

Tales of the South

by
William Gilmore Simms

StoryLines Southeast Discussion Guide No. 2

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About the author

The South was the principal subject of William Gilmore Simms's writing, and he was especially interested in the role the region had played in the Revolutionary War. His eight novels about the Revolutionary War constitute his greatest sustained literary achievement. He died in Charleston in 1870.

Discussion questions

What do you learn in these tales of life in the South? What are the prevailing attitudes and concerns of the characters?

Of what significance are dreams, visions, ghosts, and superstitions in these tales? How do these things characterize the teller of these tales? (See especially "Sharp Snaffles" or "Greyling")

Additional readings

William Gilmore Simms. *The Yemassee: A Romance of Carolina*, 1985.

Mary Ann Wimsatt. *The Major Fiction of William Gilmore Simms*, 1989.

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During the 45 years of his life he devoted to writing, William Gilmore Simms (1806-1870) produced an astonishing 80 volumes of work, including novels, plays, poetry, essays, short stories, and literary criticism. Simms also edited newspapers, served in the South Carolina legislature, and in general became a leading literary figure of the antebellum South, his renown and popularity greater for a time than other noted nineteenth century southern writers such as Edgar Allan Poe. "So influential was [Simms] in his numerous pursuits," states southern literature scholar Mary Ann Wimsatt in her introduction to *Tales of the South*, "that by mid-century he had become the acknowledged spokesperson for the cultural and literary concerns of his region." After the Civil War, Simms's books fell into relative obscurity, and to this day his work remains unpublicized, except for a growing number of twentieth-century scholars, like Wimsatt, who feel he should be restored to his rightful place in the pantheon of noted southern writers.

Prior to the Civil War, most prominent publishing houses were located in the North, and publishing was dominated by the economic, cultural, and literary climate of that region. After the Civil War, northern publishing houses became even more influential in determining the course of certain writers' reputations. Books by Simms were largely looked upon unfavorably, says Wimsatt, because Simms was ". . . a tireless proponent of slavery and secession whose attitudes toward race offended readers in a somewhat less prejudiced age."

Simms had largely been a romantic writer, in the same tradition as other early to mid-century British and American writers, employing similar literary conventions, themes and attitudes. After the Civil War, popular tastes turned away from the romantic traditions and favored more realistic fiction. Simms's family home was destroyed during the war, thrusting him and his family into difficult economic straits, and forcing Simms to fill his days with writing contracts he may have otherwise refused in favor of other, higher literary pursuits. All of these factors added to the decline of his career.

Wimsatt also points out that since the Civil War, the South has largely been defined in the eyes of the public by stereotypic notions perpetuated by writers and other persons outside the

South. Since the Civil War, in other words, the South has been more talked about than listened to; therefore, restoring Simms to the prominence he may deserve serves as counterbalance to historical inaccuracies widely accepted about the South. The "moonlight-and-magnolias" or "great plantation" image of the South, for example, is a romanticized and sentimentalized version of southern agrarian culture.

Simms—as an insider—portrays the region more accurately, at least from the point of view of his particular social status and ethnic identity. According to Wimsatt, the economic, social, and literary changes brought about by the Civil War have drastically affected the way in which both the culture of the antebellum South and the writing of Simms and other authors who were part of that culture have been viewed:

The prevailing interpretation of the South, which still operates in the late twentieth century, has distorted the national understanding of Southern culture and literature . . . The unfortunate result for our century has been that, until recently, a major man of letters who happened to be Southern has been nearly lost from sight, whereas Northern writers whom he, rightly in the main, considered his inferiors—such as Washington Irving and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow—remain fairly widely known.

William Gilmore Simms was born in Charleston in 1806. His mother died two years later and his grief-stricken father left South Carolina, striking out for a new life in frontier Mississippi. Simms was raised in poverty by his maternal grandmother, excluded from the aristocratic social and intellectual life of Charleston. As a young child he was poorly educated, though he was profoundly influenced by tales of local Indians, histories and legends of pirates along the coast, and Revolutionary War stories, all told to him by his grandmother.

By age 12, Simms was already clearly aimed at literary pursuits, composing poetry about the Battle of New Orleans and writing a play about Native Americans. At age 18, he journeyed to Mississippi to be with his father. Simms and his father traveled by horseback on various adventures in the

frontier Gulf South, coming into close contact with the Creek, Choctaw and Cherokee Nations. These trips, his later travels around the Appalachian mountain region, and the tales told to him by his grandmother, would provide material for Simms's writing for the rest of his life.

Until recently, Simms had been most noted for his historical fiction, such as *The Yemassee* (1835), depicting a tragic conflict between Carolina colonists and Indians in 1715. Sanatee, chief of the Yemassee, is portrayed as a tragic hero, dying in defense of his people and their lands, and in general, the book views Native Americans sympathetically. Nonetheless, the modern reader will note that Simms's attitudes towards both race relations and women reflect the prevailing views of his time. However well-meaning he may be, to the modern reader Simms may at times seem short-sighted. But choosing to hear such historically significant points of view, rather than censoring them, may give greater insight into the character of our country as it has evolved over time.

Of late, scholars are underscoring the accomplishment and literary value of Simms's shorter works, such as the stories in *Tales of the South*. These tales, humorous or serious, lighthearted or macabre, are a lively patchwork of legends, ghost-lore, folk beliefs, superstitions and the author's own imagination. Here, in "The Fisherman," the reader meets an indolent Southern planter who, rather than work for a living, vainly fishes for sunken treasure. In "Juan Ponce de Leon," the reader will find a fanciful portrayal—a parody—of the history of this famous Spanish explorer and his discovery of Florida and the Fountain of Youth. "Logochie" is based on an Indian legend and the widespread folk belief that spirits inhabit trees and deal mischief on passers-by. In sum, Mary Ann Wimsatt writes that Simms's short fiction is ". . . memorable for its varied subjects, characters, and settings, its comprehensive portrait of antebellum Southern civilization, and its persistent use of legends and folk tales as a means of bringing that multiracial, multicultural civilization alive."