

SOUTHERN LITERATURE

South of the USA was largely rural, agricultural, relatively poor, inhabited by a large number of blacks. The experience of defeat in the Civil War changed completely people's values. People had deeper sense of tragedy and human limitations.

High point of American Southern literature were the 1920s to 1960s. Writers emerging from the South were conscious stylists, ironical, and their writing was full of black humour.

A large number of southern writers were women, and a large number of them wrote short stories. As other regional writers, also southern writers tried to preserve the picture of their society. They tended to concentrate on dialect, details of setting, typical local characters. Very often these writers were fascinated with the extreme and perverse weirdness of characters and scene.

William Faulkner (1897-1962)

wrote 20 novels and many short stories. He depicted events and lives, trying to reach some general observation on Southern history and human nature. He gave a picture of Southern society from the 1880s to 1930s, a picture of the whole structure of the society – the rich, the poor, blacks. He described the breakdown of this society – rich families cling so much to the past that they lose their vitality. Faulkner's realistic observations are combined with a complex style, rhetorical, highly individual, subjective and imaginative. Faulkner made use of the richness of the English language: he used large vocabulary, complicated structure and style. He demanded much of his readers. To create a mood, he might let one of his complex sentences run on for more than one page. He treated time in a special way – past, present and future events are mixed. He experimented with multiple narrators, and interrupted simple stories with long stream-of-consciousness monologues.

The Sound and the Fury, a novel about a fall of a proud Southern family, using limited point of view (four narrators of story see events from different angles)

As I Lay Dying, a novel about the death of a mother, the narration is divided into 59 sections of interior monologues by fifteen characters, each with a different perception of the action

Go Down, Moses, a novel examining the racial history of the South

Eudora Welty (1909)

a short story writer, living and writing about Mississippi region. Most of her short stories are tales of eccentric and grotesque characters with rather abnormal behaviour. There is a lot of black comedy in her work, which is the typical feature of Southern writing

Flannery O'Connor (1925-1964)

is often compared to William Faulkner for her portrayal of Southern character and milieu, and to Franz Kafka for her preoccupation with the grotesque. Her characters are poor or middle class whites, who do not realize what their lives are lacking. Her stories usually provoke extreme reactions: they are funny but also horrifying.

A Good Man Is Hard to Find, a collection of short stories

Ersine Caldwell (1903-87)

wrote novels and stories about the lives of poor white sharecroppers in rural Georgia

Tobacco Road, a novel

Truman Capote (1924-84)

Breakfast at Tiffany's, a novel

William Styron (1925)

preoccupied with a question of Southern guilt

The Confession of Nat Turner, the story of a black slave revolt

Sophie's Choice, a novel about a Polish survivor of Auschwitz

Afro-American writers coming from the South: Zora Neal Hurston (Florida), Richard Wright (Mississippi), Ralph Ellison (Oklahoma), Alice Walker (Georgia)

Sources:

Lauter, Paul (ed.). The Heath Anthology of American Literature. Volume 2. Lexington: D. C. Heath and Company, 1994