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Race Relations

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RACE RELATIONS

Since the early nineteenth century, when white southern writers began to defend slavery, relationships between blacks and whites became a central concern in southern literature. Many nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century works by white writers exacerbated racial prejudice by reproducing southern white society's racist ideology. But other southern writers, both white and black, have attempted to redress this problem by using

literature to dismantle stereotypes and to imagine new relationships. The results of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement speeded up the process, suggesting new plots, new endings, and new points of view to southern writers of both races.

The earliest plantation novels, George Tucker's *The Valley of the Shenandoah* (1824) and John Pendleton Kennedy's *Swallow Barn* (1832), depicted slavery as a necessary evil but sentimentalized relationships between "benevolent" white masters and "contented" slaves. As the debate over states' rights heated up and white southerners grew preoccupied with defending slavery, William Gilmore Simms turned from writing historical romances about the Revolutionary War to proslavery propaganda, such as *Woodcraft* (1852). In a patriarchal society, the potential for women to find common ground across racial lines would seem easier than for men, and indeed Sarah and Angelina Grimké of Charleston wrote abolitionist tracts that called attention to the parallels between the position of white women and the slavery of black women, but they were exceptions among white women. The pedestal on which the slaveholding South placed white women meant that the adulation most received encouraged them to internalize stereotypes about black women as promiscuous wenches, prolific breeders, hardworking mules, or nurturing mammies. Thus nineteenth-century literature by southern white women, such as *Aunt Phillis's Cabin* (1852), which was written in response to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1851), is most often proslavery, even when gender roles of nurturance are employed to suggest female bonds across racial lines. In *Black and White Women of the Old South,* Minrose Gwin suggests that such fictional sisterhood existed in white women's writing only because the characterizations of both white and black women are stereotypical and sentimental.

Although kind slaveowners and congenial race relations appear in writings by authors of both races, the cruel mistress or master only assumes a role of prominence in antebellum slave narratives by African Americans, such as Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, who debunked the white myths of happy darkies. Nineteenth-century African American writers also focused on the lost innocence, indeed lost childhoods, of black and mixed-race children. Slave trading, which disrupted black family bonds, and white masters who refused to acknowledge their mixed-race children are the historical facts that fueled tragic plots about childhood and race relations such as William Wells Brown's *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter* (1853), a novel about the daughter of Thomas Jefferson and a slave mistress.

After the Civil War, some white writers, for example Thomas Nelson Page, looked back on the Old South with praise for the paternalistic values of "honorable" white people who took care of "childlike" black people, sometimes even employing black characters to reminisce about plantation life. Using the same frame narrative and regional dialect that Page used in *In Ole Virginia* (1887), African American writer Charles Chesnutt, the son of free blacks from North Carolina, added African American folklore to his stories in *The Conjure Woman* (1899) and demonstrated both the social construction of black identity and the repression inherent in the social system that Page praised. After the 1898 race riot in Wilmington, North Carolina, Chesnutt wrote *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), about a black doctor who never gains the respect of the white political establishment in a town much like Wilmington. In his last novel, *The Colonel's Dream* (1905), Chesnutt's white protagonist, a Confederate veteran and member of a prominent family, believes in racial tolerance but is spurned by the white community. He flees the South, just as enlightened white writers George Washington Cable and Samuel Clemens did, just as Chesnutt did himself. With the enactment of Jim Crow laws, white southerners were more interested in the racist plots of Thomas Dixon's popular novels *The Leopard's Spots* (1902) and *The Clansman* (1905) than in plots by either black or white writers encouraging improved race relations.

George Washington Cable and Samuel Clemens wrote critical portraits of southern race relations, but both men had more cosmopolitan perspectives than their fellow white southerners: Cable's mother was from New England and his father was of German ancestry; Samuel Clemens was born in Missouri, a border state. For Cable, the conflict of cultures in New Orleans typified the South's historical predicament in the United States. In *The Grandissimes* (1880), Cable proves the equality of the races, but he could not envision an integrated society, a problem disclosed by the novel's three endings: marriage for whites, exile to France for characters of mixed race, and death for rebellious blacks. In *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), Samuel Clemens, writing under the pseudonym Mark Twain, used the child's perspective to question his society's race relations. The white boy Huckleberry Finn forms a partnership and a friendship with the

black slave Jim as they both escape down the Mississippi from unhappy conditions in their Missouri hometown. In choosing to protect Jim, Huck assumes that he will go to hell because he has sinned in the eyes of his society. Twain's critique of the South's propensity for romance ironically gives *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* its schizophrenic form: realism in the first part of the novel when Huck decides he will go to hell rather than turn Jim in to the authorities; romance in the concluding chapters when Huck goes along with Tom Sawyer to elaborately stage Jim's prolonged escape after he is captured. Although this novel reflects Twain's comic spirit, a later novel, *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894), is both a bitter denunciation of slavery and a pointed lesson about the social construction of race.

Twentieth-century writers added psychological pain to the physical trials and social injustices of nineteenth-century literature about race relations. In *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) and *Go Down, Moses* (1942), William Faulkner parodies the southern social customs and myths that receive dignified and sentimental treatment in local-color fiction by writers such as Page. Just as the South developed public fictions to satisfy collective needs both before and after the Civil War, Faulkner's multiple narrators in *Absalom, Absalom!* create fictions about Thomas Sutpen to satisfy private needs and, like the South, become victims of their own myths about southern plantation society and about race relations. Both works show how the South's history of slavery and segregation crippled southern society and devastated southern families. Faulkner's novel *Light in August* (1932), about the tortured life and violent death of a southern white man, Joe Christmas, who is alleged to have black ancestry, reveals a deep-seated white fear of multiracialism. Lillian Smith, who was more publicly outspoken than Faulkner about race relations, criticized racial discrimination in her nonfiction, particularly *Killers of the Dream* (1949). In her novel *Strange Fruit* (1944), she explored the rather Freudian idea that white children cared for by black adults will develop adult sexual longings across racial lines. For both Faulkner and Smith, reaching across racial lines provokes anguish within characters and violence between them. This fictional outcome is true for African American writers in the first half of the twentieth century as well. In the collection of stories *Uncle Tom's Children* (1940) and in his autobiography *Black Boy* (1945), Richard Wright poignantly reveals the pain of the Jim Crow South in ways both large and small. Wright's black men leave the South, as Wright himself did, or they are killed by racist whites. In *Cane* (1912), Jean Toomer portrays the richness and the pain of African American life in the South; he sets his stories of twisted cross-racial relationships against the beauty of the southern landscape.

In some respects, fictions about southern children and race relations have differed along racial lines, even into the twentieth century. For the most part, many southern white writers have focused on prolonging childhood innocence as it relates to race relations. Thus their stories are about childhood friendships that crossed racial lines and about loving relationships between white children and the black slaves or servants who cared for them. Much of the poignancy of Faulkner's *The Unvanquished* (1938) comes from Bayard Sartoris's description of the close relationship he has with a black servant boy, Ringo, in a society that will separate them as they get older and that has already marked them as different based on their race. Faulkner's Dilsey in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) creates a stable center for four white children of the once distinguished, now dissipated Compson family. Revising the black servant/white child plot in a small but significant way, Carson McCullers in *The Member of the Wedding* (1946) links twelve-year-old Frankie's gender-role troubles to the racial discrimination experienced by her black caretaker, Berenice Sadie Brown. These two female characters literally sing the blues together as they talk about the ways in which they are "caught" in southern roles.

But the story behind both Faulkner's and McCullers's novels and others like them by white writers is the well-tended fiction that the beloved black servant is a member of the white family. Since 1956, when Alice Childress published *Like One of the Family* and humorously and roundly refuted that premise in the voice of a southern black woman working for a white family in New York, African American writers have presented this black adult/white child character configuration from a more complex perspective. The economic and psychological issues raised in such earlier novels have affected the way that recent southern writers, both black and white, have reversed the relationship between black adults and white children. In *The Color Purple* (1982), Alice Walker has a white woman take care of a black woman's child; in *Clover* (1990), Dori Sanders has a white woman become a black child's stepmother; in *Ellen Foster* (1987), Kaye Gibbons has a black family temporarily care for a white girl whose

mother has died and whose father is abusive; and in *Taft* (1994), Ann Patchett has a black man take care of a white adolescent girl and her brother, a relationship that leads him back to his own son. Contemporary black and white writers have also presented the practice of black servants taking care of white children as causing difficulties for both the black and white children involved when they become adults. In *Soldier's Joy* (1989), Madison Smartt Bell examines the resentment that such a relationship can spark in the black servant's children.

Contemporary southern writers Ernest Gaines in *A Gathering of Old Men* (1983), Larry Brown in *Dirty Work* (1989), and Madison Smartt Bell in *Soldier's Joy* begin their interracial buddy novels where most earlier fictions about male race relations ended—when young men go to college or return from war. *Dirty Work* and *Soldier's Joy* examine the possibilities and limits of friendships formed because of shared experiences of physical and psychological wounds suffered in the Vietnam War. Gaines's black and white characters, segregated in rural Louisiana schools during childhood, meet at LSU in the 1970s. Gil, a Cajun, has grown to respect, like, and depend on Cal, a black player on his team; together they are Salt and Pepper, a symbol of improved race relations in a new South. The novel turns on an interesting paradox in defining manhood as it relates to race and causes the tension in relationships between the races. In order for Gil to be a man, he must refuse to kill the black man who has murdered his brother Beau; in order for each old black man to be a man, he must be ready to take a stand against a white man, even to kill. The behavior that Gaines deems manly for each racial group is based on the history of "race" relations in the rural South. For Ernest Gaines, race relations will not be changed until southern manhood is redefined, on both sides of the color line. While both black and white contemporary writers demonstrate how lack of social and economic power is a problem for congenial race relations, they also show how improving race relations is threatening in itself for those who perceive such changes as an indicator of their own loss of power or their own marker of identity.

Similarly, modern and contemporary women writers have used gender roles and reversals of racial roles as ways to forge cross-racial relationships. Katherine Anne Porter's story "The Old Order" (1944) links Sophia Jane and her slave and then servant Nannie through their shared past and mutual nursing and nurturing of each other's children. Ellen Douglas's more recent novel, *Can't Quit You, Baby* (1988), reverses old plots as well, but at length and in more depth. The rich white woman Cornelia ends up taking care of her black housekeeper Tweet and begging her to speak to her, to acknowledge her humanity, really to love her as she had always thought she did. Alice Walker and Gail Godwin use the women's movement to find other similarities between women, such as politics, social class, and careers. Each creates a protagonist who discovers not only some similarity but the individuality in a woman of a different race. In Alice Walker's *Meridian* (1976), a black civil-rights worker, Meridian, discovers that a white Jewish coworker, Lynne, is not frivolous but just as hardworking and just as committed to the movement as she is. In Gail Godwin's *A Mother and Two Daughters* (1982), Lydia, a genteel young white "lady," enrolls in a women's studies class at UNC-Greensboro and discovers that her black sociology professor, Harvard-graduate Renee, shares her own grace, charm, tastes, and interests.

In *Dessa Rose* (1986), Sherley Anne Williams portrays black and white women's problems in understanding each other as not only social and psychological but linguistic as well. Williams has both the escaped slave Dessa and the white woman Rufel, who protects her, rethink their relationship to each other through analogies, a process that breaks the bind that stereotypes about racial identity have on their thoughts. Talking gives them new words (often accidentally), shared experiences create new meanings, and trust eventually develops across racial lines. Neither Godwin nor Walker nor Williams suggests that interracial friendships will eliminate prejudice between groups, nor do they believe "that the category 'woman' is the most natural and basic of all human groupings and can therefore transcend race division," a phenomenon that Gloria Joseph and Jill Lewis warn against in *Common Differences* (1981). These writers do suggest that if black and white women would only listen to each other's stories and find out about each other's lives, they would discover similarities that allow them then to appreciate differences.

Alice Walker and Sherley Anne Williams are both concerned in their novels with the tabooed sexual desires that black men have for white women, desires that create tensions between black and white women. White writers Elizabeth Spencer in "The Business Venture" (1987) and Christine Wiltz in *Glass House* (1994) play on readers' expectations about interracial

sex in the business relationships they explore between black men and white women that remain friendships. Randall Kenan completely rewrites the interracial love plot in *Let the Dead Bury the Dead* (1992) by making his lovers homosexual.

Many contemporary writers, especially African Americans, have chosen the historical novel as a vehicle for exploring contemporary race relations. Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1966), Ernest Gaines's *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971), Alex Haley's *Roots* (1976), and Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* have rewritten old stories about the slave South. Other writers, both black and white—Mark Childress in *Crazy in Alabama* (1993), Vicki Covington in *The Last Hotel for Women* (1996), Anthony Grooms in *Trouble No More* (1995), Nanci Kincaid in *Crossing Blood* (1992), and Alice Walker in *Meridian*—are revisiting the time of the Civil Rights Movement in order to understand how past prejudices continue to affect present relationships.

One hundred years after the publication of *Huckleberry Finn,* southern novelists are once again finding the first-person naïve narrator useful for examining race relations. These contemporary novels are punctuated with real-life references to lost childhood innocence: the deaths of black girls attending Bible school, the slayings of idealistic young black and white civil-rights workers, and the brutal murder of a fourteen-year-old black boy, Emmett Till, after he spoke to a white woman on a dare from friends. In *Crazy in Alabama,* set during the Civil Rights Movement, white writer Mark Childress shows readers how television shapes the way we understand our world and the way we act in it, not just through the shows we watch but by the way the news is reported. But running concurrently with Childress's very contemporary message about the media is a theme that dates back to Twain's *Huckleberry Finn.* Like Twain's Huck and Gaines's Gil, Peejoe is good only when he is bad, when he breaks the social rules and makes up a new script for interracial relationships. It is not surprising that the conclusion of *Crazy in Alabama* self-reflexively suggests that Hollywood should give America some new stories about southern race relations, such as Childress's own.

Embedded within African American writer Dori Sanders's first novel, *Clover* (1990), is a paradigm of reading or interpreting race that suggests that racial identity can be reformulated by reading Self and Other anew and that some of the difficulties in race relations are caused by misreading difference. Sanders's approach is anthropological; she fills her novel with the objects and rituals of everyday life in the South. The racial conflicts in her novel turn on misunderstandings about cultural differences. Sanders is primarily concerned with blacks' assumptions about whites, and she uses her novel to show that these assumptions are based on preconceived and unsubstantiated beliefs, just as Nanci Kincaid does from the other side of the color line in *Crossing Blood* (1992). In the last few chapters of the novel, Sanders creates new possibilities for both the young black narrator Clover and her white stepmother Sara Kate as she shows that lives are enriched when people from different cultures encounter each other in a spirit of open-mindedness.

Nanci Kincaid literally sets her novel *Crossing Blood* on the racial "dividing line" in Tallahassee, Florida, during the early 1960s. Kincaid's character configuration of childhood friends is like Faulkner's and Twain's, but with a very significant twist. Her black and white buddies are male and female, which allows Kincaid to explore the sexual ramifications of racism and race relations. In the woods between their houses, apart from the white and black worlds where they cannot interact honestly, they create another world, similar to Huck's and Jim's alternative world on the raft. Kincaid suggests that a place where blacks and whites can be open and honest with each other can exist, but it can only be created by speaking unspoken feelings and asking unasked questions, by a creative act of the imagination such as children experience when they play. This place must be constructed somewhere between the worlds we have defined as black and white.

Because Kincaid has set her story during a time of little possibility for a love affair to come to fruition between a southern white girl and black boy, the novel's form finally thwarts the characters' desires—despite the many scenes in which Kincaid's characters and consequently her readers dwell in the possibility of interracial understanding. This may be why Bebe Moore Campbell brought her historical novel *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine* (1992) into the present, thus reminding readers that possibilities can become realities. Campbell's novel begins in the 1950s with black characters sending their sons north to Chicago after the lynching of a black boy named Armstrong, whose character is based on Emmett Till. The novel ends with these boys returning as young men to the same southern town to escape the drug- and gang-infested streets of Chicago. This conclusion is a significant reversal of earlier twen-

tieth-century African American fictions about race relations such as Richard Wright's "Big Boy Leaves Home" (1940) and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), in which black men must leave the South not just to fulfill their potential but to survive. Campbell's novel also ends with mother Ida leading protest marches against the inhumane conditions of the catfish farm where she works with a young white woman, Doreen, whose father killed Armstrong before she was born. With the outcome of her plot, Campbell reveals the irony of her title—while the blues of black folk may not always be like those of white folk, there are significant similarities that sometimes call for joint action.

The most effective writers about race relations give voices to characters of different races and create conversations between them or debates within. Such narrative techniques as dialogue, debate, and multiple narrators allow readers to enter minds and hearts different from their own and to participate vicariously in a dialogic process that at the very least can provide "anxiety free access," to use Wolfgang Iser's term, to the unspoken in the readers' own lives and at the most can reformulate readers' thinking about racial identity and race relations. Recent immigration to the South, particularly by people from Vietnam and Cuba, is making race and ethnic relationships in the South more complex, and new literary representations of southern race relations are emerging.

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See also Chattel Slavery; Civil Rights Movement; Jim Crow; Ku Klux Klan; Lynching; Miscegenation; Mulatto; Plantation Fiction; Race, Idea of; Racism; Till, Emmett.

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