



RE-FRAMING THE 'SAVAGE IDEAL': NARRATIVES OF THE AMERICAN SOUTH FROM THE RECONSTRUCTION TO THE SOUTHERN RENAISSANCE PERIOD

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Abstract: *The paper brings together the concept of 'frames' as culturally determined means of interpreting reality and the concept of 'savage ideal' as the epitome of Southern identity in an attempt to explore the way in which the Southern cultural heritage survives through successive projections against different historical backgrounds, outliving its generative social and mental patterns. To this purpose, the study focuses on the turning points in the evolution of Southern literature, from its beginnings to the Southern Renaissance, in order to show how it perpetually reassesses its underlying regional cultural patterns within different narrative spaces, investing them with new significance.*

Keywords: *Re-framing, savage ideal, American South, Southern literature*

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INTRODUCTION

In his 1974 book entitled *Frame Analysis. An Essay on the Organization of Experience*, sociologist Erving Goffman sets forth the concept of 'frames', in an attempt to demonstrate how the understanding of reality is constructed. In his opinion, frames provide the culturally determined context within which individuals are able to structure their otherwise random perceptions of the world and turn them into meaningful experience. The obvious analogy with the literal sense of the word, however, also suggests that the way in which we make sense of reality is conditioned by our personal background and, therefore, profoundly intimate and unique, just like the frame of a painting holds an unrepeatable esthetic expression of artistic sensitivity. From here, we can conclude that societies operate by virtue of perpetually intersecting frames and evolve through continuous negotiations of meaning that govern the individual's relation with the environment, with the others, and with themselves. Ultimately, *(re)framing* is the underlying mechanism of cultural survival,



driving the continuous reassessment of values and norms towards a dynamic adaptation to ever-changing historical and social contexts.

THE 'SAVAGE IDEAL' AND THE DILEMMATIC DIMENSION OF THE SOUTHERN SPIRIT

In his book *The Mind of the South* (1941), journalist Wilbur Cash, a Southerner himself, attributes the specific mindset of his native region to the old rural social order of the plantation, which preserves and perpetuates the cultural dimensions of the frontier, namely: the deep attachment to the land, the reverence for the past and tradition, the cult of ancestors, and the rejection of authority. In turn, these cultural dimensions outline a regional mentality predominated by a deep sense of time, history and the native place, fostering a tendency to idealize the past to the point where the present becomes relevant only in detrimental comparison with the glorious old days, which gain the fabulous dimensions of the myth and the legendary. Therefore, 'the savage ideal' represents the irrepressible urge "to preserve the old order" and defend the integrity of tradition, nurtured within the *frame* of the plantation, "...an independent social unit, a self – contained and largely self – sufficient world of its own" (Cash, 1970, p.137).

The isolated space of the plantation provides a social context relatively immune to external influences, free from conflict, and tightly kept together by a strong sense of community fostered by shared history and collective memory. This frame accommodates a certain 'easiness' in the perception of reality, leading to another defining dimension of the Southern spirit, namely: "...the tendency toward unreality, toward romanticism, and, in intimate relation with that, toward hedonism" (Cash, 1970, p.122). In his opinion, the detachment from reality is also driven by the need to justify the institution of slavery, so that Southern culture is primarily shaped by "the history of its efforts to achieve that end, and characteristically by means of romantic fictions" (Cash, 1970, p.124).

In the aftermath of the Civil War, the isolation of the region deepens on grounds of an exacerbated defensive attitude in front of defeat, which reinforces the withdrawal into the past and revives the cultural patterns supporting it. The resistance to the Northern intrusion paradoxically determines a reassertion of the Southern values in the light of nostalgia for a lost world, where the myth overshadows history and the legendary overshadows reality. Therefore, "It was in this period that the legend of the Old South finally emerged and fully took on the form in which we know it today" (Cash, 1970, p.127).

However, we cannot overlook the emergence of two major disruptive factors that pressure the South both from the outside and from the inside to reassess itself on the background of the new historic events. The outside pressure is represented by the North – South opposition, which gradually erodes the old social order by overturning its system of values. Thus, by the end of the nineteenth century, the aristocratic standards are shaken by the emergence of new, economically determined social categories, whereas the purely agricultural society is irreversibly contaminated with industrial patterns meant to reframe Southern mentality by projecting it against the background of the modern 'New South'. The inside pressure is exerted by the Old South – new South mental conflict, triggered by the fears and complexes related with the vanishing white supremacy alongside with the planter class, which is swept away by industrialization at the turn of the twentieth century. The impact of progress brings about a decisive breach in the 'savage ideal' by questioning the very ideals of the ruling class. Once wealth supplants noble origins as an emblem of social status, the decay of the old aristocracy becomes irreversible, faintly counteracted by the aristocratic complex that involves the scorn for the working class and the attachment to the old code of Southern chivalry. The emergence of the new generations, who leave their native region to study 'up North' further enhances the



internal tension by adding their own inner conflicts rising from the painful oscillation between the inherited urge to look backward and the objective need to live in the present. This conflicting mental and emotional state fuels the dilemmatic dimension of the Southern spirit, detectable to this day in the Southern mentality and art like an enduring relic of the 'savage ideal'.

Ultimately, the emotional ambiguity pertaining to the conscious crisis triggered by the tragic suspension in an in-between space between the impulse to resort to the past as the very source of one's identity and the desperate need to break away from it in order to live in the present is the one that still gives substance to the Southern perpetually rewritten story.

RE-FRAMING THE 'SAVAGE IDEAL'. SOUTHERN NARRATIVES FROM THE RECONSTRUCTION TO THE RENAISSANCE PERIOD

The American South provides a relevant instance of re-framing, as the endurance of its culture largely relies on the successive reassessments of the so-called 'savage ideal', considered to be the essence of the Southern spirit and the source of its defining patterns of thought and behavior. The conflict inherent to the reframing of the savage ideal surfaces in Southern literature as undeniable proof that the South has endured by assuming its dilemmatic dimension and accommodating it as a reconciliation of contraries. Therefore, the Southern artist crystallizes their mixed feelings towards their native region into a vision that balances painful awareness and unconditional affection, brilliantly summarized in William Faulkner's statement that "To write well about some place you've got to hate it. The way a man hates his own wife" (Faulkner in the University, 1977, p. 83).

As professor V. Stanciu pointed out in his *Orientări în literatura Sudului american*, "the development of social life in the American South allows us to better understand the shaping of a particular psychology and mentality, which conferred distinctive characteristics to the literature written in the South" (Stanciu, 1977, p.130).

The Old South Rhetoric in the Reconstruction Period

The evolution of Southern literature closely reflects the paradigm shifts underlying the historical transformations of the region. Therefore, it is not incidental that Southern literature begins to flourish in the period of Reconstruction, in response to the crisis triggered by the defeat of the South in the Civil War. Thus, the first Southern literary productions mainly support the Old South rhetoric, meant to defend the traditional social structures and values of the plantation culture. The poetry of Sidney Lanier (1842-1881), who also served in the Confederate States Army, and such prose pieces by journalist Joel Chandler Harris as *Uncle Remus. His Songs and His Sayings* (1880) and *Tales of the Home Folks* (1898) draw on the luxuriant scenery and the rich mythology of the region to glorify the Old South and present an idyllic image of the plantation.

By the late nineteenth century, the first manifestations of realism occur in the work of George Washington Cable, considered 'the first modern Southern writer' (*Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, 1989). Whether he portrays New Orleans Creole life in *The Grandissimes: A Story of Creole Life* (1880), or approaches such sensitive plantation related issues as racism and miscegenation in *The Silent South* (1889) and *The Negro Question* (1890), the author offers a more balanced perspective on his native region, heralding a new generation of writers whose main artistic goal is not to be prisoners of the past, but to assume it in order to come to terms with its ghosts.

Breaking Away From the Plantation: the Emergence of Realism

As we have shown, the major representations of the American South during the last decade of the nineteenth century pave the way for the twentieth century writers who reframe the savage ideal in the context of a changing Southern world, breaking away from idealistic escapism and the



romanticized plantation myths. Relevant examples in this sense are Ellen Glasgow's realistic, socially critical novels *The Descendant* (1897), *The Deliverance* (1904), or *In This Our Life* (1941); Elizabeth Maddox Roberts' narratives of the rural South, *The Time of Man* (1926), *The Great Meadow* (1930) and *A Buried Treasure* (1931); Julia Peterkin's *Black April* (1927), *Scarlet Sister Mary* (1928), and *A Plantation Christmas* (1934), set in the plantation South and offering a white perspective on the Creole culture in the Low lands; and DuBose Heyward's novels *Porgy* (1925) and *Mamba's Daughters* (1929), inspired from the life of the black community, as well as the play *Brass Ankle* (1931), one of the first Southern writings explicitly addressing the issues of mixed race.

By the fourth decade of the twentieth century, the savage ideal is re-framed yet again, as the intrusion of modernity shatters definitively the old agrarian order, questioning its constitutive myths, values and beliefs, and shapes the patterns of thought and behavior of the New South. Industrialization and urbanization open up the isolationist, legend pervaded Southern spirit, redefining its fundamental identity crisis from a constructive perspective. Thus, the emerging modern society of the New South rapidly outgrows the past oriented, fanatic mentality, calling for a more embracing approach to the contemporary world, where cultural heritage survives not by denying the present and bitterly opposing the North, but by using both as backgrounds for continuous reassessment. Consequently, once freed from the limiting plantation mentality, the Southern spirit turns from a ground of conflict and alienation into a space that accommodates the past and the present as coexisting worlds.

From Regional to Universal: The Southern Renaissance

Given the above, it is not incidental at all that the first half of the twentieth century is defined as the Southern Renaissance in literature owing to the unprecedented creative effervescence that propelled it to a predominant position in the American letters of the time. The major literary works of this period bring together the past and the present, the legendary and the ordinary, the heroic and the mundane in incongruous associations that yield less picturesque, but definitely more powerful and lively images, with gothic and grotesque touches. A tremendous breakthrough in the artistic vision of the authors creating in this period is that they reverse the perspective on their regional heritage by viewing the past from the more detached and analytical perspective of the present, instead of looking at the present from the limiting, biased perspective of past glorification. This reversal yields a body of literature that assumes its regional roots not as a means of plunging into the isolating space of the myth and the legendary, but as a source of artistic sensitivity that allows a certain openness towards universal human dimensions such as suffering, alienation, and tragedy.

One of the first and most powerful examples in this sense is poet and essayist Allan Tate, a prominent figure of the traditionalist Southern Agrarian literary movement, whose single novel, *The Fathers* (1938), set in the antebellum and Civil War-era American South, uses the retrospective glance of its main character at his childhood in an old Virginia family, torn apart by the tragic death of his mother, as well as by conflicting unionist and secessionist beliefs to acknowledge the collapse of traditional Southern values and reveal the deep psychological implications pertaining to it.

Katherine Anne Porter follows the same trend, drawing on the intersection of history and human destiny and offering a demystified image of individual dramas unfolding therein. In her short story volumes, *Flowering Judas and Other Stories* (1930), *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (1939), *The Leaning Tower and Other Stories* (1944), and *The Old Order* (1955), the writer explores the clash between personal ideals and beliefs and harsh reality, as well as between individual values and feelings and rigid social stereotypes, with such psychological implications as disillusionment, alienation and isolation. Thus, her narrative themes constructed around Southern protagonists transcend regional borders and touch upon universally human issues. For instance, the metaphor of



the fractured mirror in *The Cracked Looking-Glass* (1932) refers to the individual's attempt to escape reality by constructing mental illusions of the surrounding world and themselves, revealing the sense of alienation fostered by the inability to reconcile the two sides of the split conscience. The picture of the tragic condition of the individual in a changing contemporary world is gradually outlined by questioning political beliefs (*Flowering Judas*), human relations (*Theft*) and traditional family values (*Holiday*), defined as the main sources of the sense of isolation, alienation, emptiness, loneliness, and failure.

Like all the writers of her generation, however, Porter assumes her *Southernness* together with the identity challenges pertaining to it. In the short story sequence entitled *The Old Order*, for instance, she looks at the post-Civil War South through the eyes of the young, semi-autobiographical heroine Miranda to explore the tension between the romantic image of the glorified past and the harsh realities of the present, and to show that the former has been outgrown by the latter, no longer being able to provide a valid system of values for the young generation. Miranda's struggle to break away from 'the legend of the past' that pervaded her childhood is, therefore, illustrative of how historical memory and generational mythology need to be reassessed in order to achieve self-comprehension.

The decisive separation from regional themes was determined by the writer's personal traumatic experiences, which developed the universal dimension of her writing in her masterpieces *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* and *Ship of Fools*, both published in 1939. The former is a collection of three novellas set during World War I and the 1918 influenza pandemic, in which Porter, herself a survivor of both world crises, traces the physical, psychological and emotional torments of her young protagonist Miranda, whose inner world crumbles in the global disaster, emphasizing the fragility of the human being and, at the same time, their amazing endurance in front of death, defeat, and loss. The latter is her only novel, whose plot is constructed around a 27 – day voyage of a German passenger ship from Mexico to Germany in 1931, and which became her best known work due to a successful film adaptation. The eclectic group of passengers floating together to the unknown, their diverse nationalities, occupations and financial status, their emotions, ideals and failures, as well as their interactions and conflicts based on social and nationalist prejudices, form the substance of an allegory of the disoriented mankind in the drifting world of pre-World War II Europe.

Richard Wright, a new, bold voice in the American letters, had a decisive impact on the Southern literary canon by offering the Black perspective on the region and drawing attention to the immense psychological and moral costs of the old social order, plagued by the institution of slavery. Drawing on his childhood experience on a plantation in Mississippi, the writer dismantles its romanticized image, breaking away from the traditional agrarian literary themes centered on the nostalgia for the glorious past, the tragic obsession with history and the celebration of family aristocratic lineage. Thus, in such narratives as *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), *Native Son* (1940), *Black Boy* (1945) and *The Long Dream* (1958) he looks at the Old and the New South not through the haze of myth and legend, but in the bright light of the recent, painful memory of racial trauma and the struggle for survival in a vicious social system that proclaimed White supremacy by denying Black humanity. Consequently, in "Southern Night", the first section of his autobiography *Black Boy*, Wright equates his native region with a dark place that eludes any fond memories of childhood and youth. Actually, the metaphor of the dark lies at the center of his whole prose, evocative of a desolate native place, plagued by hunger, terror, and racial oppression. One of the most powerful messages of his work, however, is that plantation patterns outlive the social order that generated them, with long-term devastating effects. Thus, the stories inspired from his tormented childhood in the post-Civil War South reveal two vestiges of the old world, namely the sharecropping system and the persistence of the white supremacy myth, which shatter the black character's hope for a better life and



emphasize that, for them, the long-dreamed-of freedom is yet another form of slavery. This tragic awareness fuels the desire to migrate to the North, in an attempt to escape the legacy of the plantation social order. His last novel, *The Long Dream*, reveals the emotional and mental torments pertaining to the transition of the main character from childhood to maturity in a violent, corrupted New South, afflicted by racial oppression, which gradually induce in his mind the idea that migration to the North is the only way out. Taking into account that his entire prose was written after the author migrated to Chicago, and later to Paris, his stories are relevant proof that geographic separation never annihilated the artist's Southern roots, nor did it stifle his urge to voice his experience in his native place as a way of coming to terms with the past, healing old wounds and, ultimately, asserting his identity.

A highly debatable place in the Southern Renaissance literature is held by Margaret Mitchell, who not only didn't break away from the pre-Civil War romanticized vision of the plantation, but exacerbated it in her single novel, *Gone with the Wind* (1936). Thus, whereas the other authors of her generation deconstruct the Southern myths in order to offer a more detached perspective on the history and the moral burden of a declining society, Mitchell defies the trend and revives the savage ideal by recreating a romanticized South, pervaded by the myth of the Lost Cause. Although she shares such central themes of Southern Renaissance as the strong sense of history, memory, and place, the deep, almost visceral relationship with the land, the collective trauma of the Civil War, the decline of the white aristocracy, and the dissolution of the old agrarian order under the pressure of Northern modernity, Mitchell restores the glorious, mythical dimension of the plantation social order by looking at it through the eyes of Scarlett O'Hara, the proud Southern belle who has to sacrifice her inherited status and moral code in order to preserve her plantation during the Civil War. The idyllic image of the antebellum South, the stereotypical portraits of the black characters living in harmony with the white masters in the idealized world of the plantation, as well as Scarlett's determination to preserve the traditional values ingeniously shift the focus from the moral burden of slavery to human resilience in front of the hardships of history. This vision, alongside with the reader friendly, traditional narrative style, interweaving historical epic with romantic drama seems to have resonated perfectly with the people's need for stories that validate universal human values such as love, endurance and hope, which made the novel and its film adaptation some of the most famous and successful artistic productions of all times.

The Monumental Prose of Thomas Wolfe and William Faulkner

Thomas Wolfe and William Faulkner are undoubtedly the iconic representatives of the Southern Renaissance, whose prose brings together history, mythology, memory, and introspection into a monumental discourse on the South awakening from its myth-imbued slumber and rising to a higher level of self-reflexive awareness.

Thomas Wolfe's novels, *Look Homeward, Angel* (1929), *Of Time and the River* (1935) *The Web and the Rock* (1939), and *You Can't Go Home Again* (1940) are highly autobiographical narratives whose harsh realism and profound introspection create a fictional space meant to accommodate such critical issues of modern society as loneliness, disappointment, failure, alienation, and the identity crisis of the provincial in the overwhelming environment of the city. His fictional alter egos, young Eugene Gant and George Webber are the exponents of the psychological and emotional torments of the young Southerner, who sees migration from their native place to Northern cities as a voyage of self-discovery, only to discover that the disorienting experiences of city life deepen their identity crisis. For instance, Eugene Gant, the protagonist of the first two novels, manages to escape the trap of his provincial, chaotic life when he leaves the South to study at Harvard University but, as time passes by, he realizes that his studies and travels to New York and to



Europe do not provide the illuminating experiences he had expected. Wolfe reinforces the idea in the next two novels, whose protagonist, George Webber, leaves his native North Carolina to move to New York. The urban space amplifies his sense of isolation and alienation, whereas a devastating love affair with an older woman throws him off balance and prevents him from making sense of the new world and of his place in it. As a conclusion of the sequel, *You Can't Go Home Again* presents a mature George Webber, living and working as an editor in New York during the Great Depression. The protagonist returns to his hometown to find it entirely changed, and realizes that the gap between the frozen space of memory and the one of ever-changing reality is impossible to bridge. Therefore, living in the present and facing the future is more revealing than clinging to a past that no longer exists and can be relieved only in one's imagination. On the other hand, his visit to Europe and the image of economic and social collapse under the Nazi ascension is an illuminating experience that triggers the revelation that history is actually inescapable, whereas war, discrimination and oppression are not regional, but global historical turning points that periodically challenge societies and individuals.

William Faulkner is undoubtedly the iconic figure not only of Southern Renaissance, but of the entire Southern literature. His towering status among the writers of his generation and his far-reaching influence on American and world prose is secured by the unique way in which he re-frames the savage ideal and its inherent dilemmas by reconstructing it within an entirely imaginary space, evoked in monumental narratives. Faulkner revolutionized the Southern story telling by evading chronological order in favor of such modernist narrative techniques as non-linear timelines, the stream-of-consciousness, the interior monologue, and multiple perspectives, so that the historical and social landscape of the South is filtered through the characters' flow of memories, thoughts and sensorial perceptions. The ingenious setting of the imaginary Yoknapatawpha County, based on his native Mississippi, accommodates a dense historical record of successive generations, with their haunting, mythologized memories that clash with such painful Southern realities as racial tension, the institution of slavery and the decline of the old aristocratic order. By reconstructing his regional heritage in a modernist narrative space, Faulkner manages to bring together the past and the present as inseparable facets of cultural identity, which constantly interact in the individuals' consciousness and define the way in which they make sense of history, society and their own destiny. Ultimately, by placing his stories in an imaginary land and the limitless space of consciousness, constantly shaped by the mechanisms of memory, the writer annihilates both space and time and invests the unfolding destinies of his characters with universally human dimensions, so as "to arrest motion, which is life, [...] and hold it fixed so that a hundred years later, when a stranger looks at it, it moves again" (*Faulkner in the University*, 1977, p.278).

This artistic creed yielded an enormous body of short and long prose, with recurrent themes and characters, mixing mythology and history, glory and decay, memory and present reality into an epic, perpetually told story of human destiny. His major short story volumes are *These 13* (1931) and *Go Down, Moses* (1942). His 1931 debut volume is structured in three sections that cover a wide range of themes, from the devastating effects of World War I on the destinies of young American soldiers serving in Europe ("Victory", "Ad Astra", "All the Dead Pilots") to the dissolution of the Old South, with its underlying myths and racially prejudiced social order ("A Rose for Emily", "Barn Burning", "That Evening Sun", "Dry September") and, finally, to universal issues such as human evil, fear, death, crime, social taboos, mortality and the condition of the artist, evoked in three stories unfolding in a European impressionistic setting ("Mistral", "Divorce in Naples", "Carcassonne"). The second is a volume of connected short stories centered on the McCaslin family, where the narrative is driven back and forth by the mechanism of memory, gradually putting together an image of Southern destiny shaped by the bonding relationship with the land and the mixed blood ties



pertaining to the institution of slavery. In the seven stories ("Was", "The Fire and the Hearth", "Pantaloon in Black", "The Old People", "The Bear", "Delta Autumn" and "Go Down, Moses"), Faulkner alternates mythical landscapes and deeply realistic settings to trace the evolution of the two main protagonists, Lucas Beauchamp and Isaac McCaslin, exponents of a social order that vanishes under the pressure of modern times just like the wilderness, with its fabulous totemic animals, shrinks in front of the invasion of Northern lumber mills. The interplay between these two destinies throughout the volume offers two opposing perspectives on regional legacy and family history, as well as on the ways in which individuals make sense of them in the process of self-assertion. For instance, Isaac McCaslin's profound connection with Sam Fathers, the half-Chickasaw, half-Black woodsman who marks his childhood and youth, and his close relation with his white older cousin Cass Edmonds, great-grandson of the plantation founder, represent the two clashing dimensions of his identity, which he decides to redefine by rejecting his inheritance, together with the moral burdens attached to it. On the other hand, mulatto Lucas Beauchamp assumes his family lineage in a more detached manner, being focused on its material benefits rather than its oppressive legacy.

William Faulkner's novels share the themes of his short prose, but address them within a monumental narrative space, where the mechanisms of memory call forth legendary genealogies, fabulous characters and mythical time, evoked in individual flows of consciousness through the emotions and perceptions of the present.

The Sound and the Fury (1929) uses multiple perspectives and stream-of-consciousness narration in order to successively filter the events and reconstruct the tragic story of the Compsons as representatives of the falling Southern aristocracy. Thus, the first section tells the story from the point of view of the 33-year-old, intellectually disabled son, Benjy, whose fond memories of his sister, Caddy, jostle in his troubled mind with absolutely no sense of time and purpose. The second section offers the perspective of the oldest son, Quentin, a Harvard student whose obsession with the traditional code of honor, guilt and family history finally lead him to suicide. The third section belongs to Jason, the embodiment of the greedy landowner, whereas the final section is entrusted to a third-person outside narrator, who evokes an Easter Sunday service, the only sign of continuity in times when the family is falling apart, in spite of the efforts of the loyal Black cook, Dilsey, to keep it together. This multiple perspective offers a revealing background for the interplay between history, family heritage and individual destiny, as well as for the various ways in which people make sense of their experience, deal with past traumas and cope with social change.

As I Lay Dying (1930) is an emblematic representative of the Southern gothic, tracing the excruciating nine-day journey of the Bundrens, a poor family from the rural South, across the Mississippi to fulfil their matriarch's wish to be buried in her hometown of Jefferson. Constructed with the stream-of-conscious technique, the narrative perspectives shift across fifteen characters, either members of the family, or outside witnesses. The opening scene in which Addie is dying while her eldest son, Cash, builds her coffin outside her window and the wagon journey, afflicted by numerous hardships and haunted by the stench of the decaying body gradually complete the image of an epic experience, ingeniously ruined in the end with such grotesque scenes as the one in which Addie's husband steals the family's money, buys a new set of teeth, and finds a new wife. These final touches are actually the ones that turn the narrative from a family story into a 'larger than life' (Cowley, 1978) picture of human nature as a mixture of strength and weakness, of greatness and decay, of endurance and mortality.

Light in August (1932) is another masterpiece of the Southern Gothic, dealing with the tragic consequences of racial prejudice and mixed lineage as fundamental sources of the characters' sense of alienation in the puritanical world of the South, whose present is tragically shaped by its haunting history. The three intersecting story lines set forth deeply tormented characters, such as Lena Burch,



a young pregnant woman who walks from Alabama to Mississippi in search of the father of her unborn child, Joe Christmas, an orphan psychologically and emotionally devastated by the persecutions of a violent, religious adoptive father and the suspicion of biracial lineage, who ends up committing murder and being himself violently killed by a fanatic nationalist, and Gail Hightower, a disgraced, former minister obsessed with his grandfather's death in the Civil War. Their endless wandering is symbolic of a drifting humanity, irreversibly broken either by social prejudice or their own failure in dealing with personal errors or in coming to terms with the phantoms of the past.

Absalom, Absalom! (1936) evokes the power of the haunting past through multiple narrative voices, primarily Quentin Compson and his Northern friend Shreve McCannon, whose talks in their Harvard dorm reconstruct the story of Thomas Sutpen, whose ambition to build a Southern dynasty collapses together with the old social order of the region. The story goes back to 1833, when Thomas Sutpen arrives in Jefferson, Mississippi with his slaves and starts setting up a massive plantation named Sutpen's Hundred, meant to be the home of a powerful dynastic family. To achieve his ambitious goal, Sutpen marries a local merchant's daughter, and they have two children, Henry and Judith, who will ironically destroy their father's dynastic aspirations. Thus, when Henry brings home his university friend, Charles Bon, who soon becomes engaged to Judith, he unknowingly unleashes the demons of his father's past, bringing about the dissolution of the whole family. The inexorable family decline begins with the revelation that Charles Bon is Sutpen's unacknowledged half-race son whom he had abandoned in Haiti, and surges when Henry shoots his half-brother upon the latter's insistence to pursue the incestuous relation and marry Judith. Sutpen's subsequent attempt to resuscitate his long dreamed of dynasty by having children with another woman is not only doomed to another failure, but also puts an end to his life, as the woman's father kills him in a reparative gesture on account of his insulting behavior when she failed to bear the expected heir. The epic dimension of the story has a matching, Greek tragedy ending, in which one of the slaves, Sutpen's unacknowledged daughter symbolically named Clytemnestra, sets fire to the decaying mansion and kills herself in a monumental, redemptive gesture meant to annihilate years of suffering, sin and evil.

The conversation between Shreve and Quentin at the end of the novel is emblematic not only for the North-South opposition in terms of perceiving history, but also for the ambivalent attitude of the Southerner towards his region. Thus, Shreve concentrates the fundamental North – South incompatibility in terms of dealing with the past by stating that: "We don't live among defeated grandfathers and freed slaves [...] and bullets in the dining room table and such, to be always reminding us to never forget. What is it? Something you live and breathe in like air? Quentin's answer to this question reveals the depth and, at the same time, the burden of assumed belonging: "You can't understand it. You would have to be born there" (Faulkner, 1991, p.361). Ultimately, Shreve's question "Why do you hate the South?" triggers an emotional outburst on Quentin's part, revealing the painful, desperate awareness of being tied to something whose repudiation would be the equivalent of self-denial: "I don't hate it, Quentin said quickly, at once, immediately. I don't hate it, he said. I don't hate it, he thought, panting in the cold air, the iron New England dark; I don't. I don't! I don't hate it! I don't hate it!" (Faulkner, 1991, p.368).

CONCLUSIONS

As professor Virgil Stanciu pointed out in *Orientări în literatură Sudului american*, "the development of social life in the American South allows us to better understand the shaping of a particular psychology and mentality, which conferred distinctive characteristics to the literature written in the South" (Stanciu, 1977, p.130).



By tracing the successive re-framings of the constitutive patterns of thought of the American South, generically called 'the savage ideal', in different literary periods, the paper shows how the cultural heritage of the South endures through perpetual reassessments against changing historical and social backgrounds. From the mythologized perspective of Agrarian and Reconstruction literature, to the realistic, more detached vision of the Renaissance period, and the monumental projections of the stream-of-consciousness novel, with its gothic and grotesque touches, the 'savage ideal' is gradually fine-tuned to emerge as a unifying rather than a separating concept. The ever more refined narrative techniques dismantle such clear-cut distinctions as past-present, good-evil, or epic-ordinary, evoking them as coexisting within the fundamental ambivalence of human destiny. On the other hand, the mechanisms of collective and personal memory sustain limitless projections and resignifications of regional history, myths, and tradition, granting access to a deeper comprehension of universally human emotions and experience. Ultimately, by revisiting its fundamental cultural patterns and rendering them through new means of artistic expression, Southern literature develops "a relationship to social and intellectual history not as documentation, but as symbolic illumination" (Spiller, 1967, p.12)



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