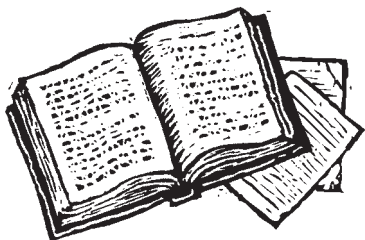


The Southern American Dream

Introduction

The southern United States are differentiated from the northern United States by far more than geographic location. Unlike other regions of the country, the South is defined by a distinct historic and cultural heritage that goes back to the surveying of the Mason-Dixon line. Originally intended to resolve a border dispute between Pennsylvania and Delaware, the boundary took on greater political and cultural significance when it became the dividing line between free and slave states. The cultural debate led to eleven Confederate states seceding from the Union, triggering the Civil War and the subsequent period of “Reconstruction” in the South. Racial and economic problems got much worse before they got better, but the region emerged to lead the civil rights movement and reinvent its economy and culture.

Much of what defines the South comes from its Confederate history, but southern culture is more than its racial legacies. Writers have long been fascinated by the South, plumbing its depths to establish a unique literary genre. Southern literature addresses a surprising range of themes that reflect the region’s rich physical, cultural, and historical tradition.



Old South versus New South

Native southerner and social critic H. L. Mencken wrote a scathing critique of his homeland in 1917’s “The Sahara of the Bozart.” The author



Flannery O'Connor AP Images

writes about the unfortunate distinctions he sees between the culture of the South before to the Civil War and Reconstruction, and afterward:

[Prior to the war] there were men of delicate fancy, urbane instinct and aristocratic manner—in brief, superior men, gentry. . . . A certain noble spaciousness was in the ancient southern scheme of things. . . . He liked to toy with ideas. He was hospitable and tolerant. He had the vague thing that we called culture.

This “Old Confederacy” was destroyed, according to Mencken, after Reconstruction. “First the carpetbaggers ravaged the land, and then it fell into the hands of the native white trash, already so poor that war and Reconstruction could not make them any poorer.” “The Sahara of the Bozart,” then, is a lament over the loss of a civilization. Of the post-Reconstruction South, Mencken writes,

And yet, for all its size and all its wealth and all the “progress” it babbles of, it is almost as sterile, artistically, intellectually, culturally, as the Sahara Desert. There are single acres in Europe that house more first-rate men than all the states south of the Potomac; there are probably single square miles in America. . . . It would be impossible in all history to match so complete a drying-up of a civilization.

In 1929, W. J. Cash was prompted to write *The Mind of the South* when he realized that the

new, post-Reconstruction South, the industrialized South, was not so different from the old, antebellum South. He notes:

One hears much in these days of the New South. The land of the storied rebel becomes industrialized . . . But I question that it is much more. For the mind of that heroic region, I opine, is still basically and essentially the mind of the Old South. It is a mind, that is to say, of the soil rather than of the mills—a mind, indeed, which, as yet, is almost wholly unadjusted to the new industry.

So what, exactly, constitutes the Old South, other than a reliance on the land? According to Cash, “Its salient characteristic is a magnificent incapacity for the real, a Brobdingnagian talent for the fantastic.” He goes on, “Every farmhouse became a Big House, every farm a baronial estate. . . . Their pride and their legend, handed down to their descendants, are today the basis of all social life in the South.” Cash argues that the romantic, largely fantastic Old South remains unchanged by industrialization and progress.

Yet another “New South” came into being during the civil rights movement. Flannery O’Connor’s “Everything That Rises Must Converge” is a wonderful illustration of what happens when the Old South and the New South clash. Set in the early 1960s, the story focuses on Julian, a white liberal, and his mother, a descendant of a formerly privileged Southern family, on a bus ride to Julian’s mother’s weekly reducing class at the “Y.” Julian feels superior to his mother and finds the purple hat she wears to her class both ugly and bourgeois:

A purple velvet flap came down on one side of it and stood up on the other; the rest of it was green and looked like a cushion with the stuffing out. He decided it was less comical than jaunty and pathetic. Everything that gave her pleasure was small and depressed him.

Describing the people in her reducing class, she says, “Most of them in it are not our kind of people, but I can be gracious to anybody. I know who I am.” Julian replies, “They don’t give a damn for your graciousness. Knowing who you are is good for one generation only. You haven’t the foggiest idea where you stand now or who you are.”

His retort reflects his generation’s belief that the Old South and its old ways are on the way out. Integration, one of the new ways, becomes the divisive issue of the story when a black woman boards the bus wearing the same hat as

Julian's mother. Julian relishes the irony: "He could not believe that Fate had thrust upon his mother such a lesson. He gave a loud chuckle so that she would look at him and see that he saw." Only momentarily uncomfortable, his mother soon begins playing with the woman's little boy. Julian thinks, "The lesson had rolled off her like rain on a roof." When Julian's mother tries to offer the little boy a penny, something Julian begs her not to do, the boy's mother turns violent:

Julian saw the black fist swing out with the red pocketbook. He shut his eyes and cringed as he heard the woman shout, "He don't take nobody's pennies!" When he opened his eyes, the woman was disappearing down the street with the little boy staring wide-eyed over her shoulder. Julian's mother was sitting on the sidewalk.

Although the act of offering the child money was "as natural to her as breathing," Julian's mother is shown just how offensive the gesture is, how outmoded her behavior has become.

Individualism

Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) packs several themes common to great works of Southern literature into one powerful package. Race, class, caste, history, the New South versus the Old South are all examined in Lee's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, but individualism is the theme that truly drives the novel. According to W. J. Cash in his *The Mind of the South*, the Southerner's individualistic spirit harkens back "to the Old South, to the soil." In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, that Old South soil-driven individualism has evolved into a nonconformist way of thinking that propels the culture forward.

Atticus Finch, the story's hero, is the widowed father of Scout and Jem. A prominent Depression-era lawyer in the fictional small town of Maycomb, Alabama, Finch agrees to defend a black man, Tom Robinson, accused of raping a white woman. His decision angers Maycomb's racist white community. When Scout gets into a fight at school over the trial and her father's role in it, Finch explains,

If I didn't [defend Tom Robinson] I couldn't hold up my head in town, I couldn't represent this county in the legislature, I couldn't even tell you or Jem not to do something again. . . . Scout, simply by the nature of the work, every lawyer gets at least one case in his lifetime that affects him personally. This one's mine, I guess.

By heeding both his conscience and his principles, Finch sets himself apart from the rest of his community. When Scout tells her father about others' opinions about the trial, he replies,

They're certainly entitled to think that, and they're entitled to full respect for their opinions . . . but before I can live with other folks I've got to live with myself. The one thing that doesn't abide by majority rule is a person's conscience.

Much like *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* (1936) is a treasure trove of Southern themes. The story spans the Civil War and Reconstruction, features the romance and history of the South, but the independent spirit of anti-heroine Scarlett O'Hara is the predominant theme that drives the novel. Unlike Atticus Finch, O'Hara's individualism is not used to promote the good of society, but rather as a survival mechanism used to promote herself and her own happiness.

As a young woman of means, the willful O'Hara constrains her rebellious temperament and learns to behave like the proper young Southern lady her elders expect her to be. As she gets older, though, she is less willing to perform as directed. "I'm tired of everlastingly being unnatural and never doing anything I want to do," she says. After the war, after her mother dies, her father suffers a mental collapse, and her sisters fall ill, O'Hara is left to take care of Tara, the family home. Her selfish independence drives her to marry a man for money. She secures the financial future of the family home and becomes a successful businesswoman at the same time. As a way of explaining what could be construed as masculine behavior, O'Hara reasons, "You can't be a lady without money."

The Georgian Mitchell and the Alabamian Lee wrote to inspire their fellow Southerners (and countrymen). They both understood the southern need to uphold tradition and reluctance to break precedent. Both used the device of the romantic past to appeal to readers in their present day and crafted alternate, authentic-feeling and ennobling versions of history that their readers could be proud of. Mitchell wanted Depression-era Southerners to be proud of their heritage, so she portrayed it as noble, dignified, and blameless. If a reader in the 1930s ever thought her Confederate ancestors were the skeletons in the family closet, *Gone With the Wind* gave her license to whistle "Dixie" with her head held high. Lee wanted her Civil



Governor George Wallace blocking the entrance to the University of Alabama AP Images

Rights-era readers to reject the racial status quo, so she presented them with a mythic figure of the recent past to show them the way. If a reader in the 1960s thought, “I wish I could question segregation, but that simply isn’t done,” *To Kill a Mockingbird* offered a blueprint of the way it might be done, if one were brave enough.

Nature

I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition (1930) is a collection of twelve essays written by twelve different Southerners addressing the premise that with industrialization comes the sure and steady erosion of Southern culture. The introduction of *I’ll Take My Stand* begins, “The authors contributing to this book are Southerners, well acquainted with one another and of similar tastes.” These tastes include a longing for a way of life nearly gone by the time the book was published. They see growing

industrialization as a first step toward man’s losing “his sense of vocation.” They also agree that industrialization would lead to a disinterest in religion and art, an acceleration in the speed of life that would lead to general instability, and the much-feared advance of a consumer-based society. The introduction goes on to ask,

How far shall the South surrender its moral, social, and economic autonomy to the victorious principle of the Union? That question remains open. The South is a minority section that has hitherto been jealous of its minority right to live its own kind of life. . . . Of late, however, there is the melancholy fact that the South itself has wavered a little and shown signs of wanting to join up behind the common or American industrial ideal. It is against that tendency that this book is written.

Rather than specifics about how to shift a rapidly growing industrialized society back to an agrarian one, the book provides a philosophical



Vivien Leigh and Butterfly McQueen in a scene from *Gone With the Wind* John Kobal Foundation/Getty Images

argument for retaining the traditions and institutions inherent to the South. “The Agrarians,” as the writers would come to be known, feel that industrialization made good, honest, hard work monotonous, which dehumanized the endeavor, turning purposeful labor into servile monotony.

The work of Nobel laureate William Faulkner epitomizes Southern literature, myth, and tradition. A native of Mississippi, Faulkner chose as his primary subject the land he came from. His story, “The Bear,” first published in 1935, was later published among a collection entitled, *Go Down, Moses* (1942). Like much of his work, the narrative is complex and its meaning is difficult to discern without multiple readings. One easily comprehensible aspect of the story, though, is the important role nature plays in the action. The hunt for Old Ben, the eponymous bear, represents the ancient ritual of hunting for food and protection, a ritual shared and passed down by Southern families for generations. Ike McCaslin,

the main character, undergoes a traditional rite of passage when he is taught as a ten-year-old boy how to navigate the wilderness and stalk and kill his quarry. The successive hunting seasons throughout “The Bear” may be interpreted as a symbol of man’s tendency to destroy the wilderness in an attempt to sustain the culture’s values and traditions.

Class

Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Rick Bragg’s moving memoir, *All Over But the Shoutin’* (1997), wrenchingly illustrates the critical role of class in Southern culture. Bragg was born in 1959 in Possum Trot, Alabama, into a poor, disadvantaged, “white trash” family. He was raised by a loving mother while his abusive father was largely absent.

Bragg remembers his mother dragging him along on a gunny sack while she picked cotton:

The tall woman is wearing a man's britches and a man's old straw hat, and now and then she looks back over her shoulder to smile at the three-year-old boy whose hair is almost as purely white as the bolls she picks, who rides the back of the six-foot-long sack like a magic carpet.

Many of the episodes in *All Over But the Shoutin'* exemplify the pain Bragg felt as a lower-class citizen. He describes the wealthy as "the old-money white Southerners who ran things, who treated the rest of the South like beggars with muddy feet who were about to track up their white shag carpeting." Bragg describes how the common experience of poverty was, at the time, not enough to bridge the gulf between the races in the South. He writes that a black neighbor boy once brought food from his mother to help the Braggs in a particularly rough time, and Bragg recalls:

In the few contacts we had with them as children, we had thrown rocks at them. . . . I would like to say that we came together after the little boy brought us that food, that we learned about and from each other, but that would be a lie.

Politics

A seminal work of Southern literature and winner of the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men* (1946) is among America's best political novels. Fashioned after the life and political career of Louisiana Governor Huey P. Long, the Depression-era novel tells the story of the rise and fall of political giant Willy Stark. Stark, a blackmailer and bully, raised in poverty, becomes the unnamed Southern state's most powerful political figure. The story also features Stark's right-hand man, the cynical Jack Burden. Burden relinquishes his genteel, Southern upbringing and abandons his dissertation in American history, choosing instead to use his talent for historical research to dig up unsavory secrets about Stark's enemies. Stark threatens and blackmails his way into instituting liberal reforms designed to assist the state's poor farmers, but becoming champion of the people does not come without costs. The tale of Stark's downward spiral illustrates the consequences of every human act and the role politics plays in contemporary society.

But the truth of Southern politics may be stranger than the fiction. Alabama Governor George C. Wallace's 1963 Inaugural Address, delivered in Montgomery, Alabama, at the height of the civil rights movement, is an

important artifact of Southern political thought. In 1958, when Wallace decided to run for governor, he denounced the Ku Klux Klan and was supported by the NAACP. His stand lost him the primary. Four years later, determined to win the white vote and the governorship, Wallace drastically reassessed his platform and ran as a pro-segregationist. He won the 1962 election by a landslide. Wallace hired white supremacist and Ku Klux Klansman Asa Carter to write his inaugural address, which is largely remembered for the following lines:

Let us rise to the call of freedom-loving blood that is in us and send our answer to the tyranny that clanks its chains upon the South. In the name of the greatest people that have ever trod this earth, I draw the line in the dust and toss the gauntlet before the feet of tyranny . . . and I say . . . segregation today . . . segregation tomorrow . . . segregation forever.

The inaugural address outlines Wallace's understanding of segregation and why he felt it was valid:

The true brotherhood of America, of respecting the separateness of others . . . and uniting in effort . . . has been so twisted and distorted from its original concept that there is small wonder that communism is winning the world.

Religion

George C. Wallace's 1963 Inaugural Address also touches on the importance of religion in Southern literature. Wallace's personal religious beliefs served as the foundation for his political views, views that Alabamians heartily and repeatedly supported. In his 1963 inaugural address, Wallace said,

We are faced with an idea that if a centralized government assumes enough authority, enough power over its people, that it can provide a utopian life. . . . It is an idea of government that encourages our fears and destroys our faith. . . . We find we have become a government-fearing people . . . not a God-fearing people. . . . We find we have replaced faith with fear . . . and though we may give lip service to the Almighty . . . in reality, government has become our god.

His emphasis on a faith-based form of government, embraced by the founding fathers, was perceived to stand in opposition to the system called for by the "so-called 'progressives.'" Wallace argues, the "'progressives' tell us that our Constitution was written for 'horse and buggy' days . . . so were the Ten Commandments."



PROPER LIVING IS A MATTER OF THE INTELLIGENCE AND THE WILL, DOES NOT DEPEND ON THE LOCAL CLIMATE OR GEOGRAPHY, AND IS CAPABLE OF A DEFINITION WHICH IS GENERAL AND NOT SOUTHERN AT ALL. SOUTHERNERS HAVE A FILIAL DUTY TO DISCHARGE TO THEIR OWN SECTION. BUT THEIR CAUSE IS PRECARIOUS AND THEY MUST SEEK ALLIANCES WITH SYMPATHETIC COMMUNITIES EVERYWHERE.”

Source: The Twelve Southerners, *I'll Take My Stand*

Wallace's views are in sharp contrast to those W. J. Cash set forth more than thirty years earlier in his scathing critique, *The Mind of the South*. Cash blames much of the problems he finds with the South and its people on its emphasis on religion: “The mind of the South begins and ends with God, John Calvin's God—the anthropomorphic Jehovah of the Old Testament.” Cash believes this strain of religious devotion keeps Southerners from achieving their greatest potential:

Whatever exists is ordered. . . . Under this view of things, it plainly becomes blasphemy for the mill-billy to complain. Did God desire him to live in a house with plumbing, did He wish him to have better wages, it is quite clear that He would have arranged it. With that doctrine, the peon is in thorough accord. . . . The peon is always a Christian.

Conclusion

Southern literature attempts to describe, define, challenge, and celebrate the region's rich and varied culture, sometimes all at the same time. The many themes that run through Southern

essays, speeches, memoirs, and novels do more than illustrate a region, they define a people. Mitchell's O'Hara, Lee's Finch, and Bragg's mother are characters shaped by both history and culture. The deep scars left by the Civil War and Reconstruction are felt in integration stories told by Flannery O'Connor in the early 1960s and the declaration of “segregation today, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever” in George Wallace's speech. As critical as they are of southern culture, “Sahara of the Bozart,” *The Mind of the South*, and *To Kill a Mockingbird* have at their heart a real love for the South and a true desire to right its wrongs. These authors have shown that learning history's lessons begins by reading and writing authentically about the painful truths of the past.

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