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Sample Lesson Plan: Southern Writers and the Old South Myth
Grades 6-12

Objectives:

- Students will learn about the pastoral and counter pastoral traditions of southern literature.
- Using the PBO bindings database, students will see how book covers reflect these traditions.
- The lesson includes two optional activities to enhance student learning: a creative writing assignment and a book report.

Materials:

A computer with an Internet connection and a large screen or other capability to display the teacher's actions to the entire class.

Lesson

Introduction

Southern literature always has had a distinctive flavor, since its original settlers wrote stories promoting the fertile land. Colonial writers such as Thomas Jefferson continued to advocate the agrarian ideal. These early writings were the beginning of the pastoral genre of southern literature.

As the pastoral genre developed, it served writers seeking to resolve the tension between memories of a simpler, rural past and a more complex present world. Pastoral literature historically has flourished in times of dramatic change, when writers emphasized the past as an idealized lost realm. In the South the idealization of the rural past includes creating a positive view of slavery.

Slavery became increasingly important to the Southern economy after the invention of the cotton gin by Eli Whitney. Slaveholding southerners often were characterized by northerners and European visitors as lazy, cruel, and irreligious, or, at the very least, ignorant and misguided. Particularly after Harriet Beecher Stowe published her novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, some southern writers used pastoral writing to respond to these attacks, using fiction to extol the virtues of slavery.

Antebellum Anti-Tom novels

[Teacher's Note: Go to <http://bindings.lib.ua.edu/sitesearch.html>, select the "Search by Keyword" link, and type "pba00446" in the top search box. Click on "search." Click on the thumbnail, and enlarge the image by clicking on the largest of three boxes under it.]

Also known as anti-Tom literature, because of its contradiction to Stowe's work, the plantation novel became an enduring genre in Southern literature, characterized by a gentle, fatherly master and his pure and charitable wife presiding over child-like blacks in the plantation "family."

One of the most famous works in this genre was John Pendleton Kennedy's *Swallow Barn; or, A Sojourn in the Old Dominion*, first published in 1831. Kennedy, who was from Baltimore, Maryland, decided to publish a revised edition in 1851, the year that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* first was published as a series of stories in a magazine. He said he wanted to counteract the abolition movement that was gaining momentum in the North. The narrator of *Swallow Barn* is a city dweller describing his visit to an idyllic plantation on the James River in Virginia, which many pastoral writers considered to be the center of plantation life. Kennedy's descriptions bathe the plantation in a nostalgic glow and proclaims that Negroes could never be happier than they were as slaves at Swallow Barn. Illustrations in *Swallow Barn*'s 1851 edition, including the gold-stamped leather cover seen here, portray the happy plantation life.

[Click on "Search" at the top of the page, and type "pba01296" in the top search box. Click on "search." Click on the thumbnail, and enlarge the image by clicking on the largest of three boxes under it.]

Another popular anti-Tom novel was *The Sword and the Distaff* by the South Carolinian William Gilmore Simms, which came out only a few months after Stowe's novel and contains a number of sections and discussions that clearly debate Stowe's book and view of slavery. The novel focuses on the Revolutionary War and its aftermath through the lives of Captain Porgy and one of his slaves. Simms novel was popular enough that it was reprinted in 1854 under the title *Woodcraft*. This is the cover from the 1852 edition.

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Caroline Lee Hentz was another anti-Tom writer, and one of few pastoral authors that were women. Although born in Massachusetts, she lived for many years in Alabama and became an adopted southerner. She is best known for *The Planter's Northern Bride*, published two years after *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. It offers a defense of slavery as seen through the eyes of a northern woman who marries a southern slave owner, and tries to demonstrate that that black people lacked the ability to function without oversight by whites. Her novel also focused on the fear of a slave rebellion, especially if abolitionists didn't stop stirring up trouble. This is the cover from another of Hentz's novels, *Eoline; or, Magnolia Vale* (which also was published in 1854). This novel was so popular a city in Alabama was named after it.

Post-Civil War Plantation Tradition

Slavery ended after the Civil War, but the pastoral novel did not. It simply shifted purpose. Rather than trying to justify slavery, the plantation novels of the late nineteenth century served to help upper class southern readers heal from the loss of the war and endure what they considered to be the horrors of Reconstruction.

The term “plantation tradition” applies to works that look back nostalgically to the times before the “Lost Cause” of the Southern Confederacy was lost, as a time when an idealized, well-ordered agrarian world. These writers take the “ruined plantation,” now overgrown and destroyed by the mercantile north, and reconstruct it as an idyllic spot for masters and slaves alike—contrasting the golden age of the past with a present of loss and desolation. The nostalgic looking back on the good old days is the main difference between the post-war pastoral tales and the antebellum stories, which described an idealized agrarian present.

Plantation works are similar to the anti-Tom pastoral tales in that they portray a plantation “family” with mutually devoted white and black members and a white master as the head of this patriarchal system. Stories of this tradition frequently portray African Americans as happier and better off under slavery than when they became free. The tale is often told by an ex-slave who reminisces fondly about the bravery, kindness, and aristocracy of his owners and fondly recalls the rituals of life before the war.

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Many literary scholars credit Thomas Nelson Page with inventing the “plantation tradition,” with its romanticized view of slavery. Page was born on a slave-holding Virginia plantation and was eleven years old when the Civil War ended. He believed elite whites were superior to others, and found the changing social order after the war to be painful. His stories contrasted the mythical Old South with the difficulties of Reconstruction, often through the dialect of a black narrator. In his most popular story, “Marse Chan,” an ex-slave narrator tells the tale of a young man who died for the southern cause, placing duty and honor above all personal gain. The story demonstrates the heroism of former Confederates as well as the loyalty of slaves to their masters, even after Emancipation. The story first appeared in *The Century* magazine and later was published in this book, *In Ole Virginia; or, Marse Chan and Other Stories*. The floral cover art carries out the theme of agriculture’s superiority over industrialization.

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Georgian Joel Chandler Harris also made ample use of dialect in his work, particularly his Uncle Remus stories. In his stories, an elderly African American narrator tells his tales to a young white boy, recalling the plantation tradition. Harris’s work are slightly different from that of other plantation writers because some of the stories Uncle Remus tells are based on original folk tales of the African slaves. However, the portraits they gave still were highly romanticized, interpreting the African American in a manner that was neither objective nor realistic. The cover

of this book, *Nights with Uncle Remus: Myths and Legends of the Old Plantation*, has an illustration of one of Remus's folk tales, with an inset depicting a stereotypical nineteenth-century black man.

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Although other plantation writers were unsympathetic to the reality of black slaves, they were not necessarily racist. That was not true of North Carolinian Thomas Dixon, who attempted to excuse the anti-black terrorism of the Ku Klux Klan in the South. In his famous trilogy—*The Leopard's Spots* (which is pictured here), *The Clansman*, and *The Traitor*—Dixon presents racial conflict as an epic struggle, with the future of civilization at stake. He argued that blacks must be denied political equality because that leads to social equality and miscegenation, thus to the destruction of both family and civilized society. *The Clansman* later became the basis for D. W. Griffith's famous pro-Klan film *The Birth of a Nation*.

Counter-Pastoral Literature

Not all southerners advocated slavery, nor did they all mourn the plantation days before the Civil War and shun industrial progress. Most of the pastoral writers were upper-class white men who believed their race, gender, and caste to be superior to all others. The rest of southern society—including African Americans, women, and white men from the lower classes—welcomed the societal changes that the Civil War brought. Their literature, often considered to be counter-pastoral, supported industrialization and the advancement of people other than the elite white man. They openly opposed the mythical, idealized view of the South that pastoral writers presented.

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These southern literatures are not conceived as "acts of memory" involved in "recovering" the Past. Instead such works emphasize locating and questioning realities in the present, starting with the question of whose stories are actually being lived in multi-dimensional the South. For Ellen Glasgow, the prominent characters usually were women and lower class men. Most of Glasgow's stories explored the changing social order in rural Virginia, advocating the advancement of the middle class. She also dealt with feminist issues, including the independence of women. One of her most popular novels, *Barren Ground* details thirty years in the life of a farm girl who fights for her own independence amidst the early twentieth-century debate between farming as a business built on technological change and farming as a traditional way of life. The illustration on the spine of the book depicts the plantation as a desolate place.

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Several of the counter-pastoral writers were African Americans such as Charles W. Chesnutt, who dismissed the Old South nostalgia by pointing out the racism and exploitation of blacks. Although born in Ohio, Chesnutt lived for many years in North Carolina. His most popular stories about the South appeared in *The Conjure Woman* (1899), in which the black former slave narrator Uncle Julius critiques the white racist and class assumptions of the outside frame narrator, John. Although his stories are set before the Civil War, Chesnutt looks at the slavery era not to idealize the past but to offer analogies between the brutal governance of slaveholders and the racist political assumptions and policies of the Reconstruction era. Another collection of stories, *The Wife of His Youth* (shown here), also represents Chesnutt's serious effort to correct the distortions of Reconstruction fiction and offset the plantation school of Page and Cable. His stories were controversial and rejected by white southerners who protested that Chesnutt was vilifying the South.

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George Washington Cable attacked racial prejudice through mulatto characters negotiating the complex color lines of his native New Orleans. Cable hated slavery and was angered by the power it gave the white man over the lives of African Americans. His novel *The Grandissimes: A Story of Creole Life* provides a sympathetic treatment of mixed bloods in old Louisiana. Unlike the advocates of racialism and the plantation tradition, Cable faced the facts of race and caste in the southern setting which he described. This cover of *Grandissimes* depicts the South as a primal place, unspoiled by either agriculture or industry.

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Another strain of counter-pastoral writing used irony to expose the self-serving motives of the master class. The humorists debunked notions of class privilege upon which much southern pastoral had been constructed. Their tales satirize many elements of antebellum plantation fiction through tricksters who hold up an ironic, inverted mirror to slave-holding society and its hypocrisies. At their most violent or absurd, the tales of this genre offer versions of anarchy that seem especially to target preoccupations with social class. The poor white challenges any class claim to superiority. The humorists displaced the traditional gentleman, supplanting him with rugged anti-heroes.

This rowdy genre gave Mark Twain some of his most useful models for contesting the emerging white racist power structure of Post-Reconstruction. Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is perhaps the most compelling counter-pastoral work. Twain's backward glance is taken through the eyes of a child who exists uneasily on the margins of a supposedly idyllic village. His ambivalence is traced satirically in his relations on the one hand with Jim, a slave, and on the other with several varieties of white communities. Ten years later, Twain published *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, which confronts the absurd final consequences of white southern racist order.

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Another example of southern humor is Johnson Jones Hooper’s *Some Adventures of Captain Simon Suggs*. The protagonist is a con man in a frontier community, where transplanted Virginians trying to lord over others are routinely victimized by sharper drifters with no pedigrees. The rugged, primal nature of backwoods Alabama—Hooper’s home and the setting of his stories—opposes the idealized plantation picture of the South that the pastoral writers presented.

Conclusion

To the elite white man, the South was an idyllic place with sprawling, stately plantations, patriarchal gentlemen, lovely ladies, and happy, devoted slaves. Pastoral writers of the early nineteenth century used these images to combat the abolitionist movement, portraying slaveholding as a positive institution. After the Civil War, writers of the plantation tradition offered a romantic view of the Old South to combat the loss southern aristocrats faced during Reconstruction. These stories advanced the view that upper class white men were superior to all others, giving a chauvinistic and racist picture of southern life.

Women, African Americans, and lower-class white men countered the pastoral movement with literature that provided a realistic picture of the Old South and its changing social order after the Civil War. These stories—whether dramatic, humorous, or rooted in folklore—exposed the South as a heterogeneous place where anyone could achieve success and power.

Taken together, the pastoral and counter-pastoral genres of southern literature offer an interesting picture of how different social groups can view the same time and place in very different ways.

Optional Activities

Creative Writing Assignment

Although pastoral and counter-pastoral stories were fictional, they usually were based on the experiences of the authors.

For this activity, students will write a short story based on an interesting personal experience. The stories may be completely factual or embellished.

All students, or those who volunteer, should have an opportunity to read their stories in front of the class.

Book Report

Students will select a book from the list of pastoral and counter-pastoral fiction.

After reading their books, students will write a book report about their selections. Distribute “Guidelines for Book Reports” for students to follow.

Students should be given at least a week to read their books and write their reports. The instructor may choose to set aside a class period for students to discuss what they reported.