



## The Changing Perspective On The History of The South: A Literary Approach

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History has been the persistent and obsessive element in Southern thinking. The South's sense of past is deeply rooted and it is more passionate and complex. The region's concern with history, truly speaking, is fostered by Scott's works and the Civil War has intensified it. Out of the experience of defeat and humiliation, the South has developed its own view of history. But with passing of times the Southerner's view of history has been changed. Consequently, there are many perspectives on history rather than one. The romantic perspective on history is the earliest of the series. The Southerner's tendency to idealize things predates the Civil War but the aftermath of the war not only rejuvenated it but also made it a necessary quality of Southern mind. The period after the Civil War with its trauma and scars of defeat was marked by great frustration for Southerners. Since the present is ignominious, they looked back to the years before the war as glorious ones. The romantic view of the past was accepted partly as an emotional requirement of Southerners and partly as a defense against Northern criticism. The romantic view presents an idealized version of the plantation regime. It stresses, specifically, the congenial relationship between the master and the slave. The upholders of this view urged upon their fellows to enshrine the ideals of the plantation regime. Prior to the Civil War, they said, their land was home of culture and refinement. Thousands of slaves cultivated their broad acres and the people lived in ease and plenty.

The romantic perspective of the past owes very much to the Southern men of letters. They presented the Southern readers with the plantation romance. Among those writers the most prominent were Harris and Page. *Red Rock (1898)* by Thomas Nelson Page is an example of romantically sentimental presentation of the past society. The romantic view of the Southern past achieved popularity in the 'eighties. Even the New South prophets while advocating the new creed gave their allegiance to the romantic view of the past. The romantic perspective, no doubt, worked better to encounter the North's criticism on the Southern institutions. But the defeat in the Civil War left bitter wounds in the South. Pride and hope were destroyed by the defeat and humiliation was added by the Reconstruction. Under such



circumstances Southerners desperately needed a thing to be proud of, to boast of. The only such thing left to the Southerners was their past, intact and untouched by the enemy. They glorified their past up to a level where it acquired mythic value, thus extending the mythic view of the past. When the romantic view of the past was still a ruling force, its complementary view, the mythic view, was achieving the status of what Gatson Calls “an inviolable shibboleth” (Gatson 191) through other means. Mythic perspective sees the Old time as an age of culture and values. It was the age in which the code of honor, the code of chivalry and the code of manners constituted the Southern way of life. The Old Age is looked upon as an era of chivalrous men and gentle women, of traditional aristocracy representing honor, courage, orthodox religion, respect for women and noblesse oblige to inferiors. The South fought the Civil War, according to this view, for the cause of the Southern way of living epitomized in the Confederacy. The fall of the Confederacy became the Lost Cause and the gentleman planter became the symbol of that cause. Those who fought and die for the cause became the model heroes, the marble image, the men above men. Thus the mythic view generated the hero worship in the South after the manner of the ancient Romans.

Thy mythic perspective persisted in the South of 1920's as an attempt to preserve the old values against the onslaught of the commercial civilization. The Southern writings in this period insisted on the Southern ways of living. One of the attempts of this kind was made by the twelve Southerners in the book, *I'll Take My Stand*. It recommends the Southern ways of living against the Northern ones, and projects it in terms of conflict between Agrarian versus Industrial Civilization. After a decade, another attempt of such kind was made by a historian, Dr. Douglas Southhall Freeman. His four volume biography of Robert E. Lee contributed to the myth of the Lost Cause. In 30's and 40's the novelists of the South used mythic past as a substance for their novels. The two novels of this period *Red Rose* by Stark Young and *Gone with the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell put history in mythic perspective. These two novelists gave this perspective a way to the Southern Literary Renaissance. From 1930's to 1950's each of the Southern literary giants, Faulkner, Warren, Wolf and Welty, produced a series of novels reconstructing the Southern history in every possible perspective. A study of their novels reveals that a single novel can hold more than one perspective on the past and the same author may have different perspectives as well. Thus the Southern novels and the books on Southern culture are the compendium of the various views on the South's past. In the works of Faulkner different perspectives on the past can be traced. He looks at history from the romantic perspective as he depicts the congenial relations between the master and the slave. The mythic perspective generates its place in his novels soon as he uses the past raising



up to the level of myth. Faulkner recognizes the power of the mythic perspective on the modern man by showing how it can force him either in disaster or into some favorable situations.

They mythic view on the past makes place in the novels by Warren who is interested in its negative aspect. He delineates the white male and female characters whose lives are bounded by notions drawn from a remembered mythic past. In the practice of using history in novels, the Southern novelists keep changing their view of the past. While the mythic view is still appealing to some Southerners, the tragic view on history is being adopted. The new perspective is more realistic in its nature than the earlier two ones. Seen from this perspective, the Southern history remains the story of a common suffering of the people of the South. It is no more the story of a glorious past but it is a story of ostracism and tragic experience of the Southern people. The South had fostered and lived with a peculiar institution of slavery. The region fought and lost the Civil War. It has endured the Reconstruction with humiliation and lived with poverty and frustration as parts of everyday life. Taken together, these experiences make the history of the South tragic and burdensome. The tragic perspective gets free play in Warren's novels. His attempt has been remained to show how Southern consciousness can respond to the tragic fact of history. In *All the King's Men*, Jack Burden, a Southerner, attempts to take a definite stance on his past. He realizes that past cannot be approached sentimentally but realistically. Southern history for Jack remains a burden to be borne, guilt to be accepted and expiated.

In the hands of Faulkner, the South's history of defeat, frustrations and guilt has been transformed into what Simpson calls "a universal myth of the human condition." (Simpson 74). Faulkner is engaged in depicting how the tragic perspective affects the Southerner's outlook on his life. Quentin's attitude differs from Shreve's in *Absalom, Absalom!*. The former has a sense of past and through it a personal access to a tragic vision. In 1960 the tragic perspective on history gets an elaborate treatment in Woodward's book *The Burden of Southern History*. The writer perceives the Southern history as a sum of "un - American experience" (Woodward 21). which constitutes the burden for the Southerners. Southerners' obsessive concern with the past results into different perspectives on it. They view history in terms of time giving way to temporal perspective on past. According to this view, history is an extension of the present into the past. Time past becomes the essence of time present. The temporal perspective on the past is elaborately treated in Southern novels. It facilitates the Southern writers to choose subject matter related to the present or recent past without losing their sense of past. For them past remains a part of the present, or a dimension of the present.



Many Southern novels describe the importance of the past in the present lives of the characters. Faulkner's novels, for instance, reveal how the past pervades the present of the Southern characters. Past breathes all around Pickett, a character in *Intruder in the Dust*. For him it is not yet two o'clock on the July afternoon in 1863; the brigades are in position behind the rail fence waiting for Longstreet to give the word.

The temporal perspective is presented in other ways too, in the Southern novels. Time past, present and future seem to constitute one dimension. However, the focus is on the time past; it is the producer of the present and shaper of the future. Jack Burden in *All the King's Men* uses the spider web metaphor to relate the past to the future and the present to the past. In so doing, he shows how the past, the present and the future are interrelated. Burden's sense of time is the sense of totality, of the whole, the typical of the Southerner's. By this the Southern novelists remind us that man is not free in his present, and the past is part master. The time past is inescapable how much one tries to avoid it. The temporal perspective on history keeps the past alive in the lives of the Southerners. It is not surprising when we see the past monitoring the present lives of the characters in the Southern novels. Past, present and future form one dimensional time in Southern literature. The other perspective reflected in Southern literature is artistic perspective on the past. It is evolved from the writer's act of viewing history in artistic terms rather than philosophic one during Southern Renaissance. The European writers view history on the philosophic plane; the Southern writes, on the other side, see history in terms of perception, consciousness, or apprehension of self. Explaining the issue McCormick writes that the Southerner "treats history through art rather than through philosophy." (Cormick 102). History for Southern writers becomes recent and urgent. It is seen in the dilapidated mansions, hovering over the statues of the Civil War heroes. Burden tells us that he can see a little chunk of history right there in front. History, as this perspective holds, becomes a matter of expression rather than reflection.

History as a matter for reflection is held by Flannery O'Connor in 1950's. She sees the Southern history from philosophic view point. To her an awareness of the larger history of salvation lies behind the awareness of the Southern history. O'Connor looks at the Southern history as a microcosm of larger universal history. Her characters move from the history of the South to the Biblical history. The understanding of Southern history, to her, extends the understanding of salvation history. Lack of awareness of Southern history precludes an awareness of the larger history of salvation. This philosophic interlinking of Southern history with the Biblical history is special to O'Connor extending philosophical perspective on history. The other writers after '50 are like Percy, Foote and Ellison offer



changing perspectives on the Southern past. They also retain the earlier perspectives presented by the predecessors. The Classical view of history is initiated in the novel of Faulkner and Warren and it is retained by Percy and Foote. Classically understood, history denotes knowledge – knowledge of past, present and future. History preserves knowledge of conscious living for the future generations. “History was exemplary knowledge”, Gross comments, “preserving for future generations what might otherwise sink into oblivion.” (Gross 2). History for the holders of this perspective is a guide, a form in an age of permanent crisis. This is tightly held by Aunt Emily in Percy’s *THE MOVIEGOER*. She insists that the knowledge of history can guide men in moments of life such as success, failure, marriage, and death. The classical view of history is countered by the cynical perspective on past.

The cynical perspective views history as no longer useful in present times. The past is no more a nourishing tradition but rather a storage of bygone style. There is nothing in it worth to imitate. Its worst side is that a preoccupation with the past and its customs may make one’s life empty. In the words of Hoffman, “A mere preoccupation with the past and with its relations to custom and human ceremony may very well lead to rather empty life” (Hoffman 7). This perspective is reflected in Binx’s ambivalent stance toward the past in *THE MOVIEGOER*. To him Aunt Emily’s manners and grace seem to be worthless. When it comes to live by the past without being oppressed by it, the Southern characters take either ambivalent stance or keeps ironic distance between themselves and history.

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