The “Southern Literary Renaissance” took place in cultural and political circumstances that resembled similar flowerings of literary culture in mid-nineteenth century Russia, in late nineteenth century Ireland, and among African-Americans and Jewish Americans in the twentieth century. Literary flowerings are commonly a consequence of modernization, and the writers involved in them contest with each other about the meaning and value of modernization. Our texts argue with each other about the distinctiveness of southern culture, and whether modernity might extinguish that distinctiveness. They also argue about how to grapple with the ugliest features of that distinctiveness, the long history of racism the south shares with the rest of the United States but which took distinctive forms there. They also argue about some of the other traditional consequences of modernization, such as secularization, social alienation, and deracination.

In 1960, the historian C. Vann Woodward argued in a famous essay entitled “The Burden of Southern History,” that the ensemble of themes which people nowadays refer to as “American Exceptionalism,” have never quite applied to the south. Nowadays, few take Exceptionalism seriously about any aspect of US history and culture, particularly about the three themes Woodward singled out, innocence, the sense that the US represented an opportunity to begin history anew, to escape the shadow of authoritarian government, social hierarchy, and religious war which characterized the old world according to this view, success, a theme which referred not only to victory in war and to social stability but also to scientific progress, new forms of cultural expression, and increasing political liberalization, and prosperity, which meant not only increasing material success but increasing equality of distribution as well. Woodward pointed out that the southern experience of racial segregation and oppression, military defeat, and persistent poverty, made southern history a kind of standing exception to the idea of exceptionalism. At the same time, reflecting on those three themes in southern history and culture might offer some of the wisdom and humility that Woodward felt that lack of in the US of his time.

The course begins just as the first stirrings of what would become the Civil Rights movement were beginning to be felt, and ends roughly at the present moment. It begins in a moment when the south’s economic relationship to the rest of the republic was essentially colonial, providing raw materials to be made into finished products in other regions, finished products the south would have to import from those regions for its own use. For the white south, the course begins as a period of defensive insularity and enforced loyalty politics begins to face the pressure of a more cosmopolitan and egalitarian but also more
deracinated modernity. For the black south, the course begins just as the thorough repression of political life and economic and cultural autonomy imposed first by the Bourbons at the end of Reconstruction and then, more intensely, by the Populists in the 1880s and 1890s, began to show strains under the pressure of the modernization brought to the region by the first world war and by the great migration. And the literature of the Southern Literary Renaissance also demonstrates the same transformations of and the same tensions about the situation of women that were happening elsewhere in the United States, even where the situations of women in the south were somewhat distinct.

This course will fulfill the English Department’s new research paper requirement, and students will develop a research paper in this course in several stages, with drafts, conferences, and revisions along the way.

This course is also designed to fulfill the University’s requirement for a course concerning issues if Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the United States (DEIS-US).

Schedule of Readings and Assignments

Week 1: Porter: Old Mortality; Pale Horse, Pale Rider
Porter is an undervalued great writer whose short novels stand comparison with the finest short novels in any tradition. Old Mortality thinks about the embeddedness of its main character in a network of family stories whose truth the protagonist comes to doubt, while also doubting her skeptical take on those stories. Pale Horse, Pale Rider takes that protagonist out of the south into the anonymous and alienated world of 1918 Denver, in the midst of wartime repression, and at the height of the 1918 pandemic. Both short novels lend themselves to feminist readings, the first concerning the pressure of a romanticized and impossible feminine idea (and, to some extent, the sexual dark side of well-to-do southern life), pressures that have something to do with an idealized historical rootedness, and the second concerning the special repressions (but also special opportunities) offered to women in the rootless and politically tawdry world of a city that seems to Porter to have no history at all.

Week 2: Faulkner: Absalom! Absalom!
Absalom! Absalom! is the key dynastic tragedy of the southern renaissance, the novel against which every other novel in its tradition is measured. Of particular interest is the way in which it intertwines themes of class conflict and themes about racism. It is also a masterpiece of modernist indirection, in which many tellers grapple with the truth of an inherited story in which they themselves are implicated but whose meaning they do not fully understand.

Week 3: Faulkner: Absalom! Absalom!
Week 4: Warren: *All the King’s Men*

*All the King’s Men* is the greatest novel about politics in the American tradition, or in any tradition. Not very loosely based on the regime of Huey Long in 1930s Louisiana, it asks key southern questions about race and class, and universal questions about the contradiction between political means and political ends and about the connection between fallenness and moral identity. The main political plot of the novel, which turns on the conflict between the poor uplands and better off lowlands of a southern state that may or may not be Louisiana, is an examination of the politics of class conflict that is unequalled in any other American novel. The inset Cass Mastern episode, in which the Civil War era protagonist’s sexual transgressions face him in answerable ways with his complicity in issues of slavery and race, gives some intellectual background to Warren’s later role as someone who, with C. Vann Woodward, sought to persuade the white south that accepting racial integration would not require the south to sacrifice its cultural distinctiveness.

Week 5: Warren: *All the King’s Men*

Week 6: Welty: *Delta Wedding*

This complex comic novel about a wedding in the 1920s Delta asks searching questions about the relationship between eros and death and about the unacknowledged aspects of a multigenerational family drama. Although the novel mostly turns on the tensions and reconciliations that are part of marriage, it also turns on the conflict between the genteel family at the center of the novel and the less than genteel spouses who marry into that family.

Week 7: O’Connor: *The Violent Bear it Away*

A combative novel about prophetic religion in a secularized and alienated culture, told with cruel, ironic humor and a deadly serious consciousness of the stakes. The protagonist, raised in isolation in the countryside but called by God to a fulfill a prophetic task in the city (and also fleeing to the city in order to evade that prophetic task), must fight out the question of what is it to take a religious stance in a world where taking such stances is for the most part seen as a sign of mental illness. Because both author and characters see prophetic religion as a distinctive feature of provincial southern culture, the novel also raises the question about whether modernization of the south also means secularization and alienation.

Week 8: Styron: *The Confessions of Nat Turner* This extremely controversial 1967 novel about the 1831 Southampton slave insurrection seeks an inside view of the ways race and gender intertwine in the slavery era.

Research Proposal Due October XX

Week 9: Styron: *The Confessions of Nat Turner*
Week 10: Gaines: *Of Love and Dust*
A nuanced and subtle development of two different doomed interracial relationships in 1940s Louisiana. In both cases these relationships are presented to the world (and also, to some extent, to the characters themselves) as exploitive and inauthentic, but each relationship, in some covert way, has enough depth to raise (but not to answer) the question of to what extent love might make a private armistice in racial conflict possible.

Annotated Bibliography Due November XX

Week 11: Ellison: *Juneteenth*
Ellison worked on the novel of which *Juneteenth* is a selection for more than forty years. Adam Sunraider, a racist U.S. Senator, but also the unacknowledged foster son of an African-American evangelist, is shot on the Senate floor by his unacknowledged mixed-race son. The text is only a draft, but it develops the themes of *Invisible Man* in a number of unexpected directions.

Rough Draft due to Writing Groups November XX

Week 12: Jones: *The Known World*
A rich magical-realist imagination of the lives of (fictitious) African-American slaveholders in 1850s Virginia.

Week 13: Ward: *Sing, Unburied, Sing*
A lyrical novel of race, family, and survival set in the present-day Mississippi Gulf Coast, a novel with echoes both of Hurston and Faulkner.

Requirements

1. **Short papers**
   There will be short (750 to 1000 word) writing assignments due every week for 5 weeks, beginning September XX, and ending October XX. You will pick a passage of about 250 words from the reading for that day or the next and type it out. (This passage isn’t included in your word count. I want you to type the passage out because doing so will bring its particulars more closely into view.) Be sure to pick a passage which strikes you as rich and interesting and full of a significance that might not be already obvious to every reader of that text. In other words, I don’t want you to pick a passage that will enable you to repeat some point I have already made in the lecture, or that you were all ready to make on some other basis, but rather some passage which will enable you to bring a new reflection into our conversation, some passage that casts some new light upon the conversation we have already been having, some light that we might not have seen were it not for you. You will write a two to four page commentary (500 to 1000 words) on that passage, giving what you take its point to be, noting its context, and developing in cogent detail the claim it leads you to make about the text. You are not merely to give a summary of the passage, but to point out something important in it that other intelligent, well-informed readers might
well have missed, some unexpected turn of argument, some subtext, some complexity of
tone or treatment, some unanticipated light upon the characters and their situation, some
insight into the point of view of the narrator or the agenda of the novel. Imagine that
you are writing for someone who has some knowledge of the text but who does not know
what precisely is your point of view about it—someone rather like the other members of
this class, for instance. I will not give particular papers letter grades, but I will comment
upon them in detail and give them either a check, a check plus, or a check minus. You
may revise and resubmit these papers as often as you wish, but please do not merely edit
in corrections of errors.

At least two of these papers must explicitly concern themselves with critical analysis
of issues about diversity, equity, and inclusion in the United States.

2. Research Paper
The principal assignment for this class will be a research paper, of 12 pages (3000
words) minimum, concerned with one or more of the texts this course will examine. To
prepare this paper you might need to start with an overarching paradigm from literary
study. Some overarching studies of the themes of the course might give you a starting
point, or perhaps themes that arise from more general treatments of the texts of the course.
Literary theory might provide you with paradigms to discuss issues of racial conflict, cul-
tural conflict, colonialism, or gender and sexuality issues. You may also start with some
of the other themes in the course, such as dynastic tragedies, inherited stories, or other
themes that have come up in the class discussion. Or you may start with some of the
famous arguments in the existing criticism, such as the argument that the narrator Flann-
ery O’Connor’s *The Violent Bear it Away* is more in sympathy with Tarwater’s demonic
“friend” than with Flannery O’Connor as we know her from her biography. You should
also make yourself familiar with the critical literature on your chosen novel, which you
can access using *The MLA International Bibliography* or *JSTOR Language and Literature*.

You will develop the papers in stages, which will include

- A one-page research proposal, giving your topic, developing your take, and outlin-
ing the stakes of your project, due on October XX

- An annotated bibliography, outlining what is to be learned from your key sources,
due on November XX

- A conference with me, which will take place during the week of November XX

- A rough draft, which will be due to a writing group of your peers on November XX.
You will respond to the drafts given to you by the other members of our group, and
will meet in a writing group outside of class to discuss your work together.

- A completed research paper, due on December XX. Please also hand in the commented-
upon first drafts which you have received from the other members of your writing
group.
3. Responding to Each Other’s Papers

As you read each other’s papers bear in mind that the point is to help each other to write better papers. Bear in mind also that as readers you are not all that different from me. We both have some familiarity with the text, we both know the kinds of things we have talked about in class, and we both know a thing or two about literary interpretation. We also can recognize that some “tacks” give a new twist to the discussions we have already been having, and maybe suggest some discussions we ought to have in the future. It is this sense—of advancing a conversation already underway— which you should keep in mind as you read each other’s papers. Do not hesitate, then, to write in the margins—you should, in fact, hold up your end of the conversation there. Note down where the major claim is made, and what you think it is. Note also where some point is tellingly made. Pay attention also to those moments where you don’t quite get what the author is saying. Sometimes these moments happen when the author has left something out that seems obvious to him or her but not to anyone else. (If you find such a moment see if you can guess what’s missing.) If you understand, say that in the margins too—put in the margin all the “uh huh’s“ and “wait a minute’s“ and “have you thought of’s“ that you would be bursting out with if your room-mate were telling you what his or her paper is about. At the end of the paper you should also write a comment. These comments are most useful if they’re not all evaluation. It’s very useful, for instance, to summarize what you think the paper’s argument is, because sometimes the author hasn’t made the argument he or she intended to make, and that is something it is important for the author to know. Here are a few more questions to ask yourself as you compose your responses.

1. What is the author’s major claim? Has the author staked out an argument, or merely announced a subject matter? Is this a subject matter which will call for the author to read the text closely, or could someone who has read the text cursorily make the same argument? What might the author learn from making this argument?

2. What does the author need to do in order to substantiate his or her claim? Do these things get done? Are there counterarguments to be considered, say, or other ways of reading the passages the author chooses to examine? Has the author chosen the passages he or she cites merely as evidence of something the author already knows, or do the passages themselves provide rich sources of information?

3. How does the author’s style strike you? Are there gaps in the presentation? Does the author talk “up” to you, or “down” to you? Does this author have an idea of what it’s like to read this paper?

4. Is the author’s conclusion merely a restatement of the original claim, or does the author close on a note which makes you wonder what turn he or she will take next? Are there questions you still want to ask at the end of the paper that should have been answered in the paper? Are there other questions which you might want to answer in another paper, your own, for example?

Obviously you can’t answer all of these questions in your responses, and some of these questions probably can’t be answered explicitly anyway (although you should keep them
in mind). But do remember that the point of reading each other’s papers is not to grade them (that’s my job!) but to see how they are put together and to suggest ways they might better further our continuing conversation.

4. Writing Groups

On the day the drafts of your papers are due you should bring enough copies for everyone in your group to have one. Even these drafts should be typewritten if at all possible. You should arrange with your writing group for a convenient time to meet and discuss your papers among yourselves, and you should read and comment upon the papers of the other members of your group some time before you meet. (You should look over my handout describing how to do this.)

I will leave the format of your actual meetings up to you, but you will probably find them most useful if you keep them somewhat informal. You might want to begin by asking the author to tell you briefly his or her sense of what the paper is about, and what he or she has learned or proven by writing it. (There is much to be learned from those occasions where the author describes a different—and usually better—paper than the one you have read.) You will also find that time spent on examining what the author is trying to show will generally prove more useful than time spent editing and correcting small errors, although time spent on organization and style can be well spent also. If you do discuss style, be sure not to merely say that the style is vague, or worse, boring—specify instead some of the things the author must add to make the meaning clear, or specify some of the things the author need not say and should omit to avoid insulting the reader’s intelligence.

When the final draft is due, please turn in the revised version—and make sure it is revised rather than merely corrected—along with all the copies of the first version. I won’t be grading the draft, obviously, and I won’t be grading the marginal comments you make in each others’ work either (although I take these very seriously), but I would like to see just how different the drafts and final versions are and what you have learned from talking with each other.

Rubric

The papers will be evaluated on the basis of this rubric, which is widely used at Brandeis:

1. Basic
   - Clear, concise and professional writing
   - A sustained discussion of a single issue covering multiple points of view.
   - Significant editing of a single paper draft with responses to instructor comments
   - The production of a final paper mostly free of sentence fragments, run-ons, misspellings, etc.

2. Intermediate
• Effective use of scholarly, critical, or historical texts to support an argument
• Clear articulation of an original thesis
• Clear and concise survey of scholarly problems on a given topic
• Completion of a research project which utilizes five or more sources from different types of media

3. Advanced

• Critical engagement with multiple works of scholarship.
• Sustained presentation of a multipart argument
Learning Goals

1. Develop the habit of independent critique, intellectual self-reliance, and self-confidence from the perspective of attentive reading and collaborative discussion

2. Become conversant with the major questions, concepts, theories, traditions, and techniques of humanistic inquiry about the southern fiction

3. Become conversant with the ways in which the fiction of the American South in the Twentieth Century reflects upon (and shapes) some of the key historical, social, and cultural experiences of that region, such as racial conflict and segregation, urbanization and modernization, gender conflict, secularization, as well as some of the themes special to the particular authors we will examine, such as the burden of history, the sense that every story is embedded in a network of prior stories, imbri- cation in family and separation from family, the problem of metaphysical evil and metaphysical good, or the question of regionalism.

4. Reflect on quality peer-to-peer interaction.

5. Develop and sharpen writing skills through rigorous assignments.
Policies

1. **Disability** If you are a student with a documented disability at Brandeis University and wish to have a reasonable accommodation made for you in this class, please see the course instructor immediately.

2. **Attendance and Participation** Attendance in this course is required. A student with more than two unexcused absences should expect to fail the course. Participation in the class discussion is required, so come to class prepared to speak. There may well be classes at Brandeis in which you can coast for much of the term and recover yourself by heroic efforts at the end, but this isn’t one of them. It’s best to plan to work steadily.

3. **Extensions** You must contact me no later than the class before a paper is due to receive an extension. I will not grant extensions on the due date of the paper. Late papers will be docked in proportion to their lateness.

4. **Academic Honesty** You are expected to be honest in all of your academic work. The University policy on academic honesty is distributed annually as section 5 of the Rights and Responsibilities handbook. Instances of alleged dishonesty will be forwarded to the Office of Campus Life for possible referral to the Student Judicial System. Potential sanctions include failure in the course and suspension from the University. If you have any questions about my expectations, please ask.

5. **Electronics** You are not allowed to have an open laptop in this class. Please turn off your cell phones for the duration of the class.

6. **Four-Credit Course (with three hours of class-time per week)** Success in this 4 credit hour course is based on the expectation that students will spend a minimum of 9 hours of study time per week in preparation for class (readings, papers, discussion sections, preparation for exams, etc.).

7. **Communications** The course will have a mailing list on LATTE. Information about snow days, changed deadlines, and so forth will be broadcast on that mailing list. We may make use of LATTE discussion forums as well.

**Assignment Weights**

I view calculations using these values with suspicion, and I will not accept arguments about your final grade based on calculations from this table, but I include this table to give you a rough idea of how much each assignment is worth.

- Short Papers 15 %
- Research Proposal 5 %
- Annotated Bibliography 10 %
- Research Paper First Draft 10 %
- Research Paper Final Draft 35 %
- Participation 25 %