

FROM INNOCENCE TO EXPERIENCE IN THE FICTION
OF FOUR SOUTHERN WRITERS

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INTRODUCTION

In 1917 H. L. Mencken charged that the South was "almost as sterile, artistically, intellectually, culturally, as the Sahara Desert."¹ The scathing criticism produced a furious reaction among Southerners, but they found little evidence with which to refute the claim; the condition was another of the consequences which their unique culture had produced. John Samuel Ezell explains:

The social mores had not been conducive to a life of letters; nor had the rural nature of the region, the absence of cities and publishing houses, absorption of literary effort by the slavery controversy, and the tendency to look to England and the North for reading matter. These all contributed to literary backwardness.²

But the backwardness was not to continue, and almost by the time the Mencken essay was published and circulated the condition which it deplored was being corrected, and one of the most remarkable literary phenomena of all time was under way.

What causes such a literary renaissance is a subject for speculation, but John M. Bradbury suggests that

¹H. L. Mencken, "The Sahara of the Bozart," A Mencken Chrestomathy (New York: Knopf, 1962), p. 184.

²John Samuel Ezell, The South Since 1865 (New York: Macmillan, 1963), p. 277.

. . . a prime requisite must be a sense of challenge that stirs the minds of men simultaneously and stimulates a new awareness of the values by which they have been living. Whether the challenge is primarily intellectual or social, it must extend sharply into both spheres.¹

These conditions were exactly those which existed for the homogeneous group called the Fugitives who were largely responsible for launching the Southern Literary Renaissance in the early 1920's.

The Fugitives--an appellation they appropriated later for their own inscrutable reasons--consisted of sixteen poets--John Crowe Ransom, Donald Davidson, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, Merrill Moore, Laura Riding, Jesse Wills, Alec B. Stevenson, Walter Clyde Curry, Stanley Johnson, Sidney Mtttron [sic] Hirsch, James Frank, William Yandell Elliott, William Frierson, Ridley Wills, and Alfred Starr--who had come together by accident over a period of twelve years on the campus of Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. Their mutual artistic interests led to the practice of meeting casually at regular intervals to read and discuss their poetry. These friendly chats grew more serious in purpose to the end that the group began publication of a magazine also called The Fugitive.

¹John M. Bradbury, Renaissance in the South: A Critical History of the Literature, 1920-1960 (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1963), p. 7.

The magazine, they suggested, would serve the cause of letters in the South by making their own poetry and that of other poets available to a public, of sorts, and by providing an effective means of communicating their developing theories of the art of poetry. Though the magazine's distribution was somewhat limited and continued only through nineteen issues (1922-1925), it received much attention in academic circles and elevated the Fugitives to a position of prominence which Southern men of letters had never before attained. The philosophy of the group was probably most cogently expressed by John Crowe Ransom, its guiding spirit, though Donald Davidson, Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren shared leadership with Ransom on almost equal terms. His philosophy is summarized in one statement which Louise Cowan claims is "a key to the attitude behind the whole modern Southern school of writing: 'Irony is the rarest of the states of mind, because it is the most inclusive;'"¹ Louise Cowan interprets Ransom's elaboration of the concept in this way:

. . . man is by nature dualistic, his very coming into the world creating an awareness of the chasm which separates himself from the universe--the spirit within from the material world without. He seeks to bridge the chasm, to "effect an escape

¹Louise Cowan, The Fugitive Group: A Literary History (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1959), p. 201.

from dualism," by erecting philosophical and metaphysical systems which encompass the observable world. In effect, he erects a "mystical community" so that he may "escape from an isolation which he cannot endure." He ascribes to the objects of experience the spiritual qualities which properly belong within himself. Thus, Ransom declared, the pathetic fallacies of the romantic poets stem from this desire to establish a mutuality of feeling between man and the cosmic order. In the light of man's scientific observations, however, this romantic construction cannot always stand; consequently, Ransom continued, the poet accepts a dualism again, but it is not like his original naive position, he is a dualist with a difference--reluctant, speculative, sophisticated rather than ingenuous, and richer by all the pathetic fallacies he has ever entertained.¹

In the practice of this philosophy, the Fugitives created a poetry firmly grounded in the Southern experience and asserted with increasing insistence that "the individual mind was less important in the production of literature than was the culture. . . ." ² Thus the Fugitives, whose challenge had been primarily intellectual to this point, were led into the second sphere of challenge which Bradbury considers requisite to a literary renaissance. Their emphasis upon the importance of culture caused Ransom, Tate, Davidson, and Warren to assemble a group known as the Agrarians, which included, besides themselves, Andrew Lytle, Stark Young, John Gould Fletcher, Frank Lawrence Owsley, Lyle Lanier, H. C. Nixon, John Donald Wade, and

¹Cowan, p. 200.

²Ibid.

Henry Blue Kline. These twelve scholars, representing various disciplines, differed from the Fugitives in two important ways: they were widely separated by distance and exchanged views by correspondence instead of personal contact; and their purposes were social rather than artistic. The chief result of this fellowship of minds was publication of a volume titled I'll Take My Stand, an anthology of essays praising the agrarian life and condemning industrialization. Again John Crowe Ransom was the leading spokesman, and in that capacity he wrote "Statement of Principles" which introduced the book. John Lincoln Stewart calls Ransom's conception a myth and explains its intention in these terms:

. . . like a myth it was intended to enable man to enter into some kind of right relation with a universe too vast and unpredictable for his understanding. . . . Agrarianism had its Adamitic Hero, the yeoman farmer; its lost Garden, the bountiful subsistence farm of the past; its Satan, the Northern scientist-industrialist; its Hell, the modern city. Implicit everywhere in it was a narrative of fatal knowledge, a fall from grace, a defiance of the supernatural, and after suffering, a quest for salvation. There was even a body Elect: the Southerners who yet might re-enter the Kingdom.¹

The Agrarians were attempting to translate the implications of the Fugitive poetry, grounded so firmly in the Southern

¹John Lincoln Stewart, The Burden of Time: The Fugitives and the Agrarians (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1965), p. 105.

experience, into a concrete social order; and it could not be done. Robert Penn Warren is typical of many who later denied the value of their contributions to I'll Take My Stand. He said, "In a little while I realized I simply couldn't have written that essay again."¹ As a social movement the Agrarian venture was a failure, but it constituted a major influence upon Southern writers whose genius exploded into literary works of acknowledged brilliance over the next four decades. The breadth and depth of their talent is inherent in the statistics with which Bradbury begins his book on the movement:

What has now for some years been recognized by literary critics and historians as the Southern Renaissance includes, in addition to one winner of the Nobel Prize for literature, eleven recipients of Pulitzer Prizes for fiction, which constitutes a full third of those awarded since 1929; four for drama and five for poetry. Since 1940-41, seven of the seventeen awards by the New York Drama Critics Circle have gone to Southern playwrights. Three Bollingen Prizes, representing "the highest achievement in American poetry," have been taken by Southerners since 1950, and thirty-five Southern authors have been granted Guggenheim Fellowships to work in fiction, poetry, and drama since 1927. The National Book Awards, offered since 1950, have gone three times to Southern novelists and three times to Southern poets. In sum, the South which was offering almost nothing to American letters before World War I has since been earning a considerably larger

¹Malcolm Cowley, ed., Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews (New York: Viking, 1959), p. 194.

share than its population warrants of the literary kudos.¹

Now that the Southern Literary Renaissance has subsided--it is generally dated from 1920 to 1960--important questions are being asked about the part which place plays in the work of the artist. The issue centers on the criterion of universality as an essential quality of a work of art and questions the extent to which it can be achieved within the limitations of regional values and local rituals. Arguments have been arrayed on both sides.

One of the two views is propounded by the New Critics who attempt to update and redefine the Aristotelian view of art which insists that its values are inherent.² Ironically, many of the Fugitives who first asserted the importance of culture upon literature are leaders among the New Critics; John Crowe Ransom is the group's chief spokesman. However, many of the early adherents to this philosophy have since denied the validity of its basic assumptions.

The other point of view, supported by a majority of critics, agrees with the Platonic argument that art

¹Bradbury, pp. 3-4.

²C. Hugh Holman, The Roots of Southern Writing: Essays on the Literature of the American South (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1927), p. 6.

acquires value and meaning as it relates to something extrinsic to itself. This seems to be the view which Ransom held early in his career when he formulated his principle of irony. At any rate, a preponderance of evidence lies with those who maintain that the Southern literary phenomenon is directly attributable to the cultural milieu which nurtured and sustained it. R. C. Simonini certainly agrees with this school of thought when he says:

Southern literature was born in a struggle of the creative artist for recognition in an indifferent society; it has flourished as its writers reacted with varied inspiration to their environment--its traditions, aspirations, achievements, and failures.¹

And C. Hugh Holman's position is perfectly clear when he asserts: "Out of the cauldron of the South's experience the southern writer has fashioned tragic grandeur and given it as a gift to his fellow Americans."²

Obviously, the proof of any theory of literature is in the literature itself. Four writers of the Southern Literary Renaissance--Katherine Anne Porter, Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O'Connor--in certain

¹R. C. Simonini, Jr., ed., Southern Writers: Appraisals in Our Time (Freeport, N. Y.: Books for Libraries, 1958), p. vi.

²Holman, p. 15.

writings centered in a common theme support the theory that the South not only equipped its artists, but also became the raw material of their art. These works, dealing with a girl's growth from innocence to experience, will be considered on the assumption that certain economic, religious, sociological, and psychological factors which characterized the South of the early twentieth century and produced its literary renaissance are the same factors employed in unique and artistic configurations by these writers to communicate the universal and enduring power of the initiation experience. This study will begin with a look at the region from which the writers emanate and progress through a study of selected writings on the theme indicated. Selection and documentation of the various aspects of the topic will be suggestive rather than inclusive and will represent only one level of interpretation among many.

CHAPTER I

THE SOUTH: OLD AND NEW

The writers of the Southern Literary Renaissance came to maturity in what has been called the New South, but W. J. Cash suggests that what passes as a New South is but new growth upon the Old:

. . . the extent of the change and of the break between the Old South that was and the South of our time has been vastly exaggerated. The South, one might say, is a tree with many age rings, with its limbs and trunk bent and twisted by all the winds of the years, but with its tap root in the Old South.¹

An understanding, then, of the economic, religious, sociological, and psychological forces which characterize the South and which underlie Southern literature requires first a look at the culture of the Old South.

Early in its history the South, for obvious reasons of geography and climate, turned to an almost totally agriculture-based economy which made slavery not only the choice of expediency but the choice of necessity for achieving the grand scale of living which Southerners envisioned. No region in history has made a choice with

¹W. J. Cash, The Mind of the South (New York: Knopf, 1968), p. x.

more far-reaching consequences, for the single factor of slavery fundamentally influenced every condition of life in the Old South. The region's economy was built on the "peculiar institution;" its religious views conformed exactly to shifting social and economic needs; its basic sociological units, especially the family, were reflections of a slave-based culture; and certain mental traits of its people were directly attributable, say psychologists, to its unique conditions of life.

Though slavery was practiced in colonial times, it was not until technological advances in England and Europe created an urgent demand for huge supplies of cotton, thus ushering in the Southern Cotton Kingdom, that it was considered the permanent and indispensable economic support of a way of life. From that point on a man's wealth was measured in white fields and black flesh, and so was his political power. The principles of Jeffersonian agrarianism and the Constitutional guarantee of states' rights were willfully manipulated and exploited to support rule by the aristocracy. Ambition for unprecedented prosperity spread into the yeoman class, and even the poor supported a political system of the planters, by the planters, and for the planters in the constant and not unreasonable hope of joining their ranks. In the cotton kingdom, even a man classed

as "white trash," the lowest of Anglo-Saxon stock, had some feeling of status and worth; for, bad as his condition was, he was still a rung above the bottom.

Not only was he not exploited directly, he was himself made by extension a member of the dominant class--was lodged solidly on a tremendous superiority, which, however much the blacks in the "big house" might sneer at him, and however much their masters might privately agree with them, he could never publicly lose. Come what might, he would always be a white man. And before that vast and capacious distinction, all others were fore-shortened, dwarfed, and all but obliterated.¹

It was the slaves, the backbone, ironically, both literally and figuratively, of the whole economic system, who occupied the bottom rung of the ladder.

Though the planters--a title of distinction reserved for agriculturists who owned twenty or more slaves--were a decided minority, history indisputably supports the fact that it was plantation wealth, or the desire for it, mostly from cotton, which influenced the life-style of the entire South. Ralph McGill says:

A beginning in cotton required little capital and no slaves, if one had a large working family. But as one ambitious grower wrote in a diary, "each bale, to the energetic, is a step in a stairway to a white-pillared mansion, to slaves and grand tours to Europe." . . . from 1820-1861 the cotton crop doubled with each decade. It was

¹Cash, p. 39.

the cotton planter who put his stamp on the land, its customs, its culture, thought and politics.¹

Inside those white-pillared mansions the harsh demands of a frontier existence were obscured, or deliberately camouflaged, by a show of luxury designed to reflect and perpetuate a fabled affluence and to secure the family's claim to the privileges bestowed upon aristocracy. But the hard, cold facts of finance often stood in sharp contrast to this surface abundance. The outward opulence more accurately bespoke the ostentatious romanticism of the planters than their shrewd business acumen. While the North and West were expanding through diversification and the application of sound economic theory in their trade with the South and nations abroad, the South seemed content with its show of finery. Dodd declares:

While . . . the returns all seemed to be going to the planters, the evidence is conclusive that by far the greater part of the proceeds was left in the hands of those who supplied the South with its necessities and its luxuries. The earnings of the slave plantations were thus consumed by tariffs, freights, commissions, and profits which the Southerners had to pay. Southern towns were only marts of trade, not depositories of the crops of surrounding or distant areas. Thus while the planters monopolized the cotton industry, drew to themselves the surplus of slaves, and apparently increased their wealth enormously, they were really but custodians of these returns,

¹Ralph McGill, The South and the Southerner (Boston: Little, Brown, 1959), p. 154.

administrators of the wealth of Northern men who really ultimately received the profits of Southern plantations and Southern slavery.¹

The bitter consequences of this condition, however, were not fully felt in the South until after the Civil War.

The tendency to accept the course of least resistance in matters of business, however, did not carry over into politics, which the planters saw as an extension of their economic interests. Ezell states:

The planters, though a decided minority, naturally were the leaders in all phases of life: social, economic, and political. . . . Little could happen in any Southern state without their consent. Attacks against their overlordship were met by a united defense.²

McGill adds:

The counties sent their legislators to the state capital and there they elected their United States senators. The planters were powerful enough in Washington to make it legal to add three-fifths of the slave population to the free population for the purpose of determining the number of congressional representatives to which each state was entitled. The slaves had no vote or civil rights, but they were a very real political asset in Congress.³

Indeed, so great became the feeling of self-importance among the Southern demagogues that the security of the

¹William E. Dodd, The Cotton Kingdom: A Chronicle of the Old South (New York: United States Publishers Assn., 1919), p. 17.

²Ezell, p. 8.

³McGill, p. 154.

Union became secondary to their own vested interests. The action of South Carolina in opposition to the tariff of 1832 typifies the strong regional sentiment which pervaded the whole South. The South Carolina Convention adopted an Ordinance of Nullification and proceeded to bolster it with an intricate system of legislation, including the right to military defense against the federal government should that government decide to enforce the tariff. This state of mind vividly represents the political extremities to which the South had been pushed by the necessity to defend its slave-based economy.

The growing paranoia of the South with the accompanying sense of need to shore up its defenses on all fronts at once precipitated a radical shift in religious views. In the colonial period while New England was plagued by the excesses of Puritanism the South enjoyed great freedom of religion. But Sydnor points out that during the period from 1820 to 1850

. . . the South and New England were in the process of swapping their colonial positions in respect to religious conservatism. The South, whose deistic liberalism had shocked conservative New Englanders at the time of the Revolution, was becoming the citadel of conservative theology. Its religious leaders, in turn, were shocked at the unorthodoxy of New England.¹

¹Charles S. Sydnor, The Development of Southern Sectionalism, 1819-1848 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1948), p. 226.

Eaton finds the explanation for the reversal in religious views a very simple one:

. . . with the rise of the cotton kingdom and the renewed profitability of slavery, both the evangelical and the gentlemanly traditions were able to accommodate the existence of slavery in the South with high Christian ideals. This feat was accomplished by a literal interpretation of the Bible, which immeasurably strengthened conservative trends in Southern society.¹

Theologians capitalized on a proof-text preaching which handily provided chapter and verse in defense of the status quo. The sons of Ham were predestined by the Creator to be the servant race: "Without the productive power of the African whom an 'all-wise Creator' had perfectly adapted to the labor needs of the South, its lands would have remained 'a howling wilderness.'"² Furthermore, it was a self-evident fact, they claimed, that a benevolent providence was at work in lifting the heathen out of a pagan land and depositing them upon the shores of a Christian nation where their souls could the more easily be claimed for salvation through the preaching of the gospel. Stamppp summarizes the content of the spiritual diet to which the slaves were regularly subjected. His comment implies more about the

¹Clement Eaton, The Mind of the Old South (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1967), p. 220.

²Kenneth M. Stamppp, The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South (New York: Knopf, 1967), p. 7.

white man's motivations than the black man's spiritual condition:

Through religious instruction the bondsmen learned that slavery had divine sanction, that insolence was as much an offense against God as against the temporal master. They received the Biblical command that servants should obey their masters, and they heard of the punishments awaiting the disobedient slave in the hereafter. They heard, too, that eternal salvation would be the reward of faithful service, and that on the day of judgment "God would deal impartially with the poor and the rich, the black man and the white."¹

The ministers in the South who held antislavery views diplomatically refrained from expressing them, and the vast amount of oratory devoted to a defense of slavery suggests that few opposed it. Indeed, that slavery influenced the churches far more than the churches influenced slavery is seen in the ante-bellum split of three major denominations--Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian--exactly along the Mason-Dixon line.

The South's religious views conformed exactly to its dream of a Utopia which preserved the values of the past and perpetuated a paternalistic aristocracy based on a society of inflexible class distinctions. The Romantic Movement also became a support of the status quo. Chivalry was ardently practiced, and women were all but deified. Sir Walter Scott was idolized; and his novels, reinforcing

¹Stamp, p. 158.

the South's romantic tastes and confirming the rightness of its way of life, were sold by the ton. The culture of ancient civilizations also served the South's purpose.

Thomas Roderick Dew of William and Mary College, who exercised perhaps a greater influence upon the thinking of the South than any other single individual, extolled the classical social order. Unfortunately, so discrete a social structure does not take into account the dynamic quality of community life. The masters and slaves of the South lived in close daily contact, and no amount of legislation or social theory could prevent the mixing of the two cultures. Moreover, a phenomenon known by sociologists as "cultural convergence" was evident in the native culture of the slaves and that of their Southern masters. In their native land the slaves, like their new masters, were an agricultural people. They lived close to nature, felt a deep family relatedness based on rigid customs of class distinction, and experienced religion as a fundamental support of a way of life. Even mutual distrust could not prevent amalgamation of the two parallel cultures under conditions of mutual dependence.

Certainly the influence of the master race upon the subservient one was overtly greater than the reverse. Hence, the slaves were destined to live their lives in a

kind of twilight zone of conferred identity without a proper sense of self or relationship to their families or to society. This lack of a sense of self was evident in the slaves' efforts to identify with rich and influential masters. They often bragged about belonging to respectable families, and boasted of the price that was paid for them. "A thousand-dollar slave felt superior to an eight-hundred dollar slave."¹ But the black man's sense of inferiority was so enormous that even when, in rare cases, he acquired an education, he could not, or dared not, claim its privileges. Eaton tells the story of "Uncle" Albert Burgess of Warrenton, North Carolina, a well educated former slave who, after the Civil War, refused a nomination for Congress "because he did not think that Negroes were fit for political office."² Few bondsmen, furthermore, were able to overcome the apathy which a lack of identity fostered. Olmsted recorded a significant example in the words of a woman he visited who had formerly lived in the North. She was complaining bitterly of the laziness of Negroes:

Up to the North, if a girl went out into the garden for anything, when she came back she would clean her feet, but these nigger girls will stomp right in and track mud all over the house. What

¹Stamp, p. 339.

²Eaton, p. 190.

do they care? They'd just as lief clean the mud after themselves as anything else--their time isn't any value to themselves.¹

Olmsted is quick to observe:

But note the fatal reason this woman frankly gives for the inevitable delinquencies of slave servants, "Their time isn't any value to themselves!"²

Family life among slaves was in constant jeopardy since it was completely subject to the whim of the master. Though most masters encouraged marriage and fidelity, it was not uncommon for slaves to change partners at will without reprimand. Childbearing was encouraged, since it enriched the master; and much Southern philosophy, and even some theology, removed the stigma from "illegitimate" births. Chancellor William Harper of the Supreme Court of South Carolina wrote:

In northern communities the unmarried woman who becomes a mother is an outcast from society. She has given birth to a human being who is commonly educated to a course of vice, depravity, and crime. It is not so with the female slave. She is not a less useful member of society than before. She has not impaired her means of support nor materially impaired her character or lowered her education; she has done no great injury to herself or any other human being. Her offspring is not a burden but an acquisition to her owner. The want

¹Fredrick Law Olmsted, The Cotton Kingdom (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971), p. 153.

²Ibid., p. 154.

of chastity among slaves hardly deserves a harsher name than weakness.¹

Once the child was born, he not only was the property of the master but was under the control of the white mistress more than of his own mother. Slave parents were often beaten in the presence of their children, their orders to their children countermanded by their owners, and their ability to meet their children's simplest needs depended upon the paternal whim of the master. The ultimate indignity, of course, lay in the constant terror that either parent or child would be sold to a remote owner. Though plantation life reflected the value which the members of the ruling class placed upon a secure family life for themselves, it provided none of the requisites to this blessing for slave families.

When the slave calculated his behavior in terms of social goals his efforts were divided between "the quarters" and "the big house," for both were important to his existence. Survival required that the bondsman develop those characteristics which pleased the master--respect, obedience, submissiveness, fawning humility--none of which, he must have observed, were admired in free men. His success with his master depended upon these, and his rank

¹Dodd, p. 56.

among fellow slaves depended upon his master's pleasure in assigning tasks.

And a bondsman, in his own circle, was as highly sensitive to social distinctions as ever was his master. In a society of unequals--of privileged and inferior castes, of wealth and poverty--the need to find some group to feel superior to is given desperate urgency. In some parts of Virginia even the field-hands who felt the contempt of the domestics could lavish their own contempt upon the "coal pit niggers" who were hired to work in the mines.¹

Domestics, artisans, and foremen, or "drivers," were considered the aristocrats of the slave population; but appointment to such a high position was not an unmixed blessing. Not only did these slaves live constantly under the watchful eye of their white overlords, but they were permanently separated from easy and natural contact with their only true companions. Such a slave became what sociologists call a "marginal man." He existed in a no-man's land between two cultures, a part of neither. It was the women of this elite group who most often produced mulatto children; and they, too, took up the bewildering marginal existence. Many of these dispossessed people looked longingly toward the relaxed living in the quarters.

The influences of slavery were not altogether one-sided, for by the choice to enslave others the masters

¹Stamp, p. 335.

had enslaved themselves to certain inevitable consequences. In the first place, the need for immediate returns on their huge investment in labor required the planters to practice farming methods which resulted in desolation and waste throughout the South. That same urgency caused the landholders to pursue recklessly other practices and policies just as harmful in the long run:

It prevented the growth of towns and cities, it shut out industrialism, and it made the South dependent on the North or European nations for its manufactures. While the North was receiving an influx of free laborers the South was increasing unnecessarily its slave labor supply, indulging in unwise investments, and overstocking the markets with southern staple crops. In making labor undignified, moreover, it reduced the poor whites to poverty, caused a scarcity of money, cheapened land, and confined the South to one-crop farming at the expense of its undeveloped resources.¹

Secondly, the masters suffered the consequences of their own demeaning acts of paternalism.

Fredrick Law Olmsted . . . believed that the close association of Southerners with shiftless Negro slaves tended to develop the habit of ignoring small things because the master's patience was constantly tried by infinite vexations on the part of the careless slaves--irritations that would have infuriated a Northerner. The lax, slipshod methods of the Southern plantation tended to develop habits of mind unsuited to science. The typical Southerner . . . was given

¹Carter Woodson and Charles H. Wesley, The Negro in Our History (Washington, D. C.: Associated Publishers, 1962), p. 237.

to vague generalizations and inexact speech; his mind was oratorical and romantic; he lacked an aptitude for "close observation," . . . and he disliked applying himself to details.¹

Perhaps this was just payment for the kind of paternalism which "gave its recipient privileges and comforts but made him into something less than a man."²

An increasing laxity in moral standards, especially among white males, became one of the most painful and lasting consequences of slavery. Men watching their own children or grandchildren growing up as slaves suffered agonizing conflicts which they attempted to resolve in a variety of ways: sometimes they gave their black consorts and the children preferential treatment at home; sometimes they set them free and sent them away, providing money for their care; sometimes clauses in their wills spoke more than they had the courage to say openly:

. . . a master in Southhampton County, Virginia, freed Hannah for "meritorious service" and gave her fifty acres of land, a house, and an annual pension of fifty dollars.³

But keen as the man's suffering undoubtedly was in some cases, it could not be compared to that of the slave

¹Eaton, p. 244.

²Stampp, p. 327.

³Ibid., p. 358.

mistress or even to that of the legal wife. One embittered woman wrote:

"Like the patriarchs of old, our men live all in one house with their wives and their concubines; and the mulattoes one sees in every family partly resemble the white children. Any lady is ready to tell you who is the father of all the mulatto children in everybody's household but her own. These, she seems to think, drop from the clouds. My disgust sometimes is boiling over."¹

The children were the real victims, of course. In the light of modern psychology it is logical to assume that all--black, white, and mulatto--lived in a state of psychological conflict as they attempted to sort out the perplexities of their existences. They played together, studied together, ate together, and often bedded together. Growing up in such daily intimacy among themselves and witnessing, as children do, the intimacies of the adults around them, they not infrequently discovered a bond of kinship between them. But despite that fact, their childhood equality was short-lived. The mystical age was inevitably reached when one became master and the other slave. From that moment a great gulf separated them: one lived off the wealth which the other earned; one wielded the whip while the other submitted; one commanded while the other obeyed. Adolescent slaves might react

¹Stampp, p. 356.

with stunned disbelief, sullen stoicism, or resentment and anger; but it made no difference. Their fate was sealed, and the rift was permanent:

In the Slave Papers of the Library of Congress is a manuscript autobiography of the slave "Fields," dated at Richmond in 1847; . . . Fields relates that he never knew what "the yoke of oppression" was until he was nearly grown, for "the black and white children all faired alike." He became very attached to the master's son; but when the latter had become a teenager, he asserted his superiority over his dark-skinned playmate and friend, "like a peacock among chickens," and soon the master's son was sent away to school and the slave boy was put in the fields to work.¹

Destiny was unalterably prescribed by conditions of birth.

What Fields perceived as a show of superiority, however, may in reality have been the young man's valiant effort to play successfully the role ascribed by society to men of his station. At least, this was the rationalization with which most Southern gentlemen deluded themselves. They had not chosen slavery. Indeed, they were chosen--by God--for the task of developing the perfect society. And that included bearing the "cross" of slavery. The Greeks had demonstrated that no great civilization could exist apart from slavery, and the South would be grander than Greece because God had ordained it. Senator James H. Hammond of South Carolina affirmed:

¹Eaton, p. 194.

It [slavery] is no evil. On the contrary, I believe it to be the greatest of all the great blessings which a kind Providence bestowed upon our glorious region. . . . it has rendered our southern country proverbial for its wealth, its genius, and its manners.¹

Virginian Thomas R. Dew agreed and carried the argument a step further:

It is the order of nature and of God that the being of superior faculties and knowledge, and therefore of superior power, should control and dispose of those who are inferior.²

These attitudes represent what Sydnor has called the "curious, psychopathic condition"³ of the South. The desperate need to defend themselves in a morally untenable position had caused Southerners to close their eyes to their own injustices, their ears to any criticism of their fundamental way of life, and their minds to all objective analysis. Ralph McGill observed a century later that the Negro did not fit "the image the white man had of him. And that was bad because this meant the image the white man had of himself wasn't true either."⁴

¹Sydnor, p. 336.

²Dodd, p. 53.

³Sydnor, p. 339.

⁴McGill, p. 157.

The "New South" dates from 1877 when the last of the federal troops were ordered to withdraw and the South was again in the hands of Southerners. Reconstruction was a misnomer, as well as a failure, since it was never the intention of the North to rebuild the South, but rather to destroy it--which it virtually did--and make it over--which it did not. The altruistic aims for the South with which the abolitionists had inflamed the North were never followed up with money or practical plans or qualified leadership. To his dismay the Negro discovered that the gift of liberty was an abstraction which, much as he prized it, he could neither eat nor wear. His former master could not help him since the master was now as poor as he, and the North did not want him. The utter destruction and desolation of the land was matched only by the numb despair of the people, both black and white. Years of war in which the odds were never equal were climaxed by a humiliating defeat and followed by a paralyzing "foreign" occupation which left them drained and apathetic. Only gradually did the old pride and determination return, and it did not reach productive proportions until government had been fully returned to local control. Even then the Old South was still deeply ingrained in the psychology of the people

and still very much in evidence in every facet of Southern culture--social, religious, and economic.

The economic recovery of the post-war South began in earnest the moment Northern occupation ended. Many Southerners had long maintained that the staple-crop system of the ante-bellum South had created the conditions which lost them the war, and they were not eager to perpetuate costly mistakes; but cotton was what they knew and what they would continue to depend upon until they could do better.

The war left Southerners with little except the land; but having no cash with which to pay, landowners were forced to split up their holdings into small sections and let them out to tenants and share-croppers, both black and white. Ezell comments, "The credit-single-staple-tenancy-erosion cycle operated to produce poverty for most and economic insecurity for all."¹ Nevertheless, the financial desperation of the region kept cotton king until another crisis ended its hold on the region:

By 1913 the coming of the boll weevil, a rising international competition, and sagging farm credits had brought the southern farmer to the brink of ruin. . . .

Cotton poverty was deep and stark enough, but there was still another ghostly manifestation.

¹Ezell, p. 133.

Rising on the very ground of cotton failure were chemically made synthetics. . . . This threat far outweighed abolition of slavery, or even competition from other cotton growers around the world. It knew no drought, no insects, no ravaging plant disease.¹

Responding to these combined exigencies, Southern agriculture took a new turn. Insect-ridden cotton fields were converted to truck farms, or turned into pastures for cattle grazing, or planted in corn, wheat, trees, or any other commodity which promised a profit. Mechanized farming and an improved transportation system further changed the picture, but it was World War II which definitely brought an end to agricultural dominance in the South by the revolutionary expansion of industry which had been in progress since the close of the Civil War.

Indeed, many in the South had preached industrial expansion since pre-Civil War days and had wooed Northern industrialists to the South with the promise of two irresistible advantages: tax exemptions and an abundance of cheap labor. The politically powerful fulfilled the first half of the promise while the many women and children left widowed and fatherless by the war, together with thousands of poor whites, fulfilled the second half. The benefits which the South offered plus scientific and technological advances

¹Thomas D. Clark, The Emerging South (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1968), pp. 41-42.

evinced major industrial expansion, but the advances still did not keep up with the South's needs:

By 1930, and the advent of the Great Depression, it was clear that the South, though it had made fair progress in industrialization, had hardly dentened the surface of the urgent need for economic diversification. If the region were to compete with the rest of the nation, industrial expansion was a necessity.¹

The necessary expansion was delayed, however, and progress was arrested by the depression. Many workers were laid off, and wages were reduced to subsistence levels as industry waited out the years until the outbreak of World War II provided the stimulus which thrust it permanently into the forefront of the Southern economy.

Next to economy, perhaps no other influence was as great in the South as the religious one. Its importance is emphasized by Clark when he says: "To appraise the South without examining in considerable detail the place of organized religion would be akin to viewing a forest without the trees."² C. Vann Woodward agrees with Clark on the importance of religion in the South:

Neither learning nor literature of a secular sort could compare with religion in power and influence over the mind and spirit of the South. The exuberant religiosity of the Southern people, the

¹Clark, p. 249.

²Ibid.

conservative orthodoxy of the dominant sects, and the overwhelming Protestantism of all but a few parts of the region were forces that persisted powerfully in the twentieth century.¹

The conservative orthodoxy of which he speaks, characterized as it was by legalism and literalism, brought Clark to the conclusion that ". . . the South has preached the New Testament and lived by the narrower tenets of the Old."² Literal interpretation began with a firm belief in the Genesis account of creation and reached its climax, as far as the South was concerned, in the fixed social positions incumbent upon the descendants of Shem, Ham, and Japheth. It was equally rigid on other points of orthodoxy, though its techniques and organizations reflected the growing technology of the society in which it existed. In fact, according to Cash, religion in the twentieth century South "had now been vulgarized by the thin jazziness which seems to be the necessary concomitant of industrialism everywhere."³ The Southern church preached "sin and salvation" and left the plight of earthly man to the "social-gospel radicals" of the North.

¹C. Vann Woodward, Origins of the New South 1877-1913, Vol. IX of A History of the South, ed. Wendell Holmes Stephenson and E. Merton Coulter (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1951), p. 448.

²Clark, p. 249.

³Cash, pp. 290-291.

Woodward observes that this religious atrophy existed prior to 1913:

. . . there were three tendencies "clearly discernible" in American Christianity of this period: "a trend toward church unity, a further liberalizing of theology and an increasing emphasis upon socialized religion." Yet one searches vainly for important manifestations of any one of these three tendencies in the annals of Southern Christendom.¹

That Clark is forced to a similar conclusion of the church as it existed more than fifty years later constitutes a clear condemnation:

An era of economic revolution, coupled with the disillusion brought by two world wars, had little influence on the fundamental structure of the southern church.²

The strongly religious atmosphere did not, however, eliminate social conflict, and some noticeable sociological changes had occurred. Dominated as it was by the power, wealth, and mentality of the planter class, the Old South did not feel the influence of the yeoman and poor-white classes which the New South felt. But the leveling influence of the war caused these groups to see their once aristocratic neighbors in a more realistic light, and though at first they perpetuated the rule of the mighty by electing them to political office, they soon sensed the importance

¹Woodward, p. 450.

²Clark, p. 249.

of uniting their efforts in their own interest. Farmers began to join national organizations for alleviation of their grievances and were later drawn under the influence of the Populist party, which Ezell says aroused the class consciousness of the farmers "to the extent that they became one of the most self-conscious groups in American history."¹ The benefits of Roosevelt's New Deal devolved largely to poor whites in the South and saved them from ruin, though it stigmatized them in the eyes of their more affluent neighbors. Finally, the organization of industrial labor unions gave the blue collar worker the political clout he had always lacked and gave him a sense of dignity, at least, in a struggle which had traditionally been unequal.

The conflict among white groups, however, was superficial, indeed, compared to the struggle between white and black, before which, as Cash says, "all others were foreshortened, dwarfed, and all but obliterated." Racial discrimination, however, did not begin immediately after emancipation; for the South did not immediately recognize that it had a problem:

Under slavery the vast majority of non-slave-owning whites had been largely isolated from the Negro, and there had been only a labor issue between the white man and his slave. Under the

¹Ezell, p. 172.

new order there would be created a race issue. In a sense and to a degree, all whites had been aristocrats under slavery because they were free. After redemption, white men who had seen Negroes occupy superior positions to their own during racial reconstruction were resolved that it should not happen again.¹

The first attempt to control the Negro was through disfranchisement. Some men, like Carter Glass of Virginia, made no effort to hide their purpose. From the floor of the constitutional convention he thundered:

Discriminate! Why that is precisely what we propose; that, exactly, is what this convention was elected for--to discriminate to the very extremity of permissible action under the limitations of the Federal Constitution, with a view to the elimination of every negro voter who can be gotten rid of legally. . . .²

This was accomplished with "grandfather" clauses, the poll tax, literacy tests, stuffed ballot boxes, intimidation, and even violence when it was required. Then through a series of laws the Negro was gradually barred from all personal contact with whites except contact in a servant capacity. Even more important, he was barred from the social institutions and jobs essential to raising his status and standard of living. The Negro responded by leaving the South or by becoming, at least on the outside,

¹Thomas D. Clark and Albert D. Kirwan, The South Since Appomattox: A Century of Regional Change (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967), p. 306.

²Ezell, p. 181.

the obsequious creature the white man wished him to be. But during the depression years, he saw federal law operate in his favor for the first time. The opportunities of the New Deal included him, and in less than a decade World War II created additional opportunities for jobs and provided more laws guaranteeing his rights. In addition, a new philosophy was gaining ground among the members of his own race spearheaded by W. E. B. DuBois, head of the NAACP: the era of Negro accommodation was dead. The combination of forces had created what Odum called "a New Negro."

It was not only that Negro youth, sensing the epochal spiritual change in racial attitude and led by Negro leadership of the North and South, was minded to experiment with every type of equal opportunity--it was all this and more. It was as if some universal message had come through to the great mass of Negroes, urging them to dream new dreams and to protest against the old order.¹

That they did not stop with the dreams is seen in the enormous quantity of civil rights legislation enacted in recent times.

The vicissitudes of the New South have been recorded in the psychology of the Southern mind. Richard Weaver points out that the typical American, in contrast

¹Howard W. Odum, "The Way of the South," In Search of the Regional Balance of America, ed. Howard W. Odum and Katharine Jocher (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1945), p. 19.

with the citizen of any other civilized nation on earth, stands for "success unlimited." But, he adds,

. . . this is the point at which the Southerner ceases to be classified an American. He has had to taste a bitter cup which no American is supposed to know anything about, the cup of defeat.¹

And in this defeat lies another fact of enormous psychological significance, Weaver claims. The Southerner is an American against his will. This knowledge buried deep in his psychology explains much of the region's irrational legislation and much of the Southerner's determination to uphold it. Speaking of this peculiar characteristic, McGill says:

As is always the case, fraudulent methods begat others. In time, the originals and those spawned by them ceased to be admittedly sly and dishonorable devices and become shields of the Southern way of life--honored, hallowed customs "tried and tested by our forefathers." Segregation became, not a ruthlessly pragmatic mechanism to disfranchise and economically depress and exploit the Negro, but "two separate societies existing side by side for the protection of each." Segregation was "best" for both.²

Robert Coles, in the record of his psychological study of racism in the South, makes the same observation:

¹Richard M. Weaver, "Aspects of the Southern Philosophy," Southern Renaissance: The Literature of the Modern South, ed. Louis D. Rubin, Jr. and Robert D. Jacobs (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1953), p. 24.

²McGill, pp. 219-220.

. . . "the Southerner" is more than a resident of the South. He exists psychologically; and in at least that respect he exists across the barriers of race and class. He is one American . . . whose ancestors generation after generation, lived at cross-purposes to every political principle of this nation. He is the one American who really knows history because he lives constantly in its vengeful presence.¹

These fraudulent practices and their psychological results have been very costly to Southerners. Seeing "so much of horror, both in themselves and outside themselves," they began to be afraid, and the fear was translated into "hate for whatever differed from themselves and their ancient pattern. . . ." ² In some the hatred flamed into violence, but more often it solidified into a cold, impersonal aloofness. McGill says, "Segregation is estrangement. It is withdrawal from humanity that is close at hand, that passes in the street, that lives just over the way." ³ Perhaps the worst part of such estrangement is that it constitutes a form of self-estrangement which results in a brooding narcissism of total isolation. That such a state does exist in the South is reflected in many of her native writers.

¹Robert Coles, Farewell to the South (Boston: Little, Brown, 1963), p. 50.

²Cash, p. 294.

³McGill, p. 218.

Cash says,

. . . if it can be said there are many Souths, the fact remains that there is also one South. That is to say, it is easy to trace throughout the region . . . a fairly definite mental pattern, associated with a fairly definite social pattern--a complex of established relationships and habits of thought, sentiments, prejudices, standards and values, and associations of ideas. . . .¹

The characteristics of the South presented here and the influences from which they grew are some of those which produced the "one South," which in turn produced the men and women of the Southern Literary Renaissance.

¹Cash, p. viii.

CHAPTER II

KATHERINE ANNE PORTER: OLD SOUTH INFLUENCES IN THE MIRANDA STORIES

One of the first generation of Southern Renaissance writers, Katherine Anne Porter was born on May 15, 1890, in Indian Creek, Texas, where she lived until 1901 when she and her sister began their convent educations. At nineteen she began a long and varied career including newspaper reporting, acting, dancing, singing, painting, teaching, and writing, the last of which she always considered her real profession. However, she once admitted to Barbara Thompson, "I think I've only spent about ten percent of my energies on writing. The other ninety percent went to keeping my head above water."¹ Much of Miss Porter's time has been spent in teaching writing on college campuses. She has, in fact, lectured in more than 150 universities and colleges in the United States and Europe. She has received many awards, including five honorary degrees.²

¹Barbara Thompson, "An Interview," Katherine Anne Porter: A Critical Symposium, ed. Ladwick Hartley and George Core (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1969), p. 15.

²George Hendrick, Katherine Anne Porter (New York: Twayne, 1965), pp. 11-28.

Barbara Thompson, in an interview for Paris Review in 1963, asked Miss Porter whether or not one of her stories was "true." Miss Porter replied,

The truth is, I have never written a story in my life that didn't have a very firm foundation in actual human experience--somebody else's experience quite often, but an experience that became my own by hearing the story, by witnessing the thing, by hearing just a word perhaps.¹

The details of Miss Porter's life suggest that the seven stories and the two short novels called the Miranda stories spring from deeply personal experiences. In these stories she pictures the evolution of an innocent child into a mature young woman who has lived for days on the edge of death in the awful knowledge of the accumulated guilt of the human race. The value system against which this metamorphosis takes place for Miranda is the traditional Southern one practiced in Miss Porter's childhood home, and it is between the inherited "truths" of a bygone day and the "truth" of her own time that Miranda has to choose.

Singly, the Miranda pieces are studies in the influence of environment upon the formation of individual characters, but as a group they constitute an allegory of man's struggle against the material and psychological remnants of an archaic past. What Miranda first accepts as the natural

¹Thompson, p. 15.

order of things, she gradually comes to abhor and finally tries with only partial success to throw off altogether. A kind of resolution is achieved when she realizes that she lives in no new age, but at that eternal point of synthesis between past and future. Miss Porter's stories are not confessionals, but they are the fiction of memory, and her arrangement of those memories of time and place is the essence of her art.

The first four stories of "The Old Order" group provide the details of Miranda's family background and begin, in the true Southern tradition, with the Grandmother whose pervading influence is told in two stories called "The Source" and "The Journey." "The Source" is the story of the Grandmother's annual visit to the old family farm where she diligently sets about a two-week campaign, with the help of the Negroes, to restore the whole place to pristine cleanliness and order. The theme of the story is implicit in its title, but it is elaborated in the unfolding of the Grandmother's character and is summed up in the children's attitude toward her: ". . . she was the only reality to them in a world that seemed otherwise without fixed authority or refuge. . . ." ¹ "The Journey" begins

¹Katherine Anne Porter, The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter (New York: New American Library, 1970), p. 324. All subsequent parenthetical page numbers are to this edition.

with a picture of the Grandmother, Sophia Jane, and her old former slave, Nannie, enjoying the companionship of old age as they sew in the orchard. Their lives are then traced from the age of five when Sophia Jane acquires Nannie, through marriage and motherhood, and the vicissitudes of war and displacement. They are separated in old age only by the Grandmother's death.

The next two stories deal with the ex-slaves, Jimbilly and Nannie. "The Witness" is Uncle Jimbilly, as the children call him, and what he has witnessed are the horrors of slavery, which he recounts endlessly to them. "The Last Leaf" is Nannie, who, after the Grandmother's death, surprises the entire family by requesting the use of a vacated hut for a home of her own. There she peacefully indulges her inclinations and refuses to be troubled by either her white family or her black one.

These four stories, the prologue to Miranda's experiences, employ fictionally several prominent characteristics of the Old South. First, Sophia Jane's father, as a prominent planter, participates in the agricultural economy on which the Old South was largely dependent, and the success of his business depends upon his competence in buying and supervising slaves. Later Sophia Jane, widowed and forced to earn a living for her large family,

first attempts to operate a sugar refinery in New Orleans, but when that fails she moves to a farm in Texas and resumes the agricultural life she had known as a child. By dint of strong will, hard work, and determined management of her Negroes, now no longer slaves, she prospers, in spite of being a woman.

But more important to the stories than the agricultural economy, though inseparably related to it, is the emphatically Southern social structure with its intense class-consciousness among both whites and blacks. The very fact that the group of stories begins by providing Miranda with a family tree is a signal of the importance of family to Southerners. Richard Weaver explains:

In the South the bearer of an idea must come vouchsafed and certified. He must be of a good family or hold some position or represent some important element before he can get a hearing. Who is he to have an important thought? To put the matter in another way, the Southerner expects the idea to come with what the old writers on rhetoric used to call "ethical proof." That is to say, he frankly evaluates the idea against the background of its origin. I scarcely need add that in most situations the "proof" is not ethical at all, but political or worse, since it attempts to rate thought according to some notion of social prestige.¹

Since the Miranda stories are frankly autobiographical, by providing "ethical proof" for Miranda Miss Porter is indirectly posting her own qualifications for speaking on the

¹Weaver, p. 21.

subject of the South. Also, in "The Source" it is important that Sophia Jane marry within the family--Stephen is her second cousin--and in her later years she takes pride in having started each of her children off with some land and a little money, a practice which good Southern families always followed. This practice is apparent in Welty's Delta Wedding, also, and is one reason why, by the turn of the century, the South had few large plantations but many small farms. The family's pride is further seen in its strong objection to Sophia Jane's nursing her own babies instead of letting her slave Nannie do it. Objection reached the level of shocked indignation when they learned that Sophia was also nursing Nannie's baby during Nannie's illness. Acceptable behavior is clearly conditioned in the stories, as in real life, upon social status.

The picture of the slave culture in these two stories is also consistent with that of the Old South. Nannie is separated from her own people at the age of five when she becomes Sophia Jane's companion and begins her training as a "domestic." Her mother is jealous of her high position and taunts her with the humiliating information that she was bought for twenty dollars. Nannie is married at seventeen to Jimbilly, but there is no bond of affection to hold them together in later life:

That marriage of convenience, in which they had been mated with truly royal policy, with an eye to the blood and family stability, had dissolved of itself between them when the reason for its being had likewise dissolved. (p. 350)

Uncle Jimbilly's stories to the doubting children about the inhuman treatment and the excruciating tortures endured by slaves, especially in the rice district, were authentic, as the author knew. And in his telling the stories the deep resentment of the old ex-slave was only thinly disguised. Though Nannie loved her white mistress, she still treasured the word emancipation and was always grateful that, though born a slave, she would not die one. She proved her independence and love for freedom by moving to an empty hut to live her last days apart and in her own way after the Grandmother, Sophia Jane, died.

The white master side of the Southern portrait is no less realistic, but it is largely limited to the thoughts and actions of the Grandmother. She had seen from childhood the falseness of much of the chivalric code which dominated her life and that of the whole South, and she thought often of its inequities. It was a code which insisted that even the most trivial insult to feminine virtue or masculine honor or the most insignificant offense against the accepted code of manners be avenged; yet it winked at basic moral principles. She resented a social

system which relegated women to a position little above the servant class and robbed them of the most rewarding human endeavors while pretending to place them on a pedestal of rank and privilege. As a girl she envied men the freedom which she desired for herself and for which she substituted wild sexual fantasies. She thought often of the "delicious, the free, the wonderful, the mysterious and terrible life of men!" (p. 335). But in her later years she suffered much from knowledge of their lack of sexual restraint:

Miss Sophia Jane had taken upon herself all the responsibilities of her tangled world, half white, half black, mingling steadily and the confusion growing deeper. There were so many young men about the place, always, younger brothers-in-law, first cousins, second cousins, nephews.

. . . whenever a child was born in the Negro quarters, pink, worm-like, she held her breath for three days, she told her eldest granddaughter, years later, to see whether the newly born would turn black after the proper interval It was a strain that told on her, and ended by giving her a deeply grounded contempt for men. She could not help it, she despised men. (p. 337)

This account exactly parallels the fears registered in the diaries of women in the South quoted by Stamp. The Grandmother mentally enumerated other qualities which she abhorred in her brother, husband, sons, and grandsons, and all were qualities which Olmsted had observed in the Southerner and attributed to his culture:

. . . lack of aim, failure to act at crises, a philosophic detachment from practical affairs, a tendency to set projects on foot and then leave them to perish or be finished by someone else; and a profound conviction that everyone around [them] should be happy to wait upon [them] hand and foot. (p. 335)

Later, as a widow, she resented the fact that she had "all the responsibilities of a man but . . . none of the privileges . . ." (p. 336). She inwardly rebelled against the system; but like a true Southern lady, she outwardly conformed, and considered it her duty "to teach morals, manners, and religion . . . according to a fixed code" (p. 328). It is, then, against this background of family and social history that Miranda appears.

The last three stories of "The Old Order," titled "The Circus," "The Fig Tree," and "The Grave," deal with experiences from Miranda's childhood. In "The Circus," the Grandmother is persuaded to allow Miranda, a child of five or six, to attend the circus "just this once;" but the excitement and danger of the acts terrify her, and Dicey is ordered to take her home. When Miranda awakens in the night screaming again, she begs Dicey not to leave her and not to be angry; and Dicey grudgingly soothes her back to sleep.

The circus incident is important to Miranda's expanding perceptions in several ways. In the first place,

the circumstances preceding the entertainment further clarify her inchoate understanding of the matriarchal structure of the family in which her Grandmother occupies a position of unchallenged authority. This was often the case in Southern families: Robbie in Delta Wedding talks about the hold the women have on men and the land; Cousin Eva in "Old Mortality" advises Miranda to manage her money wisely, since it is the secret of her independence. This was one of the ironies of chivalry, actually. Within the family group women dominated, and were well provided for in the will, often owning more land than the men, but when they married their properties were at the disposal of their husbands, and in the world, as the Grandmother observed, women often had the responsibilities of men but none of the privileges.

Upper class children in the South early practiced the art of command and knew where they stood in the social structure. Miranda, at about six in this story, knows that Dicey is hers to command, and she feels free to say to her, "O hush up I don't have to mind you" (p. 347). But when she wants comfort in the night, it is Dicey who comes and cuddles up in bed with her and soothes her back to sleep. This action is consistent with the practice among Old South aristocrats of associating with

Negroes on the most intimate terms so long as the latter scrupulously maintained their position of servitude.

In the circus experience Miranda also perceives some of the horrors against which the privileges of her social class are supposed to insulate her. The Grandmother disapproves circuses with their vulgarities of sight, sound, and smell and has never attended one herself. When Harry insists that the circus has done the children no harm, she replies, "The fruits of their present are in a future so far off, neither of us may live to know whether harm has been done or not. That is the trouble" (p. 347). The Grandmother feared that accommodating her artistic tastes to the level of the common herd was a dangerous step in the direction of declining family prestige and morals. For her, perpetuating the values of the past without compromise was the responsibility of aristocracy.

In "The Fig Tree" a slightly older Miranda, awaiting the carriage which will take her family to the country house, finds and buries a dead chicken among the fig trees, but when she hears a plaintive "weep, weep" coming from the direction of the mound she fears the chicken she buried was still alive. Later at the farm she learns from

Great-Aunt Eliza that the "weep, weep" she heard in the fig grove was the sound of tree frogs.

The experiences related in this story add up to one of the most significant insights in Miranda's childhood. It centers on Great-Aunt Eliza's violation of every approved rule of conduct for a Southern lady. She bickers with the Grandmother, disobeys the rules at table, and dips snuff in the shameful fashion of lower class women. She is a "lady" by birth but not by habit, and she obeys her instincts even when they contradict the values of her social class. Later stories of the Miranda group provide other examples of women who do not measure up to the code which begins with beauty. Amy and the Grandmother are indulged in their nonconformist escapades because they are Southern beauties, but Great-Aunt Eliza and poor Cousin Eva are ugly and Great-Aunt Keziah in Kentucky is fat, so they are family liabilities. But on the last evening at the farm, when, from the roof of the chicken house, Aunt Eliza gives Miranda her first glimpse of "other worlds, a million other worlds" (p. 361) through her telescope, Miranda's developing code of cultural values is confused by a moment of joy which does not fit the traditional pattern. Later her joy is consummate when Aunt Eliza explains that the "weep, weep" she hears comes not from the grave where the chicken is

buried but from the trees, and the little creatures who make the sound are in the process of discarding their outgrown skins for new ones. Though a strong case might be made for the Christian symbolism suggested by the grave, the tree, and rebirth, it is probably a false case. For Aunt Eliza is an iconoclast, a scientist, who has acted upon her resentment as the Grandmother refused to do, has shed the confining skin of a stifling social and religious order, and has discovered to her own enormous satisfaction that there are "new worlds, millions of them." Miranda is dazzled.

"The Grave" is a story of many levels and shades of meaning of which the most obvious are probably the least significant. One day while hunting, nine-year-old Miranda and her twelve-year-old brother find a gold ring and a silver casket screw in the shape of a dove in an empty grave. Later Paul kills a rabbit about to have young ones, and after allowing Miranda to examine the unborn babies he swears her to secrecy. The incident lies buried in the back of Miranda's mind until years later in a foreign market place the sights and sounds combine to call it forth and distill it into essential form.

Thus summarized the story sounds like the typical initiation experience, but its meanings for Miranda go much

deeper, as the irony of the title suggests. The title surely does not derive from a real grave, for there are twenty of those, and they are dismissed by the children as mere holes in the ground. Obviously, then, it is the womb which is called the grave, but the rich detail which precedes the discovery of the unborn rabbits makes the story more than a lesson in sex. Miranda's reveries during her meanderings reveal her extreme class-consciousness and her growing knowledge of the influence of family upon individual life. Miranda recalls that she has been rudely chided by the old crones of the village for her dress and her behavior, and she comprehends vaguely that their lack of courtesy and respect are tied somehow to her father's financial troubles; they would never have treated the Grandmother so. But the status of the family has changed since the Grandmother's death. The caskets have, in fact, been removed from the family burial plot to the local cemetery because the land has been sold. In an agricultural economy, land is the measure of social position, and Miranda's father was slipping to a lower status. The gold ring glittering on her finger creates "vague stirrings of desire for luxury and a grand way of living which could not take precise form in her imagination but were founded on family legend of past wealth and luxury" (p. 365). Typical

of all Southern girls in this respect, she knows intuitively that security and respect stem from proper marriages between beautiful ladies and handsome, prosperous husbands; and she wishes for that kind of stability. Then Paul kills the rabbit, and she sees the delicate unborn creatures with "blood running over them," and "she felt at once as if she had known all along." Her reveries have been of summer dresses with sashes, cool verandas, and wedding rings; but now she sees that physical life is also procreation and blood and death.

She thought about the whole worrisome affair with confused unhappiness for a few days. Then it sank quietly into her mind and was heaped over by accumulated thousands of impressions, for nearly twenty years. (p. 367)

When a mature Miranda thinks of the experience again as she picks her way through "a market street in a strange city of a strange country" (p. 367) it is with horror, for her first memory is of dead rabbits. Then she recalls that she had remembered the day

. . . always until now vaguely as the time she and her brother had found treasure in the open graves. Instantly upon this thought the dreadful vision faded, and she saw clearly her brother . . . standing again in the blazing sun . . . a pleased sober smile in his eyes, turning the silver dove over and over in his hands. (p. 368).

The implications of the last part of the story are spiritual, but not "religious" in the usual Southern sense. In

this way Miss Porter's work differs from that of most Southern writers. In these stories the family seems almost a substitute for religion, as it was for many of the upper class, and it is significant that the empty grave represents the final uniting of the family in a common burial place. In addition, the symbolism of the dove--opposed to the rabbit whose symbolism is obvious--suggests the spirit of man, but does not imply, as Miss Porter employs it, any need for redemption. This vivid image, for the mature Miranda, represents that part of man which neither the womb nor the grave can contain--it is the "treasure of the opened graves."

It is fitting that the next story in the Miranda group begins at roughly the same time but stems from the family's love of romance and legend rather than the disconcerting realities to which the child has already been exposed. Divided into three parts, "Old Mortality" begins in 1885, before Miranda is born, and ends in 1912 when she is eighteen. Part one: 1885-1902 actually opens with the events of 1902 when Miranda is eight, but events occurring in 1885 are the chief focus of the section. That was the year Miranda's Aunt Amy died after a scandalously romantic courtship and marriage which are now legend. After breaking two engagements for no apparent reason, she kept her

third suitor, Gabriel, dangling for five years, before insisting upon a whirlwind marriage for the sake of getting to New Orleans in time for Mardi Gras. There she died six weeks later from an overdose of drugs.

Part II: 1904 is set in New Orleans where Miranda and her sister Maria attend a convent school. Their father has come for a visit, and they are being rewarded with a trip to the races where their romantic Uncle Gabriel's horse is running. They meet Gabriel for the first time, then visit his rude and embittered second wife, Miss Honey, before returning to school.

Part III: 1912 opens with Miranda seating herself on the train beside a thin old lady whom she soon learns is Cousin Eva, a contemporary of Amy. They are both going "home" for Uncle Gabriel's funeral, and that fact precipitates a discussion of Amy, the heroine of the family legend. Eva wants Miranda "to hear the other side of the story" (p. 217) and suggests that Amy killed herself because she had finally gotten into trouble she could not get out of. Miranda rejects Eva's version of the story and when her father rejects her for Eva, she vows that she will not be romantic about herself but will "find something new of her own" (p. 220).

Katherine Anne Porter once claimed that she left the South in her youth because she found the atmosphere too restrictive, too stifling. The story "Old Mortality" is another way of saying the same thing from Miranda's point of view; the South of her youth, too, has an obsession with the past which makes the future seem "not an extension of [the] past, but a repetition of it" (p. 327). In her youthful romantic moods Miranda is willing to repeat the past and to follow in the train of family beauties like Cousin Molly Parrington, Aunt Amy, and Cousin Isabel, all central figures in the code of manners which governed Southern social life in their day. This is the role for which she has been conditioned by her father:

[Her father] held his daughters on his knee if they were prettily dressed and well behaved, and pushed them away if they had not freshly combed hair and nicely scrubbed fingernails. "Go away, you're disgusting," he would say, in a matter-of-fact voice. He noticed if their stocking seams were crooked. He caused them to brush their teeth with a revolting mixture of prepared chalk, powdered charcoal and salt. When they behaved stupidly he could not endure the sight of them. They understood dimly that all this was for their own future good; . . . (p. 184)

This is the role for which the Amy legend, embellished and retold again and again, is supposed to have prepared her. Like a heroine from Sir Walter Scott, whose works were read and revered in the Old South second only to the Bible, Amy "had been beautiful, much loved, unhappy, and

she had died young" (p. 173). The last two conditions increased the romance of her story while the first two constituted the aim of Southern womanhood. In fact, the romantic bent had conditioned Southerners to appreciate only a specific kind of beauty.

First, a beauty must be tall; whatever color the eyes, the hair must be dark, the darker the better; the skin must be pale and smooth. Lightness and swiftness of movement were important points. A beauty must be a good dancer, superb on horseback, with a serene manner, an amiable gaiety tempered with dignity at all hours. Beautiful teeth and hands, of course, and over and above all this, some mysterious crown of enchantment that attracted and held the heart. (p. 176)

This exacting romantic tendency in the South was the basis of judgment in other areas of life, too. When Miranda's father said that Poe was "our greatest poet," she knew that "'our' meant he was Southern" (p. 178). Every artistic performance, musical or theatrical, was evaluated in terms of the past and "there was always a voice recalling other and greater occasions" (p. 179). To repeat the past, the youthful Miranda perceives, is truly the goal of life among her people.

But at eighteen Miranda realizes that the glamorous past is only the romantic illusion which masks an unendurable reality. Those people of the past could not face the truth about themselves so they created a myth they could face. This, of course, is typical of the Southern

psychology. The whole South, Dodd says, had created just such a myth about itself during slavery and had closed its mind to the possibility that it was wrong:

No newspaper of any importance, no college or university professor, no prominent preacher, and no politician of any party offered effective resistance.

.....
The mails were closed against abolition books and newspapers as a matter of course; and boycotts were urged against Northern periodicals if they printed articles that displeased the South. There was the most perfect agreement ever known in Anglo-Saxon history.¹

If a whole region can believe a myth about itself, then surely it is easy for a family, and Miranda recognizes this preference for myth over truth in much that surrounds her: her father, who pushed his young daughters away in disgust over the slightest imperfection, has been guilty of the worst of bad manners in shooting a man before challenging him to a duel; Amy was a self-centered flirt who played havoc with other people's lives; and Gabriel is a race-track bum who worships the memory of a dead bride while creating a life of humiliation and privation for a living wife.

She resented, slowly and deeply and in profound silence, the presence of these aliens who lectured and admonished her, who loved her with bitterness and denied her the right to look at

¹Dodd, p. 70.

the world with her own eyes, who demanded that she accept their version of life and yet could not tell her the truth, not in the smallest thing. (p. 219)

Truth for her is preferable to myth, even if it is harsher; and she makes "a promise to herself, in her hopefulness, her ignorance" (p. 221).

Both Miranda's hopefulness and her ignorance are defined in "Pale Horse, Pale Rider." The year is 1918, and Miranda is living in a Southwestern city where she works as a newspaper reporter. World War I is still in progress, and Miranda meets and falls in love with Adam, a soldier on leave. Then she suddenly falls victim to a terrible influenza epidemic, is taken to a hospital, and, when she finally recovers more than a month later, learns that Adam has died of influenza in a base hospital.

This final story of the Miranda group does not deal specifically with Southern material since Miranda has left the South for a career elsewhere, but the fact that her deep introspection occurs outside the South is a part of the story's value to the group. Miranda's experiences in a new environment teach her that no one escapes the past. Not Chuck or Towney, with whom she works, or the aging performer whom she panned in her column, or the nation which is torn by world war, or Adam who is its victim--and certainly not she. In the delirium of illness

she sinks into the bottom of being where the collected horrors and guilt of the whole human race sweep over her, and she simultaneously denies and accepts her part in the terrible flood. The truths she has acquired in this life are relative and partial, but all her past has contributed to them, the immediate past as well as the past too remote to be consciously remembered. The glorious myth of the Old South, she discovers, is no more harmful than the mechanized myth called war, manufactured and manipulated by greedy men for their own selfish ends. Life itself is the ultimate myth. For one who has traveled the road of death to paradise and then returned to a life bereft of love, the face of reality is irrevocably altered, and life will never again have the same value.

Miranda's rites de passage are thus divided into four parts. The first four stories of the "Old Order" present the world into which she was born and which she accepts as given with all its contradictions. The last three stories of "The Old Order" present Miranda's first awareness of the meaning of life and her own relationship to the order of things. In "Old Mortality" she rejects that order as myth and determines to seek her own truth. And in "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," she achieves a partial, though unsatisfactory, resolution of conflict by recognizing

that all of life is a myth, but that myth, too, is a kind of truth which stems from one's time and place. For her the point of reference, the hub of all experience, is her Southern childhood. She learns to accept its evil with its good because it is the totality which serves her. She uses it as a fixed point, like the north star, by means of which she locates herself in a changing world.

Katherine Anne Porter is almost a prototype of the Southern writer who utilizes the Southern myth as an element of art while rejecting its validity as a way of life. She left the South for a less inhibiting atmosphere, but because her roots are there she writes of a young girl growing to maturity in a proud and close-knit rural family still governed by an aristocratic code of manners and system of values. Miss Porter suggests that when the girl understands the inconsistency between the "legend of past wealth and leisure" and the realities of present economic and social conflicts, and reaches beyond both to lay hold of some "truth of her own," then she has passed from innocence to experience.

CHAPTER III

EUDORA WELTY: YOUTH AND THE DECLINE OF THE OLD ORDER

Also one of the first generation of Southern Renaissance writers, Eudora Welty nevertheless arrived on the Southern scene almost twenty years later than Katherine Anne Porter. The South was only then beginning to recover from its crushing defeat, and social change was accelerating rapidly. By the time Miss Welty began her career the social consciousness of the artistic community was thoroughly aroused and active, but Charles E. Eisinger says of Miss Welty:

. . . her attitude toward the shape of southern society is, at best, passive. A defined social scheme is there in her work; it is a given. But it is hardly at the center of her concern as an artist.¹

He later, however, makes this comment:

Many of her stories turn on [a] juxtaposition of various versions of reality. The force of this tactic is twofold. It reveals the limitations of human consciousness and opens up the possibilities for the existence of two simultaneously recognized and ongoing versions of reality. And

¹Charles E. Eisinger, Fiction of the Forties (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 259.

it shows the necessity to reconcile public and private conceptions of reality.¹

Eisinger's definition of a "public conception of reality" is subject to interpretation, of course, but by any definition "a reconciliation of public and private realities" suggests a concern for social values. Miss Welty, inescapably the product of the Southern culture, could not, and by her own testimony,² did not avoid using that culture as a vital element of her work.

Eudora Alice Welty was born on April 13, 1909, in Jackson, Mississippi, the daughter of Chestina (Andrews) Welty and Christian Webb Welty, who was president of the Lamar Life Insurance Company. Her education through the first two years of college was obtained in the South, but she took her B.A. degree in 1929 at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. She then studied advertising for one year at Columbia University School of Business before returning to Jackson where she has lived ever since. She has always been actively interested in painting and photography, and her career, before she settled down permanently to writing, included advertising copy writing, radio script

¹Eisinger, p. 266.

²Eudora Welty, "Place in Fiction," South Atlantic Quarterly, 55 (Spring 1956): 57-72.

writing, and public relations work with the W.P.A.¹ In the last job, which required traveling around her native state, she recorded many of the experiences which she later used in her writing. Miss Welty has always been at home in the South and has left it only for periods of study, one of which took her to Europe for two years on a Guggenheim Fellowship. However, since neither of her parents is a native of the deep South, she is, her biographer Ruth Vande Kieft suggests, a "second generation" Southerner, which frees her from a "strong sense of a blood inheritance of southern tradition,"² and allows her to write with an objective detachment which some Southern writers lack.

Robert Daniel suggests that Miss Welty's stories can be divided according to their characteristic settings: the Natchez Trace stories of the historical South; the stories concerned with the countryside in more recent years; the stories set in the towns in which the characters are small-town aristocrats or plain townspeople; and the stories set in the cities, which are the symbols

¹Ruth M. Vande Kieft, Eudora Welty (New Haven: College and University Press, 1962), pp. 13-24.

²Ibid., p. 21.

of the future toward which Southern life tends.¹ Accepting this division, it is from the two middle groups that her two outstanding works on the theme of innocence and experience come.

Delta Wedding (1946), the first of Miss Welty's novels, is the sensitive story of a late summer wedding in the placid setting of the Mississippi Delta. The author sympathetically but uncompromisingly exposes the foibles of a family rooted in the past and pictures the age-old struggle of the young to live by newly discovered truths which their elders do not yet recognize. The story begins on September 10, 1923, with the arrival of nine-year-old Laura McRaven at the Fairchild plantation, Shellmound, at Fairchilds, Mississippi, for her cousin Dabney's wedding. In the midst of the happy turmoil undercurrents of tension surface to test the moral strength and social conscience of each member of the family. The family's disapproval of Dabney's impending marriage to their overseer Troy Flavin is balanced by their disapproval of George's recent marriage to the daughter of a local storekeeper, Robbie Reid. The three days preceding the wedding are filled

¹Robert Daniel, "The World of Eudora Welty," Southern Renaissance: The Literature of the Modern South, ed. Louis D. Rubin, Jr. and Robert D. Jacobs (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1953), pp. 306-315.

with happy reminiscences as family arrive and conflict and faultfinding when Robbie returns to George after a brief separation. The story ends on a mild note of insecurity about the future as the family picnics with the newlyweds on the evening of their return from the honeymoon.

John Crowe Ransom has called Delta Wedding a sympathetic rendering of the "'high art' of living achieved by the Fairchilds."¹ But a close examination suggests that it is more nearly an incisive critique of an antiquated and disintegrating social order and a record of the responses of various people to the forces at work among them. Miss Welty says in her essay "Place in Fiction,"

Every story would be another story, and unrecognizable as art, if it took up its characters and plot and happened somewhere else.

The very notion of moving a novel brings ruder havoc to the mind and affections than would a century's alteration in its time.²

But in Delta Wedding time and place are equally important, and the author perfectly captures the conditions of an extended period of social and economic change in the rural South. From the first scene, where Laura feels she is "an

¹Vande Kieft, p. 108.

²Welty, "Place in Fiction," p. 62.

arriver in a land,"¹ to the last, where George and Troy talk of changes they foresee in Delta farming practices, the story focuses upon encroachments to tradition and class solidarity. In fact, the wedding which brings the family together is an example of one of the major forces of social change--marriage with people of lower social rank--and this is the Fairchild's second recent experience of it. That they resist change in the basic family structure means that the family honor is as important to them as it was to their ancestors in the Old South whose values they perpetuate.

The similarities between this family and Miranda's family are very strong, and both are realistically portrayed, though Delta Wedding occurs after World War I. One aspect of the realism of both families is that they still live in the glow of an ante-bellum splendor which no longer exists. Young Laura stands in awe of the portraits and diaries of dead ancestors as regularly as Miranda sits in reverent silence over the carefully preserved memorabilia in the attic. In the Fairchild household the family's history is daily rehearsed, as it was in many a Southern home of the era, and the dead Civil War heroes eulogized

¹Eudora Welty, Delta Wedding (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1945), p. 5. All subsequent parenthetical page references are to this edition.

more often even than Denis, who lost his life in World War I. In fact, the two old aunts widowed by the War who raised the three boys--Denis, Battle, and George--still live with the family and are daily reminders of past glories and sorrows. All of the older generation wish to retain a continuity with the past which they feel slipping through their fingers.

One method of holding to the past is an insistence upon an uncompromising practice of the code of honor. This obsession is really the root of the conflict between George and Robbie. When George rescues his mentally retarded niece, Maureen, from the train track at the risk of his own life, the act is to Robbie an empty gesture of honor binding him to his family, so she accuses, "George Fairchild, you didn't do this for me!" (p. 61). Robbie has seen George turn the Grove over to his maiden sisters--the "honorable" thing to do--when he goes to Memphis to practice law, and she sees the family's pretention that Maureen "owns" Marmion as an empty gesture of honor. Dabney and Troy do not move into the house until Dabney has gone through the formality of asking the mentally incompetent child for permission to do so. The practice of honor includes exalting women in the traditional manner, especially the aging matriarchs, who staunchly insist that

family confers privilege. Aunt Mac is expressing this idea when she says to Robbie, "You're in Shellmound now, Miss Robbie, but I know where you were brought up and who your pa and your ma were, and anything you say don't amount to a row of pins" (p. 163). This is reminiscent of what Richard Weaver calls the South's insistence upon "ethical proof," which is really social prestige. Shelley sees very clearly that the Fairchild power lies not in individuals but in their family solidarity, and her sympathies lie with maintaining it. She writes in her diary, "We never wanted to be smart one by one, but all together we have a wall, we are self-sufficient against people that come up knocking, we are solid to the outside" (p. 84).

Though this strong family unity is grounded on an agricultural economy largely dependent upon Negroes, the Negroes are never mentioned as real "people." This is a major point of contrast between Delta Wedding and the Miranda stories. Nannie and Uncle Jimbilly in the latter group are strong characters who participate in life with their masters, but the Negroes are not characters at all in this novel; they are only a part of the setting, like tables and chairs and trees and rivers. Miss Welty's treatment of them, however, is no less realistic than Miss Porter's, for both constitute attitudes traditionally held

in the rural South. And Miss Welty does in other stories, like "The Worn Path" and "Powerhouse," vividly portray Negro characters.

In spite of the abundant evidence of traditional Southern attitudes, the real focus of the novel is upon "insiders," so-called solid aristocrats, who willingly admit "outsiders" to their once exclusive circle. These members of the family do not maintain the "wall" against those who come up knocking, and the older people feel the family stability eroding. The outsiders know very well who they are and are keenly conscious of the Fairchild opinion of them. Little Laura, though a member of the family, feels an outsider at Shellmound.

Laura generally hesitated just a little in every doorway. Jackson was a big town, with twenty-five thousand people, and Fairchilds was just a store and a gin and a bridge and one big house, yet she was the one who felt like a little country cousin when she arrived, appreciating that she had come to where everything was dressy, splendid, and over her head. (p. 54)

When the cousins play hide-and-seek, they find ways of closing her out, too; and Laura's keen perception of their motives reveals the basis of the Southern philosophy by which a privileged status was maintained for one group at the expense of another:

. . . the cousins were a clan. They all said things, and they all kissed one another, and

yet they all had secret, despiting ways to happiness. At hide-and-seek a trick could be played on Laura, for she was still outside.
(p. 74)

Robbie knows very well she has always been held in contempt. When she returns to George after their separation the whole family blames her and she thinks:

. . . let them kill [me], with [my] wrinkled dress, and with never an acre of land among the Reids, and with a bad grief because of them. . . . their smile had said more plainly than words, Bow down, you love our George, enter on your knees and we will pull you up and pet and laugh at you fondly for it. (p. 158)

Finally she storms out:

"I think you are already the same as what you love. You're just loving yourselves in each other--yourselves over and over again!" (p. 165)

Their behavior has proven to her that they are not superior as human beings, and she sees nothing else at Shellmound which she recognizes as superior:

You're all a spoiled stuck-up family that thinks nobody else is really in the world! But they are! You're just one plantation. With a little crazy girl in the family. . . . You're not even rich! You're just medium. Only four gates to get here, and your house needs a coat of paint!
(p. 163)

Nevertheless, Battle makes no bones of his disapproval of the outsiders. He speaks of Troy Flavin only in contempt and links him with Robbie Reid, George's wife. After Robbie leaves George, Battle thunders: "If I weren't tied down! I'd go find little Upstart Reid myself, and kill

her. No, I'd set her and Flavin together and feed 'em to each other" (p. 64). The aunts rarely mention Troy at all, but when they do it is usually a reference to the "over-seer."

George and Dabney are the two members of the family who will not maintain the family's exclusiveness, and it is George upon whom the chief focus rests. There are, in fact, strong similarities between George and Amy of "Old Mortality." Each is the realization of the family "ideal," and George possesses, in the eyes of the family, all the masculine traits which parallel Amy's exalted qualities as a reigning beauty. The incident of the rescue on the track is a repeated refrain of the novel because it epitomizes the philosophy and the man at its heart. Robbie makes the mistake of believing that George's loyalties are as narrow as anyone's and that he has simply switched them from family to her. That's why she is so angry with him over Maureen's rescue. But George is a paradox, a contradiction. He loves the family as he loves the world--freely. He is worshipped as a family demi-god, but he has no wish to conform to a model in which he has no faith. As Ellen watches him at Dabney's wedding dance her thoughts encompass his complexities:

He appeared . . . infinitely simple and infinitely complex, stretching the opposite ways the self

stretches . . .; but at the same time he appeared very finite in that he was wholly singular and dear, and not promisingly married, tired of being a lawyer, a smiling, intoxicated, tender, weather-worn, late-tired, beard-showing being. He came forward through a crowd and anybody's hand might beckon or reach after him. He had, and he gave. . . . (p. 222)

It is this having and giving which sets him apart from the beginning and which influences Dabney so dramatically: "it was actually Uncle George who had shown her that there was another way to be-- . . . he was different, somehow" (p. 33). The "other way to be" was demonstrated to Dabney when she was much too young to appreciate it. It was only later that she understood its meaning. On that day she watched from a distance as George separated two Negro boys who were fighting with a knife:

Wonderfully he had reached up and caught the knife in the air. Disgracefully, he had taken two little black devils against his side. When he had not even laughed with them all about it afterward, or told it like a story after supper, she was astonished, and sure then of a curious division between George and the rest. . . . George loved the world, something told her suddenly. Not them! Not them in particular. (pp. 36-37)

Little Laura made much the same startling discovery:

. . . she knew that he out of all the Delta Fairchilds had kindness and that it was more than an acting in kindness, it was a waiting, a withholding, as if he could see a fire or a light, when he saw a human being--regardless of who it was, kin or not. . . . (p. 75)

And Shelley wrote in her diary: "I think Uncle G. takes us one by one. That is love--I think" (p. 80).

Three days before her wedding Dabney returns from a visit to the Grove with an antique lamp, a family treasure, a wedding gift from her two maiden aunts. She sees Troy at the window and, running to meet him, drops the lamp and breaks it. The broken lamp becomes the symbol of her lost innocence in breaking with tradition by marrying outside her social class. It is fitting that Uncle George interprets the broken lamp as "a little old piece of glass that Dabney would never miss" (p. 53), for it is in his steps that Dabney follows. Each respects, admires, and falls in love with a person for his own sake, exclusive of any claim to social position. They acknowledge what other members of the family ignore, that Robbie and Troy are proud and worthwhile people in spite of their lack of wealth and family name.

In Robbie and Troy, Miss Welty realistically represents two important groups in the South, the yeomen class and the proud mountaineer. Robbie's father is a country store-keeper, one of the furnishing merchants who played such an important role in the post Civil War South, and Troy comes from the mountain people characterized by fierce pride, devotion to the principles of democracy, and

a love of beauty. He is far prouder of his mother's patchwork quilts than Dabney is of the family silver. By bringing these two people into the novel the author shows the social leveling taking place in the South. The changing agricultural picture is clearly a contributing factor, for at the end of the story, George, who sees Battle's cotton prosperity diminishing every year, talks about returning to the Grove to initiate new farming practices and experiment with new crops. The family listens in brooding consternation, but Troy heartily agrees with George's plans, and the changes which this closing conversation portend bring to mind one of Dabney's prophetic thoughts:

. . . that she was one of the Fairchilds was of no more need to her than the locust shells now hanging to the trees everywhere were to the singing locusts. (p. 33)

Shellmound was just that, and Dabney, like George before her, moved to a new experience of knowledge.

The Golden Apples is a series of short stories often read as a novel because the setting of all is Morgana, Mississippi, and the volume is prefaced with a list of the main families of the town who are the main characters of the stories. The unifying theme of the volume is stated in its title and is explained in the

Yeats poem "The Song of Wandering Aengus" from which the title comes. The poem tells the story of the mythical Aengus who, "Because a fire was in his head," fishes with a hazel wand until he catches a silver trout. While he blows up the fire, the fish becomes a glimmering girl with apple blossoms in her hair who promptly vanishes into thin air. The poem ends with these lines:

Though I am old with wandering
Through hollow lands and hilly lands,
I will find out where she has gone,
And kiss her lips and take her hands;
And walk among long dappled grass,
And pluck till time and times are done
The silver apples of the moon,
The golden apples of the sun.¹

Though the poem from which the title derives concerns a Celtic hero-god, the organization of the volume reflects a distinctive characteristic of small Southern towns, the desire to place everyone in terms of individual family history and the relationship of one family to another. It is not enough to know an isolated person; indeed, he cannot be "known," in terms of this colloquial social theory, unless his parents and grandparents are also known and, better yet, can be located geographically. This classification system includes identifying members of specific

¹William Butler Yeats, "The Song of Wandering Aengus," The Mentor Book of Major British Poets, ed. Oscar Williams (New York: New American Library, 1963), p. 414.

families by physical traits too: weak eyes are common to the members of one family, a certain walk or slump of the shoulder to another, and so on. This is a common characteristic of Southern literature--Margaret Mitchell's Gone With the Wind and Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird are other good examples--and Miss Welty's book reflects Southern life all the more realistically because she prefaces it with a sociograph. An extension of this same practice is the Southern habit of calling women, no matter how long they've been married, by their given names prefaced by "Miss." Often married women in the traditional South are known indefinitely by their maiden names. Thus, Mrs. King McLain is known all her life as "Miss Snowdie." Katherine Anne Porter also observes this practice in her writing. In fact, in an essay on Flannery O'Connor she takes an incident directly from life showing how firmly entrenched the habit is. The humorous experience occurred while Miss Porter was attending a conference in Flannery O'Connor's hometown where Flannery's mother was still known by her maiden name, Regina Cline:

. . . one evening at a party . . . someone mentioned Flannery's name and another--a neighbor, mind you, who had probably been around there all her life--said, "Who is Flannery O'Connor? I keep hearing about her." The other one said,

"Oh you know! Why, that Regina Cline's daughter: that little girl who writes."¹

This characteristic of the South appears throughout The Golden Apples, but it is especially important to the story considered here.

Though each story in the collection presents a new configuration of "wanderers" and invests the theme with a special nuance of meaning, "June Recital" most clearly elaborates the theme in terms of innocence and experience. In this four-part story, the events of a single afternoon--Miss Eckhart's final "June recital"--are observed and reported alternately by Loch and his sister Cassie. Characteristically, Miss Welty emphasizes here not what is happening so much as the characters' responses to what is happening, and it is Cassie's perceptive interpretation of the past which gives meaning to the story.

The plot is simple. It is June, and Loch Morrison, some years younger than his sister Cassie who is sixteen, is confined to bed with malaria. Bored and restless, he watches the "vacant" house next door through his father's telescope as Virgie Rainey, a girl just Cassie's age, and a sailor, both "delightfully bare," "play" upstairs and

¹Katherine Anne Porter, "Flannery O'Connor at Home," The Collected Essays and Occasional Writings of Katherine Anne Porter (New York: Delacorte, 1970), p. 296.

as an old woman downstairs seems to be preparing to set fire to the house. Meanwhile, Cassie becomes submerged in thoughts which identify the two occupants of the house as Miss Eckhart, a music teacher, and Virgie Rainey, her gifted pupil. When the old woman actually sets fire to the house, she is taken away to a mental institution and Virgie and her sailor face additional ridicule by the ladies of the community.

The most consuming of human tasks, which Miss Welty explores in Delta Wedding within the context of the family, she now explores in the relationships among the families of the whole town.¹ Identifying the self and seeing it in relationship to other selves--moving, that is, from innocence to experience--is the task to which every human being is born, and in "June Recital" Cassie perceives that while personality determines the outcome, community forces determine the nature of the struggle. As she stands in the yard at the end of the story with Loch pinned against her and watches as the ladies from the rook party taunt and tease Virgie, Cassie can only think:

. . . we were spies too. And nobody else was surprised at anything--it was only we two. People saw things like this as they saw Mr. MacLain come and go. They only hoped to place

¹Vande Kieft, p. 164.

them, in their hour or their street or the name of their mothers' people. Then Morgana could hold them, and at last they were this and they were that. And when ruin was predicted all along, even if people had forgotten it was on the way, even if they mightn't have missed it if it hadn't appeared, still they were never surprised when it came.¹

In this moment Cassie sees herself as one with the voyeuristic townspeople who stand aloof of participation in life with Virgie and Miss Eckhart and King MacLain, and thus force them back upon their own resources to sink or swim alone. The thought seems to clarify for her all the disconnected memories of the afternoon and makes her own future as predictably moribund as Virgie Rainey's is predictably vital.

Cassie's reveries of the afternoon revolve around the implications of what she has seen and experienced of Virgie's and Miss Eckhart's relationship to each other and to the community at large. In the minds of the small Southern community the two are linked to each other; and Cassie tries to understand why, since family links are the ones to which she is accustomed. She remembers the rumors that Miss Eckhart was a German sympathizer which circulated during the war and robbed her of many music pupils. Even

¹Eudora Welty, The Golden Apples (New York: Harcourt, 1947), p. 90. All subsequent parenthetical page numbers are to this edition.

Virgie stopped "taking" after her brother was killed in France, but, strangely enough, this fact strengthened the link which the town saw between them. Cassie recalls:

And when she stopped, Virgie's hand lost its touch--that was what they said. Perhaps nobody wanted Virgie Rainey to be anything in Morgana any more than they had wanted Miss Eckhart to be and they were the two of them still linked together by people's saying that. How much might depend on people's being linked together? Even Miss Snowdie had a little harder time than she had had already with Ron and Scooter, her bad boys, by being linked with roomers and music lessons and Germans. (p. 63)

In the beginning Miss Eckhart had said that Virgie Rainey was her "good luck." Though her students never understood what she meant, she seemed to feel a need to be linked to someone with promise and "Virgie Rainey was gifted. Everybody said that could not be denied" (p. 44). The need was especially strong because Miss Eckhart knew she did not "belong," as far as the residents of Morgana were concerned. She was a yankee, or worse yet, a foreigner; she didn't even have anyone buried at the local cemetery. Soon after her arrival she was attacked and threatened by "a crazy nigger." "They wished she had moved away . . . then they wouldn't always have to remember that a terrible thing once happened to her" (p. 57). "Of course her only associates from first to last were children, not counting Miss Snowdie" (p. 66), and she once begged Cassie and Virgie

to stay for dinner, but they refused. When her mother died just after the war, it was rumored that Miss Eckhart had killed her with opium; and the grocer, Mr. Wiley Bowles, reported on all the strange foods the foreigner ate. The reasons for her unacceptability could be enumerated by most everybody in town, and they invariably reflect social standards typical of small Southern towns:

Missie Spights said that if Miss Eckhart had allowed herself to be called by her first name then she would have been like other ladies. Or if Miss Eckhart had belonged to a church that had ever been heard of, and the ladies would have had something to invite her to belong to . . . Or if she had been married to anybody at all, just the awfulest man--like Miss Snowdie MacLain, that everybody could feel sorry for. (p. 66)

In her "separateness" she had reached out to the only person who shared her passion for music, Virgie Rainey.

But just as Miss Eckhart was isolated from the community by her differences, Virgie Rainey was isolated by poor social standing. Virgie's father, Fate Rainey, was a ne'er-do-well who peddled milk through the town, and her mother was a gossiping garrulous rustic who wore her milking hat to the June recital. That particular night, recital night, was really Virgie's night; and Miss Eckhart planned the whole program around her piece. Since "mothers were scared of Miss Eckhart then" (p. 68) and never dared defy her orders about recital dresses, that Virgie was

invariably the star of the evening was further reason for linking pupil and teacher. And though Virgie might play a Liszt concerto which none of the other students could ever hope to play, the town made very sure that the honors were appropriately awarded. Cassie observed:

The recital audience always clapped more loudly for her than they did for Virgie; but then they clapped more loudly still for little Jimmy Love Stark. It was Cassie who was awarded the Presbyterian Church's music scholarship that year to go to college--not Virgie. It made Cassie feel "natural"; winning the scholarship over Virgie did not surprise her too much. (p. 64)

Miss Eckhart tried to make up for the scholarship slight by giving Virgie a gold butterfly pin. She loved Virgie and took great pride, even if the town did not, in the artistry of her performance of the Liszt concerto:

Virgie would be heard from in the world, playing that, Miss Eckhart said, revealing to children with one ardent cry her lack of knowledge of the world. How could Virgie be heard from in the world? And "the world"! Where did Miss Eckhart think she was now? (p. 60)

But Miss Eckhart's pride and confidence expressed in her ritual tribute, "Virgie Rainey, danke schoen," never once shook the faith of the town in the justice of its appraisal of Virgie:

. . . they had all known Virgie would never go, or study, or practice anywhere, never would even have her own piano, because it wouldn't be like her. They felt no less sure of that when they heard every recital, every June, Virgie Rainey play

better and better something that was harder and harder . . . (p. 60)

These incidents reveal the Southern tendency to suspect and deprecate anything "foreign," meaning anything outside its ken. Difference is equated with inferiority or even evil. Anything unknown is a threat to an established order in which everyone and everything has a place. Miss Eckhart represents such a foreign element and is therefore unacceptable. But Virgie Rainey represents a member of a lower social class whose talent threatens to elevate her above the station to which birth has assigned her. As Shelley said in Delta Wedding she has "come up knocking." Cassie understands the social code, and knows that Morgana did not want Miss Eckhart or Virgie to be anything. She is not surprised, then, when she wins the music scholarship over Virgie.

No slight, however, is humiliating enough to diminish Virgie's physical and spiritual vitality. She is like Robbie of Delta Wedding in this respect. She is a free spirit who drinks deeply of every experience, obeys her own instincts and impulses, and ignores the consequences. To Cassie, who "out of nice feeling, looked the other way" (p. 45) when anything was amiss, who "found it so easy . . . to feel terror and pain in an outsider" (p. 53), who "doubted herself, so easily" (p. 35), "Virgie was a secret

love, as well as her secret hate" (p. 43). At speaking-nights Cassie watched her timidly as she ran and jumped and hollered and played, rolled the watermelons away, caught lightning bugs and "let herself go completely as anyone would like to do" (p. 51). At her music lessons Virgie refused to play the piano with the metronome ticking and threw tantrums when the sheets of music did not lie flat, but immediately after, she "lay her hands on the keys, as she would take up a doll" (p. 46). Her gift for music was only one facet of her gift for life. She represents the vitality and energy of the rising lower classes in the South which is a major theme of Faulkner and other Southern writers, as opposed to the decadence and decline of the old-order aristocrats.

Cassie sees that the "differences" which isolate Virgie and Miss Eckhart from the community and link them together in the minds of the townspeople are both the glory and the tragedy of their lives, and she has grown keenly conscious of others like them--her mother and Loch, for instance. But already she knows that she is not like them, just as Shelley is not like Dabney, and just as the Grandmother could never have done what Miranda did:

She could never go for herself, never creep out on the shimmering bridge of the tree, or reach the dark magnet there that drew you inside, kept

drawing you in. She could not see herself do an unknown thing. She was not Loch, she was not Virgie Rainey; she was not her mother. She was Cassie in her room, seeing the knowledge and torment beyond her reach. . . . (p. 77)

She is neither a victim, nor a victor; she cannot flaunt the social order and seize life, so she can neither conquer nor suffer defeat to any intense degree. Her mother can indulge her whims and fancies and ignore the plights of others; Loch can defy life by hanging from the farthest limb of his tree upside down while he contemplates the sweet figs bursting with ripeness; Miss Eckhart can hold a whole town in thrall every spring, measure time in her own way or lock it in a safe, and "consider one thing not much more terrifying than another" (p. 57); King MacLain can escape the responsibility which he does not wish to accept by simply walking away from it; Virgie can click her heels through a group of scandalized women "as if nothing had happened in the past or behind her, as if she were free, whatever else she might be" (p. 90); but the most Cassie can do is sit amazed at the sight of an original design she has produced on her tie-dye scarf: ". . . she didn't see indeed how she had ever made it" (p. 66).

These two stories by Miss Welty dealing with innocence and experience in the lives of two Southern girls, though different on the surface, are strangely similar

fundamentally. For in each the girl reaches experience in the decision either to "go for herself" against the traditional pressures of family and social class as Dabney did, or to bow to the standard as Cassie did. Though the struggle is an internal one, Miss Welty clearly intends the social implications which permeate her work, for in an interview with William F. Buckley in 1972 she made this comment about her response to people who were asking why she did not use her "novelistic powers" to fight racial injustice:

I assumed that my whole life I had been writing about injustice.

I was writing about it from the inside, not from the outside, and when it was stated from the outside it seemed to be so thin and artificial.¹

This is the key to understanding Miss Welty's approach to truth. The "lesson," the "message," is inherent in the responses and thoughts of the characters and must be "distilled out" of the total context just as in real life. It is because her stories are so close to life in this respect that they strike the consciousness with such force.

¹From a transcript of the Firing Line program taped at WMAA in Jackson, Mississippi, on December 12, 1972, and originally telecast on PBS on December 24, 1972.

CHAPTER IV

CARSON MCCULLERS: COMING TO MATURITY

IN THE SMALL SOUTHERN TOWN

Columbus, Georgia, in 1917 was a town of about thirty thousand population, and its principal industry was a textile mill. It was here that Lula Carson Smith was born on February 19 of that year in a house located close to the mill district. Though she moved from the immediate area in her fifth year, she unquestionably had many opportunities to absorb the mill atmosphere of poverty and ignorance which she so vividly describes in her first book, The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter. Carson--the name she preferred--remained in Columbus until she was seventeen, developing her interests in music and literature. She then went to New York to study music but studied writing instead, for a time. She published her first novel at twenty-two and at twenty-three suffered the first of three strokes which left her partially paralyzed for the rest of her life. In 1937 Carson married James Reeves McCullers who committed suicide in 1953. Carson McCullers died in 1967.¹

¹Oliver Evans, Carson McCullers: Her Life and Work (London: Peter Owen, 1965).

That the social structure of Carson McCullers' home town was rooted in the narrow orthodoxies of the Old South is demonstrated in an anonymous telephone call which she received at the home of her parents during a visit in 1941, shortly after publication of her second book Reflections in a Golden Eye. The caller identified himself as a member of the Ku Klux Klan and told her

. . . that unless she got out of town immediately he was coming with his friends to 'get her' that very evening. 'We know from your first book that you're a nigger-lover,' the voice said, 'and we know from this one that you're queer. We don't want queers and nigger-lovers in this town.'¹

Though the threat was never carried out, it helps to explain the author's discomfort in the South. Once her liberal social views became widely known, she visited her home state infrequently and briefly.

Nevertheless, the South played a vital role in her personal pilgrimage and consequently in her fiction. In "Loneliness...An American Malady" she says

Consciousness of self is the first abstract problem that the human being solves. Indeed, it is this self-consciousness that removes us from the lower animals. This primitive grasp of identity develops with constantly shifting emphasis through all our years. Perhaps maturity is simply the history of those mutations that reveal to the individual the relation

¹Evans, p. 87.

between himself and the world in which he finds himself.¹

She combines her own experience of the world called the South with her artistic imagination to create the two short novels of lost innocence, The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter and The Member of the Wedding.

The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter is the story of four people in a small Southern town who find in a deaf mute the qualities of human understanding which each needs to deliver him from a sense of spiritual isolation. The deaf mute is John Singer and the four people are Mick Kelly, the thirteen-year-old daughter of the owner of the boardinghouse where Singer lives; Biff Brannon, the middle-aged owner of the New York Cafe where Singer takes his meals; Jake Blount, an itinerant, self-appointed labor organizer; and Dr. Benedict Mady Copeland, a Negro physician whose obsession is the liberation of his race. These four represent the lower levels of society in a small Southern town and are typical of the character types through whom Mrs. McCullers communicates so effectively. Each of these people meets Singer and believes that he possesses a rare quality of understanding. They confide in him the events

¹Carson McCullers, "Loneliness...An American Malady," The Mortgaged Heart, ed. Margarita G. Smith (New York: Bantam, 1971), p. 293.

of their lives and their dreams for the future, and they derive from him the comfort and courage which gives them hope. Though Singer is the central figure in the lives of the other characters, he is never the central figure of the story for the reader, who knows him in a way the characters never do. The author's account of Singer's life for the ten years preceding his encounter with the other four reveals that he is emotionally dependent upon another deaf mute, a Greek named Antonapoulos, who has been committed to a mental institution. When Singer learns that his friend has died, he puts a bullet through his head. One of the pervading ironies of the book is the spiritual impotence of the personality most deified by the other characters.

Once Singer's true nature is understood, it is Mick Kelly who stands out as the central character. It is her experience of lost innocence, with its accompanying sense of guilt and fear, and her ultimate disillusionment with which the reader most keenly identifies; and it is through the context of conditions of life in the Southern town where she lives that he views her tenuous future.

Mick's environment and the forces which circumscribe her life are, of course, clearer to the reader than to Mick herself. This is always true of fiction in which

the writer takes the omniscient point of view where the purpose is to reveal the total map to the reader while restricting individual characters to progressive road markers. Eudora Welty speaks to this point in her essay on place:

Paradoxically, the more narrowly we can examine a fictional character, the greater he is likely to loom up. We must see him set to scale in his proper world to know his size. Place, then, has the most delicate control over character too: by confining character, it defines it.¹

In The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter the reader is able to see the entire Southern world which operates upon Mick, including events and characters she cannot see and influences of which she may remain unaware. In other words, Mick will never know all the forces involved in her loss of innocence, but her failure to recognize them in no way negates them. They will have done their work.

The religious and psychological aspects of the novel overlap somewhat. Many of the symbols are in the Gothic tradition, which is basically psychological; but their effectiveness in Southern literature is a direct consequence of the general attitude of credulity toward Old Testament literature and New Testament fundamentalism which exists in the South. In gothicism the grotesque

¹Welty, "Place in Fiction," p. 62.

intensifies psychological and moral truth, while the strong emphasis upon faith healing among the popular sects of the South indicates an acknowledged relationship between physical imperfections and spiritual depravity. Physical deformity is a multi-level symbol in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter, and no major character is represented as physically whole. Mick worries all the time about being a "freak." She is thirteen and is already five feet six inches tall. Biff mused that she was "at the age when she looked as much like an overgrown boy as a girl."¹ Biff himself is sexually impotent and admits to hiding a certain part of his body. Jake's "head was very large and well-shaped, but his neck was soft and slender as a boy's. The mustache looked false, as if it had been stuck on for a costume party. . . . It was like something was deformed about him--" (pp. 12, 16). Dr. Copeland is tubercular, and the first indication that Singer does not really possess the qualities attributed to him is his symbolic deafness and muteness. An additional tension underlying the action is that between those who claim the faith and those who deny it. Biff's religious indifference is contrasted with Alice's daily Bible reading. Blount confesses to an early

¹Carson McCullers, The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter (New York: Bantam, 1940), p. 112. All subsequent parenthetical page references are to this edition.

religious fanaticism which inspired him to drive nails through his palms preparatory to life as an evangelist. But his disillusionment with the church and its perversion of Jesus and his message has embittered him toward organized religion for which he substitutes the evangelism of socialism. Simms preaches in the mill district and constantly tries to convert Blount. The intensity of these three religiously fanatical characters suggests a violence on the verge of eruption as it is in Flannery O'Connor's Hazel Motes and Francis Marion Tarwater. It also suggests the religious life of the many Southerners upon whom both Miss O'Connor and Mrs. McCullers modeled their characters. Daily life in the Old South was characterized by violence and reinforced by a literal Biblical interpretation which justified it. Its effects are still very strong in the region. The conflict of Dr. Copeland's agnosticism with the simple faith of the rest of his family contrasts dramatically with the former examples. When Willie comes home crippled, Dr. Copeland seeks justice through lawful authority; but the rest of the family, from the old grandfather down to the youngest child, draw closer to each other in love and read from the Bible, their only source of comfort and hope, and talk of the peace and happiness of a heaven reserved for the meek and faithful. Perhaps it is with

this scene in mind that Louis Auchincloss observes:

Even in the most appalling scenes of violence in the novel there is a strange sweet taste, like that of a sticky soft drink shot with whiskey, or of a kiss ending in a bite, that evokes the nightmare combination of brutality and sentimentality that is so persistent a part of the legend and actuality of the Old South.¹

Mick could certainly not escape so pervasive an influence, though her views on the subject of God are immature and confused. Once she says of the music she is listening to:

For a minute the opening balanced from one side to the other. Like a walk or march. Like God strutting in the night. The outside of her was suddenly froze and only the first part of the music was hot inside her heart. She could not even hear what sounded after, but she sat there waiting and froze, with her fists tight. After a while the music came again, harder and loud. It didn't have anything to do with God. This was her, Mick Kelly, walking in the daytime and by herself at night. (p. 100)

At that point in her life music is the only thing remote enough and inexplicable enough to be associated with the concept of God, but when it reaches deep inside her then she identifies it with the self in which her anthropomorphic concept of God has no part. The keenest evidence of the influence of religion upon Mick is her sense of sin and guilt after the unpremeditated sexual experience with Harry and her feeling of need to confess. A nagging fear haunts

¹Louis Auchincloss, Pioneers and Caretakers: A Study of Nine American Women Novelists (New York: Dell, 1961), p. 163.

her; she constantly seeks diversions, but nothing relieves her, and she wishes she might go to Mr. Singer with her problem:

Had ever he felt a terrible afraidness like this one? No. He had never done anything wrong. He had never done anything wrong and his heart was quiet in the nighttime. Yet at the same time he would understand.

If only she could tell him about this, then it would be better. She thought of how she would begin to tell him. Mister Singer--I know this girl not any older than I am-- . . . (p. 268)

For the first time in her life Mick is afraid of the dark, a subliminal religious influence. "She felt very old, and it was like something was heavy inside her. She was a grown person now, whether she wanted to be or not" (p. 236). In this extremity of spiritual need she turns naturally to Singer whom she has subconsciously cast in the role of God from the very beginning:

She whispered some words out loud: 'Lord forgiveth me, for I knoweth not what I do.' Why did she think of that? Everybody in the past few years knew there wasn't any real God. When she thought of what she used to imagine was God she could only see Mister Singer with a long, white sheet around him. God was silent--maybe that was why she was reminded. She said the words again, just as she would speak them to Mister Singer. 'Lord forgiveth me, for I knoweth not what I do.' (pp. 101-102)

In Mick's image there is an important clue to the role of Singer in the book. Social conditions in the South during the 1930's caused many people to think of God as strangely

silent. But the God-hunger still existed, and so they created gods in their own images. Of Singer it is said:

The rich thought that he was rich and the poor considered him a poor man like themselves. And as there was no way to disprove these rumors they grew marvelous and very real. Each man described the mute as he wished him to be.
(p. 190)

But Singer does not see himself as God or Paraclete or Savior. He writes to Antonapoulos that he has no idea what these people are talking to him about, though they keep telling him that he is the only one who understands. His subconscious supplements the deficiencies of his conscious knowledge in a most revealing dream, but he fails to comprehend, apparently, what the reader surely understands:

Out of the blackness of sleep a dream formed. There were dull yellow lanterns lighting up a dark flight of stone steps. Antonapoulos kneeled at the top of these steps. He was naked and he fumbled with something that he held above his head and gazed at it as though in prayer. He himself knelt halfway down the steps. He was naked and cold and he could not take his eyes from Antonapoulos and the thing he held above him. Behind him on the ground he felt the one with the mustache and the girl and the black man and the last one. They knelt naked and he felt their eyes on him. And behind them there were uncounted crowds of kneeling people in the darkness. His own hands were huge windmills and he stared fascinated at the unknown thing that Antonapoulos held. The yellow lanterns swayed to and fro in the darkness and all else was motionless. Then suddenly there was a ferment. In the upheaval the steps collapsed and he felt himself falling

downward. He awoke with a jerk. The early light whitened the window. He felt afraid. (p. 185)

The dream clearly reveals Singer and the other four in their true relationship to each other and to Antonapoulos. Each is reaching out for contact with those god-like qualities which he has imputed to another, and such a false view can only produce fear. That the moronic, obscene Greek is uppermost in the scale is the ultimate irony which provokes Eisinger to comment:

In the transcendent circle, then, is the mad Greek, upon whom all in the novel are ultimately dependent. But what is the Greek if not a symbol for vacuity, for nothing? He cannot love. He can neither give nor receive. He is the reduction to the abysmal zero of the human hope for communion.¹

Bradbury suggests a slightly different interpretation of Singer as symbol:

Clearly symbolic, the ironically named Singer seems to sum up all the finally unsatisfactory resources of modern man in his heart's loneliness: religion, psychiatry, political or social expedients.²

Regardless of the meaning inherent in the structure of the dream, it collapses and Singer awakens afraid. If Mrs. McCullers intended, as some critics suggest, that Antonapoulos symbolize God and Singer symbolize Christ,

¹Eisinger, p. 248.

²Bradbury, p. 111.

then her intention has strange implications for Christianity which anticipate a revolutionary theology which also came out of Georgia some years later.¹ For the Greek dies and Singer kills himself, leaving his followers, whom he never understood anyway, dispersed and desolate.

Mick's sexual experience was the precipitating factor in her guilt and the immediate cause of her feeling "a grown up person," but sexual knowledge is fundamentally a biological change in adolescents which symbolizes a loss of innocence and initiation into experience. It occurs in every adolescent quite apart from sexual experimentation, though that often, also for biological reasons, is a part of it. Miranda grew up with sexual knowledge, surrounded as she was by farm animals; but her personal loss of innocence came in connection with a more penetrating experience apart from the sex act. Dabney's lost innocence was related as much to filial and fraternal love as to romantic love. The physical change, then, symbolizes a casting off of all myths about life and an acceptance of the guilt inherent in humanness. It is significant for this reason

¹In 1966 Thomas J. J. Altizer, Associate Professor of Bible and Religion at Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia, aroused a highly articulate emotional response throughout the nation by publication of The Gospel of Christian Atheism (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), considered the manifesto of what is called the "God-is-Dead Movement."

that Mick's loss of sexual innocence immediately precedes her other disillusionments, Singer's death and the necessity to get a job.

This last necessity is evidence that the religious influences of The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter are scarcely more significant than the enormous social and economic pressures which impinge on daily life. Mick accepts the fundamental assumptions on which social distinctions are based as natural and unalterable. At this point, too, she contrasts with Miranda and Dabney who refuse to accept a ready-made code. Their independence of thought probably stems from the security of social class and a relative affluence which Mick does not enjoy. Mick takes her evening walks "in the good part" of town where she lies on green lawns and listens to music, but this is her only contact with affluence. She attends Vocational High School and enrolls in a free government art course and has her life in every way circumscribed by borderline poverty. But she is at least two levels above the bottom, a fact which is constantly reinforced. After the Kellys sacrifice the mortgage on their house to pay Baby Wilson's hospital bills, Mick says of her family, "They were mighty near as poor as factory folks. Only nobody could look down on them" (p. 203). Again as the family discusses the

possibility of Mick's going to work, Mama says, "Even if we have to give up the house and move down in mill town, . . . I rather keep Mick at home for a while!" (p. 271). Mill town was occupied only by the poorest of the poor. It was, in fact, a reconstruction of the old plantation system with the workmen's houses replacing the Negro shacks and surrounding the master's factory instead of the master's plantation house.¹ Mick and the town understand it as a degrading form of life, a serfdom to be avoided at all costs. Another thing she clearly understands is the position of the Negro and her position of superiority to him. Miranda and Dabney both take Negroes for granted. For them the Negro is not a competitor but a servant. The attitude in a small Southern mill town during the depression is very different. Mick's feeling of superiority is apparent in the distinction she makes in forms of address. She carefully says, "Mr. Brannon" and "Mr. Singer," but when the intelligent, highly educated Dr. Benedict Copeland enters--through the backdoor--to visit his daughter Portia, the Kelly's cook, Mick addresses him first as "Uncle" and then as simply "Benedict." And though she deplores the treatment he has received at city hall and is indignant at the horrors which Willie endured in his imprisonment, it

¹Ezell, p. 141.

is only because she knows these people as Portia's family, not because she recognizes their rights as persons. When Hazel tells Mick that the ten-cent store job pays ten dollars a week, Mick exclaims, "Portia don't make but about that much," and Hazel responds, "Oh, colored people--" (p. 271), an explanation which Mick finds reasonable.

Social structure and economy are mutually reinforcing, and most human misery and loneliness stem from their combined force. Mick learns in the end how much must be sacrificed for the almighty dollar:

It was money, money, money all the time. They owed to the grocery and they owed the last payment on some furniture. And now since they had lost the house they owed money there too. The six rooms in the house were always taken, but nobody ever paid the rent on time. (p. 264)

Though Mick is touched that everyone in the family verbally objects to her going to work at fourteen, she understands the urgent need for it and consents, hoping it will be only for the summer, but in the family's reaction to this compromise she feels herself permanently trapped: "It was as though a great worry and tightness left the family. In the dark they began to laugh and talk" (p. 272). She takes the job knowing it will not be just for the summer. "Once they were used to the money coming in it would be impossible to do without again. That was the way things were" (p. 272). And later when she feels all her dreams slipping away from

her she thinks: "It was like she was cheated. Only nobody had cheated her. So there was nobody to take it out on." However, just the same she had that feeling. Cheated" (p. 302). The door to the "inside room" where all her dreams are stored has been slammed shut.

In his analysis of The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter, Eisinger concludes:

A peripheral matter in this novel is the way in which Mrs. McCullers treats social problems.

But these matters are hardly at the heart of the novel. It is true that Mrs. McCullers reveals a cold realism in portraying the diseases of her society.

But it is her people in whom she is chiefly interested, not society. Isolation is of the soul, not of the small southern town. The failure of love is the failure of communion, not of labor unions or Negro-white relations.¹

But in her own statement about the book Mrs. McCullers ties her people and their search to the society in which she pictures them. Soon after publication of The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter she said to Ralph McGill:

There was something of the conscience of the South in the theme and characters of the book. . . . All of us seek time and a way to communicate something of the sense of loneliness and solitude that is in us--the human heart is a lonely hunter--but the search of us Southerners is more anguished. There is a special guilt in us, a seeking for something had--and lost. It is a consciousness of

¹Eisinger, p. 251.

guilt not fully knowable, or communicable. Southerners are the more lonely and spiritually estranged, I think, because we have lived so long in an artificial social system that we insist was natural and right and just--when all along we knew it wasn't. The fact we bolstered it with laws and developed a secular liturgy and sacraments for it is evidence of how little we believed our own deceits.¹

Perhaps this statement explains why the only successful effort at human understanding and communication in the whole book is among Portia and her family, exclusive of her father. But Mrs. McCullers allows Portia to give the explanation in her own words in a conversation with her father:

Hamilton or Buddy or Willie or me--none of us ever cares to talk like you. Us talk like our own Mama and her peoples and their peoples before them. You think out everything in your brain. While us rather talk from something in our hearts that has been there for a long time.
(p. 67)

The characters of the book can literally be divided in terms of "brain talk" and "heart talk," and in the end it is those of the "heart talk" who find identity, relationship, and peace of mind. Portia says that she and Willie and Highboy "have our own way of living and our own plan" (p. 61), and in her agony over Willie's tragedy she grieves, "us haves our own plan and nothing ever went wrong with it before" (p. 117). The specific plan of

¹McGill, p. 217.

which she speaks is financial, but the overall "plan" is a mutual love and support which never fails and which reaches out to include Dr. Copeland in the end.

Irving Malin also objects to Eisinger's view that social problems in this novel are a peripheral matter. He admits that Gothic writers, with whom he classifies Mrs. McCullers, use the recurring symbols of the haunted castle, the voyage into the forest, and the reflection as objective correlatives of the psyche,¹ but he adds:

Surely the buried life is always tied to some sort of social conditioning: it conditions and is conditioned by "others." The writers of the new American Gothic are aware of tensions between ego and super-ego, self and society; they study the field of psychological conflict.²

Mick is conditioned by all the social forces which surround her. Her brutal treatment of Bubber after he accidentally shoots Baby Wilson and the hatred which she projects onto Biff Brannon after her own petty thievery in his cafe are evidences of the price at which experience is bought.

The Member of the Wedding, Mrs. McCullers' second book dealing with lost innocence, is virtually a continuation of the earlier one and, in the estimation of most

¹Irving Malin, New American Gothic (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1962), p. ix.

²Ibid., p. 4.

critics, a more successful effort. The similarities between the two books are striking. Each story is set in a small Southern town, and each begins in summer with sun and swelter representing the emptiness and boredom of the leading character, who, in each case, is an overgrown adolescent girl suspended in that agonizing marginal existence between childhood and the adult world. In each story the girl's father works with clocks and watches, as Carson McCuller's own father did, and the girl is strongly influenced by a young boy--Mick by her little brother Bubber and Frankie by her young cousin, John Henry. Both girls engage in sexual experiences which leave them with intense guilt. In each case, too, the girl reaches out to a Negro cook who also experiences a marginal existence, the inherent quality of a racially divided society. Each of the Negro women understands and comforts her young charge with the unique folk wisdom with which her culture and social position have equipped her.

But there are some major differences between the stories, too. The Member of the Wedding is primarily the story of one character, Frankie Addams, and the events of one week during which she leaves the innocence of childhood behind. Furthermore, the story opens upon a Frankie who has analyzed her situation thoroughly and thinks she

understands her problem clearly. She can pinpoint the moment at which a change began to take place. In the first paragraph the reader learns that Frankie has thought of herself as "an unjoined person," but that "on the last Friday of August, all this was changed. . . ."¹ The world, Frankie concludes, is certainly a "sudden" place (p. 4). Another major difference is the outcome of the stories. While Mick's childhood ends in disillusionment, Frankie's serves as a springboard of hope, and the reader feels confidently that she is on the road to finding "the real 'we' of 'me.'"

The Member of the Wedding begins with Frankie's sudden idea to end her dull, drab existence as an "I" person by joining herself to her brother and his bride to become a "we" person. She no longer belongs to a "bunch," and she is bored by the long hot days spent only with Berenice, the maid, and little John Henry in the ugly kitchen. Around the town she goes, telling everyone about the wedding and saying goodbye to the old place. In the Blue Moon Cafe she meets a soldier who takes her upstairs and makes advances which she resists by hitting him over the head with a water pitcher. Next day at the wedding

¹Carson McCullers, The Member of the Wedding (New York: Bantam, 1966), p. 1. All subsequent parenthetical page references are to this edition.

she is dragged screaming from the honeymoon car which then drives away without her.

Sometime after the publication of The Member of the Wedding in 1946, Mrs. McCullers, upon the insistence of her friend Tennessee Williams, adapted the novel for the stage. Williams immediately saw the dramatic potential of a story in which the point-of-view character is never out of sight, but much of the play's audience appeal lies in one element which is a point of contrast between the experience of Mick Kelly and that of Frankie Addams. While Mick's identification with Singer closes her off from the world, makes her retreat more and more into her secret dreams, and produces a failure of communication, Frankie's identification with the wedding opens her up to the people around her and increases her ability to communicate. The day before her trip to Winter Hill for the ceremony she goes out for a walk through the town and is aware of the most remarkable change in herself:

. . . she had no sooner walked down the left side of the main street and up again on the right sidewalk, when she realized a further happening. It had to do with various people, some known to her and others strangers, she met and passed along the street. An old colored man, stiff and proud on his rattling wagon seat drove a sad blindered mule down toward the Saturday market. F. Jasmine looked at him, he looked at her, and to the outward appearance that was all. But in that glance, F. Jasmine felt between his eyes and

her own eyes a new unnamable connection, as though they were known to each other--and there even came an instant vision of his home field and country roads and quiet pine trees as the wagon rattled past her on the paved town street. And she wanted him to know her, too--about the wedding.

Now the same thing happened again and again on those four blocks. . . . (p. 50)

With every one she meets she feels a connection--"a connection close as answers to calls" (p. 50), and she loves them all. In the projection of her own feelings, Frankie fails to take into account what Jerry H. Bryant calls "a relative world-center"¹ or the fact, as Allen Tate puts it, that reality lies only "in the consciousness of the protagonist and not in the exterior world."² Frankie has projected Jarvis's and Janis's willingness to take her with them, and in their refusal to do so, suggests Bryant, is both the destruction of innocence and the beginning of a richer, fuller life. In explaining this truth he calls attention to the scene in which Frankie, Berenice, and John Henry weep, each for a separate reason (pp. 112-117), and he says,

Their weeping is like their singing: . . . "their three voices were joined, and the parts of the song were woven together." People's lives are like

¹Jerry H. Bryant, The Open Decision: The Contemporary American Novel and Its Intellectual Background (New York: Free Press, 1970), pp. 34-68.

²Cowan, p. 227.

this song and this weeping, each separate strand contributing to a whole and deriving from the whole a satisfaction missing without the others. If the condition of the human being is to "lack," he can share that condition with others through love. Metaphysically, it is the actual entity committing himself to his society as an element of his individual satisfaction. As a child, this is not good enough for Frankie. She demands absolute communion. As an adult, suggests McCullers, she will learn that this is the way we fulfill ourselves.¹

Frankie appears to be influenced less by social conditions than Mick, partly because her story covers a period of only a week, but the conditions which do exist are vividly Southern. The town in which Frankie lives appears to be the same as Mick's hometown, and both are modeled on the Columbus, Georgia, of the author's youth. It is a typical small Southern town with its Negro section and its mill district, a town in which an adolescent girl feels safe to wander at all hours of the night. This action, however, probably reflects social class and family standards of behavior more than the nature of the town. It is impossible to imagine Miranda or Dabney engaged in such unlady-like conduct. The old crones in Miranda's youth criticize her father for allowing her to dress "practically," and it is inconceivable that the Grandmother would have tolerated either Mick's shorts or Frankie's

¹Bryant, pp. 248-249.

grotesque Mexican hat and orange satin dress. The action of Mrs. McCullers' novels, however, occurs twenty to thirty years later than that of the previous novels, a difference which allows for changes in acceptable patterns of social behavior.

Interestingly, Mick and Frankie have similar sexual experiences over which they feel extreme guilt, and in each case the experience immediately precedes another of great consequence. Frankie's rejection at the wedding, however, is more vital to her as an initiation into knowledge than her experience with the boy.

Religion is not an issue in The Member of the Wedding; and since the story occurs during the war years the economic situation is not nearly so stifling for Frankie as it is for Mick. But the unities of time and action which the author observes prohibit emphasis on these aspects of Frankie's environment. Their influence is implicit rather than explicit.

One of the major successes of both the novels is the Negroes. Both Portia and Berenice are heroines on the order of Dilsey in Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury, and Oliver Evans says that Richard Wright praised all of Mrs. McCullers' Negroes for their authenticity.¹ Certainly the

¹Evans, p. 10.

scope of her Negro community is very broad, ranging from the intelligent and highly educated to the poor and simple, from the militant to the passive. Both the abuses they suffer at the hands of society and the contributions they make to it are realistically drawn. These two novels emphasize the love which they share among themselves and the love two surrogate black mothers extend to two bewildered growing girls. Frankie's relationship to Berenice is much more intimate than Mick's to Portia, and through it she learns what it means for colored people to be "caught" and "squeezed . . . off in a corner" (p. 114). Through Honey, Berenice's foster brother, she learns something of the price of resistance to social mores. But when the book ends the reader senses that it will take years of growth before these seeds of knowledge produce the fruits of real compassion.

Carson McCullers' novels on the loss of innocence suggest that the human struggle may be unavoidable, but its outcome is unalterably ordered by fate. To Portia, the "plan" did not work, and it does not work for any character in the book; to Mick, "it is like she was cheated;" to Berenice, it is like people were "caught;" to Frankie, it is like they were all "loose." Man is the victim of the world into which he is born. The only hope

Carson McCullers seems to offer is the result of the action which Bryant recommends, sharing one's "lack" with others through love.

CHAPTER V

FLANNERY O'CONNOR: THE SOUTH AS A REFLECTION OF THE SOUL

In a lecture entitled "The Church and the Fiction Writer" Flannery O'Connor said, "When people have told me that because I am a Catholic, I cannot be an artist, I have had to reply, ruefully, that because I am a Catholic, I cannot afford to be less than an artist."¹ Her fiction is the proof that she was not less, and most critics agree with Hugh Holman that her death at thirty-nine "silenced one of the finest voices of American fiction."² But the voice was not Catholic only; it was also Southern, and Miss O'Connor publicly and insistently claimed both conditions as essential to her creative powers:

The two circumstances that have given character to my own writing have been those of being Southern and being Catholic. This is considered by many to be an unlikely combination, but I have found it to be a most likely one. I think the South provides the Catholic novelist with some benefits that he usually lacks, and lacks to a conspicuous degree. The Catholic novel can't

¹Flannery O'Connor, "In the Protestant South," Mystery and Manners, eds. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1957), p. 146.

²Holman, p. 177.

be categorized by subject matter, but only by what it assumes about human and divine reality. It cannot see man as determined; it cannot see him as totally depraved. It will see him as incomplete in himself, as prone to evil, but as redeemable when his own efforts are assisted by grace. And it will see this grace as working through nature, but as entirely transcending it, so that a door is always open to possibility and the unexpected in the human soul. Its center of meaning will be Christ; its center of destruction will be the devil. No matter how this view of life may be fleshed out, these assumptions form its skeleton.¹

Of the South's contribution to her art she said:

The Hebrew genius for making the absolute concrete has conditioned the Southerner's way of looking at things. This is one of the reasons why the South is a storytelling section. Our response to life is different if we have been taught only a definition of faith than if we have trembled with Abraham as he held the knife over Isaac. Both of these kinds of knowledge are necessary, but in the last four or five centuries, Catholics have overemphasized the abstract and consequently impoverished their imaginations and their capacity for prophetic insight.

Unfortunately, where you find Catholics reading the Bible, you find that it is usually a pursuit of the educated, but in the South the Bible is known by the ignorant as well, and it is always that mythos which the poor hold in common that is most valuable to the fiction writer. When the poor hold sacred history in common, they have ties to the universal and the holy which allows the meaning of their every action to be heightened and seen under the aspect of eternity.²

¹O'Connor, Mystery and Manners, pp. 196-197.

²Ibid., pp. 202-203.

An understanding of these two fundamental influences upon Miss O'Connor is helpful in understanding not only her artistic vision, but her indomitable will to speak her truth in the face of conditions of health which would have stifled the creative urge in a less valiant spirit.

Flannery O'Connor was born on March 25, 1925, in Savannah, Georgia, but moved to Milledgeville in the late thirties. After a childhood education in Catholic schools, she graduated from Georgia Woman's College in Milledgeville in 1945 and received her M.A. degree from the University of Iowa in 1947. After college Flannery lived and wrote in New York until she fell victim to lupus in 1950, the disease of which her father died, and returned to Milledgeville. In addition to writing, Flannery O'Connor spent much of her time lecturing. In 1963 she received an honorary degree from Smith College, one of many awards and grants she received during her lifetime. She died in 1964.¹

Though Miss O'Connor once advised a student, who asked what she was supposed to "get out of" the author's stories, to "forget about the enlightenment and just try to enjoy them,"² and though Robert Fitzgerald insists that her

¹Robert Fitzgerald, "Introduction," Everything That Rises Must Converge by Flannery O'Connor (New York: The New American Library, 1957), p. xv.

²O'Connor, Mystery and Manners, p. 107.

stories should not be treated "straight off as problems for exegesis or texts to preach on,"¹ it is unlikely that much enjoyment of Miss O'Connor's work is possible apart from interpretation. In discussing her use of the Kenyon Fellowship money, she told friends it would go to, among other things, "a few sideline researches into the ways of the vulgar. I would like to go to California for about two minutes to further these researches, though at times I feel that a feeling for the vulgar is my natural talent and don't need any particular encouragement."² Even her most devoted readers will probably agree. Miss O'Connor's splendid fiction, however, is the proof that this salient characteristic is vital to her unique configurations of truth, and the power of her images lies largely in their horror. She explains why this technique is particularly effective in the South:

To be able to recognize a freak, you have to have some conception of the whole man, and in the South the general conception of man is still, in the main, theological.

.
. . . it is when the freak can be sensed as a figure for our essential displacement that he attains some depth in literature.³

¹Fitzgerald, p. vii.

²Ibid., p. xvi.

³O'Connor, Mystery and Manners, pp. 44-45.

Her use of the vulgar and of freaks parallels that of other second generation Southern Renaissance writers, including Carson McCullers. Certainly the freakish qualities of the major characters in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter are for the purpose of showing man's essential displacement, and the similarities between the religious fanatics of each author have already been mentioned. The freaks of both writers are psychic projections intended to communicate moral truth.

Jonathan Baumbach argues that all of Miss O'Connor's work "has the same rigidly defined religious concerns, the same theological pattern. . . ."¹ Of her two novels, Wise Blood and The Violent Bear It Away, he says:

A highly specialized initiatory ritual takes place in both . . . novels. . . . The ritual configuration is a reversal of the rite de passage; that is, her central characters do not fall from innocence. They are fallen from the outset and move doomed, through an infested world proliferating its evils, until at the heart of darkness they discover light, or God, and through renunciation and extreme penance achieve redemption for themselves and, in extension, for all of us.²

This is a unique reversal of the usual approach to this theme and certainly represents a wide divergence from the

¹Jonathan Baumbach, The Landscape of Nightmare: Studies in the Contemporary American Novel (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1967), p. 87.

²Ibid., pp. 87-88.

other writers of this group. Even Carson McCullers' Frankie and Mick, unsheltered and world-wise in their small town, lower-class way as compared to the young Miranda or Laura or Dabney, contrast sharply with the young girl evangelist in The Violent Bear It Away and the degenerate Sabbath Hawkes in Wise Blood. These social degenerates do no service to a discussion of the journey from innocence to experience, that journey having been made by each character long before the story opens. For the two leading male characters of these novels, Hazel Motes and young Tarwater, the journey, as Baumbach suggests, is a reverse one from depravity to a recovered "innocence" through redemption, but the girls experience no such moment of grace. In fact, no story in Flannery O'Connor's collection is an initiation story by the usual definition. But two stories featuring adolescent girls as leading characters lend themselves to the innocence and experience interpretation in a peculiarly religious sense of the word. They are included here because they provide an ironic comment on the Southern religious environment. The South is fundamentally Protestant and, in many sections, openly anti-Catholic. Ironically, a devoutly Catholic writer has provided some of the best examples of the pervading religious influence in the Bible Belt to be found

in Southern fiction. As already stated, she offers as her explanation for this fact the unique correspondences between spiritual truth and Southern regional realities which perfectly illustrate it. Two short stories are sufficient to confirm this point.

"A Circle of Fire" is told primarily from the viewpoint of twelve-year-old Sally Virginia who is usually referred to as "the child." From an upstairs window the child gazes out while her mother, Mrs. Cope, pulls weeds and nut grass from a flowerbed and Mrs. Pritchard, the wife of her foreman, watches and talks. Three boys enter the yard carrying a suitcase, and the spokesman introduces himself as thirteen-year-old Powell Boyd whose father was once Mrs. Cope's caretaker. Powell enjoyed the farm and has brought his friends from the housing project in Atlanta for a visit. They stay on, wreaking havoc, even after Mrs. Cope has threatened to call the sheriff. Finally, they set fire to the woods.

The first paragraph suggests the tone of the story and provides many of the details necessary to its interpretation. The child, by moving from room to room on the second floor of the house, commands a view of everything which transpires outside without being seen herself. Only twice does she leave the house, once in the car, and once

to go into the woods, but in both cases she remains the observer, the one upon whom impressions are registered. She first looks down upon her mother and Mrs. Pritchard who wear identical hats, except that Mrs. Pritchard's is faded and shapeless, while Mrs. Cope's is still new. This fact, together with physical descriptions which picture them as exact opposites, is the first indication that Mrs. Pritchard is Mrs. Cope's alter ego. Another such image is observed by the child when she looks down over the banister: "Mrs. Cope's and Mrs. Pritchard's legs were facing each other in the back hall."¹ And later when the boys run away to explore the farm the child notices that "the two women sat with the black suitcase between them" (p. 183). Finally, the relationship between the two characters is inescapably clear when Mrs. Cope says to the child, "Why do you have to look like an idiot? . . . I look at you and I want to cry! Sometimes you look like you might belong to Mrs. Pritchard!" (p. 190). Since Mrs. Cope and Mrs. Pritchard are two expressions of the same person, the child belongs as much to one as to the other.

As the story progresses the green hats are always together with Mrs. Pritchard finding pleasure in morbidity

¹Flannery O'Connor, The Complete Stories (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971), p. 181. All subsequent parenthetical page numbers are to this edition.

and evil and Mrs. Cope always trying to change the subject to something cheerful. In fact, Mrs. Cope prides herself in being able to "cope" and repeats again and again how thankful she is, while Mrs. Pritchard's refrain is "Like I toljer, there ain't a thing you can do about it" (p. 188). But Mrs. Cope's prayers of thanksgiving echo the empty hypocrisy of the Pharisee who went up to the temple to thank God that he was not like other men, and they leave her burdened still and afraid: ". . . when the seasons changed she seemed almost frightened at her good fortune in escaping whatever it was that pursued her" (p. 190). Her attitude contrasts sharply with that of the Grandmother in Katherine Anne Porter's story "The Journey." She, too, sits with Nannie at the end of each season and reviews with her the events of their mingled lives, but always with an attitude of acceptance. Religion is for her a dogma which explains the source of life and outlines its duties, but it holds no threats. Miss O'Connor's characters all feel "pursued," and Mrs. Cope in middle life is still successfully escaping, season after season, the ragged figure who moves from tree to tree in the back of Hazel Motes' mind and to whom he finally surrenders in his bizarre way. Of course, since the child is the "eye" observing events and since the last paragraph indicates that it is her story

which has been told, Mrs. Cope and Mrs. Pritchard may be interpreted as her psychic projections representing the forces which resist the prophets of God who pursue. Certainly her movement from room to room in the house, her sinking into the deep recesses of the car seat, and her journey into the woods suggest that the struggle is hers and that it is an internal one.

The first suggestion of violence appears in the fourth paragraph: "[Mrs. Cope] worked at the weeds and nut grass as if they were an evil sent directly by the devil to destroy the place" (p. 175). Almost simultaneously with this observation, the child lifts her eyes to see the boys descending from the truck. Mrs. Cope's attitude toward them is hardly distinguishable from her attitude toward nut grass, and she works feverishly to rid herself of both. But from the beginning the boys refuse to accept Mrs. Cope as the rightful "owner" of the farm. The big boy tells her, "We ain't bothering nothing of yours" (p. 185), and they wait for her to leave, but she argues, "After all, this is my place" (p. 186). Then the boys walk away, "leaving her there with a shocked look as if she had had a searchlight thrown on her in the middle of the night" (p. 186). In truth, that is precisely what has happened. In her prayers she has thanked God that she is

not Negro or European, that she has never been in an iron lung or lived in a "development;" in short, when she declares "This is my place" she implies not only her position of ownership but also her position of superiority to other beings. When redeeming truth is presented through the evil instruments "sent directly by the devil to destroy the place," her rejection of it is followed by increased violence which vivifies the child's opportunity to accept grace at the end of the story.

When Mrs. Cope accuses the child of looking like she might belong to Mrs. Pritchard the child responds, "'Leave me be. Just leave me be. I ain't you,' and she went off to the woods as if she were stalking out an enemy, her head thrust forward and each hand gripped on a gun" (pp. 190-191). It is interesting to contrast the child's experience here with Miranda's experience of lost innocence when she takes a real gun into the woods. The child's toy guns suggest that the enemy she stalks is psychological, and so the outcome of the two experiences is vastly different. In the woods the child thrashes around angrily threatening personified trees and bushes, and finally sits down on a stump grinding her heels into the ground. Since she has spoken violently before of what she would do to the boys if she could catch them, her

anger seems to be against them, but this is not at all certain. She abhors her mother's hypocrisy and has just experienced another of her humiliating insults. It is more than possible that her vengeance is directed against her mother. Nevertheless, in this mood she comes upon the boys washing and cavorting in the cow trough and continues to watch them until they set fire to the woods. Then: "She turned and tried to run across the field but her legs were too heavy and she stood there, weighed down with some new unplaced misery that she had never felt before" (p. 193). Mrs. Pritchard has just been in to tell Mrs. Cope, "I got the misery in my face today" (p. 191) when the child runs out of the woods screaming about the fire. The full impact of the experience strikes her as she watches her mother's face:

The child came to a stop beside her mother and stared up at her face as if she had never seen it before. It was the face of the new misery she felt, but on her mother it looked old and it looked as if it might have belonged to anybody, a Negro or a European or to a Powell himself. The child turned her head quickly, and past the Negroes' ambling figures she could see the column of smoke rising and widening unchecked inside the granite line of trees. She stood taut, listening, and could just catch in the distance a few wild high shrieks of joy as if the prophets were dancing in the fiery furnace, in the circle the angel had cleared for them. (p. 193)

The child sees her mother as one with all those she has contemned and as no more redeemed than they. Her mother has again escaped "whatever it was that pursued her." For a moment the child senses in herself the same misery, but there is one difference. For an instant she sees the boys not as the instruments of Satan to destroy, but as the prophets of God sent to illumine. The fire, mentioned so often during the story and seen by Mrs. Cope as destructive, has done its purifying work, and in her recognition of it the child accepts the mystery of life which her mother has rejected and moves to a new plateau of spiritual experience.

"A Temple of the Holy Ghost" is also the story of a twelve-year-old girl who audits the experiences of others and makes them her own. Her mother invites two fourteen-year-old cousins from the nearby convent to spend a weekend, but when they arrive the problem of providing entertainment for two boy-crazy teenagers looms large. The child suggests inviting two country boys planning to be Church of God preachers to squire the girls around, and her mother accepts this idea as "safe." The boys take the girls to the fair where they see a freak in a side show, half man and half woman. After the girls are returned to the convent, the child learns from Alonzo Myers, the cab driver, that

some preachers inspected the fair and then had the police to shut it down.

Early in the visit of the girls, they informed the child's mother, when she asked why they jokingly called each other Temple One and Temple Two, that Sister Perpetua had instructed them to resist ungentlemanly conduct with the command, "Stop sir! I am a Temple of the Holy Ghost!" (p. 238). Though the girls giggle hysterically at the thought, the child does not find it funny. "I am a Temple of the Holy Ghost, she said to herself, and was pleased with the phrase. It made her feel as if somebody had given her a present" (p. 238). The thought persists inescapably; she reminds herself that Miss Kirby, their sad old school-teacher boarder, is also a Temple of the Holy Ghost, and her attitudes toward life begin to change. In her childish half-comic way she reviews all the wild ambitions of her life, concluding that what she really ought to be is a saint, but knowing that her sins are too great. She hears about the freak and later during benediction his image is mixed with the idea of the body as the temple of the Holy Ghost:

. . . when the priest raised the monstrance with the Host shining ivory-colored in the center of it, she was thinking of the tent at the fair that had the freak in it. The freak was saying, "I don't dispute hit. This is the way He wanted me to be." (p. 248)

Now the elements of her epiphany are complete. When at last she sees the setting sun as "an elevated Host drenched in blood" (p. 248) she glimpses the divine power intervening to transform spiritual deformity into a spiritual abode.

Most of the elements of these initiation stories are in sharp contrast with those of the three previous writers, though the Southern aspects are just as realistic. Miss O'Connor's characters are always poor whites who struggle to hold their own against poorer whites. Consistency with her artistic purposes requires this, of course, for she means her characters to be interpreted as exaggerated objectifications of individual spiritual needs. This is the reason the South serves her Catholic mind so well. The Southern history of slavery, defeat, rural poverty, mill-district ignorance, religious perversion, depression, backwardness, isolation, heat, and disease has produced more physical representations of the deformed and vulgarized soul than any other section of the country. In "A Circle of Fire" members of the tenant-farmer class serve as religious symbols, but they accurately reflect a large segment of the population of the rural South. Powell is a picture of the emptiness of those who suffer from annual uprooting. It is significant

that to Mrs. Cope the boys always look hungry but never accept her offer of food; their hunger is of the spirit. Both the boys and Mrs. Pritchard, another tenant, are eager to see Mrs. Cope robbed of what she considers rightfully hers. Having nothing of their own and seeing no prospect for acquisition of material goods, they take pleasure in seeing others reduced to similar circumstances. In "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," the typical Southern symbols of displacement are the fair people whose vulgar means of livelihood is repugnant to the more respectable members of the community. From these two groups representing the lowest social orders of the South, Flannery O'Connor draws her symbols for the reader's spiritual degeneracy.

The family in Miss O'Connor's fiction is rarely whole and rarely feels any sense of unity. More often than not it resembles a pen of starving animals, each seeing the other as a threat to existence. Much of the violence and hatred of her world, in fact, is among members of the same family. The contrast of this condition of life with that experienced by Miranda and Dabney is somewhat appalling. Family life for Mick and Frankie lies somewhere between the two, suggesting that family values are largely determined by economy and social class. When Negroes appear in O'Connor

stories they are stereotypes or stage props and are rarely, if ever, developed.

Religious symbolism, then, is the fictional purpose which the South serves for Flannery O'Connor, and each of the girls in the two stories considered here finds her rite de passage in a spiritual epiphany. "A Circle in the Fire" is the more typical of the two, for spiritual truth for this writer most often comes clothed in violence.

CONCLUSION

In response to a question by newsmen as to why there were so many good Southern writers during the period known as the Southern Literary Renaissance, Walker Percy answered, "Because we lost the War." He meant, as Flannery O'Connor put it, that the South had had her Fall, had lost her first state of innocence, and had gained the "inburnt knowledge of human limitations and a sense of mystery."¹ But the question logically follows: if the South's defeat in the Civil War produced the literary renaissance, why was it more than half a century in appearing? In the answer to that question lies, also, the reason that the South produced so few first-rate writers before the War: the defense and maintenance of a way of life which the rest of the civilized world found repugnant so totally consumed intellectual and physical energies that the Southern climate could neither evince nor sustain the artistic vision. When the war abruptly ended the unique culture in which Southerners were almost mystically involved, the pain of defeat was keenly personal and temporarily precluded the detachment necessary to artistic perspective. It took many

¹O'Connor, Mystery and Manners, p. 59.

years for the combined consequences of that defeat plus the catalyst of time to arouse the South's collective artistic consciousness and carefully school it in an intellectual and social climate replete with tangible evidences of its lost innocence and concrete expressions of its new knowledge. By this time, too, the North, disillusioned by the failures of the industrial revolution, and the world at large, suffering from the aftermath of a devastating world war, could identify, at least in part, with the defeated South and share in her tragic vision. Both conditions were essential to a literary renaissance.

Certainly the South's knowledge through experience did not come full blown in 1920. The revelation was progressive, and its characteristics can be traced through the writers who testify to it. The Fugitives subscribed to the theories that man's efforts to escape dualism produced philosophical and metaphysical systems which encompassed the observable world and that the individual mind was less important in the production of literature than was the culture. The four writers discussed here are examples of those who demonstrate the truth of this philosophy. When Katherine Anne Porter and Eudora Welty wrote in the 20's and 30's, because they were much closer in time to the old order than the second generation of writers, their fiction

was marked by a slightly nostalgic view of the tragic and dying aristocratic hierarchy which had characterized the Old South. This quality is more evident in the fiction of Katherine Anne Porter than in that of Eudora Welty who came along twenty years later and wrote of the final disintegration of the planter class and the last vestiges of an archaic social structure barely visible in small Southern towns. The disappearance of the nostalgic yearning for past glories from later fiction, including that of Carson McCullers and Flannery O'Connor, caused Richard Meeker to assert: ". . . the tragic vision has been replaced by a guilt complex . . ." ¹ Carson McCullers and Flannery O'Connor both wrote about the poor whites by whom they were surrounded in their small, Southern hometowns. By the time these writers reached maturity the plantation system was no more, and the South had reached that condition which caused it to be labeled the "Nation's Economic Problem Number One." ²

Though the lives of the four writers included here span the period from 1890 to the present, several other interesting points of comparison and contrast further illustrate the varying influences of the South upon them.

¹Simonini, p. viii.

²Odom, p. 18.

The two first-generation writers have enjoyed relatively good health and still enjoy active lives, while the two younger writers, both of Georgia, were victims of crippling diseases in early adulthood from which they suffered intensely and from which they died at fifty and thirty-nine years respectively. Katherine Anne Porter and Carson McCullers experienced unhappy marriages; and both left the South because they felt it threatened and stifled their creativity. On the other hand, Eudora Welty and Flannery O'Connor never married, and each lived and worked in the town in which she was reared, finding the Southern atmosphere highly compatible with her artistic efforts. Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O'Connor made much use of grotesques in their writings, but each claimed to have drawn her characters directly from the Southern scene and each employed them for the purpose of vividly demonstrating psychological or moral truth. Katherine Anne Porter sets all except the last of her Southern stories in the rural South, while Eudora Welty divides hers between the rural scene and the small country town. Carson McCullers pictures a successive phase of regional development, the small industrial town in the throes of social change; and Flannery O'Connor returns the reader often to a rural scene in which the aristocratic landowners of

Katherine Anne Porter's fiction have been replaced with a barely literate farmer class struggling to hold its own against an on-slaught of illiterate tenants.

But in the fiction of each writer, the conditions of life which destroyed the innocence of the South and brought it to a state of knowledge are the same conditions which combine to destroy the innocence of their adolescent girls: for Miranda it is a false view of life which makes manners more important than morals and a smug paternalism nobler than individual freedom; for Dabney and Virgie it is a resistance to change which retards social progress and binds them and their fellows in the rigid bonds of social class; for Mick it is the force of the depression which compounds the social evils of a careless past; and for the child in each of Miss O'Connor's stories it is the perception of spiritual truth made manifest in the everyday. Each experience of knowledge reflects the unique artistic vision of a writer nurtured in the paradoxical Southern world to which it attests.

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