6.2: Southern Literary Renaissance - Second Wave (1945-1965)

While the first wave of Southern writers were writing with an agenda, in reaction to H.L. Menken's claims that the South could not produce great art, the Post-1945 Southern writers came of age under the spell of a group of writers studying at Vanderbilt University who named themselves the Agrarians (John Crow Ransom, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, Andrew Lytle, etc) as well as several commercially successful Southern writers such as William Faulkner. In turn, they internalized a story telling tradition that was already on-going. These Second Wave writers had concerns of their own, as the South, along with the rest of the World, entered the Cold War, in the post World War II period. Yet, while the South tried to keep pace with a changing world, Southern literature continued to produce some of the most innovative, critically acclaimed work of the time period. Eudora Welty's debut novel, *The Robber Bridegroom* (1942), gained national attention for her as a short story writer who had already won back-to-back O. Henry awards, including one for her well anthologized short story, "A Worn Path." Carson McCullers was the literary "wunderkind" who exploded onto the national spotlight at the age of twenty-three with her debut novel, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940). Flannery O'Connor emerged as the super star of the Iowa Writer's Workshop, winning multiple accolades, including two O. Henry Awards, as her short story "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" (1955) became widely anthologized. Doctor turned lawyer, Walker Percy's debut novel, *The Movie Goer* (1961), won the National Book Award for mixing theology, philosophy, and the Mardi Gras into one beautifully written novel. From Percy to Porter to Peter Taylor, the Southern Literary Renaissance remained strong well after 1945.

America's war efforts bolstered the national economy, especially in the South, which is home to several military training bases. While the South still suffered from Jim Crow laws and antiquated racial politics, it did offer more progressive roles for women who found themselves taking professional jobs, filling positions vacated by men who had left for war. This shift became a major theme in Katherine Ann Porter's "Miranda" stories. Flannery O'Connor saw such role changes firsthand when she studied at Georgia College for Women where the WAVES (Women Accepted for Voluntary Emergency Services), a female naval reserve unit, were training. As the country continued to change drastically after World War II, the South tried to keep pace.
The post World War II South was positioned for economic prosperity, as soldiers returned home to find more infrastructure and a trained workforce. The rise of the middle class also helped develop major Southern cities, such as Atlanta and Birmingham, into national prominence. The South had finally begun to embrace the shift from agricultural to industrial economy. With a growing middle and professional class, the South began to shake off the image of rural poverty with which it was associated in works such as Erskine Caldwell’s *Tobacco Road* and *God’s Little Acre* or the influence of Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind*.

Unfortunately, the South’s prosperity during this time was marred by its bigotry and antiquated racial politics as many of the South’s preeminent African-American authors, such as Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and Ralph Ellison, left the South to escape the antagonism and racism they encountered. As the segregationists dug in their heels, the Civil Rights movement became a major theme of the Southern Literary Renaissance. Although the South was growing, the legacy of racism as the Civil Rights Movement gained national attention in the 1950s and 1960s gave the region a national black eye, but also gave birth to the Civil Rights movement, the Black Power movement and the Black Arts movement. A strong literary tradition developed around these movements, giving rise to powerful writers such as Nikki Giovanni and Maya Angelou.

One unexpected result of the Southern Literary Renaissance was the creation of the first Southern literary celebrities. This rise to prominence of Southern literary authors coincided with the return of thousands of soldiers entering college for the first time, courtesy of the GI Bill. Suddenly these soldiers were enrolling in creative writing classes, wanting to tell their own stories.

Around this time, the University of Iowa and Stanford University piloted the nation’s very first graduate creative writing programs, offering a Masters of Fine Arts (MFA) degree. These creative writing programs, especially the Iowa Writers Workshop, were heavily influenced by the Southern literary celebrities. While Columbia University’s writing program featured Thomas Wolfe, the early faculty at the Iowa Writers Workshop included Allen Tate and John Crowe Ransom, while Robert Penn Warren, a professor at Louisiana State University, was a featured speaker on numerous occasions. The instruction at the Iowa Writers Workshop was based upon the textbooks *Understanding Poetry* and *Understanding Fiction*, which were co-written by Warren and Cleanth Brooks, a professor at LSU and co-founder of The Southern Review. Through their celebrity, Southern writers exerted national influence over these creative writing programs as well as the early classes of writers who enrolled in these creative writing programs, such as Flannery O’Connor who was a student at the Iowa Writers Workshop from 1945-1948. Additionally, many of the early creative writing textbooks and anthologies featured these Southern writers; for example, Caroline Gordon’s *The House of Fiction* was extremely popular in creative writing programs. In fact, the second editions of both *Understanding Fiction* and *The House of Fiction* would feature work from Iowa alum, Flannery O’Connor. Thus, the Southern Literary Renaissance writers continued to exert influence on creative writing, with everyone from Caroline Gordon, Katherine Ann Porter, and even Peter Taylor becoming associated with these programs.

Like their predecessors, from whom they learned, the Second Wave of the Southern Literary Renaissance featured writers continuing the legacy of reinvention. Flannery O’Connor’s fiction was particularly noteworthy for its marriage of violence, humor, and religious themes, a mixture that amused and baffled readers. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Walker Percy’s experiment with blending philosophy and fiction captivated a national audience, while Tennessee Williams revolutionized theater with his hits *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), both of which highlighted the complex sexual politics of the South while also capturing its dialect and storytelling tradition.
The Southern Literary Renaissance, much like the South itself, was a diverse movement with wide regional variations. Although it started as reactionary, with the work of the Fugitives, it grew in ways that the original authors of *I'll Take My Stand* could have never predicted, producing some of America's most famous writers and forever changing the way writing was viewed in the United States. After World War II, a new generation of Southern writers took up the cause. While not always responding to Menken, these writers continued the artistry, experimentation, and innovation of the previous generation.