

MARY FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S AND WILLIAM FAULKNER'S NOSTALGIC  
REPRESENTATIONS OF THE AMERICAN SOUTH: AN INTERPLAY  
BETWEEN HISTORY AND FICTION

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**Abstract :** This article discusses the narrative representation of the American south in the short stories of William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor. The study examines the southern backgrounds of the two authors and looks into the gothic genre and the short story as literary forms used by both writers to express their views on this region, heavily impacted by the historical legacy of the secession war. The paper examines in particular, the interplay between history and fiction through the representation made by both writers of the trauma left by the war and the societal disruption it created afterwards. Through a close examination of Faulkner's *A Rose for Emily* and O'Connor's *A Good Man is Hard to Find* and *The Life You Save May be Your Own*, the paper also assesses the two authors' impact on southern letters and their nostalgic evocation of a region they both cherish.

**Key words :** Fiction, Gothic, History, Trauma, War.

LES REPRÉSENTATIONS NOSTALGIQUES DU SUD AMÉRICAIN DE MARY  
FLANNERY O'CONNOR ET WILLIAM FAULKNER : UNE INTERACTION  
ENTRE HISTOIRE ET FICTION

**Résumé :** Cet article traite de la représentation narrative du Sud dans la nouvelle de William Faulkner et de Flannery O'Connor. L'étude examine les origines sudistes des deux auteurs et se penche sur le genre gothique et la nouvelle comme formes littéraires utilisées par les deux écrivains pour exprimer leur point de vue sur cette région, fortement marquée par la guerre de sécession. L'article examine en particulier, les rapports entre fiction et histoire à travers la représentation faite par les deux romanciers du traumatisme laissé par la guerre et les bouleversements sociaux qu'elle a provoqués. Par une approche historique de *A Rose for Emily* de Faulkner ; de *A Good Man is Hard to Find* et *The Life You Save May be Your Own*, d'O'Connor, l'article évalue l'impact des deux auteurs sur les lettres du sud et leurs évocations nostalgiques d'une régions qu'ils chérissent..

**Mots clés:** fiction, gothic, history, trauma, war.

## Introduction

The intricate interplay between history and fiction has been discussed by many. For Georg Lukacs for instance: "The historicity of the novel is shown in its derivation of the individuality of characters from the historical peculiarities of their age"<sup>1</sup>. In his *Toward a Philosophy of History* (1941), Ortega y Gasset, the Spanish philosopher and essayist argues: "Man has no nature, what he has is... a history"<sup>2</sup>. Yet, one should not think of the novel as history as such but as a particular history. As Vincent B. Leitch puts it: "As history seeps into the novel, it becomes transformed into something else, into what might be called history-in-the-novel. (Leitch, 2010:1495). Leitch also argues that the weight of history on the novel can be both an advantage and a drawback, because over time, that history might lose its attractiveness and render at the same time the novel less attractive:

"History may be the rock on which the novel rests, but time crumbles that rock into grains of sand. The circumstances forming the matrix of fiction soon turn out to be inaccessible, distant, perhaps no longer arresting: come to seem alloyed by values we can no longer credit; or decline into mere reflexes of social bias". (Leitch, 2010:1400).

But ultimately, one will have to recognize it, when its attraction is real, history has that power "to make and unmake the novel" (Leitch, 2010: 1402). Faulkner's fiction as Diane Roberts<sup>3</sup> views it, reexamines Southern history" (Roberts, 92:233-246). In particular it looks into the history of the Old South in the aftermath of the Confederate Army's defeat over the North following the 1861-1865 American Civil War. Faulkner's obsession with that history can be seen through his fictional representation of southern women as aristocrats who refuse to concede defeat and defy their region's past. By tapping into that history, Faulkner manages to capture at the same time, the image and status that Southern women gained during the Civil War:

During the Civil War, the position of Lady redefined itself to accommodate, even valorize, certain hardships. With the men away, women had to run plantations and farms, sometimes taking to the fields themselves to bring the crops in. In the Southern imagination, they were constructed as medieval chamberlains with crusader-husbands abroad fighting the heathen or Trojan women scorning the rude invader (Roberts, 929:234-235).

Like Faulkner's, Mary Flannery O'Connor's southern gothic fiction, echoes the chaotic situation of the South after the Civil. In her popular short stories, she gives a vivid account of the South's societal disruption through the ethos of atypical characters which embody both the region's chaotic present and its haunting past. Her prose like Faulkner's, serves as a platform where fiction interplay with history and textual representation stands as memorial artifact. Based on the historical approach, this study examines the ways in which, Faulkner and O'Connor, through a particularly gothic

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<sup>1</sup> Georg Lukacs cité par Vincent B. Leitch in Norton Anthology of theory and Criticism, New York: Norton Company, 2010, p.1391.

<sup>2</sup> The Spanish philosopher and essayist Ortega y Gasset quoted by Vincent B. Leitch in Norton Anthology of theory and Criticism,, New York: Norton Company, 2010, p.1394;

<sup>3</sup> Diane Roberts is Assistant Professor of English at the University of Alabama.

prose, come to make representations of the South which shows the region's societal disruption and aristocratic decay in the aftermath of the Civil War. The study looks at the interplay between history and fiction and highlights the two authors' nostalgia toward a region they both cherish.

### 1. O'Connor and Faulkner: a civil war trauma and the southern background

Southern society before the Civil War was known for its vibrant agrarian and aristocratic culture. Its dynamic economy served as the driving force for the American economy before the industrial revolution. A vivid symbol of that agrarian South was The Cotton Gin, a revolutionary machine invented in 1793 by Ellie Whitney. The machine reduced the amount of time needed to separate cotton seeds from its fiber and helped the South produce more raw materials. This vibrant culture and economy will be heavily impacted by the war and the defeat of the Confederates' army.

The secession war opposing the North to the South mainly was the bloodiest one in the American history. It claimed the lives of more than 750,000<sup>4</sup> Americans and took a heavy toll on the South's social fabric. The war was followed by a decade long period of Reconstruction which in vain, attempted to rebuild the South's social and economic bases. As an immediate consequence to the war, the image of a stable and socially stable South, would slowly vanish and give way to that of a region in crisis. The South's state of chaos and uncertainty will be largely echoed by a type a writing in which; the region's agrarian and vibrant culture will then appear as disrupted and seriously destabilized by the war. The features of this literature known as the Southern gothic are very much perceptible in the short stories of William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor<sup>5</sup>; Two writers whose backgrounds are deeply rooted in the South. They both developed a regional consciousness which stems from their attachment to the people and places where they lived. They also share the proud concern for a vivid narrative representation of their region and their short stories serve as platforms by which, they report on the traumatic consequence of the American civil war on their region. Both writers also draw extensively on the gothic register, to show the trauma and societal disruption caused by the war. Their lives' trajectories are closely tied to the history of their region.

William Cuthbert Faulkner (1897-1962) was born in New Albany, Mississippi. He came from an old southern family and grew up in Oxford, Mississippi. He studied for a while at the University of Mississippi, and temporarily worked for a New York bookstore and a New Orleans newspaper. He spent a significant amount of time working on his novels and short stories on a farm in Oxford, Mississippi. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1949.

Mary Flannery O'Connor (1925-1964) was born in Savannah, Georgia. She was the only child of Edward Francis and Regina Cline O'Connor. O'Connor grew up in a Roman Catholic family in her native Savannah, Georgia. During her adolescence, she

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<sup>4</sup> This is a generally accepted figure, even though the exact number of casualties of the civil war continues to be a matter of debate.

<sup>5</sup> Whose short stories in particular give a perfect picture of the post-war south's state of chaos and disruption.

relocated in rural Milledgeville, Mississippi where she lived until her death at the age of 39. In 1972, she was granted the U.S. National Book Award for her entire work. This southern origin makes of Faulkner and O'Connor typical regional writers whose sense of belonging and southern consciousness can be clearly perceived both in their fiction and their non-fictional works<sup>6</sup>.

## 2. Southern gothic literature as an expression of the post-war chaos

Southern gothic literature is largely characterized by a recurrent use of the grotesque as a satirical tool<sup>7</sup> by which writers give center stage to often mentally and/or physically distorted characters whose lives have been drastically changed by the trauma of the civil war. These characters are for instance, Miss Emily in *A Rose for Emily*, Tom Shiftlet in *The Life You Save May be Your Own* and The Misfit in *A Good Man is Hard to Find*. As typical examples of southern writers' use of the grotesque, these characters bear with them mental and physical disabilities which make them stand out as caricatured individuals. Their attitude and atypical discourse also inform as to the societal disruption that they and their region have been through<sup>8</sup>. Adding to the gloomy depiction of the situation of the South, the characters are also poised in settings where social and family structures are either inexistent or on the verge of collapsing. The nature of these settings as Brianne Keith rightly put it is another important feature of the southern gothic style "The setting of the southern gothic stories and novels are broken-down, forgotten towns of the South. There is often violence, depravity and a blurring of good and evil" (Brianne Keith, 2017: 225).

The violence in question stems from a lack of a moral and ethical compass which presents the characters as both victims and perpetrators. When presented as victims, they often have an issue with the broad societal order, the judicial system and/or their own region's history. A good example of this is O'Connor's the Misfit in *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, as he, vehemently claims to be innocent of the parricide for which he was accused of and sentenced to jail.

*It was a head doctor at the penitentiary said that I had done was kill my daddy but I know this for a lie. My daddy died in nineteen eight nineteen of the epidemic flu and I never had a thing to do with it. He was buried in the Mount Hopewell Baptist Churchyard and you can go there and see for yourself (O'Connor, 1955, p. 18)*

Similarly, Faulkner's Miss Emily seems to be in the same nihilist vein as she keeps refusing the inevitable downfall of her southern aristocratic class and the loss of its privileges. Miss Emily's attitude throughout the story; reveals a complete denial of her region's historical legacy and an obsession for its past. That is exemplified by her refusal to pay taxes to the northern government which is now presiding over the destinies of the South.

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<sup>6</sup> That is also what makes them stand in American letters, as writers who embody the true spirit of the American south

Mainly in a few short stories by southern writers such as Faulkner, O'Connor and Poe.

<sup>8</sup> Following the military defeat of the confederate's Army during the civil war

Eventually, Miss Emily will not only deny this, she will also try to reverse the inevitable trend of history. That is what justifies her ultimate relationship with Homer Barron a northerner, a "Yankee" who is a vivid symbol of the North's victory over the South. This is exactly the figure that she would have been if the south had won the war. This image of the yankee who is free from any trauma of the past and is resolutely turned toward the future is a further testimony of the regional divide caused by the civil war. As Lawrence P. Spingarn rightly put it:" the civil made America aware of sectional differences<sup>9</sup> "

Miss Emily will end up using a drug known as arsenic to poison and kill this man before committing suicide. Such an act of violence can be equated and compared to the massacre of Bailey's innocent family by O'Connor's Misfit in *A Good man id Hard to Find* and to the brutal abandonment of Miss Lucinell Crater by Tom Shiftlet in *The Life You Save May be Your Own*. Faced with violence, these characters become both victims and perpetrators. Once their life trajectories are shaken, they keep going but constantly seek revenge from the violence they were victim of. Ultimately, they turn into monsters who respond to violence by perpetrating another violence, which ultimately, reveals the inexistence or serious distortion of their own moral and ethical compass.

Their recourse to violence also serves as a means by which both authors show the impact and size of their region's traumatic experience, its level of alienation and the internal struggles that its people had to go through. That's why the characters are presented as isolated figures, juggling with intriguing dilemmas they don't really know how to confront. Ultimately, they will understand that they are fighting a losing battle. And it is at that very moment that they turn into radicals whose actions are difficult to rationalize. The harshness and tragic nature of the acts of violence they commit, further testify to the deep sense of alienation that they are in<sup>10</sup>. Through the singularity of these characters trajectories. Faulkner and O'Connor signal the South's state of desperation and the profound societal disaster left by the civil war.

### 3. Southern gothic at the intersection of history and fiction

As a genre, Southern gothic is unique in its capacity to recreate the past. In Faulkner's fiction in particular, the literary expression might sometimes resonate as history and the text serves as a window-shop to the past. The author's nostalgic representation of his region's cultural and historical legacy blurs the lines between fiction and history and his literary evocation of the past seem to compete with history. As Edmond Volpe aptly points to it:

Faulkner's fiction is as southern as Bourbon Whiskey. Southern history, natural life, geography, society, customs, traditions, ideologies, living conditions, speech patterns-everything that particularizes the American South and its traditions is rendered realistically in his writing. (Edmond L. Volpe, 2003: 29)

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<sup>9</sup> Lawrence P. Spingarn, "The Yankee in Early American Fiction", *The New England Quarterly*, Boston: The New England Quarterly, Inc., [Vol. 31, No. 4, Dec., 1958](#), pp. 484-495.

<sup>10</sup> These go from the sheer massacre of an entire innocent family to the poisoning of an innocent man simply because he is from the North.

In Faulkner's fiction, the lines between history and narrative fiction seem interwoven<sup>11</sup> and the historiographical issue as to how to tell history becomes a real issue. History as an objective study of the past gives way to storytelling as a subjective account of the past<sup>12</sup>. To what extent that subjectivity can be trusted, that is the question? Is narrative fiction a reliable source when it comes to recording, telling and/or revisiting history? The answer may not be simple but in any case, it is easy to perceive that narrative fiction provides a significant amount of facts which at least can provide a glance into the past.

Consequently, both Faulkner and O'Connor's characters often cling to a bygone past through places in the Deep South they seem to be quite nostalgic of<sup>13</sup>. The grandmother for instance in *A Good Man*, reminisces a plantation in East Tennessee where she desperately wants to return to. Miss Emily Grierson on her part proudly sticks to her aristocratic abode where everything around her is falling apart. Her house is a physical symbol of that aristocratic heritage which she does not want to let go. Her world is in total contrast with that of the community where she is. That is why, when she died, the women in the neighborhood curiously came to see what her house looked like. More than a simple house, Miss Emily's place is to be a relic of a southern pre-war culture, a haunted area and ultimately a graveyard for dead body and that of her husband.

The South in *A rose for Emily*, is in the throes of a societal decay. Miss Emily's trajectory alone is quite revealing. The novel begins with the end of Emily's life that is to say with her death as the last emblematic figure of the pre-war southern aristocracy. The whole plot revolves around the life of this southerner whose father participated in the civil war. The story, like Emily's personal drama, will then revolve around several other family dramas which will gradually lead the protagonist to nihilism, isolation and then death. The ladies of the community narrating her story show the way in which Miss Emily will deny the death of her father when they came to her to offer condolences:

The day after his death, all the ladies prepared to call at the house and offer condolences and aid, as is our custom. Miss Emily met them at the door, dressed as usual and with no trace of grief on her face. She told them that her father was not dead. She did that for three days, with the ministers calling on her, and the doctors trying to persuade her to let them dispose of the body. Just as they were about to resort to law and force, she broke down, and they buried her father quickly; (Faulkner: 2002, 520)

Emily is not mourning her father's death. She rejects that fact as it symbolizes for her the post-Civil War history of the South's defeat and decadence. She clings to the history of the war as an unfinished business, that is what explains her relationship

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<sup>11</sup> Faulkner's realistic style allows him to fully capture his region's life while expressing at the same time a prose which responds to the norms of fiction writing.

<sup>12</sup> Faulkner's short stories in particular, give a real account of the region's vibrant culture before the civil war. In this interplay between history and fiction, fiction seem to be less accurate but more equipped to go beyond the facts and to fully capture the spirit of the South.

<sup>13</sup> Which places them as southern gothic writers whose writings are at the intersection of fiction and history.

with Homer Baron, a Yankee, a typical symbol of the Northern Army. She will manage to have a short romance with him before poisoning him with Arsenic. Members of the community who are also narrating the whole story were mesmerized to find the dead body of Homer Baron when they went to Miss Emily's house following her death: "Then we notice that in the second pillow was the indentation of a head. One of us lifted something from it, and leaning forward, that faint and invisible dust dry and acrid in the nostrils we saw a long strand of iron gray hair. (Faulkner: 2002, 524)

Miss Emily's tragic story is told by her community which is also helplessly witnessing the moral degeneration of one of its most iconic southern families. Beyond this family, it's the whole South which seems to be collapsing. The sexual relationship maintained between a living and a dead is also one more metaphor to indicate that Miss Emily, like the South, refuses the present and clings to a bygone past. Additionally, the Yankee identity of Miss Emily's suitor is quite revealing. Indeed, socially, the Yankee is a young military man of the Northern army, the very army which defeated and ruined the South. By choosing to attract and then kill this suitor, Miss Emily, is like any vanquished southerner searching for a revenge<sup>14</sup>. The exchange with the druggist gives a hint as to what she intends to use arsenic for:

- Miss Emily: I want some poison
- The druggist: What kind? For rats and such? I would reckon.
- Miss Emily: I want Arsenic
- The druggist: If that's what you want but the law requires you to tell what you are going to use it for (Faulkner, 2002: 521).

Miss Emily will finally get the poison she wants from the druggist but will refuse to tell him what she was going to use it for. In his final public appearance, Homer Baron is invited in her kitchen by Miss Emily's servant, which could be quite indicative as to how Miss Emily might have used the poison: As the community narrating the story suggests it "Homer Baron was back in town. A neighbor saw the Negro man admit him at the kitchen door at dusk one evening. And that was the last time we saw of Homer. (Faulkner: 2002, 522)

Like Faulkner's, O'Connor's South is in the throes of a moral chaos and a constant quest for an impossible redemption. O'Connor's narrative universe echoes the gothic writing of Faulkner as she gives center stage to places and people of the South. She also shows southern people's dark and demonic sides while probing at the same time, their capacity to do good and resist to the temptation of evil. Tom Shiftlet also known as Mr Shiftlet is a typical incarnation of O'Connor's Southerner.

Mr Shiftlet's pale sharp glance had already passed over everything in the yard-the pump near the corner of the house and the big fig that three or four chickens were preparing to roost in - and had moved to a shed where he saw the square rusted back of an automobile... "Nothing is like it used to be lady" he said. "the world is almost rotten" O'Connor, 53)

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<sup>14</sup> A revenge for herself and her region, for that bitter military defeat of the South which she and her community never accepted.

Right from the beginning Mr Shiftlet is depicted as a materialist who is only interested in the old lady's car. Ironically enough, his evocation of a "rotten world" will also apply to him as a character. Indeed, as the narrative evolves, he will turn out to be as rotten as the world he describes. He will seduce the lady's deaf and dumb daughter, marry her and finally drop her down and then run away with the lady's car. (O'Connor, 1955: 64)

In retrospect, one can clearly see that Shiftlet's materialist attitude is what had led him to repair the car in the first place, he was never driven by a genuine desire to help. He then gained the Grandmother's trust with a particular wise discourse in which he philosophizes about life and laments about the present state of the South: His voice serves here as a platform from which O'Connor shows the rupture between past and present, tradition and modernity. It is also through him that the reader gets a sense as to how the South's agrarian values were being corrupted the United States's post-war economic transformation" Nothing is like is used to be (O'Connor, 1955: 53).

Tom Shiftlet and the Misfit in *A Good Man is Hard to find* are vivid symbols of the South as a territory under the domination and control of criminals, convicts and vagrants wanderers who unscrupulously seize the goods and lives of others. These figures are torn between the desire to do good and the constant temptation of the devil. Within them, is a battle between the forces of good and evil and their actions are dictated by this internal power struggle. Like Shiftlet, O'Connor's Misfit in *A Good Man is Hard to find* is a dangerous bandit escaped from prison. In his fugitive journey, he crosses his path of a grandmother with her son Bailey, his wife and little children. Upon seeing the Misfit, The grandmother instinctively felt the danger awaiting them, but remained convinced that in the end, she would be able to touch the moral sensitivity of The Misfit. The latter is at first receptive to the moralizing discourse of the old lady but ended up by killing her and her entire family. Before this final act, they both engaged in a profound dialogue which allows to better understand the dynamics at play within them.

- The Grandmother to the Misfit: "Pray, pray".

- The Misfit: "I never was a bad boy that I remember of, but sometimes along the line, I done something wrong and got sent to the penitentiary.

- The Grandmother: What did you do to get to the penitentiary...you must have stolen something?

-The Misfit: Nobody had nothing I wanted. It was a head doctor at the penitentiary said what I had done was kill my daddy but I know that for a lie. My daddie died in nineteen ought nineteen of the epidemic flu and I never had a thing to do with it" (O'Connor, 1955: 19).

The Misfit looks trapped and will not be able to choose the path of moral redemption; instead, he will radicalize and follow the demonic forces controlling him. That is what explains his fortuitous massacre of the Grandmother's and her entire family. Like Tom Shiftlet and Miss Emily, the Misfit final final actions reveal that he is trapped by a past which stands as the trouble history of the South coming to haunt the present. Through these flawed characters, Faulkner and O'Connor use their fiction to question the history of the civil war and its legacy of trauma and social disruption.



## Conclusion

William Faulkner and Mary Flannery O'Connor have undoubtedly left their marks on the literature of the South thanks mainly, to a prose which takes into account both the chaotic situation of the region while, giving voice to their deep attachment to a place where they both belong to and have spent most of their lives. Due to his more pronounced southern roots, Faulkner was able, through his mastery of the gothic genre, to fully account for the civil war's trauma on the southern aristocracy in particular and on the whole region at large. In this respect, *A Rose for Emily* stands out not just a blueprint of the Southern Gothic genre, but also, as a major text in the short story category in which, O'Connor would later on excel. But Faulkner's similitude with O'Connor goes beyond this, it is perceivable on her masterful use of this Gothic and in the deep anchoring of her stories in the South. Also, like Faulkner's, O'Connor's stories seem to be implicitly expressing nostalgic feelings toward a forgone southern cultural heritage which, she also is unable to mourn.

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