



## USE OF HISTORY IN SOUTHERN FICTION

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The Southern literature unlike the Northern literature expresses emotional grip and power of history on the Southern men of letters. It is because the South has a unique experience of history which the Southern literary men try to come to terms with and that makes them to deal with the past in their literary works. In the words of Holman, "It is the attempt to come to terms with their past that leads most Southern novelists to deal with history" (Holman 40). The obsessive concern of the Southern writers with the history of the South establishes the vital relationship between history and literature in the Southern culture. The writers in the South deal with history, often explicitly as well as implicitly, in various ways.

The Southern literary men, particularly the novelists, use history for creative purpose. In their search for subject, they turn to the history of their region which provides them with a usable mythology. It is available for them because of the nature of the Southern past which is constituted of two elements; the legendary past and the actual past. The Southern novelists handle the legendary past in novels. History of the South becomes a modern myth, a collection of traditional tales which are time bound yet possess contemporary relevance and emotional force. Unlike Yeats, Eliot and Hemingway who invented mythology of their own, the Southern writers like Faulkner, Warren, Welty, O'Connor and Ellison have mythology available in the past of their region. Myth of Lost Cause, for instance, persisted in Faulkner's novels; he recognized the strength of the legend by showing how it could prepare modern-day character into disaster as well as into some favorable situation. The Southern writers have just listened to old servants or neighbors for mythology. The old kins communicate the memories of the old days which they have either experienced or heard about. The Southern writers have selected and shaped those bits of history into a usable past. History in the form of myth or memory is used as substance in the Southern literature. The legend of chivalry which is the main of the legendary past is exploited to its utmost point in the Southern novels. The portrayal of the protagonist as the Southern gentleman is built upon the code of chivalry which he tries to live by. In his attempts to live by the code, the protagonist, in many cases, brings about his fall. In the rise and fall of the Southern gentlemanly protagonist, the novelists in the South symbolically show the rise and fall of the Old South.

History plays a large role in the Southern literature; it is involved in the making of it on both the thematic and artistic level. The Southern writers evoke history through the use of various metaphors and devices interlinking literature with history. Southern literature without its reference to the South's history is inconceivable. Such a congenial relationship between history and literature cannot be found elsewhere as it is in the Southern culture. The testimony of the development of vital relationship between these two issues is seen in the use of history in the Southern fiction.

There is a tradition of fiction writers in the South who have used history in their works. Among these writers, and who may be taken as specific in their use of history in fictions, are William Faulkner, Robert Penn Warren, Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor and Ralf Ellison. Faulkner's novels are loaded with history for they are concerned with characters who are



obsessed with a personal, family or regional past. He avoids the direct use of the history of the region in his fictions; his use of history is more symbolic and allegoric. Faulkner explores the private life, the personal consciousness of the individual character through which history is always filtered. He creates the characters that have their own vision of history. Past exists in their memories and speculations thus making it a matter of individual concern in the South. A selection of *The Sound and the Fury*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, *Flags in the Dust* and *The Unvanquished*, for special scrutiny will help to explore the use of history in fictions by Faulkner. These four novels are chosen as representatives of Faulkner's use of the past.

The central character of *The Sound and the Fury*, Quentin Compson attempts to recover the time past. He exemplifies Faulkner's concept of the time past, for him the past is never lost. On the narrative level, it relates the history of the Compsons and of the South. Thematically, the novel is about a haunting meditation upon the time past, and its relation to the individual man. The family history which is interwoven with the history of the South is discovered and interpreted from the point of view of the members of the Compsons family. Using the circular narration, Faulkner extends different views of the past; one is held by Quentin himself. He is haunted by the past, trying to live in accordance with that past. His taking refuse in the code of chivalry is a part of this attempt which makes him senseless in the present. On the other side is Caddy, his sister, who has adopted a different way of living. She doesn't mind losing her virginity and stepping out of the code. Seeing Caddy's failure to conform to his idea of virginity, the ideal he tries to defend, Quentin withdraws into himself. He realizes he cannot ultimately escape into his own private world. The tombstones, documents, and other objects from the past have the power to evoke history in his mind. This is further underlined in the character sketch of Benjy.

In *Absalom Absalom!* too, Quentin Compson along with his friend Shreve is fascinated with the past. Faulkner uses history in this novel in order to tell how the Southern men can respond to the terrible facts of the Southern past. The characters of Quentin and Shreve with their different attitudes towards the past execute Faulkner's intention in the novel. Their fascination with the few events of Thomas Sutpen's life and death leads them to reconstruct his character. Their doing it, in a sense, is the act of reconstructing the past. They try through inference and guesswork to ascertain what manner of man he was. Quentin's and Shreve's different attitudes to the past explicitly show the theme.

Shreve is a man who has little sense of the past. Although the past of the Old South fascinates him, it is not because it percolates through his consciousness but because it is melodramatic, better than the theatre. The story of the Suptens family is irrelevant to him and it is easy for him to cast it out from his mind. His approach to the past is a result of education that he is having. He is a medical student and his concern is with the human body that can be described scientifically. To Shreve, truth is laboratory truth and history, as he sees it, doesn't affect man's future. Quentin Compson, on the other hand, is obsessed with the history of the lost war and family disaster. He confronts the family and regional pasts in order to interpret and understands them. For interpretation of the past, Quentin uses eyewitness testimony, historical documents and imagination. Shreve dismisses the past in a cavalier fashion; Quentin lets the past to rule him. The past clutches Quentin so hard that release from it seems impossible. The Sutpens legend impinges more directly and movingly upon Quentin because of his close connection with his family and his region. His attitude to the past is different from Shreve's because the former has the sense of the presence of the past, the later doesn't have. Quentin Compsons's legacy is retained by the young Bayard Sartoris of *Flags in the Dust*.

The question of how young Bayard Sartoris responds to his past while living in the present reveals Faulkner's use of history in *Flags in the Dust*. The first part of the novel



reveals young Bayard Sartoris's obsession with the past, particularly with his brother's death. The narrator of the novel describes him as an alienated figure who has engaged himself in coming to terms with the past. This fact makes him different from his brother John who had what Miss Jenny's Jeb Stuart and the Carolina Bayard had. The World War First is a godsend for John as the Civil War had been for Carolina Bayard. In this light, young Bayard's obsession with his brother's death is a subconscious attempt to attach himself to the Sartoris's heroic legend. A curious fact about his behavior is that he never confronts directly his family's past. It is only the members of the older generation showed an active and conscious interest in preserving ancestral past. Instead of taking conscious interest in his family's legendary past, young Bayard rather attempts to incorporate himself into rhythms of the land - through farming, his marriage to Narcissa, and his final trip to the Mac Callums. But all these attempts failed to restore peace to his rootless soul. Just after his automobile accident, he goes to his room, picks up his brother's canvas hunting coat, smells it whispering his brother's name. After that he burns the coat and other things of John's childhood and youth in a futile effort to destroy the hold of his brother's memory over him.

*The Unvanquished* delineates mature Bayard Sartoris in his recollection of the past - his youth and early manhood in the Civil War and the Reconstruction - and his improvement on it. The novel becomes a retrospective narrative as Bayard searches the past to recover the stages by which he develops into the persons he has become. In a sense, the novel seems to attempt a comprehensive view of historical process. It reworks the Sartoris story in which the past events are recreated in the original vitality and in the chronological order. They are placed in their contemporary context and in relation to Bayard's own biography. As a result, we get a portrayal of the past which is also an account of Bayard's development from childhood to manhood. At first Bayard Sartoris seems to be a detached observer of the past than the active actor in it. His detachment may be due to his ability to evaluate his heritage from a somewhat removed stance. But he no more remains passive observer when he kills Grumby, the killer of Granny. In the act of killing, we see Bayard fulfilling the revenge code of his society.

Warren's use of history in his fictions is not limited just only to historical setting and event but goes beyond that. His purpose is to search a meaning for life by placing man in time and history. For this purpose, he uses history in *All the Kings Men*, *Night Rider*, and *Band of Angels*. In its juxtaposition of the characters of Jack Burden and Cass Mastern, *All the King Men* reveals the past and its burden the characters carry in their present lives. Jack's preoccupation with the past is revealed when he meditates upon the word 'history'. His name testifies to the burden he bears of the past in his mind. As a historian he is conscious of the impingement of the past on the present. He is engaged in a doctoral dissertation, the journal of Cass Mastern. At the same time he undertakes another project that of digging up of the dirt on Judge Irwin. Jack's commitment is to the past so he is not afraid of searching the human past. Doing his job, Jack reconstructs his own past and of Willie Stark by undertaking search into the past.

Jack's search into the past of Judge Irwin is linked to his growth towards self-knowledge. It reveals the Judge as a bribe-taker and the aftermath of his suicide uncovers him as an adulterer. Judge Irwin, like Cass Mastern, had committed adultery with the wife of a trusted friend, Ellis Burden. When the judge kills himself, Jack's mother tells Jack that she is leaving her present husband for she knows she always loved the judge. Her present act gives Jack the past which establishes his own identity. In *All the King's Men* the knowledge of the past is closely linked with the self-knowledge. Jack's sentimental attachment to the past paralyses his action.



Percy Munn of *Night Rider* is projected by Warren as a disintegrated man for he is obsessed with the need to know himself. Munn's longing is for self-definition, for integration of self. Thus the past is recaptured in *Night Rider* to establish the identity of the central character, Percy Munn. Throughout the novel, he turns to others to know himself. He goes to his wife for an explanation of who he is but she cannot help him. In his other attempt to define himself, Munn makes affair with his elderly cousin Miss Ianthe. But she neither has memory of the past nor has any desire to remember it. Like Ianthe, Munn tries to protect himself by denying memory. In his last attempt to define himself through action, Munn embarks on a career of violence and lawlessness. He decides to kill Senator Tolliver because the act of killing, he thinks, will give him the integrity of self as Captain Todd possesses. The captain has about him the air of conviction and confidence which Munn attributes to his life of action. Captain Todd had heroically fought the Yankee during the Civil War, and after Appomattox captured and hanged guerrillas who preyed on the defeated South. Munn sees in the life of the captain the possibility of fulfillment in action; he won the meaning from the past. Munn tries to learn about himself but he fails. His failure in grasping the meaning of the past for present living seems to lie in the sin of abstraction.

History is too much with Amantha Starr, a Mulatto girl of *Band of Angels*. The fiction describes her inner conflict on the journey to self-acceptance through past-acceptance. Amantha is bound to the past in many ways than one, and her attempts to free herself from it are central to the story of fiction. She repudiates her past as she realizes that her father is responsible for her life of slavery. After her father's death she is declared a piece of property, a chattel of Mr. Starr because her mother was a Negro slave. She is handed over by the Sheriff to Mr. Marmaduke to whom her father owed money. Amantha has no manumission paper from her father to argue for her liberty. She feels betrayed by her father who treated her as white but did not manumit her. She repudiates her father and the past related to him because these are responsible for her present misery. Amantha experiences an inner conflict; what she was.

The character's struggle with the past is as much common in Warren's fiction as it is in Eudora Welty's fiction. The use of history in her fictions is geared to her technique of using place metaphor, memory and character's move into the past. The men and women in her fictions have close association with the place, particularly houses which are containers of the relic from the past. They are moored to the past by the place where they do live. Her characters struggle to come to grip not only with the human past but also with the house as an on-going physical symbol of the past. It is the reason of Welty's wide use of place metaphor and its importance in her fictions. The characters in her fictions move into the world of past in order to understand it and get relieved from it. It is a way by which history enters her fictions, and use of memory is the other way. Memory renders the past. It is treated as domain of history which may otherwise be forgotten. It is a means through which the past can be captured. Using history in her fictions, Welty enriches them. Her use of history in *The Optimist's Daughter*, *Robber Bridegroom* and *Losing Battles* keeps her up with the tradition of the Southern writers who use history in fictions.

Welty's *The Optimist's Daughter* projects the struggle of a daughter, Laurel MC Kelve in making sense out of her own past as well as her parents'. First she tries to comprehend why her father took for a second wife, and secondly, she attempts to interpret her own marriage. Laurel develops her own version of the past as something precious and must be protected from, she thinks, outside incursion. It disturbs her when friends and townspeople invent a heroic past of her parents that does not conform to her own version. She attempts to protect the dead from the living and thus preserves the past intact. A change in her view about the past occurs in a long night during which she wrestles with her own version.





She confronts the past, examines it, and frees it from her chain. Welty's portrayal of Laurel's struggle to evade and then finally free the past is highly symbolic. The image of a chimney swift trapped inside the family home symbolizes the past caught in Laurel's inflexible idea of it. The bird, like the past, pursues her.

The past is a fact no more open to help or hurt like her father in his coffin. The deads are saved by being released into memory. Now Laurel needs no breadboard, no house; she can exchange those lifeless tokens for the continuous. Laurel overcomes the past by releasing it into memory but Clement Musgrove of *The Rober Bridegroom* suffers from the memory of the past.

Clement Musgrove bears in his memory the guilt of the past of pioneering. He is moored to the past and carries the burden of the guilt of the past. He tells Jamie his early life story which is the history of the white settlers in wilderness, pursuing their dream of a new world. Central to the story is Clement's contemplation of the Indians's fate. To him the passing of the Indians is the extinction of a human race. This past in the form of guilt lodges in Clement's heart. He feels the cost of pioneering in sorrow, loss and general estrangement. Both the Indians and Clement are the victims; the former of the pioneering, the later of the implications of the pioneering. To Clement, Jamie provides a contrast in his own person. He tells Clement that guilt is burdensome thing to carry about in the heart and better not to bother with it. Other pioneer left the past behind and forgot all about it. Clement keeps it with him in the form of memory and uses it to judge his present situation. His memory of the little group gathered around a campfire and the Indians penetrating the circle and bursting the illusion of security helps Clement to understand his present condition. He comes to know that though he has gathered whoever around him for familiarity and protection may not be firm, as it seems. He understands the present in relation with the past. In the course of the time, he learns that his own family circle have left him alone, pursuing dreams of wealth and success. Like the Indians, Clement is pushed aside by time and change; both are victims of the change.

In *Losting Battles*, Welty uses the past in a highly symbolic way. She employs the recurring metaphor of reunion which can hold the past within the present. She invests it with the circle motif. Thus the novel describes the uneducated reunion against the forces of learning led by Julia Mortimer. In the background there is an old tree symbolizing the presence of the past in the poor farmer's family. The tree presides over the reunion connecting the old with the new. The tree is described as a veteran of all old blows carrying the marks of the past. The family of the farmer remembers its origin not in fact but in legend. The family has mythic consciousness whose center is the recurrence of the ritual, reunion. The circle motif is widely used in the novel. The story of Jack Renfro begins with a gold wedding ring, follows a circular path into the whole past of the family, and returns to ring itself. This circle motif is invested with the union by allying the family with the daily cycle of sunrise and sunset. For the retention of the reunion the family must be reaffirmed by the annual birthday gathering. So on the evidence of postcards and entries on the family Bible, the reunion concludes that Gloria is really Beecham and part of the family blood. Jack becomes a reincarnation of his uncle Sam who dies young about the age of Jack. Both of them are loved by the family, are taken out of circle by government. Both courted red-haired girls with mysterious past, thus making the circle complete. In the reunion motif, Welty conceives the time past as retrieval. Welty's treatment of history in her fictions is more or less similar to the Southern writers discussed here so far, but the other writer of her sex, Flannery O'Connor uses history in a new mode.

Her characters labor to create the dynamic relationship between the past and the present. They move from the particulars to the universal; from the history of the South to the Biblical history. O'Connor looks at the Southern history as a microcosm of larger universal



history. It is reflected in her fictions and short fiction, *Wise Blood*, “A Late Encounter with the Enemy”, and “Judgment Day”. In her novel *Wise Blood* O'Connor labors to work out her own vision of history. She depicts Haze Mote's changing perception of history in course of time. Haze is projected in his quest that is essentially about the meaning of self in history. In his early life, he claims to nihilism and innocence in order to escape history. It is the history of the legacy of original sin transmitted to him and specified in the guilt he feels over the carnival sideshow visit. Haze's mother and uncle take the condition of guilt as the inborn condition of sin which can only be meliorated by Christ's redemption. But Haze tries unsuccessfully to repudiate this vision of history and contrarily maintains a commitment to absolute truth. He seeks self-redemption in a Church without Christ, neglecting Christ's redemptive act. He anticipates that the power of salvation must totally be contained within the self, cut off from the history. Consequently he is left rootless, divorced from the past.

Haze's efforts to escape history are confounded by both internal and external factors; his own integrity of conscience and the outside condition of sin-brokenness, deceit, indifference to truth. Inevitability of history in human life is symbolically described by O'Connor in the character of Haze Mote. In her short fiction “A Late Encounter with the Enemy” she shows various aspects of man's relationship with history. The focus is on the theme of death which places, O'Connor thinks, the individual life in the perspective of history - personal, social and biblical. The story describes the death of a wizened Civil War veteran in the context of history. In a climactic scene, the old man becomes conscious of the presence of death. Having dressed in the Confederate uniform, the old man sits on the stage at his granddaughter's commencement exercises and looks at the black procession forming in front of him. It enters a hole in his head slowly deepening and widening. For many years the past and the future had been the same to him, one forgotten, the other not remembered. He had no use for history because he never expected to meet it again. But at the moment of death, history becomes significant as the past rushed into his mind, and forces his vision into future.

The old man's view of history as a black procession fixes in his consciousness, and brings him to death. Although he is a representatives of history he is not interested in it, consequently he is not conscious of death. “This lack of awareness of Southern history”, Feeley writes, “in which he has played a part, evidently precludes, for him, an awareness of the larger history of salvation which lies behind it” (Feeley 91). The old man's memory of history is as weak as his body. He accepts and revels in the romanticizing of history by a movie. He sums up his philosophy when he muses on history as procession and life as parades, and he likes parades. The theme of man's death in the context of history is reworked once again in the “Judgment Day”. For the old man, Tanner death among the unknown people is meaningless. He regrets his choice of leaving the South and moving to the North to live with his daughter. Down the South the old man had enjoyed free air around his shack; here in the North the halls are narrow and dark. The old man amuses to see how his daughter, who had shamed him for living with a Negro, has to accept a black couple as neighbors. He tries to exercise his Southern hospitality on the black neighbor, but it turns out disastrous. It questions his identity and his ability to handle Negro.

After the incident of the Negro's grabbing Tanner and pushing him through doorway, makes the old man to think to return to his native place, Georgia. He wants to go there either dead or alive. For weeks he dreams and plans how he might do it. He imagines his Negro friends Coleman's reception of his corpse in a coffin. He worries he might die and be buried in the North that he wants to escape. If it happens, he will find himself among the strangers on the Judgment Day. This knowledge of biblical history makes Tanner restless. When he realizes his daughter's intention to bury him in New York City for economic purpose, he sets



out for his native place, the South. He pins a note inside his pocket instructing the finder to send his body express collect to Coleman, should he die en route. He thinks that his return to the South would maintain his metaphysical identity. O'Connor's working on Biblical history beyond the Southern history is very much special to her. Ellison differs in his use of history in his novels from O'Connor.

Ellison uses history in his works for a special purpose. His concern is a hero's individual responsibility for his role in history. His nameless protagonists consider history as a means to action, a guide to securing full human rights. The question of hero's identity is also related to a knowledge of history. The black characters in Ellison's fiction suffer from self – alienation until they realize their past. The central theme that evolves in his fictions, is the more conscious a person of his past, the more free he becomes. *Invisible Man* is a superb example of Ellison's use of past in his works for aesthetic purpose. In a quest for self-definition in history, the hero of the novel realizes the meaning and importance of the past in present life. The early life of the protagonist shows him future oriented. He is eager to think ahead and is reluctant to reflect upon past. He doesn't dare even to open the Bible because it makes him homesick. He thinks that the Brotherhood and not the past will provide him with a system of belief which makes individual and political action significant. But his attempt to escape the past and begin life anew dooms him to repeat his earlier mistakes. He has realized that he is as invisible as he was in his hometown and at his college. He severs his connections with the Brotherhood. He learns the significance of the past in his present life and identifies himself with it. He becomes aware of the fact that to deny one's past is to deny oneself.

In *Invisible Man* the protagonist's quest for self-definition in history ends in the eviction scene. It occurs immediately after he has lost his Southern identity in a hospital. He encounters an aged black couple being evicted from their home by white city marshals. In their scattered shabby belongings, the protagonist sees "free papers" of an ancestor of one of the old folks. After reading it, he feels as if he is being dispossessed of some painful but precious thing that he could not bear to lose. On that occasion he delivers a brief speech uniting the past and the present in an assertion of black human right. The closing part of the novel reveals that the protagonist at last realizes the value of history.

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