

# Similarities in new and old southern literature

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Karen Russell's modern Southern novel, *Swamplandia!* is informed by various works of Southern Literature through different time periods. It is through the use of themes and motifs specific to literature of the American South that *Swamplandia!* gets its confirmation as a modern interpretation of the genre. The themes of strong family bonds, storytelling styles, and the importance of names are seen in older and contemporary Southern literature alike. The presence of strong family bonds is evident in both *Swamplandia!* and William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, in the idolatry that is shared between Ava Bigtree and Addie Bundren for their mothers and sons. Storytelling is a device used as a means of preservation, in *Swamplandia!* Ava uses it to protect her sense of self and sanity, whereas Flannery O'Connor preserves Mrs. Turpin's old ways of thinking in her short story "Revelation". Lastly, character's names and the naming of certain items is a motif of the Southern genre that enhances a character's presence and personality, and shows the importance of an object with a specific name. In *Swamplandia!* names show future aspirations and humor, and in Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* names represent the glorified past and illusions. *Swamplandia!* uses these themes to build on the Southern Literature genre by interpreting them in a setting that is relevant to today. Russell's writing style and topics of discussion in *Swamplandia!* are modern, but in understanding the parallels of the themes to older literary works, it is apparent that Russell's work in Southern Literature is in equal measure to Faulkner's work.

*Swamplandia!*'s use of idolizing one's family members is very similar to *As I Lay Dying*, and this shows its direct lineage with the Southern genre. Ava Bigtree refers to her mother, Hilola Bigtree, several times throughout the

story for guidance and comfort after her death. Hilola is usually mentioned in the glorified and amazing words by Ava as a world-class alligator wrestler, and her dramatic introduction to the story is proof of Ava's wonder towards her, " Trumpets tooted from our big, old-fashioned speakers, and the huge unseeing eye of the follow spot twisted through the palm fronds until it found Hilola. Just like that, she ceased to be our mother... fame settled on her like a film..." (Russell 4). Russell's wording and tone differ from Faulkner, and so Ava's idolization of her mother is more indicative of her naiveté and the pedestal one places upon one's parents as their being the ideal. That Ava is also the daughter and a young girl also makes her big talks about her mother more affectionate and idealistic. Comparatively, Faulkner's disruption of the family hierarchy in a mother idolizing her son creates a tone that is more depressing and less idealistic. " He is my cross and he will be my salvation. He will save me from the water and from the fire. Even though I have laid down my life, he will save me" (Faulkner 113). Faulkner's dramatic allusions to the Bible give the impression that, Addie Bundren holds her son Jewel closer to the ideal of a literal, Christ-like idol. While both of these stories feature characters that place family members on high ideals, each is interpreted differently through the personality of the character and the author's word choice.

Storytelling by itself is an act of preservation- a medium through which it is possible to save something from history. It seems appropriate then, that it would feature in *Swamplandia!* and " Revelation" as a way to save one's self. Ava Bigtree tells a story in the brief moment before the scene of her sexual assault by The Bird Man. She goes back in time and recalls a nature slide

show, “ Kiwi made us after-hours caramel popcorn... the three of us crunching loudly” before jumping back to her present situation, ““ Lie down, Ava” the man said, spreading a green tarp for us, and I did” (Russell 260). The storytelling then includes meticulously detailed descriptions of nature alongside the assault by The Bird Man, as Ava retreats further into an out-of-body voice in telling her story. Russell uses storytelling here to show how Ava tries to protect herself against the assault, and ultimately preserve her sanity as her young mind tries to process what is happening to herself. Storytelling by Mrs. Turpin in “ Revelation” is done much differently than by Ava in *Swamplandia!* as Turpin uses it to hold onto her classist and racist mindset. She also alternates in her storytelling, referring to one audience as the white-trash woman and the other as the pleasant lady (O’Connor 821-822) and dips into talking about her dream of doing away with poor and Black people, before telling of her superior farm. She ends her farming escapades with “ The look that Mrs. Turpin and the pleasant lady exchanged indicated they both understood that you had to have certain things before you could know certain things” (O’Connor 822). The way in which Turpin ends her story shows how her character is insecure and tells materialistic stories to protect her illogical personal convictions. Storytelling exists in both stories to preserve some form of identity and self, but subject and situation in the story dictate its significance.

The names of characters and places having specific meanings are used in the Southern genre as an enhancement. A quirk or unique personality trait is usually explained in a dissection of the name. Animals are a recurring motif with the *Bigtree*’s, and since *Swamplandia!* is told through only two of the

Bigtree's points of view, it is fitting that both Ava and Kiwi have names relating to birds. Irony is also used in the names, as the kiwi is famous for being a flightless bird, while Kiwi Bigtree rescues his sister Osceola once he becomes a pilot. It is also ironic that Osceola be named for a famous Seminole leader, when she is the odd one out in her Native American-ish family, and described as "... not a weak chamomile blond, but pure frost, with eyes that vibrated somewhere between maroon and violet" (Russell 6). However, *Swamplandia!* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* similarly use the names of objects to address other aspects of the story. Ava's nature slide is titled "The Silently Screaming World" which is very much a direct observation of her thoughts during the assault (Russell 261). In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the home that Blanche duBois and her sister Stella used to have was called 'Belle Reve' which translates into 'beautiful dream'. The home harkens back to the old plantation days and the wealthier, Southern aristocracy the women once belonged to, but it's also a reference to the way Blanche lives her life once the house is gone. She hides around in the shadows and hesitates for anyone to see her true self as she attempts to pretend her life is fine, but her explanations for Belle Reve's demise show Blanche's true suffering side "... I think it's wonderfully fitting that Belle Reve should finally be this bunch of old papers..." (Williams 44). The author's similar usage of names stem from the understanding that the specific meanings of certain names is the deciding factor in what becomes important to the story.

*Swamplandia!* is the modern Southern novel that expands upon the genre by bringing its themes and style to light in a contemporary way. Strong family

ties are interpreted differently from Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, but the theme of family importance still holds true. Storytelling is used as an act of preservation of the mind, and is used differently for various reasons by different characters. Lastly, the use of name meanings remains similarly used in both *Swamplandia!* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* as the importance of the meaning is used equally in both stories. By comparing and contrasting these older stories with a contemporary Southern novel, it is apparent that history can always make some relevant connection in to the present. More often than not, the themes and motifs were paralleled but discussed differently in the modern novel. These connections help to assert the importance of preserving older literature, as it continues to be relevant today.

## **Works Cited**

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