Gender, Race and Region in the Writings of Grace King, Ruth McEnery Stuart, and Kate Chopin (review)

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Hoffman draws upon Lord Raglan, Joseph Campbell, and Otto Rank to establish definitions of the mythical hero that apply well enough, I suppose, to Huck, Hank, and Pudd’nhead. His aim is to show that Twain’s heroes “do not fail under their own weight; they fail in context.” In short, they are mythic heroes living in worlds where myth is dead. Specifically, Huck’s adventures unfold in a time and place called “Jacksonian America,” a phrase associated in our popular language with hypocrisy. Huck represents Jacksonian idealism as it never was realized; the world Huck goes up against is the one documented by history: selfish, corrupt, and violent. In a sense, Huck cannot do battle with his world; he cannot engage it in terms that matter. In Hank Morgan’s case, the greater enemy turns out to be himself—his nineteenth-century, technology-oriented self. His mythic heroic qualities, at first so successfully exercised in the war against medieval ignorance, are at last swamped by his mechanistic world view. This is the man who, when he brags about being an American who can make any kind of “labor-saving machinery,” gives as his examples “guns, revolvers, cannon, boilers, engines.” In David Wilson, though, Hoffman finds “a hero to believe in,” a character who “achieves authenticity” and a “knowledge of identity.” Then he appends a speculative epilogue in which he evaluates the moral victory of Pudd’nhead’s “simple knowledge and simpler faith” by contrasting it to the defeat Huck and Hank are dealt by history. Hoffman likes to muddle around like this, and, as Huck would say, he is mostly wrong usually, but occasionally his muddling struck me as fascinating.

All three of these books have their fascinating moments. They are not so compelling that every scholar needs to buy them, but they do deserve to be in the nearest university library. Moreover, undergraduates can read them and not be damaged much.

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Taylor’s book is an astute analysis of the fiction of three successful postbellum Louisiana women writers who, in different ways, were radically feminist but politically reactionary and racist. Taylor places their works in a literary, social, and historical context and examines various influences on these writers: women friends, male mentors, and domestic circumstances; the Local Color movement; the salability of romanticized versions of the Old South; and the break up of the old social order after the Civil War.

RECENT BOOKS—THE AMERICAS
Taylor elucidates the feminist concerns of these writers—Grace King’s depictions of strong working women, Ruth McEnery Stuart’s analysis of gender stereotyping and women’s resistance to it, and Kate Chopin’s celebrations of female sexuality. The author also offers provocative reinterpretations of major literary works. Our reading of *The Awakening* is enriched, for instance, by thinking of it as a political work about the “Protestant/Catholic divide” and about “nationality and regionalism.” But the most important contribution of this book is its examination of the relationship between feminism and orthodox southern white racism in these texts. Taylor deliberately focuses on the writers’ treatment of black experience—King’s view of slavery as benevolent protection and Stuart’s use of dialect to perpetuate stereotypes like the loyal mammy. The author emphasizes the problematic class- and race-bound perspective that generates the “conceit” between “bourgeois white marriage and slavery” and the connection, in turn, between racism and the political construction of a southern mythology that these writers participated in.

*Gender, Race and Region* would, however, benefit from greater theoretical sophistication. Every chapter begins with a mechanical and traditional birth-marriage-children-death biography that is then related to the texts in a simplistic, causal, and reflectionist manner; letters and diaries are treated as “evidence,” as embodying a linguistic transparency that needs no interpretation; and there is a complete absence of theories of race, a crucial omission in a study so concerned with racial politics. There is also the politically troubling acceptance of the traditional version of southern history—the relative racial harmony and stability before the Civil War and the eruption of racial hostilities thereafter.

Despite these problems Taylor’s book is a significant contribution to feminist scholarship. It is a much needed corrective to the apolitical and essentialist gender analysis of much of American feminist criticism. It is also an important addition to the small but growing body of scholarship on Southern women writers initiated by Anne Goodwyn Jones’s *Tomorrow is Another Day* (1981) and followed by Louise Westling’s *Sacred Groves and Ravaged Gardens* (1985) and Katherine Seidel’s *The Southern Belle in the American Novel* (1985). By focusing on a narrow group of Southern women writers but through a broad spectrum of racial, gender, and political concerns, Taylor has set intellectual standards for further serious and specialized studies in the area.

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