

(10) Southern Literature after 1945

William Faulkner, William Styron, Truman Capote, Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty

Views of the American South

- Position of the South
- Fred Chappell: the canon of the American literature ought to be cracked open to receive the Southerners, they ought not to be considered a mere curiosity and approached in terms of regional rather than American literature
 - Elizabeth Spencer: the South is still exceptional for its history, weather and nature, sense of family, variety of population, but it is now being formed by the experience of the whole nation and is no more an independent unit
 - Richard Ford: the label of a Southerner is **too restrictive**, it sets a barrier between the author and the audience
 - the South constitutes a particular cultural and social unit within the United States, with emphasis on traditional **moral values**¹, the traumatic but inspiring heritage of slavery and the loss suffered in the Civil War (1861–1865)
 - most Southern writers refuse to be restrained by their region but still draw on it with a mixture of love and hate

Southern Literature in Overview

- Humorists
- **Southwestern Humorists**: geographically in the Deep South², included Augustus Baldwin Longstreet (1790–1870), George Washington Harris (1814–1869), Thomas Bangs Thorpe (1815–1875), Mark Twain (1835–1910)
 - tall tale: originally a frontier anecdote of violent exaggeration or understatement told in the vernacular idiom, presents improbable incidents with solemn face lying and rough humour, producing the effects of the grotesque
- Fugitive Agrarians
- the Southern Renaissance: an unprecedented concentration of intellectuals and creative minds in the relatively poor agricultural region, came to flourish in the 1920s to 1930s, called alternately '**Renascence**' by Southerners
 - the **Fugitive Agrarians**³: the spiritual fathers of the Southern Renaissance, centred at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, published the collection *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (1930)
 - Allen Tate (1899–1979): a Fugitive Agrarian, literary critic, essayist, poet of the 'Ode to the Confederate Dead' (1926), author of the novel called *The Fathers* (1938), dealing with the complex racial relationships in the South
 - Robert Penn Warren (1905–1989): a Fugitive Agrarian, essayist, poet and novelist, author of the political novel set in the South *All the King's Men* (1946), which is often regarded to mark the end of the Southern Renaissance
- New Critics
- the **New Critics**: evolved from the Fugitives, argued for literary interpretation through close reading, included Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, John Crowe Ransom (1888–1974), Cleanth Brooks (1906–1990) and others
 - influenced the following generation of writers because they acted as university tutors to many of them and also contributed to the inclusion of European and in particular **British literature** to the syllabi of South's universities
 - Eudora Welty: wrote her dissertation thesis on the poetry of William Butler Yeats, makes his poem 'Leda and the Swan' figure in her short stories of *The Golden Apples* (1949), for instance in the story entitled 'Sir Rabbit'
 - Lewis Nordan: wrote his thesis on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, which significantly influenced his own fiction
 - Fred Chappell: inspired by Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, to whose structure and themes he keeps on returning
 - Richard Ford: influenced by the work of the French realists and especially naturalists of the nineteenth century

Contemporary Tendencies

- Writing Modes
- traditional psychological realism with aspects of local colour: Eudora Welty, Peter Taylor, Elizabeth Spenser
 - dirty realism, later called also **new realism**, influenced by the minimalism of Raymond Carver: Richard Ford
 - the subject of impoverished people, mentally and materially, influenced by Erskine Caldwell: Harry Crews
 - **K-Mart realism**, focused on uneducated working-class characters leading consumer lives: Bobbie Ann Mason
 - womanism, the African American branch of feminism, focused on the integrity of both sexes: Alice Walker
 - postmodernism, in its Southern form including a sense of the moral dimension: John Barth, Cormac McCarthy
 - **growing-up** novel and **genre literature**, horror, detective story, western, sci-fi: Fred Chappell, Lewis Nordan

Southern Gothic

- Aims & Ways
- inspired by the nineteenth century British Gothic novel, develops the lines of **paranoia, barbarism and taboo**
 - the American Gothic writing focuses on the exploration of one's internal life and the horrors of consciousness
 - the Southern Gothic shows the different ways that the characters take when trying to come to terms with the disappearing faith and dissolving moral values and to find their new identity in the unstable and uncertain world
 - offers a new way of dealing with the traditional topics of the family, community, death, religious faith and past
 - shows cruelty and violence, uses the motifs of uprooting, degeneration, incest, flight to the North from the past

¹ Typically those of conservative Protestantism; the region is known as the **Bible Belt**, labelled so first by Henry Louis Mencken.

² Includes Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia and South Carolina; sometimes Arkansas and Tennessee are also included.

³ Called themselves Agrarians in reference to their views, later became Fugitives for their magazine *The Fugitive* (1922–1925).

Grotesque Elements

- often employs the **grotesque**, the mixing of the comic and the tragic, and emotional distance or even cynicism
- seeks to **shock** the audience and through the shock make them realize the difference between the good and evil
- representatives of the genre include Flannery O'Connor, Lewis Nordan, also Eudora Welty and Fred Chappell

William Faulkner (1897–1962)

Biography & Influences

- born William Falkner but changed the spelling of his last name (1918), which he explained by various stories
- lived in Oxford, Lafayette County, Mississippi, on which he modelled his fictional Jefferson, **Yoknapatawpha**
- grew up with the legends and stories about his ancestors, the family and the past; his great-grandfather was an influential public figure and a colonel in the Confederate Army, he became the model for Colonel John Sartoris
- influenced by the **tall tale**, as seen in his growing-up stories *The Unvanquished* (1938) and *The Reivers* (1962)
- dropped out of high school distressed by his childhood sweetheart's marriage, she later divorced to marry him
- tried to enlist in the army but was too short, eventually enlisted and served with the Royal Air Force in Canada
- enrolled as a veteran and special student at the University of Mississippi (1919), dropped out after three terms
- moved to New Orleans, underwent a series of odd jobs, met Sherwood Anderson, who encouraged his writing
- supported himself by producing Hollywood scripts, as *To Have and Have Not* (1945) or *The Big Sleep* (1946)

Southern Subjects

- appreciated deeply the American South and the South's history, believed the native soil is worth writing about
- occupied with a single imaginary country but within it he managed to explore the whole of human experience
- aimed at an imaginative recovery of the South, sought to know it as a region and to chart also its spiritual map
- populated his fictional Yoknapatawpha County with representatives of all the social classes and ethnic groups
- illustrated on the fate of several families the rise and decline of the **Southern aristocracy** and society based on slavery, heroism and foolishness of the Confederation supporters and the changing moral climate in the region
- concerned with the complexities of familial, sexual, social and racial identities and with the burden of the past
- believed in the interpenetration of **past and present**, claimed that any identity is indelibly stamped by history

Writing Techniques

- tended to interpret writing as a revelation of the writer's secret dark twin, the story of himself and the world, and by extension he was inclined to see writing as shadowed by the repressed myths, the secrets of his culture
- used **repetition** as rediscovery, reinvention of what has been lived and missed, experienced but not understood
- both the author and his narrators keep coming back and back again to events that resist understanding, brim with hidden meaning and block the contact of the commemorating person with the commemorated experience
- weaves many lives into one life, many texts into one text, a text that seems to lack any circumference or close
- exploits the absence of a centre or central figure who is both there and not there because dead or traumatized
- employs **black characters** who act as a shadowy and admonitory chorus, as the present shadowed by the past
- obsessed with the presence or absence of link between words and actions, between language and experience

Assessment

- his earlier work prefers the private area, the intimacies of the inward vision summed up as Modernism, his later work gravitates towards the public area, the intensities of the outward, summed up as a shift to **Modernity**
- his later work inclines towards a more direct address of social and political issues and a search for some hope
- as the recipient of the Nobel Prize (1950) came to represent the Southern literature despite the paradox that the Southern literary tradition lies in folk tales and oral stories, inconsistent with Faulkner's often inaccessible work

Sartoris (1929)

Introducing the Family

- his first major novel, follows the declining history of several generations of a distinguished Mississippi family
- introduced his mythical setting, his central themes and the characters to work with throughout his whole career

The Sound and the Fury (1929)

Modernist Masterpiece

- his dense modernist masterpiece, examines the economic and emotional deterioration of the **Compson** family
- explores the disintegration of the family and the private obsessions of three brothers who lost their loved sister

As I Lay Dying (1930)

Burying the Mother

- a mixture of horror and comedy, presents the multiple perspectives of fifteen consciousnesses of fifteen people
- traces the mourning procession of a poor white family to fulfil the mother's wish for a burial in her hometown

The Unvanquished (1938)

Civil War Stories

- an episodic novel including seven short stories concerning the **Sartoris** family, set at the time of the Civil War

The Hamlet⁴ (1940)

Poor White Trash Rise

- a deeply serious comedy focusing on the social transformation of the region, dealing with the rise to power and the eventual fall of the **Snopes**, a poor white entrepreneur family, beginning in Jefferson as tenants and outcasts
- includes 'The Spotted Horses', one of the many short stories that the author often incorporated into his novels

⁴ *The Hamlet* together with *The Town* (1957) and *The Mansion* (1959) forms the **Snopes Trilogy**, connected by the Snopes family.

Jews &
Blacks***Go Down, Moses***⁵ (1942)

- an episodic novel consisting of seven interrelated stories, previously published separately and now rewritten
- the title refers to a spiritual of the name, which draws a parallel between blacks in America and Jews in Egypt
- focuses on the racially mixed **McCaslin** family, relates the stories by the voice of Isaac⁶ McCaslin, called Ike
- includes the novella 'The Bear', focused on Ike's growing up, learning about nature and coming to know life
- deals with the issues of slavery and race, vanishing wilderness, inheritance, stewardship and ownership of land

Black
Innocent***Intruder in the Dust*** (1948)

- continues the author's occupation with racial prejudice and social injustice in the South, follows a black farmer whose innocence in a white man's murder trial makes him a 'tyrant over the whole country's white conscience'

Caught up
by the Past***Requiem for a Nun*** (1951)

- a hybrid of a novel and a play, presents the main story in the dramatic form and the background in the narrative
- returns to the protagonist of *Sanctuary* (1931), Temple Drake, a girl then involved with drugs, criminals and prostitution, now a married woman with a child who must learn how to deal with her violent and turbulent past

Christ
Allegory***A Fable*** (1954)

- an allegory set during the false armistice in 1918, retells the story of Christ to dramatize its message of peace
- uses a story from the First World War as an allegory for the suffering of Christ and his crucifixion for mankind
- follows a corporal who orders his troops not to engage the enemy, on which the enemy does not attack either, and the war comes to a standstill until the corporal is arrested by a superior officer and executed by being shot

Snopes
Trilogy***The Town*** (1957)

- a more episodic continuation of the Snopes Trilogy, follows the rising socio-economic position of Flem Snopes

The Mansion (1959)

- the last book of the Snopes Trilogy, follows the fall of Flem Snopes, which is triggered by a plotting relative

The Reivers (1962)

- a picaresque novel, uncharacteristically light-hearted in the subject matter, in a straightforward narrative style

Growing-
up Novel**William Styron (1925–2006)**

- qualifies as a peculiarly Southern writer in his concern with the themes of **guilt** and the indelible nature of **evil**

Southern
Family***Lie Down in Darkness*** (1951)

- the novel seems almost an exercise in Faulknerian tropes and themes, it reveals the tragic life and **suicide** of a girl whose rich Southern family was unable to supply either her or themselves with the love and security needed

Plantation
Novel***The Confessions of Nat Turner*** (1967)

- a radical rewriting of plantation romance, a fictitious memoir of the historical leader of the 1831 **slave revolt**
- criticized for its controversial racist stereotyping, including for instance the protagonist's fantasy of raping a white woman or his homosexual encounter with a fellow slave, the novel eventually won a Pulitzer Prize (1968)

Army
Novella***The Long March*** (1957)

- the novella deals with the author's experience in a military camp where he was trained before serving in Korea

American
Expatriates***Set This House on Fire*** (1960)

- a minor novel concerned with American intellectual expatriates on the Riviera, inspired by his stay in Europe
- centres on the themes of evil and **redemption**, shows a troubled alcoholic artist and his encounter with the evil

Post-
Holocaust
Novel***Sophie's Choice*** (1979)

- deals with the **Holocaust** theme, the historical event which cast its shadow over all subsequent Western history
- portrays a non-Jewish victim of the Holocaust, a Polish Roman Catholic woman who survived Auschwitz but lost her two children, sending her daughter to death when forced to choose one, and not hearing of her son again
- set in New York, follows Sophie's involvement with Nathan, a Jewish-American man plagued by his paranoid schizophrenia and cocaine addiction, and Stingo, a writer working on his first novel, who is the novel's narrator
- concludes with Sophie and Nathan committing suicide together and Stingo breaking down on learning about it

Depression
Memoir***Darkness Visible*** (1990)

- the author's memoir about his struggle with a serious case of clinical depression and his successful recovery
- the title refers to John Milton's blank verse epic *Paradise Lost* (1667), describing Hell as 'darkness visible'

⁵ The Biblical Moses was ordered by God to lead the Israelites out of the Egyptian slavery, which he did by parting the Red Sea.

⁶ The Biblical Isaac was the son of Abraham, who was ready to sacrifice Isaac to God to prove his devotion but was stopped by an angel. Isaac married Rebekah, who bore him Esau and Jacob, and in his old age he was tricked into blessing Jacob instead of Esau.

Truman Capote (1924–1984)

- openly **homosexual**, led a glamorous lifestyle, plagued by depressions, breakdowns, alcohol and drug abuse

Short
Story

‘*Miriam*’ (1945)

- his first successful story, explores loneliness of an elderly woman haunted by visions of a girl intruding on her

Growing-Up
Novels

Other Voices, Other Rooms (1948)

- his first published novel, a semi-autobiographical Gothic tale of a homosexual boy groping towards maturity

The Grass Harp (1951)

- a novel following an orphaned boy and two elderly ladies in retreat in a treehouse from which they observe life

Glamour
Novella

Breakfast at Tiffany’s (1958)

- a novella following a light-hearted, freewheeling, romantic playgirl, Holly Golightly, living in New York City

Non-Fiction
Novel

In Cold Blood (1966)

- a ‘Non-Fiction Novel’ in the vein of **New Journalism**⁷, written after a five-year-long research on its subject
- based on facts concerning an incident of 1959 when two ex-convicts, Perry Smith and Richard Hickock, broke into the isolated farmhouse of a respectable family, the Clutters, tied the four family members and killed them
- the murders left with the loot of forty or fifty dollars, were captured, sentenced to death and executed in 1965
- captures the bleak emptiness of life on the vast wheat plains of Midwest, where the Clutters lived, and also the quit desperation of Smith and Hickock as they wander across the country in search of a job or someone to rob

Cold-Fact
Style

- the novel aims to make understandable the cold fact of the murder and the **violence of contemporary society**
- eschews social or psychological analysis, avoids sensationalism, presents cold facts derived from observation, interview and record, using a coolly dispassionate tone, a cold but uncynical eye and scrupulously mean style
- supplies no explanation for the killing, suggests that ‘the crime was a psychological accident, virtually an impersonal act’ but the victims had experienced prolonged suffering, so that the aggressors had to suffer in turn
- leaves it to the reader to see violence as random, gratuitous, meaningless, as peculiar to contemporary America

Collection

Music for Chameleons (1980)

- a collection of fiction and non-fiction, includes short stories as well as conversations with famous personalities

Celebrity
Articles

Answered Prayers (1986)

- an unfinished posthumously published novel, a series of articles revealing personal lives of famous celebrities

Flannery O’Connor (1925–1964)

Biography

- born in Savannah, Georgia, her family later moved to Milledgeville (1938), a small town within the same state
- spent two years at Yaddo, an artist’s colony in Saratoga Springs, New York, working there on her first novel
- diagnosed with lupus (1950), a hereditary disease in her family, on which she returned back to Milledgeville

Writing
Features

- her fiction is appreciated for its density, strikingly original metaphors and her rendering of local vernaculars
- her writing was formed by her being a Southerner and a Roman **Catholic** in a predominantly Protestant region
- portrays the South as a savage and empty wasteland of decaying towns and villages and endless tobacco roads
- the atmosphere of her work is brutal and farcical, sees the world as a nightmare that is comic because absurd
- sparkles with a bizarre comic inventiveness, shows **grotesque** parodies of humanity rather than human beings
- presents her characters as distorted in some way, social or physical, mental or material, to mirror their guilt, original sin and spiritual poverty, they seem to be stubbornly foolish and ignorant witnesses to the power of evil
- interprets experience in tough and uncompromising terms, without compassion that excuses human weakness

Writing
Subjects

- centres the meaning of life in **redemption** by Christ, which she sees as a painful act of divorce from this world
- explores a world of corrosion, decay and evil, apparently forsaken by God but saved by his incalculable **grace**
- the corruption of her characters acts as a proof of the great scope of God’s extraordinary forgiveness and love, her characters ultimately reveal the workings of eternal redemption, even though against their will or awareness
- produces a fictional world whose significance lies in its obvious aberration, its **Gothic** deviance from the norm
- explains that ‘the novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him’ but which his audience may find ‘natural’, therefore the novelist must make his vision ‘apparent by **shock**’

Geranium and Other Stories (1947)

Short
Stories

- a short story collection against which she earned her degree at the prestigious Iowa Writers’ Workshop at the University of Iowa, became the first writer to graduate with a work of fiction rather than with a theoretical thesis

⁷ New Journalism was promoted by Tom Wolfe (b. 1931), author of *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968). New Journalists should stick to the facts and use the following four techniques: extensive dialogue, detailed recording of the everyday activities, careful arrangement of the narrative scene by scene and a consistent narrative point of view.

- Masterpiece Novel** *Wise Blood* (1952)
- the novel's protagonist, Haze Motes, preaches 'the Church Without Christ' and declares that Jesus was a liar, which provides for a comedy of savage paradox because Motes relies on belief for the power of his blasphemy
 - the Christ-haunted protagonist struggles to deny his faith but also perversely admits the sway it has over him
 - the novel's title refers to the idea that mentally afflicted people tend to see the world more clearly than others
- Short Stories** *A Good Man is Hard to Find* (1955)
- her first short story collection, called for a blues song of the name which was popularized by Bessie Smith
- Religious Novel** *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960)
- the novel continues her exploration of characters who attempt to discard their faith only to find it reaffirmed
- Short Stories** *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (1965)
- a short story collection, published posthumously, takes its title from the French theologian Teilhard de Chardin
- Eudora Welty (1909–2001)**
- Views of the Place**
- born in Jackson, Mississippi, came to know the state well when she gathered here material for a documentary
 - insists that 'feelings are bound up in place' and that you judge where you are 'by knowing where you started'
 - sees place as fact and feeling, says that 'location pertains to feeling' and 'feeling profoundly pertains to place'
- Writing Features**
- her short stories are comic, tragic, lyrical, Gothic or grotesque, her novels often combine all of these features
 - focuses on the human consciousness, on attempts to find one's place and know oneself, often through **myths**
 - influenced by the hawthornian romance, mixes the marvellous and the realistic to reveal truths of human heart
- Short Stories** *A Curtain of Green* (1941), *The Wide Net* (1943), *The Bride of Innisfallen* (1955)
- collections of short stories, set mostly in and around the South, though some are set in London, Italy or Greece
- American Romance** *The Robber Bridegroom* (1942)
- a novel set in the Natchez Trace region of Mississippi in the eighteenth century, featuring the Natchez Trace as a symbol of division between the wilderness and the civilization, the Trace being a link to Nashville, Tennessee
 - based loosely on a Brothers Grimm **fairytale**, uses the peculiarly American genre of the hawthornian romance
 - explores the ways we try to understand the past and accommodate it to the present, to attach memory to place
 - suggests that landscape and history are both fictions, they are spun out of certain given facts of space and time
- Plantation Novel** *Delta Wedding* (1946)
- a magical but also slyly mocking plantation novel, set on a Mississippi plantation in 1923, a year picked by the author as being one in which no wars or natural disasters occurred to disrupt the normal pattern of domestic life
 - the narrative is uneventful in the conventional sense, concentrates on the people without any undue influences
 - describes 'many little lives lived privately', people living alone and leading lives of extraordinary **solitude** and even **mystery**, for any communality they share is partial and any order or ceremony they achieve is but fleeting
 - follows the complicated relationships of an extended family which is to have one of their daughters married
 - includes numerous analogies to myths, the marriage itself is a parallel to the myth of Hades and Persephone⁸
- Interrelated Short Stories** *The Golden Apples* (1949)
- her finest collection of short stories, features interconnected stories, all set in the town of Morgana, Mississippi
 - the characters appear in several stories at once, the key events of their lives are not revealed chronologically but in different stories, which gives the impression of the stories being told and read all at one and the same time
 - the central character is King MacLain, paralleled to Zeus, a character and an archetype at once, he represents both the wanderer searching for the golden apples of Yeats's poem and the modern man searching for his place
- Tragicomic Novel** *The Ponder Heart* (1954)
- a tragicomic novel about a loneliness uncle who gives away family fortune and marries a girl who is seventeen
- Storytelling Novel** *Losing Battles* (1970)
- the novel is a comedy but describes with sympathy people who wage a disgracefully unequal struggle with circumstances but remain hopeful despite everything and use old tales and talking as a stay against confusion
 - focuses on 'people at the rock bottom of their lives', poor farmers from the hill country during the Depression
 - centres at a family reunion whose members untiringly keep on telling tall tales, family legends, personal memories, folk humour, religious myth, stories of magic and mystery, each one having his own telling technique
 - gives the sense that each tale and conversation belongs to a larger body of speech, a continuum of **storytelling**

⁸ Hades, the god of the underworld in Greek mythology, abducted Persephone, the beautiful daughter of Zeus and Demeter, goddess of the harvest. Demeter made the earth cease to be fertile until it was agreed that Persephone will stay for two thirds of the year with her parents and for one third of the year with Hades, which is the winter time.

- presents conversation as a way of escape from loneliness and of identification with a particular place and past

Masterpiece ***The Optimist's Daughter*** (1972)

Novel

- the novel examines death, loneliness, disillusion and the necessity of knowing oneself and accepting one's fate