the wild Florida scrub? Can we be optimistic for Old Slewfoot? Indeed, the name given to the bear resulted from his extraordinary ability to escape an earlier entrapment by chewing off one of his toes. The question is resolved later in the novel. Old Slewfoot was eventually cornered and shot by Penny, and with the help of Jody, ignominiously skinned.

Killing Old Slewfoot was Penny's triumph. Living a life of subsistence on Baxter's Island afforded few amenities. The Baxters had adjusted well to living off of the land taking only what they needed. But the success of Penny and Jody in finally felling Old Slewfoot brought forth a feeling of achievement that comes only once in one's lifetime, if it comes at all.

They looked wonderingly at each other. They approached the prone carcass. Jody was weak in the knees. Penny's walk was unsteady. Jody felt a clear lightness fill him, as though he were a balloon.

Penny said, 'I declare, I believe I'm surprised.'

He slapped Jody on the back and cut a buck-and-wing.

He screeched, 'Yippee!'

The sound echoed through the swamp. A jay-bird screeched after him and flew away. Jody took up his excitement and shrilled 'Yippee!' Old Julia crouched and barked with them. Rip, licking his wounds, wagged his stumpy tail.

Penny shouted tunelessly,

'My name is Sam.
I don't give a damn.
I'd ruther be black
Than a pore white man.'

He pounded Jody again.

'Who's a pore white man?'

Jody shouted, 'We ain't pore. We got ol' Slewfoot.'⁵

Rawlings' novel offers an interesting paradox: Penny's destruction of the environment he loves so well. This is the symbolism of the novel. Flag, the fawn befriended by Jody, became domesticated but he could not coexist with the Baxters on their farm. Jody tried valiantly to prevent the yearling from

eating the sprouting corn and cow-peas which were essential to the Baxters to survive the winter. He had worked hard to replant the fields and surround them with an enclosure. It was all to no avail. Flag surmounted the railed fence with ease. Reluctantly, a decision was made to have the animal destroyed.

Flag thrashed to his feet and was off again. Blood flowed in a steady stream. The yearling made the edge of the sink-hole. He wavered an instant and toppled. He rolled down the side. Jody ran after him. Flag lay beside the pool. He opened great liquid eyes and turned them on the boy with a glazed look of wonder. Jody pressed the muzzle of the gun barrel at the back of the smooth neck and pulled the trigger. Flag quivered a moment and then lay still.⁶

The Baxters were human beings of a technological society and by establishing a farmstead in the Florida scrub they were an unwanted intrusion. Penny Baxter seems to experience the ambiguity of attitude toward environment expressed by Tuan: "Wilderness is primeval chaos and potency, a threat and a lure."⁷ Penny becomes symbolic of modern man, fearing and destroying the environment, yet revering it at the same time. Cross Creek becomes frontier America in microcosm.

The Yearling has value of course by supplying locational information on the period, and providing description of geographical phenomena. But additionally the novel offers explanation of the processes of frontier expansion and the impact of technology on nature. Herein lies the value of the novel in historical geography.

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1. Yi-Fu Tuan, *Man and Nature*, Association of American Geographers, Commission on College Geography Resource Paper No. 10 (Washington, D.C., 1971), pp. 34-38.
2. Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, *The Yearling* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938), p. 18.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 62.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 60-61.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 350-51.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 410.
7. Yi-Fu Tuan, "Ambiguity in Attitudes toward Environment." *Annals, Association of American Geographers* 63 (1973):422.