

Regionalism in New Orleans: A Study on Select Stories of Plantation Literature

P. Dinesh¹ (reg. no: 19114014011025)

Ph.D. Scholar (Full-Time)

Manonmaniam Sundaranar University

Tirunelveli-627012.

Tamilnadu.

Email: dineshscholar25@gmail.com

Prof. S. Prabahar²

Dean Faculty of Indian and Other languages

Manonmaniam Sundaranar University

Tirunelveli-627012.

Tamilnadu.

Abstract:

Regional literature is a genre of fictional works or poetry that significantly emphasises the inhabitants, language, customs, geographical features, and other distinctive aspects of a particular geographical area. During the period spanning from the Civil War to the conclusion of the nineteenth century, a notable surge in the adoption of this specific writing style was observed within American literature. Regional literature endeavours to accurately depict or establish a connection with a specific geographical region or population. Regional literature often revolves around a particular geographical setting, with the author or poet aiming to portray that specific locale's distinctive characteristics, speech patterns, customs, and historical background. Richard Brodhead, an American scholar, in his work "Cultures of Letters", argues, "Regionalism's representation of vernacular cultures as enclaves of tradition insulated from larger cultural contact is palpably a fiction ... its public function was not just to mourn lost cultures but to purvey a certain story of contemporary cultures and the relations among them" (Brodhead 121). The present paper tries to explore regionalism in New Orleans by analysing the short stories from Plantation Literature.

Keywords: Regionalism, geographical setting, speech patterns, vernacular culture and historical background.

Regional literature is typically grounded in a distinct geographical area and provides insights into the unique features distinguishing that particular region and its residents. These features may encompass various aspects of their culture, including their lifestyle, social dynamics, traditions, language, dialect, and other cultural elements. This work of fiction also exhibits a profound sense of the setting's topography, geography, or landscape. These texts may employ a specific geographical location or regional culture to illustrate a broader aspect of human life or the effects of a specific environment on its residents. Moreover, it is customary to encounter some aspects within a regional novel. These include a comprehensive depiction of a particular location, setting, or region, whether urban or rural, closely resembling an actual place. The characters in such novels are typically drawn from the working or middle classes, although their presence may only be familiar across some regional fiction. Additionally, in a few instances, the narrative may centre around a particular family or lineage and its intricate relationship with the local environment or historical context. The main components of regional literature often prioritise the focus on nature.

The settings depicted in these literary works are typically characterised by their inaccessibility and considerable distance from populated areas. The environment plays a crucial role in the narrative and sometimes assumes a distinct persona. The literature of a particular region often places significant emphasis on the unique characteristics and qualities of the local neighbourhood or geographical area. The characters in this scenario may evolve into archetypal or stereotypical character types. The characters are notable for their commitment to conventional values, unique dialects, and personality traits specific to their respective regions.

A plantation refers to a type of agricultural property intended explicitly for the cultivation of cash crops. The focal point of this farm system typically revolves around a manor house situated on a plantation, where the cultivation predominantly focuses on a single crop. In some instances, additional areas may be designated for cultivating food crops and other supplementary plants. Plantation crops hold significant economic value and are crucial in numerous developing and industrialised nations' agricultural economies and export trade. The social, economic, and cultural lives of individuals across various socioeconomic classes are intricately interconnected within the framework of the plantation society. Hence, it is imperative to consider the distinctive social characteristics fostered by the plantation system. Due to the labour-intensive and perennial nature of cultivating these commodities, both on-farm and off-farm processing activities offer substantial employment prospects.

The literary subgenre referred to as plantation tradition originates in the southern states of the United States. In a broad sense, the genre is situated within the time frame preceding the American Civil War. The plantation was idealised in numerous literary works predating the American Civil War, such as John Pendleton Kennedy's 1832 poem "The Swallow Barn". In contrast, there was a notable resistance towards narratives depicting the experiences of enslaved individuals, such as those authored by Frederick Douglass, as well as literary works advocating for abolition, like "Uncle Tom's Cabin." Paradoxically, this resistance contributed to the increased favorability and prevalence of plantation culture during the latter part of the nineteenth century. Thomas Nelson Page (1853–1922) and Harry Stillwell Edwards (1855-1938) are esteemed literary figures renowned for their contributions to the plantation heritage.

The historical context of the southern antebellum plantation has garnered increasing attention in scholarly literature throughout the 18th century. The American scholar Walton

Richard Patrick in his thesis, the plantation writings, defines, “The reason for this interest is two-fold: plantation life because of its unusual character provides abundant material for the fiction writer; and that same unique character forming as it did a distinct way of life, yields Important sociological, economic, and historical factors to the student of the period” (Walton 1). The contemporary authors who focus on plantation narratives have generated an overwhelming volume of literature, which unfortunately contributes to the existing state of confusion rather than offering a substantial effort to rectify the prevailing misconceptions surrounding plantation life. The author’s primary emphasis is characterised by superficial romanticism, wherein certain charming elements of the past are exaggerated while other more significant factors are overlooked.

“Estate” or “plantation” denotes a substantial agricultural enterprise characterised by cultivating a single crop on a significant scale. Plantation crops such as millet, cotton, and sugarcane are grown on a large scale. The soil survey of New Orleans was conducted through a collaboration between the United States Department of Agriculture and the Soil Conservation Service. Larry J. Trahan referred to this survey about New Orleans:

There are three different types of soils; firm, loamy, and clayey soils make up around one-third of the entire land area. These soils have been used for nearly all urban purposes. The remaining two-thirds of New Orleans’ land area are made up of grounds that were created in marshes and swamps. These areas are used as habitat for wetland wildlife and for recreation (Trahan 1).

New Orleans Literature writers’ literary works effectively embody their respective regions’ unique cultural and geographical characteristics. The natural levees of the Mississippi River exhibit an elevation that surpasses that of the sea level, in contrast to the drained farming

marshes and swamps situated at a lower elevation below sea level. The concept of the “plantation tradition” pertains to literary works that romantically evoke the pre-Civil War periods before the demise of the Southern Confederacy’s “Lost Cause.” These works portray an idealised, meticulously organised agricultural society and its inhabitants. They adhere to distinct values such as gallantry towards women, courage, honesty, honourable conduct among men, and a deep sense of regional pride and loyalty. Works within this tradition employed the metaphor of a plantation “family” comprising white and African American individuals who shared strong bonds of commitment, with the white master assuming the role of the authoritative figure in this patriarchal establishment.

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, “Swamp means a wetland often partially or intermittently covered with water especially: one dominated by woody vegetation.” (Merriam-Webster). They are commonly found nearby due to their dependence on the natural fluctuations in water levels of major rivers, such as the Amazon and Mississippi. The water in question exhibits variability and is characterised by fresh and brackish water. Lowland forests and wetlands share certain similarities; however, the key differentiating factor lies in the presence of water. Typically, swamps exhibit greater depths of standing water. Additionally, there is a more significant duration of moisture throughout the year. The writer Sallie Rhett Roman’s “Bastien: A X-mas in the Great Salt Marshes of Louisiana” says, “Cabanage Francais and through a gloomy swamp, with tall cypress and magnolia trees, swaying moss and hooting owls, until finally, we reached the borders of the great salt marshes” (Roman 171). The individual embarked on a journey through the wetlands, characterised by the presence of magnolia trees and the obscure darkness of the nighttime, eventually arriving at the saltwater marshland. In the author’s literary works, the depiction of New Orleans is characterised by its distinctive features, such as swamps,

magnolia trees, and marshes. Identifying wetlands and the ability to thrive in consistently wet soil and standing water can often be attributed to the prevalence of certain tree species in these environments.

A bayou can be defined as a slender watercourse characterised by a sluggish flow. These wetland outlets often manifest as anabranches, which are secondary channels that diverge from the primary medium of a waterway and subsequently merge with it further downstream. The currents can undergo a reversal, resulting in the transportation of brackish water. Lowlands and wetlands are commonly observed areas where these exits are found. The velocity of their water flow is often so minimal that it is scarcely discernible to observers. As a consequence, they often transform into a state characterised by the presence of mud and a decrease in speed. The literary work “At La Glorieuse” by Mollie Evelyn Moore Davis, a renowned writer from New Orleans, depicts:

The plantation house at La Glorieuse is built in a shining loop of Bayou L’ Eperon. A level grassy lawn, shaded by enormous live oaks, stretches across from the broad stone steps to the sodded levee, where a flotilla of small boats, drawn up among the flags and lily pads, rise and fall with the lapping waves. On the left of the house, the white cabins of the quarter show their low roofs above the shrubbery; to the right, the plantations of cane, following the inward curve of the bayou, sweep southward field after field, their billowy, blue-green reaches blending far in the rear with the indistinct purple haze of the swamp. (Davis 279)

The design and construction of the plantation’s infrastructure and residences are informed by an understanding of the natural environment and a deep familiarity with the local area. The conceptualised environments suitable for narratives of romance, mystery, sacrifice, nature, and

opulence encompass a bayou and a plantation. In his literary work, author M.E.M. Davis employs storytelling to provide a more comprehensive depiction of the characters, thereby establishing connections between the plantation, bayou, agricultural regions, and grasslands. Nevertheless, the inclusion of the plantation serves to enhance the narrative's level of engagement significantly and contributes to the overall cohesion between the theme and the natural environment.

The writer John Dimitry's "Le Tombeau Blanc" portrays, "One star-lity night in April, the moon rose clear, full, queenly. She threw the forest into gloom, but touched with silver the broad-spreading fields in front of it. Moreover, as the waters of the bayou caught upon their dark and frowning bosom her radiance, they broke into rippling laughter and flowed in smiles gulf ward" (Dimitry 145).

The narrator envisions the young lady as a moon object, resembling the moon on a night illuminated by starlight during April. In his literary works, the author idealised the natural environment encompassing the climate of New Orleans, the sprawling fields, and the mysterious bayou. A marsh is characterised by the continuous influx of water originating from various sources. Marshes are commonly encountered in areas with inadequate drainage and serve as well-known freshwater reservoirs. This phenomenon has the potential to be observed in multiple aquatic environments, including ponds, lakes, and streambeds. The soil exhibits remarkable fertility due to its consistent exposure to moisture. Consequently, the ecosystem supports a wide variety of flora and fauna. The plant roots show an adhesive property, enabling them to attach firmly to the muddy substrate, thereby impeding water flow velocity. The literary work titled "Whistling Dick's Christmas Stocking" by the author O. Henry conveys

Bushes and rank grasses crowded it to the wheel ruts, and out of this ambushade, the pests of the lowlands swarmed after him, humming a keen, vicious soprano. Moreover, as the night grew nearer, although colder, the whine of the mosquitoes became a greedy, petulant snarl that shut out all other sounds.... Moreover, there were mysterious marshes at his left, out of which came queer gurgling cries and a choked croaking. (Henry 307)

The vegetation of bushes and marshes resembles a dimly lit, low-lying grassland, prompting a survivor to draw a parallel between the terrestrial environment and a spectral realm. The author describes the marshland, climate, minuscule organisms, and the buzzing of insects that disrupt the survivor's enigmatic sense of focus. William Faulkner's "Out of Nazareth" describes, "the morning sun casts long shadows across the fields. The dew of early morning glitters, and the tall grass overhanging the side of the road is heavy with it. I am at peace with the World. Nothing matters" (Faulkner 372). The author suggests that the grassland provides physical energy and fosters positive emotions while drawing a parallel between the grassland and a heavenly location. As a result, the writers from New Orleans depict the swamp, bayou, marsh, and land areas, offering optimistic and pessimistic descriptions based on their subjective observations.

Agriculture is the amalgamation of artistic and scientific practices in cultivating soil, growing crops, and rearing livestock. The process consists in preparing plant and animal products for human consumption and their subsequent distribution to various marketplaces. Much of the global food and textile supply is derived from agricultural practices, encompassing leather, wool, and cotton crops. In addition, to produce, wood for construction purposes and paper products are also derived from farm activities. The commodities and the agricultural

methods utilised may vary across different geographical areas. The article “The Art and Science of Agriculture” in *National Geographic* defines, “Before agriculture became widespread, people spent most of their lives searching for food, hunting wild animals and gathering wild plants. About 11,500 years ago, people gradually learned how to grow cereal and root crops and settled down to a life based on farming. By 2,000 years ago, much of the Earth’s population had become dependent on agriculture.”

Agricultural practises exhibit significant variations on a global scale, owing to factors such as climate, geography, cultural norms, and technological capacities. A characteristic of low-tech agriculture involves the cultivation of permanent crops or food on land that is not replenished following each harvest. Crop rotation is an agricultural practice requiring a comprehensive comprehension of cultivable land. It is considered a more sophisticated farming technique. In the growth process, the plants obtain water through precipitation through rain. The agriculturalist employs a hoe as a tool to cultivate their agricultural land. During the period of harvest, the agriculturalist’s family engages in the process of gathering maize, removing its husk, and subsequently exposing the ears to solar radiation for desiccation. Furthermore, the dry maize is subjected to grinding while producing porridge. The writer O. Henry’s “Whistling Dick’s Christmas Stocking” asserts:

He overlooked fields of sugarcane so vast that their farthest limits melted into the sky. The sugar-making season was well advanced, and the cutters were at work: the wagons creaked drearily after them: the Negro Teamsters inspired the mules to more incredible speed with mellow and sonorous imprecations. Dark-green groves, blurred by the blue of distance, showed where the plantation houses stood.

The tall chimneys of the sugar-mills caught the eye miles distant, like lighthouses at the sea. (Henry 307)

In New Orleans, sugarcane farmers opt to plant seed cane during the late summer despite the prevailing practice of conducting agricultural planting during spring. The commencement of the sugarcane harvest in New Orleans typically occurs in October. Nevertheless, it is imperative for the farmer to consistently allocate a specific area of his land for yearly cultivation with fresh seed cane. Ensuring completion of the planting process before harvest is of utmost importance; however, inclement weather, such as rain and muddy conditions, may impede this progression. In his work, O. Henry refers to the allocation of labour during the sugarcane harvesting season, whereby plantation owners entrusted cultivating and reaping sugarcane fields to individuals held in bondage. In “Whistling Dick’s Christmas Stocking,” the author parallels the sugar mill chimneys and the lighthouse at sea. In his article titled “History of Sugarcane Research in Louisiana,” Kenneth Gravois, an expert in American sugarcane, conveys

In 1795, Etienne de Boré and Antoine Morin could granulate sugar from sugarcane on de Boré’s plantation in New Orleans – and the Louisiana sugar boom began. In 1806, Governor William Claiborne of the Territory of Orleans wrote a letter to President Thomas Jefferson that included this statement: “The facility with which the sugar planters amass wealth is almost incredible”.(Kenneth Gravois)

The sugarcane fields in New Orleans were subject to extensive harvesting, which significantly contributed to the economic prosperity of the United States market. The Louisiana Sugar Planters Association was founded in November 1877 by notable sugar planters such as Duncan Kenner and John Dymond. The establishment of the Sugar Experiment Station at Shulze

Plantation in Kenner can be traced back to 1885 when it was founded under the auspices of the Louisiana Sugar Planters Association. Various commercial sugarcane varieties are available to farmers in Louisiana. The presence of sand in the soil can have advantageous effects on the growth of certain plant species. Specific individuals possess the ability to manage soils with higher clay content effectively. Certain cultivators can endure extremely low temperatures, while certain varieties planted early in the season produce more sugar. The cultivation of sugarcane in Louisiana has been observed to yield multiple harvests, typically ranging from three to four crops, owing to its classification as a grass species. The authors of New Orleans literature directed their attention towards the sugar plantations and the affluence of the plantation owners in their literary works. Nevertheless, the authors described the techniques employed by the labourers during harvesting sugarcane in the fields while also providing a portrayal of the daily lives of these workers on the plantations.

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