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**Building Southern Identity through Reading:
The Role of the Works of Southern Writers
in Promoting Specific Cultural Values**

Diplomová práce

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Abstrakt

Tato diplomová práce se zabývá vztahem literatury Jihu Spojených Států Amerických a společensko-kulturních realití tohoto regionu. Na výběru děl pěti jižanských autorů tato práce zkoumá, jakým způsobem byla specifická kultura Jihu reflektována v literatuře v období od konce Americké občanské války do druhé poloviny dvacátého století. Práce se vymezuje proti tvrzení, že jižanská literatura vznikala především za účelem podpory jižanské identity a kulturní nadřazenosti Jihu nad Severem. Základní hypotéza, která je v práci ověřována, tvrdí, že přes nezanedbatelné příspěvky významných jižanských autorů k budování jižanské identity, tito autoři využívali svá díla ke kritice společenských poměrů na americkém Jihu.

Abstract

This thesis examines the relationship between Southern literature and socio-cultural realities of the Southern region of the United States of America. Analyzing works of five distinguished Southern writers, this thesis examines the reflection of specific Southern culture features in literature of the region in the period from the end of the American Civil War to the second half of the 20th century. The thesis oppose the opinion that the primary goal of Southern literature was to promote Southern identity and its cultural superiority above the North. The central hypothesis, that is being verified by this thesis, is that despite the indisputable contribution of highly recognized Southern writers to building of Southern identity, these authors expressed in their works also often sharp critiques of the social conditions in the South.

Klíčová slova

Americký Jih, literatura, kultura amerického Jihu, jižanská identita, Mark Twain, William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy

Keywords

American South, Literature, Southern Culture, Southern Identity, Mark Twain, William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy

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Introduction

The United States consists of diverse ethnicities and cultures. One of the interior boundary lines that divides distinct cultural regions in the United States is more significant historically than the others. The line in question is the border dividing the country in two distinctive regions - the North and the South. The disparity and, at times even rivalry between these two regions has been evident since the settling of the colonies in the 16th century. A climax was the American Civil War and the following Reconstruction era. With the modernization and industrialization of the South, the differences between the two regions gradually faded, but certain cultural aspects of the American South are visible even in the 21st century. A sense of regional distinction manifested itself in various political and intellectual movements and in cultural spheres as well. One of these cultural spheres with clearly distinguishable traits of Southern identity is Southern literature.

Southern literature comprises a body of works usually written by authors whose origins are rooted in the American South and who, typically, wrote about the South in their poems, stories, or novels. One of the integral features of books of Southern literature is an imprint of crucial aspects of Southern culture in their texts. Themes representing Southern reality as well as their presentation and interpretation naturally differs in the works of various writers, and different eras. Some of the texts almost completely support the way of Southern life as envisioned by some, while others perceive Southern reality with critical lenses and are critiques of local conditions.

This thesis examines the relationship between Southern identity and Southern literature. How did prominent white authors included in the body of Southern literature presented their region to the reading public? Were they blindly supportive of Southern tradition and cultural aspects, or did they offer constructive critique of the social and economic order of the region? Did the authors promote Southern distinctiveness within the boundaries of the United States or did they rather support the assimilation of the region with the rest of the country? And how were these trends evolving in time?

The authors whose works are included in the body of Southern literature being considered, indisputably contributed to the building of the regional identity of Southerners. Their works promoted virtues of Southern society and culture. Nevertheless, most, with the exception of the sentimental plantation legends, did not promote Southern culture in blind admiration. On the contrary, works of prominent authors of Southern literature such as Mark Twain, William Faulkner, or Eudora Welty often contain sharp critiques of local conditions, perhaps hoping to somehow change them.

The works of five Southern writers, all universally recognized as significant to Southern and American literature are analyzed. Among these works are: *Puddn'head Wilson* by Mark Twain, *Absalom, Absalom!* by William Faulkner, *A Curtain of Green* by Eudora Welty, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find and Other Stories* by Flannery O'Connor, and *The Last Gentleman* by Walker Percy. These particular authors were chosen for the analysis as they belong among the most prominent Southern writers and are considered to be valuable contributors to the body of Southern literature in their respective eras. Their writings were widely read already during their lives and despite being in the center of literary scene they were not afraid to express ideas of disapproval with some aspects of Southern culture. Besides, the chosen works chronologically cover the period of time from the end of the Civil War, when the discrepancy between the North and the South reached a violent climax to the second half of the 20th century, when some differences between the two regions gradually began to disappear. The Black authors, who were no less significant in creating the legacy of Southern literature are omitted as the traditional themes of southern literature such as family, community, sense of place, and the legacy of defeat have significantly different meanings in their works, beyond the scope of this paper.¹

This analysis of individual works is not a literary study. Rather, texts are assessed from socio-cultural point of view seeking the links and references to features

¹ Michael Kreyling, *Inventing the Southern Literature*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 77.

typical for Southern culture. Furthermore, the tone of these references within the context of the particular work is examined and its possible contribution to the promotion of Southern culture discussed.

A cultural context of the American South and an explanation of historical evolution of the polarity between the North and the South sets the stage. The two regions have differed since the very origins of the colonies and the nation and the differences shifted in the course of time as did the mutual perceptions of each other. Hand in hand with these differences between the regions came the need to define one against the other, creating an intensity which shifted as well. The grounds for this part are taken predominantly from works of significant American historians who focused specifically on Southern history, such as W. J. Cash, James C. Cobb, and C. Vann Woodward.

The second chapter is a brief introduction to the phenomenon of Southern literature. It deals with the origins and development of Southern literature as well as with specific features typically found in its works. The chapter concludes with the building of Southern identity through the works of literature. The most important sources for literary background was the work of J. A. Bryant Jr., professor emeritus at the University of Kentucky, concerned mainly with the 20th century Southern Literature and Michael Kreyling, Vanderbilt professor of English and author of several books, primarily on Southern literature from the antebellum period to the 20th century.

Following are the analysis of chosen novels and stories in chronological order. The particular features of Southern cultures examined in the analysis are a perception of the past, the chivalry and tradition, the community and family relations and racial relations. Occasionally, when it is an important part of the work, other feature is considered as well, such as the theme of poverty in Welty's stories or the theme of changes in the South in *The Last Gentleman*. Prior to the analysis is a brief introduction

to the author's work and place in the Southern literature based on their biographies or literary studies of the works of the individual authors.

1. Cultural Context

1.1 Southern-Northern Polarity

The polarity between the Southern and Northern United States can be traced from the origins of the colonies and the nation. In fact, even the natural environments of the thirteen original colonies differed widely due to their geographic location. Bennet H. Wall once wrote “there never has been the 'one South'” as described by many historians, but it is also possible to say that there has never been the “one North” either. Within the regions, there are many dissimilarities, but also certain general aspects that transcended the differences and constituted two distinctive civilizations, as assumed by many historians.²

The differences between North and South developed gradually and were recognized by most Americans. Each section - a democratic and commercial North and an aristocratic and agrarian South - had different ethnic, historical, class, religious, cultural and political traditions.³ While the North was settled mostly by people seeking religious freedom in the New World, the predominant group of people in the South were defenders of the monarchy, who retained a closer cultural and religious contact with Europe, than did the northern colonies.⁴ Unlike the North with its blend of family farms, businesses and manufacturing, the South was either large plantations of agricultural production centered around cotton and tobacco plantations, or poor whites and small

² Edward Pessen, “How Different from Each Other Were the Antebellum North and South?”, *The American Historical Review* 85 (Dec, 1980): 1119 - 1120, accessed on March 25, 2016, doi: 10.2307/1853242.

³ William Robert Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee: The Old South and American National Character*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 15.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.

land holdings. Many historians have questioned the centrality of plantations in the southern society and their thesis is supported by many studies of the ante-bellum southern economy. Indeed, great plantations inhabited by honorable or cruel slave owners, beautiful southern belles, loyal Negroes and white trash did exist, but not in very great numbers.⁵ The most typical white Southerners were small farmers working on modest acreage and they owned only few, if any, slaves.⁶ One of the leading historians of the American South, W. J. Cash expressed this already in 1929 when he wrote about the legend of the Old South as of “warp and woof of the Southern mind.” “The plantation”, he continued “was actually no more than a farm; its owner was neither a planter nor an aristocrat, but a backwoods farmer, yet the pretension to aristocracy was universal.”⁷

Thus perhaps the most distinctive and objective feature of the South was the existence of its “peculiar institution” and the general disparity between the populations of the two regions. Before the Civil War the population of North was more than 50% greater than that of the South. Both regions also differed significantly in their racial balance. While Blacks constituted 1% of northern population, they presented one third of the southern population. In addition almost 95% of southern Blacks were slaves.⁸

In addition the obvious and easily defined differences mentioned, some observers have suggested the existence of differences in the characters of people living in the South and North. Some declare that the North developed a peaceful, dynamic and utilitarian society, while southern society was based on the values of the English country gentry.⁹ In a 1785 letter to Chastellux, Thomas Jefferson wrote that “...an observing traveller may always know his latitude by the character of the people among whom he

⁵ Pessen, “How Different from Each Other Were the Antebellum North and South?”, 1123.

⁶ *Ibid*, 1128.

⁷ W. J. Cash, “The Mind of the South”, *The American Mercury* 70 (Oct, 1929): 185, accessed on March 24, 2016, <http://www.wjcash.org>.

⁸ Pessen, “How Different from Each Other Were the Antebellum North and South?”, 1121.

⁹ Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee: The Old South and American National Character*, 15.

finds himself.”¹⁰ The Northerners, or Yankees, were well-known for thrift, industriousness and asceticism but also for their greed, hypocrisy and coarse manners. Southerners, on the other hand, were often referred to as gay, pleasure-loving, generous people indifferent to financial ambitions, as well as weak, hesitant, wild and self-destructive people.¹¹ Many believe that these characteristic difference between North and South resulted in the Civil War.¹²

1.2 Building the Southern Identity

1.2.1 The Ante-bellum Era

Thanks to the general lack of incentives for investments in public education in the rural South, the nation`s earliest literary and publishing institutions were established predominantly in the Northeast of the United States. It was the northern-based American print culture that aimed to present an official story of America that was built up as the result of the efforts to articulate what the United States stood for in the post-Revolutionary period. In this particular context, the formation of the United States was presented as the triumph of freedom, national unity and equality, the acquisition of wealth, the growth of great urban centers and the ethnic diversity of the population - concepts northern in character and not accepted by many Southerners.¹³

The principles of liberty, equality and democracy unavoidably clashed with the southern economy, society and culture based on and significantly shaped by the institution of slavery. Considering this basic discrepancy in regional values, the North, willing to defend its own proclaimed principles, defined itself against the South. As a consequence the South was eventually depicted as the “other” situated within the

¹⁰ A letter of Thomas Jefferson to Chastellux, Sep 2, 1785, available on <http://www.let.rug.nl/usa/presidents/thomas-jefferson/letters-of-thomas-jefferson/jefl35.php> (accessed on March 29, 2016).

¹¹ Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee: The Old South and American National Character*, 21.

¹² *Ibid*, 15.

¹³ James Charles Cobb, *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 3-4.

country's geographical boundaries, but embodying everything the United States was not about.¹⁴

Southerners, however, were not willing to accept the northern values and created other values, developing a sense of their own self-defined distinctiveness and reshaping the dissimilarities into claims of superiority. Southern myths centered around an idyllic plantation which first appeared shortly after the War of 1812, when William Wirt published his biography of Patrick Henry. Southern myth making by Wirt laid the ground of the later traditions when he “constructed for himself exactly the kind of legendary Southern past into which successive generations of Southerners were to retreat from the problems of the present.”¹⁵ By 1850 the cavalier legend of the South fully developed and became the central myth of Southern ethnic nationalism.¹⁶

During the ante-bellum era Southerners focused on their perception of social decline of the United States. They claimed that the values and ideals of the Revolution had eroded away and, consequently, while building a Southern identity, sought symbols of stability and order.¹⁷ According to the legend, the Southern cavalier lived a life of leisure, was courteous, cultivated, charitable, yielding and free from greed. He had honor, integrity with a high sense of civic and social responsibility and lived close to nature. Though a slave holder, he was a kindly and conscientious master to his slaves.¹⁸

These myths contrast the so called Yankee character defined by Southerners. Their Yankee was acquisitive, uncultivated and amoral. Unlike the Southern cavalier, the Yankee was individualistic and ascetic.¹⁹

¹⁴ Cobb, *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity*, 14.

¹⁵ Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee: The Old South and American National Character*, 82.

¹⁶ Cobb, *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity*, 42 - 43.

¹⁷ Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee: The Old South and American National Character*, 146.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 132 - 133.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 95 - 96.

1.2.2 The Reconstruction and the New South Creed

These differences in character of both regions are considered by some historians to be one of the main causes of the American Civil War. The origins of the conflict were complex and opinions on the significance of single issues that the American nation confronted at the time of the Civil War vary. The result of the War, is however indisputable. The South was defeated, economically declined and likely culturally devastated and humiliated further by Reconstruction.²⁰ The proponents of the South as an exceptional and extraordinary territory of the United States needed to create a proper narrative of its history to defend the Southern values and the harmed reputation of the South after the War.²¹

The national myths of each section were quite different and rivaled each other as the War began. Some in the North believed in holy crusade, and that they are predestined by the will of God to liberate Southern slaves and to punish their masters, others fought to retain the Union, which was probably also the primary goal of the North. Southerners, on the other hand, were defending their ideals of gallantry, aristocratic freedom and elegant lifestyle from the materialism of the North.²² The sense of southern distinctiveness was further fortified, as C. Vann Woodward points out in *Irony of Southern History*, by the un-Americanness of the up to then Southern historical experience. The experience of military defeat, occupation and reconstruction, though shared by many European nations could not be shared with any other part of America.²³ After the War and with the creation of the New South movement, however, came a reconciliation of the two myths and by the 1880s there was a national acknowledgement of the Old South legend and the Southern and Northern myths of national identity complemented each other.²⁴

²⁰ Paul M. Gaston, "The New South Creed: A Study in Southern Mythmaking," in *Myth and Southern History, vol. 2: The New South*, ed. Patrick Gerster, and Nicholas Chord (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 31.

²¹ Cobb, *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity*, 99.

²² Gaston, "The New South Creed," 20.

²³ C. Hugh Holman, *The Roots of Southern Writing: Essays on the Literature of the American South*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 9.

²⁴ Gaston, "The New South Creed," 27.

The proponents of the New South ideology sought the recovery of the South by northern investments, southern industrial development and growth. The despair over the Southern backwardness in industrial production is very well demonstrated in the famous speech of Henry Grady, one of the most influential New South enthusiasts. Standing in front of the Bay State Club of Boston in 1889, Grady expressed his anxiety about the lack of Southern industrial production when he told the famous story of a southern funeral in which the South “didn’t furnish a thing but the corpse and the hole in the ground.”²⁵ The goal of the New South Creed proponents was to redeem the Southern heritage by leaving the model of slavery and agriculture behind and by implementing democracy for whites and diversified industrial production in the region.²⁶

The interesting paradox of this time was that simultaneously with the rise of the New South creed, the mythic image of the Old South was revitalized as well, widely supported by both, Southerners and Northerners.²⁷ The Old South myth that developed after the War bore no traits of the abolitionist tradition. Remaining was only the picture of a nearly perfect society: “a country studded with magnolias that offers sweet scents and served as a background for beautiful maidens the fathers of which were invariably courtly, noble and generous presiding over enormous plantations and thousands of lovable, amusing and devoted slaves.” The New South proponents praised this myth as it gave South a necessary sense of greatness desperately needed after defeat in the War. At the same time though, they would change many aspects of the civilization depicted in the myth to fit the modernized version of the South. Instead of magnolias, they would thus prefer cotton mills, factories would be deemed superior to plantations and bustle and energy would be preferred to life in leisure.²⁸

²⁵ Henry Grady to the Bay State Club of Boston, 1889, available on: <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5745/> (accessed on April 5, 2016).

²⁶ James Charles Cobb, *Redefining Southern Culture: Mind and Identity in the Modern South*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999), 150.

²⁷ Gaston, “The New South Creed,” 18.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

Of special importance in the legend of the Old South was the role of the negro. By implementing a stereotype of the poor freed negro mourning for the past days to whom freedom from slavery brought only misfortune, the authors of the legend managed to convince some Northerners that the relations between the races in the South were kind and mutually beneficial. Thus the major obstacle in installing sectional harmony was removed.²⁹

Unfortunately, the expectations of the New South creed were not realized. Despite the efforts to enhance the economic situation in the region through more intensive industrialization; the South remained the poorest and economically least progressive part of the United States.³⁰

1.2.3 The Twelve Southerners and the Southern Renaissance

The ideal of the Old South was reinvigorated and the myth was revived in the 1920s and 1930s by a group of scholars and poets centered at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. Among the members of this group, that was known as “Twelve Southerners”, or “Southern Agrarians” were such notable scholars, poets and writers as Robert Penn Warren, Alan Tate, John Crow Ransome, Donald Davidson, and the historian Frank Lawrence Owsley.³¹

The group was brought together by their efforts to confront the effects of industrialism and modernity on Southern culture and to defend the Southern cultural tradition and Southern reality that faced attacks in the 1920s. The main attack was led by a prominent eastern scholar and journalist Henry Louis Mencken, who criticized the South sharply as the consequence of the 1925 Scopes trial taking place in Dayton, Tennessee. The defendant was a young teacher who had dared to defy a state law of

²⁹ Gaston, “The New South Creed,” 28.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 32.

³¹ Susan V. Donaldson, “Introduction: The Southern Agrarians and Their Cultural Wars”, in *I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*, Donald Davidson et al. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), xii.

Tennessee forbidding the teaching of evolution in public schools. By its critiques, the case was used as a demonstration of southern backwardness.³²

In perhaps his most famous essay *The Sahara of the Bozart*, Mencken wrote of the South as of a region “almost as sterile, artistically, intellectually, culturally, as the Sahara Desert.”³³ Mencken believed that prior to the Civil War, the South had an affluent civilization of aristocratic manners, a civilization that brought to the United States original and active political minds such as Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry, or James Madison, a civilization where nearly all the political theories cherished in the United States had developed and a civilization that give some attention to the art of living, thus recognized that there is also a life beyond and above politics. For all this, Mencken valued the Southern tradition. However, the War, he argues, destroyed everything the South once had.³⁴ South’s best blood had been drained from the region, Mencken believed, and by 1920s the South was gross, vulgar, obnoxious and full of mediocrity, stupidity and lethargy.³⁵

Trying to defend the South against such views while protecting it from industrial America and to resist fast social-economic change of the time, the Agrarians began a kind of cultural wars against the North and the idea of the New South with their common characteristics such as scientism, materialism, economic expansion, dissolving communities and social fluidity.³⁶

The members of the group, exclusively white male Southerners, opposed the changes in the society that included demographic dislocation, expanding economic opportunities and the destabilizing of gender, racial and social hierarchies.³⁷ These

³² J. A. Bryant Jr., *Twentieth Century Southern Literature*, (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1997), 44.

³³ H. L. Mencken, *The American Scene: A Reader*, ed. Huntington Cairns (New York: Knopf, 1965), 157.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 158.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 161.

³⁶ Donaldson, introduction, xx.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, xvii.

circumstances, eventually leading to an enhancement of African Americans and white women, posed a threat to the white men's status in Southern society. In consequence, they turned to the Southern past narrated in the Old South myth as to an oasis of order, tradition and stability.³⁸

Southern Agrarians stated their opinions in the book of their essays *I'll Take My Stand*, published in 1930. The preface to the book is a common manifesto of the members of the group in which they expressed their shared view. Their goal, the manifesto said, was to "support a Southern ways of life against what may be call the American or prevailing way," and to urge the South not to give up its moral, social and economic autonomy to the "victorious principle of the Union."³⁹ Their main concern was the approach to labor in the industrial world, which they feared is practiced solely for its rewards and not for itself as a meaningful part of person's life. Further, they believed that the industrialism harms the man-to-nature and man-to-man relations.⁴⁰

Though the Agrarians constituted a conservative movement, their goal did not rest on effort to revive the ante-bellum South. Rather the members of the group protested against the "dehumanizing potentialities of a burgeoning industrialism than had already homogenized many communities and was beginning to threaten the distinctive social units of the South." Unfortunately, the Agrarian movement did not last long and by 1931 all of its members worked on their separate projects.⁴¹

With the rise of the conservative Agrarian movement in the South, the origins of Southern literature began in the 1920s and 1930s. C. Vann Woodward, the leading historian of the South in the post-World War II era, characterized this time as a "flowering of the literary arts - poetry, fiction, and drama." Not unlike the movement of Southern Agrarians, the so called Southern renaissance was a product of the tension

³⁸ Donaldson, introduction, xix.

³⁹ Donald Davidson et al., *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), xli - xlii.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, xlvii.

⁴¹ Bryant Jr., *Twentieth Century Southern Literature*, 46 - 47.

between the Southern past and the pressures of modernity.⁴² According to James Cobb, another significant historian of the American South, the main question of the Southern renaissance writers was “how such a glorious and appealing past could have degenerated into such a defective present.”⁴³

1.2.4 The End of the South?

Nearly one hundred years after the era of Reconstruction of 1860s and 1870s, the modern Civil Rights Movement began. For the South it meant yet another crisis of identity. According to Cobb, many white Southerners believed, that their racial system was in fact “the main current” of their “way of life”. And it is indeed undeniable that the racial relations in the South stood always above other specific cultural traits of the region. Be it the slavery before the War, or the Jim Crow system after the period of Reconstruction, white supremacy was a significant part of the Southern identity not only for those living in the South but also for its opponents beyond its boundaries.⁴⁴

The Civil Rights movement did not only finally eradicate the Jim Crow on the legal ground. During this time and thanks to mass migration of the Black Southerners to the North, the problems, that had once been exclusively Southern, became problems on a national scale - the creation of slums and ghettos, lack of satisfactory housing conditions, growing unemployment, deteriorating school and family ambients, delinquency or riots.⁴⁵

In his essay, *A Second Look at the Theme of Irony*, Woodward points out the extremes of the nationalization of Southern problems, when he mentions the shifting attitudes of “Northern Liberals and Moderates” once so eagerly crusading for righting the South’s racial wrongs. When riots broke out in the ghettos of Northern cities, they

⁴² Richard H. King, *A Southern Renaissance: The Cultural Awakening of the American South, 1930 - 1955*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 3-4.

⁴³ Cobb, *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity*, 130.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 212 - 213.

⁴⁵ Comer Vann Woodward, *The Burden of Southern History*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), 177.

suddenly redefined their objectives, saying that racial integration might be desirable in the South, but the conditions in the metropolitan North made the very same process impractical there in foreseeable future.⁴⁶

As the architects of the New South identity had made segregation and disfranchisement of the Black Southerners a key element in their development strategy, many believed that “once segregation was lifted from the South, then the South would become Americanized.”⁴⁷

During the 1950s and 1960s the South became more like the North and consequently many “obituaries” for the cultural specificity of the region appeared. In 1957 the Arkansas journalist Harry S. Ashmore even published an article titled “Epitaph for Dixie.” A year before John T. Westbrook celebrated in one of his text the “happy truth” that the South had lost its “regional identity” and that having grown rich, urban and industrialized it was no longer Southern. In 1970s there were even to conferences on the topic of “vanishing South” and it became more and more apparent that the era of New South is over and instead comes the era of No South.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Angie Maxwell, Todd Shields, Jeannie Wayne, eds., *The Ongoing Burden of Southern History: Politics and Identity in the Twenty-First Century South*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012), 21-22.

⁴⁷ Cobb, *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity*, 213.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 216 - 217.

2. Southern Literature

2.1 *The Development of Southern Literature*

There was a noticeable level of literary activity in the South even in the colonial times, but perhaps the only Southern writer prior to the Civil War who eventually earned national and international recognition was Edgar Allen Poe. Poe, however mostly did not tackle regional issues in his writing, a basic expectation of the body of Southern literature as understood today.⁴⁹

The period between 1865 and 1920 was not an era of great Southern literature. The literary works of that time were predominantly sentimental local stories or sentimentally exaggerated pictures of the plantation, in which “the young men were invariably gallant, the young women beautiful, and their black retainers happy darkies, content in the service to benevolent masters.”⁵⁰ Even during this period, the first piece of literature written by a Southern author published in 1885 is included among pivotal works of American literature. The book in question was Mark Twain’s satirical depiction of Southern attitudes and customs in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. It was another forty years before Southern literature experienced an overwhelming creativity, a period known as the Southern renaissance.⁵¹

The flowering of Southern literature in the 1920s challenged Mencken’s essay “The Sahara of Bozart”, which declared the South to be a region which lacked cultural activities and creativity. The reasons for such development were multiple, among the most important the military defeat in the Civil War and the era of Reconstruction that led to Southern self-analysis and reflection on the values the South fought to preserve. The resistance to cultural reconstruction also deepened the Southern sense of regional identity and distinctiveness. Among the most influential writers of the Southern

⁴⁹ M. Thomas Inge, “Literature”, in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 9: Literature*, ed. Charles Reegan Wilson (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 4.

⁵⁰ Bryant Jr., *Twentieth Century Southern Literature*, 12.

⁵¹Inge, “Literature,” 8.

Renaissance were Allen Tate, Stark Young, Erskine Caldwell, Andrew Lytle, Robert Penn Warren, Eudora Welty, and William Faulkner.⁵²

With the coming of World War II, interest in Southern literature declined, inspire of the best works of Faulkner and other distinguished novelists and short fiction by authors being published at the time. In 1946 a respectable literary critic from New York, Malcom Cowley published a selection of Faulkner's work in *The Portable Faulkner* which quickly gained significant popularity in the New England followed by demands from reading public for more Faulkner's works. In 1950 Faulkner became the first and only Southerner to receive to Nobel Prize for Literature.⁵³

The Southern Renaissance continued in the 1950s and 1960s but the authors writing at that time - Flannery O'Connor, Truman Capote, Harper Lee or Walker Percy, had not experienced the old South personally and had a little first hand knowledge of it. Nevertheless, their literature remained distinctively Southern and continued to explore aspects of the region's unique identity.⁵⁴

With the emergence of postmodernist tendencies, the body of distinctively Southern literature started to fade and merged with national literature in general. Umberto Eco, one of the most prominent literary representative of postmodernism defined the postmodern condition as the one "in which meaning is so rich it disappears."⁵⁵ From the 1970s on with the coming globalization to the region the term "southern" encompasses gradually more and more different meanings causing the specificity of Southern literature to decline.

⁵² Inge, "Literature," 8.

⁵³ Bryant Jr., *Twentieth Century Southern Literature*, 6.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵⁵ Kreyling, *Inventing the Southern Literature*, 153.

2.2 Features of Southern Literature

The body of Southern literature does not comprise only literary works with common traits such as the authors coming from the South or focusing on the South. The works of Southern writers are connected as well by their emphasis on certain topics and by an artistically specific style of writing.

Southern writers shared a sense of place, be it a particular region within the South, Middle Tennessee, the Mississippi Delta, the Virginia Piedmont, or the South in general, which was expressed in their literary works. The place and time certainly played a major role in shaping the literature of American South.⁵⁶

The image of the reality that Southern writers introduced in their works was an image of the unique Southern experience often in sharp contrast with the standard American attitude. It was rather grim, reflecting the view of life of many Southerners.⁵⁷ At the same time, this image included certain themes, reflexions of the typical Southern cultural traits, that repetitively emerged in the works of Southern writers.

One of these motives, central to the Southern literature is a contemplation of the region's past. Perhaps no other American region has rooted its identity so powerfully in its own historical consciousness as the South had. The culture of the South is the culture of remembrance and the values of Southern life are deeply influenced by the values of commemoration and ancestral meaning.⁵⁸ The defeat in the Civil War played central role in the centrality of the Southern history to its regional culture, as it served for many as a "mental shorthand" to explain any current Southern frustration.⁵⁹

Southern chivalry and sense of ancestral tradition are another themes often dealt with by Southern writers. Codified to the Southern culture primarily by the plantation

⁵⁶ Kreyling, *Inventing the Southern Literature*, 42.

⁵⁷ Holman, *The Roots of Southern Writing: Essays on the Literature of the American South*, 9-10.

⁵⁸ W. Scott Poole, "Memory", in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 4: Myth, Manners & Memory*, ed. Charles Reagan Wilson (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 104.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

novels but broadly supported even in the 20th century, the archetypal characters of Southern lady and gentlemen are central to this motive. Southern lady was a white woman either by birth or she gained her ladyhood by marriage or education. The status of lady was however conditioned by her moral, or sexual purity. Being a gentleman, on the other hand, demanded a certain amount of wealth and a behavior corresponding with a complex code including generosity and a protection of his and his family's good name.⁶⁰ The Southern emphasis on a compliance with good manners stemmed from the believe of Southern whites that they were descended from aristocratic English noblemen, who were deemed the highest archetypes of proper manners.⁶¹

Another important regional trait is an attachment to family or at least a sense of family. The term "family" is hard to define as for different people, it has different connotations. Nevertheless, two universal features were attributed to southern families in general - their paternalism and ancestors worship.⁶² No less important than family relationships is the sense of community, which expressed itself in three important institutions, namely the courthouse square - a center of business, political, and economic life of the small town, - the county - an important political and administrative institution, - and the church.⁶³

Race is indisputably one of the defining ideas of the history and culture of the South that influenced every part of Southern life. As such it is omnipresent in the Southern writings reflecting the institution of slavery, the theory of white supremacy and later the process of equalization of races.

⁶⁰ Diane Roberts, "Ladies and Gentlemen," in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 4: Myth, Manners & Memory*, ed. Charles Reagan Wilson (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 85 - 86.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁶² Ted Ownby, "Family," in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 4: Myth, Manners & Memory*, ed. Charles Reagan Wilson (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 55 - 56.

⁶³ Charles Reagan Wilson, "Community," in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 4: Myth, Manners & Memory*, ed. Charles Reagan Wilson (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 38 - 39.

Other themes typical for Southern culture emerge in the works of Southern literature as well, only not so frequently. Dependent of the era in which the work was written, the author dealt with violence, poverty, lack of education or merging of the Northern and Southern cultures.

2.3 Southern Identity and Literature

Giving the specific features of the Southern authors' writings and particularly their shared sense of the place reflected throughout their works, the question arises how and if Southern literature contributed to the building of the regional identity of Southerners and whether this process, if real, was deliberate or rather a haphazard by-product of the creative process.

In his book *Inventing the Southern Literature*, Michael Kreyling raises a similar question. He sees Southern literature as a mere cultural product, constructed to meet local needs and not innocent of political gamesmanship. The beginning of the term Southern literature as it is commonly understood today, Kreyling argues, is identical with the emergence of the group of the Twelve Southerners and their agrarian projects. His opinion is not based on the fact that it was the beginning of the era when Southern literature flowered and some of the most significant works of the region were published, but on his belief that the emergence of "southern literature" was a "deliberate campaign of one elite to culturally establish and control the South." In their manifesto *I'll Take My Stand*, the Agrarians presented the vision of the South as they wanted it to be and as the only genuine interpretation.⁶⁴ Thus, the real challenge is to decide whether the South existed independent of the Twelve southerners or whether it is a political and cultural construction of *I'll Take My Stand*.⁶⁵

The existence of the movement of the New Criticism and its background could serve as a counter argument to Kreyling's thesis. New criticism emerged approximately

⁶⁴ Kreyling, *Inventing the Southern Literature*, ix - xii.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

at the same time together with the Agrarianism movement in the 1920s and was tightly connected to the latter particularly by the people such as Robert Penn Warren appearing simultaneously in both movements thus coming from the same circles as the Agrarians. Some of the requirements put on a fiction of value by the New critics were its anonymity without projection of any intention of the author into his or her work except the intention to achieve the work's perfection. Literary works should not require any external factors to enable comprehension or judgment and it should be an extension of reality, rather than its reflection.⁶⁶

By studying the works in the body of Southern literature, one can discover that not all of the works are supportive of the Southern claims of reality and that such a support varied over time. Until 1950, the common feature of the Southern writers was that they wrote about themselves as if nothing had changed, that the Old South was still alive. The omnipresent motive of racial inequality, tightly knit families and other social units and Protestantism were still present not only in the real lives of Southerners but also in the literature they produced. The situation began to change slightly in the aftermath of World War I when some Southern writers gradually reinvented themselves diluting the conventional image of the South.⁶⁷ With World War II one observes a transition between the South still nostalgic of a way of life from the plantation legend, that was never the actual experience of any but a small minority of Southerners and the newly self-conscious South perceived of the contrasts and paradoxes in its society and culture.⁶⁸

Following are the analysis of the chosen works of five distinguished Southern writers and reflections of Southern culture contained in them. The works are arranged chronologically.

⁶⁶ Bryant Jr., *Twentieth Century Southern Literature*, 61.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 103.

3. The Irony of Slavery: Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson*

3.1 The Author

Samuel Langhorne Clemens, known as well by his pseudonym Mark Twain, was born in 1835 in a small town of Florida, Missouri. For many he is only known as an author of a single book, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, first published in 1885, and very successful in the United States as well as abroad. Perhaps it was perhaps the nostalgia for childhood in a simpler and kinder time but it was humor permeating the pages of the book that made from its author almost an icon.⁶⁹ As the proverbial exception to the rule, despite being labelled a “humorist”, Mark Twain is recognized as an author of great significance.⁷⁰

Though he spent most of his literary life in Hartford, Connecticut, Twain is regarded as a regional novelist, one of the speaking voices of the South, specifically the Mississippi Valley.⁷¹ Twain's literary work provided generations of America very authentic insight into his zeitgeist. Twain himself attributed his ability to slow accumulation and unconscious observation, thus absorption of the Southern reality. As a result, he was able to gain certain knowledge of his folk's soul, life, speech and thought.⁷²

Twain was born and raised in the time, when the legitimacy of slavery and the alleged inferiority of blacks was still widely accepted in the South.⁷³ Thanks to his marriage into the strongly abolitionist family of Livy Langdon and traveling within the

⁶⁹ Louis J. Budd, “Mark Twain as an America Icon”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Mark Twain*, ed. Forrest G. Robinson (New York: The University of Cambridge Press, 1995), 6.

⁷⁰ Allen Gribben, “The Importance of Mark Twain”, *American Quarterly* 37 (Spring 1985): 30, accessed on April 25, 2016, doi: 10.2307/2712761.

⁷¹ Malcolm Bradbury, “Introduction”, in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, Mark Twain (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2004), 11.

⁷² Forrest G. Robinson, “Mark Twain, 1835- 1910: A Brief Biography”, in *Historical Guide to Mark Twain*, ed. Shelley Fisher Fishkin, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 3.

⁷³ Shelley Fisher Fishkin, “Mark Twain and Race”, in *Historical Guide to Mark Twain*, ed. Shelley Fisher Fishkin (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 135.

United States and Europe, his view of slavery was quite different from that of most of his contemporaries among Southern writers. In his books confronting the issue of slavery, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, Twain often went further than many of his white peers when rejecting the hierarchy of color in the American society.⁷⁴

To criticize the institution of slavery and point out its injustice and paradoxes, Twain used satire and irony, often misread, bringing him accusations of bigotry and racism. Since 1957, when the New York City Board of Education removed the book from approved textbook lists for containing certain passages derogatory to African Americans, periodic efforts have been made to remove *Huckleberry Finn*. Challenges to the novel occurred across the United States and the controversy is still alive in the 21st century. The primary issue being brought up by the book's critics is the excessive use of the word "nigger" that appears in the text close to two hundred times. It is allegedly painful in a society in which negative stereotyped of black people have not yet disappeared. Twain's proponents, on the other hand, defend him as they believe that the term nigger was used as a mean of presenting and indicting a racist society and presents an authentic diction of the time and the characters in the story.⁷⁵

3.2 *Pudd'nhead Wilson*

Though less famous than *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the story of *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, first published in 1894 is as important in its denouncement of the institution of slavery, challenging the hypocritical attitudes of the Southern society. Unlike *Huckleberry Finn*, the book does not use the same kind of light, throwaway humor and the reader can not find a joyous and idyllic atmosphere either. There are certainly traces of irony and comedy typical of Twain's works, but the whole novel is graver and both, the crucial idea and plot, are more sophisticated, as indicated also by the word "tragedy" that appeared in the original title of the book.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Shelley Fisher Fishkin, "Mark Twain and Race", 146.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁷⁶ Malcom Bradburry, "Introduction", 22.

As in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the central theme of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* is the issue of Southern slavery, yet the motive is different. *Pudd'nhead Wilson* is a story of confusion of identities and a very thin and questionable line of distinction between races and between freedom and slavery. The disturbing conclusion offered throughout the story is that the social identity of a person is arbitrary, “depending not on character nor on appearance but on the chance definition of one’s nature or color.”⁷⁷

The story develops in a place called Dawson’s Landing, Missouri, in the twenty-three years between 1830 and 1853. At the beginning of the story two babies, one slave and one free, are exchanged from the cradle each gradually completely assimilated to their newly assigned identities. When grown up, Tom Driscoll, the central figure of the story and the slave child who has passed his whole life as white, is in financial troubles, begins to steal and murders his own stepfather for money. Though he tries to put the blame for the murder to another person, his guilt is proven as well as his true identity. Unlike *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, there is no happy ending to *Pudd'nhead Wilson* and Tom is sold down the river into the severest form of slavery, despite his mother’s efforts to prevent this scenario when she exchanged the babies in their cradle.

3.2.1 Tradition and Chivalry

Throughout the book, a great emphasis is put on the origins and ancestry of Dawson’s Landing’s most prominent citizen. A descendant of one of the First Families, preferably from Virginia creates a significant status. The “old Virginian ancestry” is one of the greatest sources of pride of the town’s leading citizen, York Leicester Driscoll. Together with his noble origin comes an important responsibility to cultivate the qualities of chivalry. Indeed “to be a gentleman was [York Driscoll’s] only religion,” and he was revered by his fellow citizens for his hospitality, formal and stately manners, finesse, justice and generosity.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Malcom Bradburry, “Introduction,” 22.

⁷⁸ Mark Twain, *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2004), 57.

3.2.2 Family and Community Relations

The importance of chivalry is demonstrated in the scene, where York Driscoll discovers that his stepson and a potential heir to his fortune, Tom Driscoll, refuses to challenge a man who had publicly disgraced him, deciding to take the incident to a court of law instead. “A coward in my family! A Dirscoll coward!” are the exact words of the astonished stepfather who decides to tear up his will and disinherit Tom as a consequence of him not pursuing the responsibilities of a true gentleman.⁷⁹

3.2.3 Racial Relations

Slavery, race and the paradoxes of division lines in the society according to racial attributes, are central topics of *Pudd'nhead Wilson*. The main plot of the story unfolds when Roxy, nursing her own son as well as son of her master exchanges the two babies in their cradles to save her son from the fate of slave and to give him a future of an heir to one of the most prominent families in the town. As Twain explains, Roxy was “as white as anybody, but the one sixteenth of her which was black outvoted the other fifteen parts and made her a negro - by a fiction of law and custom.”⁸⁰ Her son was “thirty-one parts white” and as the black part did not show, he was able to pass his whole life as white, without any suspicion from anybody in the town. With unconstrained irony, Twain points out the ridiculously thin line constructed on basis of people’s assumptions about one’s origins, that divided a person from slavery versus a free life.

As with *Huckleberry Finn*, many believe that the story of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* contains racism, mainly when depicting black characters with the use of common stereotypes about Negroes during Twain’s era. Many also blame Twain for labeling the false Tom Driscoll as a bad character because of his Negro origins. Indeed, once in the story Twain admitted that Tom “did his various ill turns partly out of native

⁷⁹ Twain, *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, 141 - 142.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 64.

viciousness.”⁸¹ Nowhere is stated, however that it was a viciousness native to na Negro, it could as well be a white person who has innate viciousness. Beside other parts of the book suggest, that what had made the false Tom a bad character was his nurture, not his nature. He was rather spoiled, but arguably mostly because of the preferential treatment he got from everybody when growing up. That “Tom was a bad baby from the very beginning of his usurpation”⁸² only supports the previous idea, as it suggests he was a bad baby *since* the exchange.

A passage Twain cut from the book before it was published for the first time, may shed some light on Twain’s alleged racism and maybe even reverse it: “*Whence came that in him which was high, and whence that which was Base? That which was high came from either blood, and was the monopoly of neither colour; but that which was base was the white blood in him debased by the brutalizing effects of a ... long-drawn heredity of slave-owning, with the habit of abuse which the possession of irresponsible power always create and perpetuates, by a law of human nature.*”⁸³

3.2.4 Southern Lifestyle

With a life of leisure, typical for wealthy Southerners, same a Southern care for surroundings and amenities. Twain’s depiction of Dawson’s landing at the beginning of the story supports this idea. The place is presented as a cosy and tidy place with “white-washed” exteriors of the dwellings and with extensive, varied flowerbeds in the gardens. The list in the first chapter ranges from rose-vines to honeysuckles, morning-glories, hollyhocks, marigolds, and touch-me-nots.⁸⁴

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁸² Twain, *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, 75.

⁸³ Shelley Fisher Fishkin, “Mark Twain and Race,” 145 - 146.

⁸⁴ Twain, *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, 55.

3.2.5 South-North Relations

The image of the North used in Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson* is not hostile, or suspicious at all. On the contrary. One of the central figure of the book - Pudd'nhead Wilson - who eventually discovers the mystery of the exchanged babies and finds the real murderer of York Driscoll at the conclusion of the story, came from the central part of New York state, coming to Dawson's Landing to seek his fortune. Though a Yankee, his character traits are rather pleasing - he is depicted as a homely, intelligent and frank man with comradeship in his eyes.⁸⁵

3.4 *Pudd'nhead Wilson and Southern Identity*

Written in the time when the vast majority of Southern literature praised the legend of the Old South and sentimentally remembered the ante-bellum times, Twain's book is an exception. Throughout the novel Twain supports certain cultural traits of the South, such as the chivalry and gentlemanliness, these are emphasized as very important qualities. The notion of the respect to one's ancestors and the importance of the family origins is supported as well. On the other hand, *Pudd'nhead Wilson* is also critical of Southern reality. Through irony and humor, Twain is not afraid to criticize the deficits and paradoxes of Southern society, especially its sharp racial division, in which he often went further than most of his peers among Southern writers of that time. Perhaps due to his years in Connecticut and Europe, Twain shows a detached view in his literature as there are no traits of emphasis of the uniqueness of Southern milieu as is the case with other Southern authors - Twain's contemporaries or successors. Also unlike with many other Southern writers, the Southern past and the War is not dealt with in the book.

⁸⁵ Twain, *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, 59.

4. TRUE ESSENCE OF THE DEEP SOUTH: ABSALOM, ABSALOM!

4.1 The Author

William Faulkner, the first and only Southern writer to receive a Nobel Prize for Literature awarded in 1950, is regarded by many scholars, critics, and his successors in Southern literary production as one of the most significant and influential writer of the Southern literature. He spent the most of his life in Oxford, Mississippi; the South also serves as the stage of the vast majority of his works. Most of which demand second, perhaps even a third reading to fully understand. For many writers in the South, especially those who aspire to be considered *Southern* writers, Faulkner is a primary influence and inspiration as, in his novels, Faulkner defined everything that can be seen in the Southern context.⁸⁶

Faulkner is the creator of the mythical Mississippi county of Yoknapatawpha, which he uses throughout his novels to develop the history, and legends of its people and culture.⁸⁷ Faulkner's legend, writes Malcom Cowley in his essay "William Faulkner's Legend of the South" is certainly not a scientific interpretation of the Southern history, but, on the other hand, it does not resemble the sentimental plantation legends. Unlike the latter, Faulkner saw the virtues of the old order mainly in its moral values, such as courage, honor, pride, pity, and love of justice and liberty. The shimmer and shine of the ante-bellum South that, for a short period of time before the Civil War, was an economic success, is not of a great importance to Faulkner.⁸⁸ Nor did Faulkner agree with the great consensus implied by the plantation legend, of an unflawed South. On the contrary, his work is full of critique of Southern society and its failures.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Noel Polk, *Faulkner and Welty and the Southern Literary Tradition*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 3.

⁸⁷ Joel Williamson, *William Faulkner and Southern History*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 6.

⁸⁸ Malcom Cowley, "William Faulkner's Legend of the South", *The Sewanee River* 53 (Summer, 1945): 349 - 350, accessed April 28, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27537595>.

⁸⁹ Williamson, *William Faulkner and Southern History*, 358.

Cowley briefly describes Faulkner's legend: Before the Civil War the Deep South was ruled by planters, aristocrats, i.e., the Sartoris clan or new men, Colonel Sutpen. Both groups strived to establish a lasting social order on their land previously seized from the Indians. They lived according to a virtuous rigid code, but faced an inherent guilt - slavery - that put a curse on the land eventually bringing about the Civil War. After defeat in the War, the planters tried to restore their previous way of life, achieving only partial success. According to Faulkner's narrative the South was ultimately defeated from within by a new exploiting class descended from the landless whites who succumbed to the allurements of the mechanized civilization of the North which corrupted the Southern nation.⁹⁰

The topic, that can be found virtually in any of Faulkner's books from the Yoknapatawpha county is the destruction of the former Southern order by the War and consequent military occupation but even more so by finance capitalism destroying the culture from within. His picture of the South is then a picture of an "incomplete and frustrated nation trying to recover its own identity and relive its legendary past."⁹¹

4.2 *Absalom, Absalom!*

Absalom, Absalom!, first published in 1936, is regarded by many as one of Faulkner's best novels. In this dark book, a tragedy, the story of Thomas Sutpen is told by three characters - Rosa Coldfield, Quentin Compson's father and Shrevlin McCannon, - each with a different point of view. Faulkner works ingeniously with retrospection and tantalizes his readers by disclosing the story in small pieces. He gradually sheds more light on the motives of Sutpen's contemptible deeds, yet justifying him to a certain extent by pointing out the limitations of his perception.

⁹⁰ Malcom Cowley, "Introduction", in *The Portable Faulkner*, ed. Malcom Cowley, (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2003), xix - xx.

⁹¹ Cowley, "William Faulkner's Legend of the South," 344 - 345.

When asked about the true essence of the Deep South, Quentin Compson demonstrates it in this story. Thomas Sutpen came to the Jefferson, Yoknapatawpha county, out of nowhere, but with a clear plan. First, he bargained for a “hundred square miles of some of the best [...] land in the country”⁹² from the Chickasaw Indians, then he left Jefferson for several months before returning with twenty Negroes who built a great mansion on his land. To complete his story, he married Ellen Coldfield to found a family with a woman with lineage. Later, Sutpen forbids his daughter Judith to marry Charles Bon and plans for her brother Henry to kill Charles. From the first two narratives in the novel, Sutpen’s motives are not clear. Only by talking with Shreve does Quentin find out that Charles Bon was Sutpen’s black, castaway son. By preventing Judith’s marriage, Sutpen and Henry avoid incest and miscegenation. The bleak story continues. One day, Thomas Sutpen returns home to find his wife dead, his son a fugitive, his slaves having run away and most of his land mortgaged. Yet he remains determined to fulfill his dreams - to own a plantation with slaves, and a mansion, to establish an upper class family and to have a son to inherit his wealth.⁹³ He tries to renovate his mansion and to beget a son, but fails and provokes a man who kills him.

Why would Compson select such a dim and dark story to represent the true essence of the Deep South? After some contemplation, one could, as Cowley suggests, see all the characters and the events as symbols crucial to Southern history:

“Sutpen’s great plan, or “design”, the land he took from Indians, the unacknowledged son who ruined him, the poor white whom he wronged and who killed him in anger, the final destruction of the mansion like the downfall of a social order: all these might belong to a tragic fable of a Southern history.”⁹⁴

⁹² William Faulkner, “Absalom, Absalom!”, in *William Faulkner: Novels 1936 -1940*, ed. Joseph Blotner, Noel Polk, (New York: Librery of America, 1990), 27.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 218.

⁹⁴ Cowley, “William Faulkner’s Legend of the South,” 348.

4.2.1 The Past

The Civil War, particularly its causes and consequences for Southerner's are an important theme in *Absalom, Absalom!* Faulkner sees the War as a tragic event in the course of the Southern history, one that meant virtually the end of the Old South and brought only misery and devastation for the future. As Faulkner writes: "What was, is one thing, and now it is not because it is dead, it died in 1861."⁹⁵ After the War, there was nothing left in the South peopled with "garrulous outraged baffled ghosts" for a young man.⁹⁶

The War depicted in the book is a just cause and a part of God's design. Many characters in the book believe it was God, who left the South defeated. It God's punishment for the South for "having erected its economic edifice not on the rock of stern morality but on the shifting sands of opportunism and moral brigandage."⁹⁷ It is thus the sin of slavery the South had to pay for.

The War was not supported or embraced even by some characters in the book. Faulkner does not imply this to be a bad quality. Mr. Coldfield, the owner of a general store in Jefferson, decides to close his store as soon as troops began to appear in the town, and kept it closed rather than supporting the soldiers from his stock. According to Faulkner, "he was not a coward, he was a man of uncompromising moral strength," who objected to shedding human blood and life, and to the waste of food, clothes and ammunition in the name of the War.⁹⁸

4.2.2 Tradition and Chivalry

The theme of chivalry in the book is connected primarily with the character of Thomas Sutpen. Though he dreamed about a high social status and to certain degree succeeded in achieving it, he was never accepted by his community as a true gentleman.

⁹⁵ Faulkner, "Absalom, Absalom!," 108.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 6 - 7.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 215.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 67 - 68.

On the contrary the missing gentlemanliness in his character was perceived as one of his major flaws. As Rosa Coldfield concludes: “He wasn’t a gentleman. He wasn’t even a gentleman.”⁹⁹

4.2.3 Family and Community Relations

Family is also an important topic in *Absalom, Absalom!* To establish a family with a good lineage is one of the central aspects of Sutpen’s dream. A good descent is emphasized as the hallmark of respectability. Rosa Coldfield suspects, that Thomas Sutpen married her sister only to achieve respectability among the citizens of Jefferson, as no one knew anything about his origins or history:

“All he would need would be Ellen’s and our father’s names on a wedding license that people could look at and read [...] because our father knew who his father was [...] and his grandfather had been [...] and our neighbors and the people we lived among knew that we knew.”¹⁰⁰

The role of women in the South permeates throughout the book. The South is depicted as a strongly patriarchal society where women have “a sole purpose to love, to be beautiful and to divert.”¹⁰¹ The role of the men is then to provide their women with everything in order for them to be able to comply with their “purpose.”

The inferior role of a woman in Southern society was often reinforced by her social or racial position. Women in the South in the story are separated into three categories - ladies, women and females. Ladies are meant for gentlemen to marry one day, women are courtesans for satisfying men’s lust and females are Negro women.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Faulkner, “Absalom, Absalom!,” 11.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 97.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 90.

4.2.4 Racial Relations

Some portion of racial scorn might be found in the story, but the over all tone of the novel is anti-slavery, so it is possible that the scorn is used by Faulkner only to illustrate the spirit of the time and make the atmosphere of his work more authentic.

Almost all the white characters in the novel look down on blacks and even people of mixed race deeming them inferior to themselves even if otherwise they live together. One example is when Clytie, the black daughter of Sutpen addresses Ms. Rosie Coldfield by her given name and tries to prevent her from seeing the dead body of Charles Bon: “‘Rosa?’ I cried. ‘To me? To my face?’ Then she touched me and I did stop dead.”¹⁰³

There are passages in the book condemning racial inequality and injustice. As Charles Bon says:

“We - the thousand, the white men - made the laws which declare that one eighth of a specified kind of blood shall outweigh seven eights of another kind. That same white race would have made them slaves, too, laborers, cooks, maybe even field hands.”¹⁰⁴

Slavery is presented as the sin for which the South has to pay in War and eventual defeat. Racial scorn is also harmful on personal level as well. When Thomas Sutpen does not acknowledge his marriage to a woman on the basis that she is part-black, he makes the fatal mistake which eventually leads to his own destruction.

4.3 *Absalom, Absalom!* and the Southern Identity

The story of *Absalom, Absalom!* reveals, as believed by one of the central characters in the novel “the true essence of the Deep South.” If it is really so, Faulkner’s image of the South is dark, even tragic. The Old South with its lack of virtues is gone as

¹⁰³ Faulkner, “Absalom, Absalom!,” 115.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 95.

the price that had been paid for Southern sin of embracing slavery as the cornerstone of its economic and social life. The future of the South is not optimistic, as there is nothing left there, only the “ghosts” of the past. Though the criticism of certain Southern features - such as the institution of slavery, or the patriarchal society, are easily recognizable in the story, the South as a whole is not condemned or damned by the author. On the contrary, one can recognize a portion of the author’s affection for the region. As Williamson writes, despite all the criticism in his work, Faulkner’s objective was not to damn the South, but to save it.¹⁰⁵ Perhaps the reaction of Quentin Compson to Shreve’s question “Why do you hate the South?” trying so strenuously to convince Shreve, and perhaps even Quentin himself, demonstrates the ambivalent attitude toward the South. “‘I don’t hate it,’ Quentin said, quickly, at once, immediately; ‘I don’t hate it,’ he said. *I don’t hate it* he thought, panting in the cold air, the iron New England dark: *I don’t. I don’t! I don’t hate it! I don’t hate it!*”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Williamson, *William Faulkner and Southern History*, 359.

¹⁰⁶ Faulkner, “Absalom, Absalom!,” 90.

5. ORDINARY RURAL SOUTHERNERS AND THEIR LIFE IN 1930s: A CURTAIN OF GREEN

5.1 The Author

Though none of her parents was a native Southerner, Eudora Welty was born in Jackson, Mississippi, William Faulkner's home as well. She is usually grouped with the second generation of Southern Renaissance writers - those who followed Warren, Tate, and Faulkner.¹⁰⁷ Welty, as is true for many authors writing after or concurrently with Faulkner, did not escape some critics' comparisons with his work. For many, her stories and novels were seen as "a sort of genteel, domestic, non-aggressive, female version of Faulkner."¹⁰⁸ Unlike epic works of Faulkner capturing almost an "heroic confrontation between cosmic forces such as love and hate, justice and injustice, life and death," the atmosphere of Eudora Welty's work is more intimate.¹⁰⁹

Her lifestyle and worldview, i.e., not going to the church regularly, holding liberal opinions and being fascinated by Black people, put Welty somewhat "outside the norms of Southern society."¹¹⁰ Welty tried to extricate her work from the category "regional" and promoted the idea that place is not the defining factor in her writing. She approaches her writing more than with the views of a Southerner through her personal feelings, yet the South and its environment are evident in her writing.¹¹¹ Nevertheless, the range of her works, as well as their interpretations, vary greatly; Welty can be labelled as a Southern Gothic writer for her stories "Petrified Man", or "Clytie", as well as a symbolic writer concerned mainly with feminine inner life.¹¹²

¹⁰⁷ Michael Kreyling, *Understanding Eudora Welty*, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), 7.

¹⁰⁸ Polk, *Faulkner and Welty and the Southern Literary Tradition*, 8.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹¹⁰ Suzanne Marrs, *One Writer's Imagination: The Fiction of Eudora Welty*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002), 5.

¹¹¹ Eudora Welty, *On Writing*, (New York: Random House Publishing Group, 2011), 39.

¹¹² Kreyling, *Understanding Eudora Welty*, 7.

Though maintaining her identity as a Southerner, she was very critical of Southern life in many ways. Welty confronted the South she knew with the picture of the South recreated by the Agrarians approximately in the period she began to write. Instead of the conservative, agrarian and biracial South, she saw the South as a place “refusing its nostalgic burden and showing signs of courage and vitality.”¹¹³

5.2. A Curtain of Green

Welty’s first published book of fiction, *A Curtain of Green*, presented a collection of her stories written between 1936 and 1940. Though the stories included are hard to classify, in general they were mostly prompted by Welty’s experience from the Great Depression-era Mississippi.¹¹⁴ Owing to the ongoing Great Depression with its effects visible across the United States, but particularly impacting its Southern region, which had lagged behind economically even before the crisis came, one of the most emphasized themes in her early work was the plight of poor, rural white Southerners and objections to racism.¹¹⁵ Unlike the works of Faulkner, however, Welty’s stories and novels are not so dark. She sees poverty as a limitation, not a controlling factor and her characters find sources of meaning and fulfillment despite economic deprivation.¹¹⁶

Many of the stories in *A Curtain of Green* can be categorized as modern Southern Gothic and are grotesque. The settings of such stories are typically rural Southern communities or small towns, the stories are filled with deeply flawed or eccentric and lost individuals and they often contain a mystery or some force beyond human perception. Key motifs of modern Southern Gothic are grotesque situations, dark humor violence, sense of alienation and breakdown.¹¹⁷

¹¹³ Danièle Pitavy-Souques, “‘The Fictional Eye’: Eudora Welty’s Retranslation of the South,” *South Atlantic Review* 65 (Autumn 2005): 92, accessed April 29, 2016, doi: 10.2307/3201622.

¹¹⁴ Marrs, *One Writer’s Imagination: The Fiction of Eudora Welty*, 18.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 11 - 12.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹¹⁷ Molly Boyd, “Gothicism”, in *The Companion to Southern Literature: Themes, Genres, Places, People, Movements and Motifs*, ed. Joseph M. Flora and Lucinda Hardwick MacKethan, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), 315 - 316.

In her letter to writer Ford Maddox Ford, Welty tried to disclaim the importance of the South for her writing and emphasized the centrality of her characters' inner life. She wrote:

“All the people [in my stories] live in Mississippi, but that hasn't much to do with it. They are not very exciting stories, although sometimes violent, but only come from complexity and the burdens of poverty or love or grief I have tried to describe through some incident or moment in people's lives.”¹¹⁸

Nevertheless, the setting of the stories, mentioned in every one of them, strongly evokes the sense of place in Welty's writing.

5.2.1 Family and Community Relations

The stories in *A Curtain of Green* are full of sense of alienation. Almost every couple from Welty's stories experiences isolation from each other. For instance, Jason and Sara Morton in “The Whistle” are “no more communicative in their misery than a pair of window shutters beaten by a storm.”¹¹⁹ The same goes for the deaf-mute couple from “The Key.” In spite of being on their honeymoon, Ellie and Albert Morgan are estranged from each other, the feeling of which is even fortified in the story by their common disability. Finding the key dropped accidentally by another passenger on the ground of the train station while they are waiting for their train to Niagara Falls means a lot to them. In the key, both of them see a symbol for their reunion. “I found it!”, says Albert.

“It is something important! [...] It means something. From now on we will get along better, have more understanding... Maybe when we reach Niagara Falls we will even fall in love.”¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Kreyling, *Understanding Eudora Welty*, 10.

¹¹⁹ Welty, *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty*, 57.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 32.

Despite the Southern tradition claiming strong family relationships, Welty often depicts dysfunctional family relationships. In “Clytie,” Clytie Farr lives in the house with her sister, brother and a sick father, thanks to whose sickness the family becomes significantly impoverished. Clytie basically serves the rest of the family - cooks for them and takes care of them in general. She has to endure bad and humiliating treatment from her sister Octavia who is yelling at Clytie all the time, giving her various commands and reproaching her her long walks in the town. At the end of the story, such a demeaning ambient leads Clytie to suicide in a barrel of water when she is commanded by Octavia to bring some water for her father’s shaving.

“Why I live at the P.O.” is another example of dysfunctional family relationships theme in Welty’s stories. Stella-Rondo comes back home after a separation from her husband and brings with her a two-year, allegedly adopted child. Her older sister, the young postmistress in the town of China Grove, mentions aloud that the child is perhaps not adopted at all as it strongly resembles their grandfather, Papa-Daddy. Such a claim infuriates Stella-Rondo, who finally incites the whole family against her sister. Her sister consequently decides to renounce her family who wrongly turns its back on her and moves to her room at the Post Office most probably never to see her family again.

5.2.2 Racial Relations

Several of the stories in *A Curtain of Green*, such as “Keela, the Outcast Indian Maiden”, “A Curtain of Green”, “Powerhouse”, and “A Worn Path” concern the issue of race. Unlike the work of Twain or Faulkner, Black characters in Welty’s stories are usually not in inferior positions to the rest of the society. Perhaps thanks to Welty’s documentary inclination in taking photos of Southerners, and in particular Black Southerners, the stories concerning the racial relations are more of a contemplative character. Except in the case of “Keela, the Outcast Indian Maiden”, where a white man feels a need to make retribution to the Black man who used to travel with him in a circus and, though the black man does not feel any injustice, in the white man eyes, he was not treated well, there is no conflict between the races depicted in the book.

5.2.3 Poverty And Lack of Education

Poverty is a frequent motif in the early Welty's stories. Almost all of the characters are affected by it somehow, from Ruby in a "Piece of News" for whom a simple present of a single package of coffee is a luxury, or Ellie Morgan in "The Key" being about to set out on a honeymoon journey to Niagara Falls with her husband. "It must have been her savings which were making possible the trip."¹²¹

Most strikingly is the issue of poverty captured in the stories "The Whistle" and "Flowers for Marjorie." In "The Whistle" Jason and Sara Morton with their "lives filled with tiredness [and] with poverty"¹²² are awakened in the middle of cold night by the whistles that warn them against the coming, have to rise and go to the fields using the quilts on which they sleep "every night trembling with cold"¹²³ and also their clothes to cover their tomato plants. Afterwards, to warm up, Jason burns the cherry log which was meant to be saved for the very last of winter and eventually also their chair and kitchen table.¹²⁴

"Flowers for Marjories" depicts a young couple who had moved from Mississippi to New York, Howard and Marjorie, who are expecting a baby in three months. The opening dialogue reveals Howard to be unemployed and greatly worried that he will not be able to find any job by the time the baby is born:

"Just because you're going to have a baby, just because that's a thing that's bound to happen, just because you can't go forever with a baby inside your belly, and it will really happen that the baby is born - that doesn't mean everything else is going to happen and change' [...] That doesn't mean that I'll find the work! It doesn't mean that we aren't starving to death."¹²⁵

¹²¹ Eudora Welty, *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty*, (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1991), 29.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 58.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 101.

Out of despair Howard eventually kills Marjorie by thrusting a butcher knife under her breast.

Many of Welty's characters are described as stupid, lacking education. The vulgarity of the characters is in some cases expressed by the way they speak as in "Petrified Man", "Why I Live at the P.O.," and "Piece of News." The vulgarity combined with lack of education is best demonstrated in the story "Piece of News." Ruby Fisher, barely capable of reading, reads in a newspaper about a woman called Ruby Fisher, who was shot in the leg by her husband. It takes her a long time to realize, that the newspaper is not local, but comes from Tennessee, and thus that the story it contains is not about her. Until she comes to this realization she feels angry at her husband for hurting her.

5.3 A Curtain of Green and Southern Identity

Even though Welty did not perhaps intend for her work to be typical regional literature, the sense of place in her writing is omnipresent. Just by the simple fact that the setting of all of the stories is in the American South, namely the state of Mississippi. In a much more intimate fashion than Faulkner, Eudora Welty writes about the issues in the lives of ordinary Southerners, about their poverty, love, and grief. Poverty and the intellectual backwardness of rural Southerners is one of the main themes Welty uses in her first collection of stories *A Curtain of Green*. They are perceived as ordinary parts of the Southern life, without any urgency to make this Southern condition right. The notion of the family is completely different from the one in *Puddin'head Wilson* or *Absalom, Absalom!* Instead of the traditional Southern family with firm relationships within, Welty depicts rather dysfunctional families with lack of honor and respect among their members. The motive of alienation is common as well. Race stands out of Welty's primary interest. The theme emerges only in a few stories and is not treated with a great importance. Perhaps thanks to her emphasis on the inner life of her characters in the simple events of their lives, there are no explicit judgements of Southern society nor any pressing need to bring a change to the region in Welty's fiction. Rather, her stories are an impartial report on the state of Southern rural communities in the 1930s.

6. Southern Grotesque: A Good Man Is Hard To Find

6.1 The Author

Though having a limited time for her writing, thanks to the lupus from which she suffered, Flannery O'Connor managed to gain national recognition for her fiction and, in the 1960s and 1970s, she dominated the literary scene both regionally and nationally.¹²⁶ In her short life she published two novels - *Wise Blood* (1952), and *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960) plus a body of collected stories *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* (1955), another collection of her short stories being published posthumously.

Many consider O'Connor to be a typical representative of grotesque literature, labelling her as "perhaps the most frequently cited Southern author who utilizes grotesque in her fiction."¹²⁷ And, indeed, her characters are strange and eccentric, her plots full of mystery and unexpected scenes, her stories combining violent and comic aspects, all basic features of grotesque literature.

Like Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor focuses on portrayals of small-town and rural country life in the Deep South, almost exclusively in Georgia, her home state. The characters of her stories, predominantly poor whites, include escaped criminals, Bible salesmen, housewives, cripples, beggars, etc. In her essay "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction" Flannery O'Connor defends herself against accusations that "life in Georgia is not the way [she] picture[s] it."¹²⁸ Such an accusation, she argues, is a consequence of the general and erroneous thought that if a writer uses Southern scenes in his or her fiction, he or she is "thought by the general reader to write about South and is judged by the fidelity his or her fiction has to typical Southern life."¹²⁹

¹²⁶ Bryant Jr., *Twentieth Century Southern Literature*, 200.

¹²⁷ Molly Boyd, "The Grotesque", in *The Companion to Southern Literature: Themes, Genres, Places, People, Movements and Motifs*, ed. Joseph M. Flora and Lucinda Hardwick MacKethan, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), 323.

¹²⁸ Flannery O'Connor, "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction", <http://www.en.utexas.edu/amlit/amlitprivate/scans/grotesque.html>, accessed on May 8, 2016.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

Strongly influenced by Catholicism, the focus of Flannery O'Connor was indeed less with the Southern reality, uncovering the tensions in race relations, or the Southerner's adjustments to the modern world, than with "uncovering the self-deceptions and evasions that keep us from recognizing our identities."¹³⁰ In her stories she dealt with moral and theological problems that are valid universally, not only for Southerners.

Nevertheless, she saw the body of Southern literature as something distinctive and of high value and she was anxious about the gradual merging of styles of literature and the consequential disappearance of Southern literature:

"I hate to think that in twenty years Southern writers too may be writing about men in gray flannel suits and may have lost their ability to see that these gentlemen are even greater freaks than what we are writing about now. I hate to think of the date when the Southern writer will satisfy the tired reader."¹³¹

6.2 A Good Man Is Hard to Find

It was Flannery O'Connor's first collection of short stories *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, published 1955, that allegedly gained her national recognition and acclaim. Although O'Connor did not focus primarily on Southern issues, certain aspects of Southern literature can be traced in her work.

6.2.1 The Past

The theme of history is tackled in several stories as well. In "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" there is only a fleeting memory of the glamorous past of the plantation South when the family on its trip to Florida goes by a large, old cotton field that belonged to a plantation once. The grandmother than remembers yet another old

¹³⁰ Miles Orvell, *Flannery O'Connor: The Introduction*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1972), 10.

¹³¹ Flannery O'Connor, "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction."

plantation on their way that she visited once when she was a young lady. She knows that her son “would not be willing to lose any time looking at an old house.”¹³² But she manages to get the children on her side by her story and together they persuade her son to stop by the mansion. Unfortunately, this decision costs them their lives, as they have a car accident and meet the Misfit and his companions who kill them all.

A much keener attitude toward Southern history can be traced in the ideas of Sally Poker Sash in “A Late Encounter with The Enemy”. Sally, who is sixty-two years old desires her grandfather, General Sash, to attend her graduation from college. She perceives in him a symbol for history and tradition of which she is proud and wants to boast of, this “glorious upright old man standing for traditions, dignity, honor and courage.”¹³³ “She wanted the General at her graduation because she wanted to show what she stood for, or as she said, ‘what was behind her,’ and was not behind them. This *them* was not anybody in particular. It was just all the upstarts who had turned the world on its head and unsettled the ways of decent living.”¹³⁴ Sally’s plans turn to be full of irony when it is revealed that the very man who is to represent the glorious past and Southern tradition, was actually not a general but probably only a foot soldier and that he does not really care for the past. “He didn’t have any use for history, because he never expected to meet it again.”¹³⁵

6.2.2 Tradition and Chivalry

In an adherence to the Southern tradition and customs there is also a visible gap between the old and the rising generation. “A Good Man Is Hard To Find” is a nice example of this discrepancy and how, unlike her daughter-in-law, the grandmother took care to be a lady. While the mother was wearing slacks and had only a kerchief on her had, the grandmother dressed like a lady for the trip. She

¹³² Flannery O’Connor, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find and Other Stories*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 1992), 9.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 162.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 161 - 162.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 163.

“had on a navy blue straw sailor hat with a bunch of white violets on the brim and a navy blue dress with a small white dot in the print. Her collar and cuffs were white organdy trimmed with lace and at her neckline she had pinned a purple spray of cloth violets containing a sachet. In case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once she was a lady.”¹³⁶

6.2.3 Family and Community Relations

The traditional compact Southern family in O'Connor's stories is substituted with her, almost dysfunctional family, not unlike that in Welty's stories. This is evident in the title story of the book “A Good Man is Hard to Find.” Harsh relationships between the family members are shown in the way the grandchildren treat their grandmother. Their attitude toward her is disrespectful, as if the grandmother was a nuisance to them. When grandmother asks the other members of the family not to go to Florida for their holiday but somewhere else, her grandchildren respond in a very offensive way: “If you don't want to go to Florida, why dontcha stay at home?” and “She wouldn't stay at home for a million bucks [...] afraid she'd miss something.”¹³⁷

6.2.4 Racial Relations

Racial relations are not in a primary focus of O'Connor and in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* there is only one story concerning this issue. In “The Artificial Nigger” Mr. Head takes his grandson Nelson to visit Atlanta for the first time in the young man life. The intention of Mr. Head is to show his grandson all the vices and drawbacks of the city so that he rejects it and will spend his life with his grandfather in the countryside. One of the drawbacks of Atlanta emphasized by Mr. Head is the presence of Negroes in the city. As he says to Nelson: “You may not like it a bit, [...] it'll be full of niggers.”¹³⁸ The boy, though he never met a Negro in his life, does not fancy his first

¹³⁶ O'Connor, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find and Other Stories*, 3.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 107.

encounter with one feeling a “fierce raw fresh hate”¹³⁹ toward him. The whole story culminates when the two men are lost in the Negro ghetto in Atlanta. The atmosphere is grim as Nelson is afraid, and both men rush back to the white part of the city.

6.3 A Good Man Is Hard to Find and Southern Identity

Flannery O’Connor depicts the South in a grotesque style of fiction and her stories thus seem to be surreal, exaggerated and from another world. Though she tried to escape the label “Southern writer” she was inevitably influenced by the place in which she grew up and lived. Her stories do not contain many allusions of Southern reality, though one is able to envision her ideas of the South. Interesting is the often mentioned gap between generations in their inclination to certain cultural values. The upcoming generation does not care much about the Southern code and the virtues of being a gentleman or a lady. Unlike in Faulkner’s books, the memory of the past is not crucial for the majority of the characters, though every now and then a character emerges who is proud of the Southern history and honors it. Flannery O’Connor wrote her stories published in this book in the era of segregation and prevailing racial scorn in the South. But, like many other political and social issues, racial relations are not the center of O’Connor’s interest, though she depicts the hostility toward Blacks in the story “The Artificial Negro.”

¹³⁹ O’Connor, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find and Other Stories*, 112.

7. The Last Southern Novel?: Walker's Percy The Last Gentleman

7.1 The Author

Walker Percy, whose work appeared after World War II is the last Southern author in this study. His first novel *The Moviegoer* was published in 1961 when Percy was forty-five years old, a later age for a debut.¹⁴⁰ Nevertheless, he belongs among the most important Southern writers of the 2nd half of the 20th century and by his own attitude to the question of his Southernness or to the theme of the South, he symbolizes the gradual merging of regional and national American literature.

His philosophical vision inspired by European existentialists, Percy was perceived by many critics as a European, rather than an American, much less a Southern, writer. He himself usually denied any natural influence on his work and, in several interviews, commented on the phenomenon of Southern literature: "I think that the day of regional Southern writing is all gone. I think that people who try to write in that style are usually repeating a phased-out genre, or doing Faulkner badly."¹⁴¹

It is not possible to deny the presence of the sense of a South in Percy's works. As Cleanth Brooks wrote in his essay "The Southernness of Walker Percy": "His novels are permeated with the visual appearances, accents, customs, folkways, vocabulary, and idioms of Southern culture."¹⁴² Percy himself is well aware of that and admits he "could not possibly write the way [he] writes unless [he] was born and raised and living in the South."¹⁴³ Percy tried to break out of the boundaries of typical Southern novel disapproving of its perpetual dealing with the past. He tries to have greater distance than

¹⁴⁰ Frank W. Shelton, "Novel, World War II to Present", in *The Companion to Southern Literature: Themes, Genres, Places, People, Movements and Motifs*, ed. Joseph M. Flora and Lucinda Hardwick MacKethan, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), 595.

¹⁴¹ William Rodney Allen, *Walker Percy: A Southern Wayfarer*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1986), xiv.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, xv.

¹⁴³ W. Kenneth Holditch, "An Interview with Walker Percy", in *More Conversations with Walker Percy*, ed. Lewis A. Lawson, Victor A. Kramer, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993), 20.

Faulkner, Welty or O'Connor. His settings are "middle-class, more urban or suburban and therefore closer to American suburbia."¹⁴⁴ As he says: "Faulkner and all the rest of them were always going on about this tragic sense of history, and we're supposed to sit on our porches talking about it all the time. I never did that, My South was always the New South."¹⁴⁵

7.2 The Last Gentleman

Walker Percy's second novel, *The Last Gentleman* published in 1966 tells the story of a young Southerner, Will Barret living in New York. Will suffers from a nervous condition accompanied by fugues and lost of identity. "...[H]e had lived in a state of pure possibility, not knowing what sort of man he was or what he must do, and supposing therefore that he must be all men and do everything."¹⁴⁶ Still, in New York, through a series of coincidences Will makes an acquaintance with Vaughts, a wealthy and eccentric Southern family, falls in love with Kitty Vaught and is hired by her father to be a companion to her younger brother, Jamie, who is seriously ill and slowly dying of leukemia. Will follows the Vaughts back to the South where he has to face Rita's, Kitty's sister-in-law, efforts to separate him from Kitty. Sutter and Val, Kitty's older siblings, contend for influence over him, exuding strong déjà vu from Southern past.

Will likes the idea of going back to the South as he believes that he can discover his identity there:

"I'm returning to the South to seek my fortune and restore the good name of my family, perhaps even recover Hampton plantation from the canebrakes and live out my day as a just man and little father to the faithful Negroes working in the field."¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁴ Holditch, "An Interview with Walker Percy," 21.

¹⁴⁵ Lewis A. Lawson, *Still Following Percy*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 14-15.

¹⁴⁶ Walker Percy, *The Last Gentleman*, (New York: Picador, 1999), 4.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 151.

The South, however, is not the Old South he remembers from his childhood and from the stories of his fathers. Consequently, Will finds himself lost in the South as well as in New York. Such a development of the main character and the passages on changes in the South that make it closer to the North can be taken as a symbol of joining of the two cultures.

7.2.1 The Past

Though leaving the South to live in New York, Will Barret is very anxious about the Southern past and the history of the region means a lot to him. It seems, that he is trying to retrieve his lost identity in studying and examining the Southern past. Without knowing why Will embarks upon fugue to Civil War battlefields. “He was discharged from the United States Army when he was discovered totally amnesic and wandering about the Shenandoah Valley between [...] sites of notable victories of General Stonewall Jackson.”¹⁴⁸ He enjoys reading books about General Lee and wondering what would the South be today if the War had ended differently.

While attending Princeton, the War affected him so strongly that he blew up a Union monument in memory of those who “made the supreme sacrifice to suppress the infamous rebellion.” It offended him, so he destroyed it with a liter of trinitrotoluene which he had synthesized himself. Unfortunately, the monument turned out to be of almost no importance to anybody. “It seemed I was the only one who knew the monument was there.”¹⁴⁹

7.2.2 Tradition and Chivalry

The very title of the book *The Last Gentleman* suggests the emphasis of the archetypal Southern virtue of chivalry. Indeed, throughout the book the gentlemanliness of Will Barret, who is always truthful and always honors his obligation, brings the past to the reader. It is perhaps most visibly demonstrated in Will’s attitude toward women,

¹⁴⁸ Walker Percy, *The Last Gentleman*, 17-18.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 267.

especially Kitty. There is also a perceptible discrepancy between his behavior in New York and that in the South. Coming to the South, Will decides that he “shall court [Kitty] in the old style.”¹⁵⁰ He resolved he would do right, “he aimed to take Kitty to a proper dance, pay her court, not mess around.”¹⁵¹ His chivalry and courteousness is not accepted by Kitty at first, though. Instead of being a proper Southern lady, Kitty “came on him like a diesel locomotive.”¹⁵² Obviously, Will’s idea of the Southern reality proves to be no longer authentic.

7.2.3 Family and Community Relations

In the book there are distinct emphasis on the discrepancy between Southern friendliness on one side and Northern coldness on the other. “In New York it is gradually borne in upon one that you do not speak to strangers and that if you do, you are fairly taken for a homosexual.”¹⁵³ Will Barret was used to the Yankee way “of not speaking to anyone at all” and “of going your own way and paying no attention to anyone.”¹⁵⁴ In the South, however, everyone was friendly and open to him. Everyone acted as if they known him for years, as they knew each other and the sense of community was very strong.

7.2.4 Race Relations

The story develops itself in 1960s, the time of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States and the attitude toward Blacks in the South is depicted as rather ambivalent. While Will’s father died in the name of Blacks’ equality with Whites, and Kitty’s older sister Val donated the money she inherited from her father to poor African Americans, some characters, perhaps a majority of them, in the novel profess racist opinions and are not wholly at peace with the idea of racial equality. All servants in the

¹⁵⁰ Walker Percy, *The Last Gentleman*, 166.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 174.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 175.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 202.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 204.

Vaughts' residence are Black and often depicted with racial stereotypes as "dumb", "respectful" and "absolutely amiable." Will Barret himself is a liberal on the question of racial equality, though he is really upset about the vulnerability of Negroes, especially demonstrated on the example of one of Vaughts' servants - David:

"David acted if everybody was going to treat them well! If I were a Negro, I'd be tougher then that. [...] Christ, they're not going to treat you well. They're going to violate you and it's going to ruin as all, you, them, us."¹⁵⁵

7.2.5 Changing South

The changes in the South are essential for the book's plot as Southerners prevent Will from fulfilling his idea of retrieving his identity once he is back in the South. He returned to a different region than he remembered. The new South was "happy, victorious, Christian rich, patriotic and Republican. Everyone was in fact happy."¹⁵⁶ This picture of the South corresponds with Percy's effort to avoid mourning about the Southern history and focus the attention to the contemporary South instead.

Unlike the stories of Faulkner or Welty, the story of *The Last Gentleman* is set predominantly in newly developed suburban areas in the South. As Val, Kitty's older sister explains: "I was one of the first people to be brought up in suburb [...] In the past, people have usually remembered their childhood in old houses in town or on dirt farms back in the country. But what I remember is the golf links and the pool."¹⁵⁷

Not all changes in the South are deemed to be positive in the book. The impacts on modernization and industrialization of the South are viewed rather negatively. Will Barret is convinced that "there is a balance in nature which is upset by man's attempt to improve upon it," and that "man's very best efforts to improve his environment, by air-conditioning and even by landscaping, upset a fundamental law which it took millions

¹⁵⁵ Walker Percy, *The Last Gentleman*, 197-198.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 185 - 186.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 207.

of years to evolve.”¹⁵⁸ The industrialized South is then described like this: “The air throbbled with the machinery, and the floodlights over the hill spoiled the night like a cast in a black eye. [...] The whole South throbbled like a diesel.”¹⁵⁹

In spite of the drawback of modernization, the South comes out victorious from its comparison to the North. As Percy writes: “They had everything the North had and more. They had a history, they had a place redolent with memories, they had good conversation, they believed in God, and defended the Constitution.”¹⁶⁰

7.3. *The Last Gentleman and Southern Identity*

Through its central character, Will Barret, *The Last Gentleman* could become a symbol for the search of Southern identity in the time of gradually disappearing differences between the South and the North. Will is completely lost as a Southerner living in New York and, in order to retrieve his lost identity, decides to return to the South. Unfortunately, he does not find the South he remembers from his childhood and his fathers’ stories. The South has changed; when Will decides to court Kitty in the old fashioned way, he is disappointed by her not accepting the role of a lady, the balance in nature was violated by modernization, mechanization, and landscaping, and Will feels lost in the South as well as in New York. The Southern past and defense of the Southern pride is crucial for Will, but as he discovers when blowing up the Union monument, only a few people care. Race is not a central motive in the book, but it is present. There is no hatred between the two races depicted, only an ambiguous attitude of white Southerners toward the ongoing desegregation and equalization of races.

¹⁵⁸ Walker Percy, *The Last Gentleman*, 126.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 169 - 170.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 185 - 186.

Conclusion

This thesis deals with the linkages between the Southern literature and the Southern identity from the period of Reconstruction until the second half of the twentieth century. Demonstrating similar features and motivations inherent to Southern culture, the greatest Southern literature has then potential of creating self-consciousness in the region. In fact, there are voices claiming that the phenomenon of Southern literature was merely invented in the early 1930s by a group of scholarly Southerners intending to promote Southern cultural values, thus gaining a cultural superiority over the North. However, this thesis argues that, although the works included in the body of Southern literature as we know it today indisputably contributed to the building of a regional identity of Southerners, it was not always with the intention to glorify the South or try to make it superior to the North. On the contrary, widely recognized Southern authors and some of the most significant contributors to Southern literature were highly critical of the South in their works, although they express affection toward the region as well.

This is demonstrated by the study of five Southern authors and their selected works: Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, Eudora Welty's *A Curtain of Green*, Flannery O'Connor's *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* and Walker Percy's *The Last Gentleman*. Each book includes typical features of Southern culture and assesses their tone and the messages within it. Furthermore, the selection of these particular works tracks the changes in the crucial concerns and general mood of Southern literature from the period of Reconstruction until 1960s, thus verifying the assertion of some of the literary scholars who believe that the progressing globalization and merging of the cultures of the North and the South, the Southern literature is slowly disappearing. While it is true, that at the end of World War II, more Southern writers felt a need to deny the label of a regional author, their works still shows features typical for Southern literature, even when they deal with slightly different topics than their predecessors. *The Last Gentleman* is not the last Southern piece of literature that has been written, though it would be very interesting to examine

next developments and to observe the changes in Southern literature that written by authors growing up in an increasingly multicultural environment.

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