

MIDWESTERN  
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*being a collection of essays  
observing the fiftieth anniversary  
of Ross Lockridge, Jr.'s  
Raintree County  
by members of*

The Society for the Study of  
Midwestern Literature

*edited by*  
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past becomes luminous and usable by the time he says goodbye to the Professor at the train station and meditates on his own life and that of the American republic. Perhaps one implication is that America must become more aware of its own history, however late in the day, to make that history a usable past. But not in its chronological ordering—rather, in its immanent meaning, its pivotal and horrific but sometimes luminous moments.

You mention that the neo-Freudians, the formalists, the Marxists, the deconstructors and postmodernists, and what have you, have largely ignored the novel. It seems to me that they would all have a field day. You note that it has great formal integrity. But it's bursting at the seams in other ways—the violation of chronology, the openendedness, not even a period at the end. We're in a post-formalist era now when such things are valued. *Raintree County* has some frayed edges that might appeal to such critics. We hear much, too, about intertextuality. This is a novel deliberately constructed out of other literary texts as well as the texts of American history. Also, feminist criticism: three of the four narrative perspectives are female—besides Shawnessy, we are put into the minds of his daughter Eva, his second spouse Esther, and the feminist Evelina. Another critic has called this an “ecological novel,” for its passionate evocation of the American landscape and its scorn of industrial blight. So where are the ecocritics when we need them?

I hope Jim Morrison proves a true prophet: he said that *Raintree County* was the novel for the new millennium. We'll just have to wait and see what kind of audience turns out for the centennial celebration of *Raintree County* in the year 2048.

L.L.

Response to Theodore Kennedy:

I hope your daughter finishes the novel.

1,060 pages: the length does work against *Raintree County*. I write about it in terms of what Northrop Frye calls “encyclopedic form.” My father thought of it as a compendium of sorts, making use of a large variety of subgenres. For instance, it makes use of philosophical dialogue, conspicuously of Plato's *Republic*. Most contemporary editors would probably request him to kick such dialogue out. But he thought that it belonged there, feeding also on the Ameri-

In honor of  
Toni Morrison

## Response to Douglas Noverr:

Douglas Noverr gives a somewhat brighter reading of the novel than Dean Rehberger. I'm sympathetic to both readings, for I think the novel provides for both.

Your emphasis on American history puts me in mind of my father's relationship with his father, Ross Lockridge, Senior, who was an Indiana historian. He took groups of people all over the state, performing what he called Historic Site Recitals. He'd try to evoke the great names associated with cow pastures and other featureless parts of Indiana. His conception of history was based on heroes, on giants in the earth, who can be evoked through memory and especially memorials. So Ross Senior was responsible for historical roadside markers throughout the state. He was known as "Mr. Indiana."

Ross Junior's version of history emphasized instead the irony of memorialization, the difficulty of historical retrieval. Certainly he had a greater sense of loss.

At the same time I think of *Raintree County* as an incorporative novel—not so much an allusive novel. It attempts to retrieve and shore up the great texts of the past through its own version of recitation. It incorporates the great texts of American history, often in counterpoint to elements that might seem to subvert them. For example, the Gettysburg Address is recited in a Chattanooga warehouse while the hometown sprinter and braggart Flash Perkins dances a jig with a whore. This isn't exactly the context that Ross *Senior* had in mind for these great words of history.

The question that Shawnessy and the Perfessor pose, as constant antagonists, is whether American history is progressive or in decline. The cynical Perfessor intones that all beautiful things are old things. Douglas Noverr cites the phrase "valorous dream." And the novel ends with the phrase, "endlessly courageous dreamer." The Dreamer for Lockridge is not someone who evades history, rather someone who courageously imagines new possibilities within history. This is straight out of Schiller's notion of aesthetic culture. We see it also in Wilde's *Decay of Lying* and Northrop Frye's "myth of freedom." Certainly Shawnessy believes with them that we invent our institutions—they're not here by nature. The bright implication of this is that we could imagine *better* institutions, a more aesthetic human culture; this requires a mythic imagination, an awareness of the old

## PREFACE

The appearance of *Midwestern Miscellany* XXVI (Spring 1998) marks an important new milestone in the continued evolution of the Society's publication history. With the publication of *SSML Newsletter* 27, Number Three (Fall 1997), the *Newsletter*, as we've known it for more than a quarter-century since its first issue in March 1971 announced the formation of the Society as an organization dedicated to encouraging and promoting the study of the literature of what Sherwood Anderson called his "Mid-America," has ceased publication. In its stead, *Midwestern Miscellany* will appear twice yearly, in the Spring and Fall; it will contain other features in addition to the customary essays; and it will be supplemented by information conveyed by electronic media as well as by special mailed bulletins as we carry on that founding purpose of the Society.

Fittingly, this new direction in the publications of the Society is inaugurated by this issue, in which six members of the Society discuss Ross Lockridge, Jr.'s *Raintree County*, a magnificent interpretation of the Midwest and its people, on the novel's fiftieth anniversary.

Suitably, this issue is dedicated to Toni Morrison, Ohioan, Midwesterner, novelist, Nobel Laureate, and recipient of the Society's Mark Twain Award for 1997.

June, 1998

DAVID D. ANDERSON

## LARRY LOCKRIDGE'S INFORMAL RESPONSES TO PAPERS ON *RAINTREE COUNTY*

delivered in East Lansing and San Diego and by Dean Rehberger, Douglas Noverr, David Anderson, and Theodore Kennedy. Larry Lockridge, Professor of English at New York University, is a son of Ross Lockridge, Jr.

Response to Dean Rehberger:

You've given a reading of the novel seemingly unavailable to the critics of 1948. James Baldwin, for instance, got his own career underway with a pan of *Raintree County*. He read it as a very sunny narrative—an affirmation of the American dream, an optimistic fiction that didn't acknowledge the dark underbelly of America. You've argued that another reading is available to us, that the novel contains its own dark or at least problematic reading of American history and politics. Elsewhere you've written that the novel is a critique of the "ideology of nationalism." Certainly it is very critical of race relations in America, and I've always been surprised that Baldwin wouldn't have perceived that racism is portrayed in the novel as what Ross Lockridge called "the mental illness of America."

And, yes, I'd agree that the novel is political in such a way as to have made it an outsider to the canon—though as a partisan I'm always eager to uncover motives for its exclusion that do not pertain to aesthetic judgment. John Shawnessy attempts to "look inward," but social reality, history, and politics always impinge. Shawnessy is the "rememberer" who cannot get on with his own epic poem. He's weighed down by the history and social reality and familial ties of which Dean Rehberger has been speaking. In some notes on his novel, my father said that his protagonist Shawnessy is such a debtor to his own past that he cannot write his way out of it. At the end we don't really know if Shawnessy is going to write that epic. Probably not, in any literal sense.

Certainly when Lockridge began his novel, he thought of it as affirmative. It would be a novel "that Americans need, goddam

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same fact of life will prevent *Raintree County* from winning its deserved place in American literature. Can you imagine the expressions on the faces of a class of average high school students or college underclassmen on being told that their outside reading will consist of a book of 1,060 pages?

If I were converted overnight into autocrat of this society, one of my first ukase would be to forbid the binding of more than 600 pages in any single volume. One thousand and sixty pages are just too many. The author would probably never have agreed to a sharp limitation, but the question arises for us, would *Raintree County* have been hurt by some radical pruning? I'm inclined to think not. I wish Mr. Lockridge had never read a word written by Sigmund Freud, especially his *Interpretation of Dreams*. These days even my own dreams bore me. To read repeated accounts of the fictional dreams of fictional characters is simply too much. In my opinion, every one could have been deleted and taken nearly 200 pages with them. And I am thankful the publishers insisted on cutting an additional 50-page dream sequence.

Also *Raintree County* contains many philosophical passages which remind me of an experience one summer afternoon perhaps twenty years ago. I was reclining in a lounge chair in the back yard of my home here in East Lansing when I happened to look directly overhead. There, a thousand feet up or thereabouts, a glider was silently circling. The pilot had found an updraft and was using it to gain altitude. The circling continued for about a minute while the craft gained at least another thousand feet and then headed eastward. The philosophical passages in *Raintree County* often seemed to me to interrupt the narrative while the author metaphorically gained altitude.

It is my conviction that the true meanings to be found in any narrative emerge from the actions and words of characters, and sometimes from the settings. This allows the reader the pleasure of discovery, much preferable to being lectured. Having said this, I must confess that philosophical writing has generally had an effect on my mind similar to that of a 17th Century sermon. Others, I am sure, may feel differently.

I would like to refer again to the closing scene in the book where the great character Jerusalem Webster Stiles uses his cane to write his and John Wickliff Shawnessy's initials in the air. Reading this in 1948, I for the first time noticed the similarity of names and concluded that this implied a symbolic identity. Were they two sides of a coin? Which was the obverse—surely John—and which the

THE SOUTHERN MYTH IN ROSS LOCKRIDGE, JR.'S  
*RAINTREE COUNTY*

PATRICIA WARD JULIUS

In the mid-nineteenth century, as we all know, the nature of the South and the institution of slavery impinged on the consciousness of the United States as no other issue has, before or since. However, most fictional treatments of this traumatic period in our history examine one side or the other and virtually none acknowledge the myths that surround and define that period. In his vast and panoramic novel, *Raintree County*, however, Ross Lockridge addresses that issue and dissects the myths that, in many ways, perpetuated it. Nearly 45% of the novel is concerned directly with the South and the effects of its mythology. Lockridge spends 225 pages on the story of Johnny Shawnessy and Susanna Drake and on the South's dark responsibility for the events which befell them and their son. He devotes 200 pages to Johnny's experiences in the Civil War. And the consequences of that traumatic event indirectly shape the stuff of the rest of the novel as well. The flesh of Lockridge's story is hung on the skeletal form of one day—a celebration of the 4th of July in 1892 in Raintree County, Indiana. But much of that day—the speeches, the conversations, the memories—centers around acknowledging, reliving, and debating the effects of the war. Johnny, with the rest of the County, dates events by “before the war” and “after the war.” And certainly these facts constitute “Southernness” with a vengeance. However *Raintree County* is essentially a story of myths, of which the Southern myth, the subject of this examination, is only a part.

According to historian Nicholas Cords, “a myth becomes reality precisely when people base their beliefs upon it and act as if the myth were true. In fact,” he writes, “the making of myths is a two-fold process by which a culture structures its world and by which it perpetu-

better than I have. Yet, my response to the novel on the second reading was more measured than it was after the first. This is not surprising. A few years ago I met a seventh grade classmate of whom I had been much enamored, and my response then too was measured.

The first thing I noted was what particulars had lodged in my memory over that gap in time? To be frank, relatively few details: the footrace, of course; the Raintree and the interesting events which occurred thereunder; the fact that Johnny did not marry Nell; some secondary characters, Garwood Jones, Cash Carney, Flash Perkins; some Civil War scenes; and of course the irrepressible Professor Jerusalem Webster Stiles. Most vividly of all, I remembered the last scene in the book where the Professor, standing on the receding railroad car, wrote his, and Johnny's, initials in the air with his cane—backwards! (That was—and is—almost too clever for me.)

Apart from these details, one other major element stayed fresh in my mind through all those years. As a lad I grew up with the feeling—shared by many of my schoolmates, I believe—that Indiana was a very special place, that we were lucky to be living there. We felt a bit sorry for those in Ohio because they stopped too soon, and we couldn't understand why those in Illinois went too far. I don't know how this deeply-felt loyalty was engendered. It was not caused by raising the state flag each morning and singing the state song, as was done in Texas. It may have been from the teacher reading aloud to us Edward Eggleston's *The Hoosier Schoolmaster*, or the Gene Stratton Porter's Limberlost stories, or hearing the Hoosier dialect poems of James Whitcomb Riley. Whatever the cause, I had learned to love the State, and I loved *Raintree County* for it seemed to explain that loyalty, elevating it to a philosophical plain.

Now when it comes to literary analysis, I think of Winston Churchill's comment when someone said his political opponent Clement Atlee was a very modest man. "Yes," said Churchill, "and he has a great deal to be modest about." I would have you know that I am quite modest about my talent for literary criticism. What I have to offer are merely some reactions to the book from two widely separated readings of it.

One question perplexed me after both readings of *Raintree County*: why was John Shawnessy held in such high esteem both by his old friends and by the community generally? [I am not forgetting that a few people were prepared to lynch him at one point in the story.] He was, in the world's eyes, a failure. His play never got its

whites, and, most dangerous of all, that one race could own another and remain sane, as a society or as an individual. The maintenance of this myth brutalized and dehumanized all its people, slave and free, and made them victims of the madness that was the peculiar institution. It split the nation in a Civil War whose cost is still being counted but whose first casualty was our innocence.

Lockridge spends a large part of his novel uncovering the layers of that myth, exposing its inevitable consequences for all those who strove so passionately to sustain it. Susanna Drake, "beautiful and alien," is the vehicle through which Lockridge explicates for Johnny—and for us—the scope of the corruption inevitable to a culture built "over the sinking marsh of human slavery" (439). Susanna, determined to bury the scandal of her birth in the safety of a marriage to Johnny, claims to be carrying their child. Johnny, of course, caught in his own myth of proper heroic behavior, proposes, though he knows the claim is a lie. Susanna, provocatively unclothed, strangely surrounded by her 116 dolls whom she calls her 'children,' accepts, and they are married. Lockridge's use of the events of John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry, his capture, trial, and execution as counterpoint to the betrothal, wedding, and consummation emphasizes the increasingly insistent Southern presence in Raintree County and foreshadows the inevitability of the conflict to come.

As the honeymooners traveled south: "Down the Mississippi, the oldest highway in the Republic, these pilgrims traveled toward a sensual Canterbury. And always this name meant sinful, dangerous, much desired" (430). They arrived in New Orleans to lights and activity and music but, most of all, to a stench which nearly choked Johnny. And this introduction to New Orleans becomes a metaphor for the South: the lights, gaiety, activity and beauty cannot hide the stench of rot which underlays it and corrupts its every stone and soul. One can only, like Johnny, get used to the smell. "Later he had to remind himself that this great human stink was there, always there, and that it would envelop everything he saw and did during the next few months" (431). The stink, of course, is slavery, "the oldest darkest crime in the world" (354) and all the beauty and seductive appeal of the South cannot change it or make it go away. But there was much to admire in the South in that year before the war. The land was beautiful, the horses and houses of the aristocracy magnificent, and the planters gracious and witty and hospitable. Most appealing of all to

With neither a period to end the flow of his poetic musing nor a structural end of the novel, but with a clear understanding of the oneness of the past, present, and future in life if not in grammar, John Wickliff Shawnessy stands at a new beginning at the crossroads of the National Road and the County Road, and he knows that for him and for America they have become one.

### Michigan State University

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To one whose Bible of the South was *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, there was astonishment in the lack of overt cruelty by master against slave. Only once, Johnny recalls, did he see a slave struck. But that instance is significant. At the Drake Plantation, as Susanna bent to retrieve a dropped bonnet, exposing the scar on her breast, a young groom, "watched in fascination" and Cousin Bobby Drake hit him, then raised a broadax against the unmoving slave. Johnny leapt for the handle but only Susanna's command stopped their struggle. "A man had almost lost his life for looking at a scar on the breast of this girl," Johnny realized. "He stood appalled at himself and the black moment that had sprung upon him from ambush in this genial place, among the hospitable people who had been so good to him" (446). To Bobby, of course, the groom was no man at all. He was a slave, and that made all the difference. With this incident, the moralist in Johnny took over from the poet who had gloried in the seductive loveliness of that gay sick South.

Ironically, the "grandest dream" of the South was, taken in itself, enchanting. It was to build a "Greek Republic in the soil of America," populated by the "most beautiful women and the most distinguished men in the world," a "culture of power, wealth and democratic tradition" (441). But the myth upon which this dream was founded was the belief that such a culture could be "erected on the toil of ten million slaves." So fervent was that belief that no argument was brooked, no compromise possible. Slavery, the South believed, was right and meet and just and theirs. And before they would see their myth threatened, they would invoke their "sacred right to form a government of their own" (441). The words were spoken, the idea of separation made tangible. Johnny remembered the great stink, even though he couldn't smell it any more. It was time to go back to Raintree County. It was time to go home.

But even in Raintree County, the South follows them. Lincoln had proclaimed that "A house divided against itself cannot stand," whether that house is the union or a dwelling in Raintree County. Susanna owns slaves, a practice Johnny finds despicable and unacceptable. Johnny supports Lincoln, a man, to Susanna, kin to the devil himself and, even worse, she insists, a man tainted by Negro blood. The spectre of miscegenation which has haunted the South and Susanna is raised again.

As one would expect at this time, Susanna accedes to Johnny's demand and frees her two slaves. But Susanna's violent mood shifts

*Huckleberry Finn* the two become one; the river, whether the Shawmucky or the Mississippi is at once movement—unconscious, eternal—and place—momentarily providing stability, whether on the raft or in the shade of the raintree. As movement and place fuse in Raintree County, perhaps supporting Archibald MacLeish's assertion that West—the American mythical place, the goal, the secret of fulfillment, perhaps the end of Columbus's curse—is not geographic but psychic, an eternal place in the American mind, that it *is*, as John Shawnessy learns at the end of the novel, that "His victory is not in consummations but in quests" (1059).

If John Shawnessy's search is the story of the county out of which he came and to which he returned in his maturity, it is a search on which he travels lightly, carrying little but personal baggage, even as he carries the continuum of nineteenth century America with him, reflecting the oneness of place and movement that has marked American literature from its beginnings. As an organic work, beginning at some misty point in pre-history, coming into clear focus as John Shawnessy examines his experience and that of the county and the nation, the microcosm-macrocosm of American life, and then drifts off into a not yet knowable future, as he creates a usable past for himself and for America, *Raintree County* reflects the cyclical rhythms of American Midwestern life and the literature to which American experience has given rise.

As Robert W. Spiller pointed out rightly just a few years after the publication of *Raintree County*, American literature, in its totality and in many of its individual works and genres reflects the history out of which it came, to which it contributes, and of which it is an intrinsic part. While the organic whole of American life and literature continue their cyclical flow, rhythms change, vary, manifest themselves in new or renewed patterns of art in structure, language, and idea. Firmly rooted in the cycle, *Raintree County* manifests itself as a work of art that looms so large in the literature of its time that to too many it is an aberration, to be treated seriously or not as the critic-teacher-literary historian chooses, and, of course, it is easier and perhaps safer to ignore it, hoping, perhaps, that it and the critical problems it poses will go away, or that, as Millard Kaufman, the writer of the 1957 MGM production, learned, it is perhaps safer to simplify, to make of it something less than it is, to ignore the critical questions that Lockridge poses and to which he—and the novel—deserve our reasoned answers.

Orleans, were the "They" who threatened her and sent her fleeing to Indianapolis. But of course there was no escape. So, in the end, she exorcised her demons and her memories and the continuation of herself in the only way she knew—by fire. And escaped finally into the safe shadows of insanity. Susanna, her father caught in the throes of illicit love for his mulatto mistress, his wife driven mad by her husband's betrayal and the necessity of claiming Susanna as her own, and Henrietta, trapped by race and convention, were as much victim of the Southern myth as the slaves themselves. Susanna's madness had its source in a greater madness—the madness of the belief that a society built on slavery could ever be sane.

In terms of Johnny Shawnessy's "Southern Education," if his sojourn in New Orleans was his baccalaureate, the war was his Ph.D. Interestingly, in the nearly 200 pages spent on Johnny's war years, little mention is made of the South itself. It has become a geography, marked only by the names of battles and memorable only for body counts. The cliché—cliché because it is true—that in war one must make the enemy a thing, a "they" different in kind from the "us," functions here. Apparently wars have no individual identity. All share the same character. Only the weapons and the slogans change. That being said, the Civil War remains the single greatest national trauma in our history, the most profligate in lives, the most inclusive in effect.

Johnny Shawnessy joined the Grand Army of the Republic a week after the destruction of his family. He matriculated at Chickamauga and marched to his graduation through Georgia with Sherman. In between, he feared, hungered, killed, looted, grieved, hated, and, at last, exchanged that hatred for understanding. He was wounded and survived. He watched Lincoln die and survived. He was declare dead and still he survived. But the war changed him as no other experience had. Johnny Shawnessy, "that innocent and happy youth was really dead (though it took his successor a little while to become aware of that fact)" (743). In a very real sense, the South had killed the mythical Johnny Shawnessy as surely as the war had shattered the foundations of the Southern myth.

The 19th century South, no less than Raintree County itself, was a myth, a place "without boundaries in time and space," a creation of its "mythical and lost peoples." Sustained during two and a half centuries of slavery by the myth that one human being could own another [and remain sane,] that myth was perpetuated after the Civil War by

a region, and a literature that knows neither endings nor beginnings, as Ihab Hassan wisely points out in *Radical Innocence*, is a resource for today and all the tomorrows, driven as we are by what Hassan incisively calls “The curse of Columbus...” (336).

The past, personal, regional, national, tied to us by what Abraham Lincoln called “The mystic chords of memory...” (216) that bind us together as a people even as they direct and define our individual American Midwestern culturally diverse selves, is at once a crucial element in our Midwestern lives and in those of the writers and works that define them. It is this past, historical, geographical, spacial, temporal, personal, individual, and collective, that remains with us as we come to the end of this century and the beginning of another, that provides the source and substance of what we can and must know about our time, our place, and ourselves. It is this past out of which we extract the works and themes in which we attempt to define ourselves to others and ultimately to ourselves,

When C. Van Woodward looked about him, in the South as well as elsewhere in the nation during the decades of the 1950s, the years in which the essays that make up *The Burden of Southern History* were written, he must have heard of, read reviews and news accounts of, or perhaps even read or read at what is certainly, if nothing else, the most celebrated novel of the postwar decade, a novel that, had it been published a generation later, would have propelled its young author to instant if fleeting fame on the Today Show, Inside Edition, or Oprah; in its own time it earned their postwar equivalent, the MGM Prize. The novel is *Raintree County* by Ross Lockridge, Jr. It was published on January 5, 1948; it became an immediate best-seller as well as the most talked-of novel of its time, and, if it lost the Pulitzer Prize for 1949 to James Gould Cozzen’s *Guard of Honor* (1948), it effectively dominated the literary mind and imagination in its time. Like *Guard of Honor*, it passed quickly from the popular consciousness, but unlike its rival it lives to haunt the secret place of our literary, cultural, and regional past after half a century

Woodward should have seen that *Raintree County* is a novel of all our pasts, national, regional, local, the pasts of our fears, frustrations, hopes, and ambitions; it is the past of our psyches and our myths, of the rituals of our lives and of the curious dichotomy between what we profess and what we do. More importantly, like the nation and region out of which it comes and the literature—American Midwestern literature—out of which it comes, it is a novel of the

into the reality of the past was an impossible undertaking ... There was ... only one reality—the reality of someone's experience ... And even the world of the present was sustained by the same omnipotent creative fictions. His own life was a myth to himself and other ... And if he was a myth, others were even more so" (802). Each of us creates ourself according to our values and beliefs. But we must be sure, Lockridge implies, that myth is truly our own, not the generalized creative fictions of a society or a political party or a religious leader or anything that demands that we shape ourselves blindly to standards invented by others. *Raintree County* is not a topical book, speaking of long past events and long dead ideas. Rather, it offers lessons from which we can benefit today or anytime. John Shannessy sought wisdom and greatness, we are told. Certainly, in *Raintree County*, Ross Lockridge demonstrates that he has found both. And certainly that is enough.

Michigan State University

## RAINTREE COUNTY AND THE CYCLE OF AMERICAN LITERATURE

DAVID D. ANDERSON

In an otherwise remarkable study of the impact of Southern history on the social and cultural evolution of the region, appropriately called *The Burden of Southern History*, C. Van Woodward attempts an unfortunate comparison between the literature of the Midwest, that by Sherwood Anderson, Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, Edgar Lee Masters, and others, that came to dominate and direct American literature in the 1920s and 1930s, and that of the newer Southern literature of Robert Penn Warren and the other Agrarians, Katherine Ann Porter, Thomas Wolfe, and others of the same period. The difference, Woodward insists, is clear: the Southern writers and their characters carry with them the burden of history—the ante-bellum slave-based culture, the Civil War, the myth of the Lost Cause, the ghosts of three centuries of the Southern past. Midwestern writers and their people, conversely, “appear on the scene from nowhere, trailing no clouds of history, dissociated from the past.” (30); indeed, many of them, epitomized by Hemingway’s people, “live completely in the present” (31).

Unfortunately, Woodward’s comments are too frequently echoed by other historians and critics, whether they are avowedly regional as is Woodward, or those who consider themselves national or universal, often ensconced as they are in that most provincial of American cities. Refutation is easy; one need look only at the opening lines of Sinclair Lewis’s *Main Street* (1920): “On a hill by the Mississippi where Chippewas camped two generations ago, a girl stood in relief against the cornflower blue of Northern sky. She saw no Indians now; she saw flour-mills and the blinking windows of skyscrapers in Minneapolis and St. Paul...” (1).

unequaled by any other American book” (Lockridge, *Shade* 267). His father’s “hope for his own novel,” Larry Lockridge observes “is that in evoking the old names and singing the myth of the Republic, he can move Americans to return to origins, to revere the nourishing earth and democratic vistas” (Lockridge, *Shade* 297).

We can read the novel, in other words, as a detailed search of Raintree County for the raintree, a symbol that stands in for the phallic origins of the nation, penetrating and nourishing the once virginal landscape, but as the narrator explains in the opening dream sequence, this search is continually doomed to failure. In the dream, Shawnessy is studying a map of the county and “[h]e was certain that in the pattern of its lines and letters this map contained the answer to the old conundrum of his life in Raintree county. It was all warm and glowing with the secret he had sought for half a century. The words inscribed on the deep paper were dawnwords, each one disclosing the origin and essence of the thing named. But as he sought to read them, they dissolved into the substance of the map” (Lockridge, *Raintree* 5). No trope is more pervasive in the novel than the arousal of “memory and desire” that is always thwarted and denied. As the narrator explains of the main character, John Wickliff Shawnessy, “No sooner did he appear to be caught in a definition than he somehow turned inside out to include the includer. He was always pressing beyond the confines of himself; yet could never go anywhere that wasn’t himself” (Lockridge, *Raintree* 18). The narrator concludes, “for America was always an education in self-denial. And Raintree County was itself the barrier of form imposed upon the stuff of longing, lifejet of the river” (Lockridge, *Raintree* 116). This failure of desire not only appears constantly in the tropes of the novel but is played out thematically in Shawnessy’s doomed love affair with Nell Gaither and likewise in Shawnessy’s failed attempt to write an American epic.

What I want to argue is not to focus on how *Raintree County* writes the impossibilities of its desire—to be the great American novel—but to focus on a smaller piece of the argument: how Lockridge’s choice of genre, historical fiction, while making gestures toward American literary tradition, ultimately defines the work against the grain of the American literary theory of the 1930s, 40s and 50s, dooming its hopes of being included within the canon of American literature.

and Susanna's son on July 4, 1863, and his marriage to Esther Root on July 4, 1878). There were personal myths, legends, crises in one's life (such as searching desperately in Indianapolis for the lost wife and son during the last days of the Battle at Gettysburg) known only to the individuals involved and never recorded in words or formed into a Historical Event but nonetheless real and material, although transitory and fleeting. No one else was there when Flash Perkins died in Johnny's arms just outside of Columbia, South Carolina, on February 17, 1865 or when Johnny toppled the tombstone in the cemetery commemorating his assumed death in the Civil War.

But as Shawnessy believes, human life is "Oneself, a simple, separate person. But Oneself exists by virtue in a world shared with other selves. Our life is the intersection of the Self with an Other. In the intense personal form this interection is love, and in the ideal general form it's the Republic. Jesus gave us the moral shape of this Republic—the Sign of the Cross." (929) What Shawnessy has to come to terms with are the "lost souls" and "lost voices" of his own personal history, ones with whom his own guilt, conscience, and responsibility were connected. This can, of course, never fully be done, and the intersections of the self with the others are conditional, momentary, fractional, and problematic. Shawnessy's attraction to Mrs. Brown and their intellectual union and shared excitement over the "Grand Patriotic Program" pulls her in the direction of erotic and sexual need but leaves both of them vulnerable to a charge that fortunately cannot be made credible by a blindly lustful Reverend Jarvey and the Widow Passifée, who are exposed by the children as the fornicators and hypocrites.

At some points and in some Events, however, the single human life does connect with the Republic of Christ's Cross, which is to accept individual sin and guilt and to punish oneself by the laws or imperatives of one's own conscience or to find some way to atone, and to connect with the Great Republic of the nation of America, which is not an Event but which, like Raintree County, exists beyond myth and legend. Abraham Lincoln's personal and spiritual sacrifices and those of the Civil War casualties were made in the service of the "unseen grail of the Republic" (695) These sacrifices were done out of love and hope with no knowledge or absolute certainty of an outcome, much in the same way that the sinner seeks to be justified and renewed by sacred knowledge or seeks to live according to principles of justice, charity, and forgiveness.

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What emerged from these critics was a portrait of the American novelist as a figure ambiguously caught between regional naivete and cosmopolitan sophistication, failed imitator and great artist, American democracy and European imperialism. What saves the writer from these contradictions is their displacement from their historical period and cultural context, a displacement that imagines their perspective as more modernist than romantic.

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On this particular July 4th in 1892 John W. Shawnessy engages in an extended debate with Professor J.W. Stiles over the condition of the Republic and its people as well as a debate over its material reality and its history. Shawnessy asserts that American History is

were nearer to the sources of culture, nearer to the formative thinkers and poets of the past, than those who sought to restore the past (93).

For Mumford and the critics to follow, to return to history, a storied past, is to negate the potential of American literature.

In the end, what I am arguing is that *Raintree County* should not be read only as a work of fiction, but must be read as a work of literary criticism. Or more to the point, an exploration of what the literary criticism of the mid-twentieth-century America meant for the contemporary artist. As Mumford writes of the *Golden Day*, "what precedes led up to it; what followed, dwindled away from it; and we who think and write today are either continuing the first exploration, or we are disheartened, and relapse into some stale formula, or console ourselves with empty gestures of frivolity" (91-92). Lockridge's choice was to return to the "first exploration" and examine the mind of a writer who comes of age at the end of the American Renaissance, a writer who fails, producing only fragments and pieces of the great American epic, a writer who shows us that what is important is not the object of desire but desire itself. That is, Lockridge ends up rewriting the commonplaces of American literary theory. To make such a claim for the novel, of course, should not seem so far afield when we recall that Ross Lockridge gave up working on his Ph.D. dissertation on Whitman to write his novel.

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chronology begins with Indiana becoming a state in 1816 and ends with the Populist Party convening on July 4, 1892 in Omaha, Nebraska, which is the same day as the day of the "Glorious Fourth" in Waycross, Indiana.

While these three chronologies provide the context for the narrative and locate the situations and developments of the novel in sequence (and thus are helpful to the reader), they also stand as a statement of a theory of American History as of well as of personal and individual history that are developed in the novel.

The novel's first reference to American History occurs as Mr. Shawnessy is driving his wife and three children to Freehaven.

In a world convulsed with war, famine, industrial unrest, and public and private vice, Mr. Shawnessy was a citizen of the American Republic, living quietly on the National Road of life where it intersected with Raintree County, and tacitly involved in a confused course of human events that the newspapers and people in general agreed to call American History. (18)

In the flashback dated 1848-1852, which deals with Johnny's childhood and the early formation of his mind, sensibility, and unique traits, we find a second reference to American History.

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Young Johnny is described as developing his phenomenal memory, gaining a love of oratory and rhetoric, establishing youthful convictions and certainties about great men, and acquiring "a holy faith in the printed word." This faith in the printed word is still evident in the summer of 1859, after his sexual relations with Susanna Drake at Paradise Lake on the Fourth of July and after she has left and he has not heard from her.

After a wobbly start, he took up again the unfinished work of becoming life's American, the completely affirmative man, and plunged headlong into plans for composing an epic poem based on American History. (270)

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unequaled by any other American book” (Lockridge, *Shade* 267). His father’s “hope for his own novel,” Larry Lockridge observes “is that in evoking the old names and singing the myth of the Republic, he can move Americans to return to origins, to revere the nourishing earth and democratic vistas” (Lockridge, *Shade* 297).

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## RAINTREE COUNTY AND THE CYCLE OF AMERICAN LITERATURE

DAVID D. ANDERSON

In an otherwise remarkable study of the impact of Southern history on the social and cultural evolution of the region, appropriately called *The Burden of Southern History*, C. Van Woodward attempts an unfortunate comparison between the literature of the Midwest, that by Sherwood Anderson, Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, Edgar Lee Masters, and others, that came to dominate and direct American literature in the 1920s and 1930s, and that of the newer Southern literature of Robert Penn Warren and the other Agrarians, Katherine Ann Porter, Thomas Wolfe, and others of the same period. The difference, Woodward insists, is clear: the Southern writers and their characters carry with them the burden of history—the ante-bellum slave-based culture, the Civil War, the myth of the Lost Cause, the ghosts of three centuries of the Southern past. Midwestern writers and their people, conversely, “appear on the scene from nowhere, trailing no clouds of history, dissociated from the past” (30); indeed, many of them, epitomized by Hemingway’s people, “live completely in the present” (31).

Unfortunately, Woodward’s comments are too frequently echoed by other historians and critics, whether they are avowedly regional as is Woodward, or those who consider themselves national or universal, often ensconced as they are in that most provincial of American cities. Refutation is easy; one need look only at the opening lines of Sinclair Lewis’s *Main Street* (1920): “On a hill by the Mississippi where Chippewas camped two generations ago, a girl stood in relief against the cornflower blue of Northern sky. She saw no Indians now; she saw flour-mills and the blinking windows of skyscrapers in Minneapolis and St. Paul...” (1).

into the reality of the past was an impossible undertaking ... There was ... only one reality—the reality of someone's experience ... And even the world of the present was sustained by the same omnipotent creative fictions. His own life was a myth to himself and other ... And if he was a myth, others were even more so" (802). Each of us creates ourself according to our values and beliefs. But we must be sure, Lockridge implies, that myth is truly our own, not the generalized creative fictions of a society or a political party or a religious leader or anything that demands that we shape ourselves blindly to standards invented by others. *Raintree County* is not a topical book, speaking of long past events and long dead ideas. Rather, it offers lessons from which we can benefit today or anytime. John Shannessy sought wisdom and greatness, we are told. Certainly, in *Raintree County*, Ross Lockridge demonstrates that he has found both. And certainly that is enough.

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a region, and a literature that knows neither endings nor beginnings, as Ihab Hassan wisely points out in *Radical Innocence*; is a resource for today and all the tomorrows, driven as we are by what Hassan incisively calls "The curse of Columbus..." (336).

The past, personal, regional, national, tied to us by what Abraham Lincoln called "The mystic chords of memory..." (216) that bind us together as a people even as they direct and define our individual American Midwestern culturally diverse selves, is at once a crucial element in our Midwestern lives and in those of the writers and works that define them. It is this past, historical, geographical, spacial, temporal, personal, individual, and collective, that remains with us as we come to the end of this century and the beginning of another, that provides the source and substance of what we can and must know about our time, our place, and ourselves. It is this past out of which we extract the works and themes in which we attempt to define ourselves to others and ultimately to ourselves,

When C. Van Woodward looked about him, in the South as well as elsewhere in the nation during the decades of the 1950s, the years in which the essays that make up *The Burden of Southern History* were written, he must have heard of, read reviews and news accounts of, or perhaps even read or read at what is certainly, if nothing else, the most celebrated novel of the postwar decade, a novel that, had it been published a generation later, would have propelled its young author to instant if fleeting fame on the Today Show, Inside Edition, or Oprah; in its own time it earned their postwar equivalent, the MGM Prize. The novel is *Raintree County* by Ross Lockridge, Jr. It was published on January 5, 1948; it became an immediate best-seller as well as the most talked-of novel of its time, and, if it lost the Pulitzer Prize for 1949 to James Gould Cozzen's *Guard of Honor* (1948), it effectively dominated the literary mind and imagination in its time. Like *Guard of Honor*, it passed quickly from the popular consciousness, but unlike its rival it lives to haunt the secret place of our literary, cultural, and regional past after half a century

Woodward should have seen that *Raintree County* is a novel of all our pasts, national, regional, local, the pasts of our fears, frustrations, hopes, and ambitions; it is the past of our psyches and our myths, of the rituals of our lives and of the curious dichotomy between what we profess and what we do. More importantly, like the nation and region out of which it comes and the literature—American Midwestern literature—out of which it comes, it is a novel of the

Orleans, were the "They" who threatened her and sent her fleeing to Indianapolis. But of course there was no escape. So, in the end, she exorcised her demons and her memories and the continuation of herself in the only way she knew—by fire. And escaped finally into the safe shadows of insanity. Susanna, her father caught in the throes of illicit love for his mulatto mistress, his wife driven mad by her husband's betrayal and the necessity of claiming Susanna as her own, and Henrietta, trapped by race and convention, were as much victim of the Southern myth as the slaves themselves. Susanna's madness had its source in a greater madness—the madness of the belief that a society built on slavery could ever be sane.

In terms of Johnny Shawnessy's "Southern Education," if his sojourn in New Orleans was his baccalaureate, the war was his Ph.D. Interestingly, in the nearly 200 pages spent on Johnny's war years, little mention is made of the South itself. It has become a geography, marked only by the names of battles and memorable only for body counts. The cliché—cliché because it is true—that in war one must make the enemy a thing, a "they" different in kind from the "us," functions here. Apparently wars have no individual identity. All share the same character. Only the weapons and the slogans change. That being said, the Civil War remains the single greatest national trauma in our history, the most profligate in lives, the most inclusive in effect.

Johnny Shawnessy joined the Grand Army of the Republic a week after the destruction of his family. He matriculated at Chickamauga and marched to his graduation through Georgia with Sherman. In between, he feared, hungered, killed, looted, grieved, hated, and, at last, exchanged that hatred for understanding. He was wounded and survived. He watched Lincoln die and survived. He was declared dead and still he survived. But the war changed him as no other experience had. Johnny Shawnessy, "that innocent and happy youth was really dead (though it took his successor a little while to become aware of that fact)" (743). In a very real sense, the South had killed the mythical Johnny Shawnessy as surely as the war had shattered the foundations of the Southern myth.

The 19th century South, no less than Raintree County itself, was a myth, a place "without boundaries in time and space," a creation of its "mythical and lost peoples." Sustained during two and a half centuries of slavery by the myth that one human being could own another [and remain sane,] that myth was perpetuated after the Civil War by

*Huckleberry Finn* the two become one; the river, whether the Shawmucky or the Mississippi is at once movement—unconscious, eternal—and place—momentarily providing stability, whether on the raft or in the shade of the raintree. As movement and place fuse in Raintree County, perhaps supporting Archibald MacLeish's assertion that West—the American mythical place, the goal, the secret of fulfillment, perhaps the end of Columbus's curse—is not geographic but psychic, an eternal place in the American mind, that it *is*, as John Shawnessy learns at the end of the novel, that "His victory is not in consummations but in quests" (1059).

If John Shawnessy's search is the story of the county out of which he came and to which he returned in his maturity, it is a search on which he travels lightly, carrying little but personal baggage, even as he carries the continuum of nineteenth century America with him, reflecting the oneness of place and movement that has marked American literature from its beginnings. As an organic work, beginning at some misty point in pre-history, coming into clear focus as John Shawnessy examines his experience and that of the county and the nation, the microcosm-macrocosm of American life, and then drifts off into a not yet knowable future, as he creates a usable past for himself and for America, *Raintree County* reflects the cyclical rhythms of American Midwestern life and the literature to which American experience has given rise.

As Robert W. Spiller pointed out rightly just a few years after the publication of *Raintree County*, American literature, in its totality and in many of its individual works and genres reflects the history out of which it came, to which it contributes, and of which it is an intrinsic part. While the organic whole of American life and literature continue their cyclical flow, rhythms change, vary, manifest themselves in new or renewed patterns of art in structure, language, and idea. Firmly rooted in the cycle, *Raintree County* manifests itself as a work of art that looms so large in the literature of its time that to too many it is an aberration, to be treated seriously or not as the critic-teacher-literary historian chooses, and, of course, it is easier and perhaps safer to ignore it, hoping, perhaps, that it and the critical problems it poses will go away, or that, as Millard Kaufman, the writer of the 1957 MGM production, learned, it is perhaps safer to simplify, to make of it something less than it is, to ignore the critical questions that Lockridge poses and to which he—and the novel—deserve our reasoned answers.

To one whose Bible of the South was *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, there was astonishment in the lack of overt cruelty by master against slave. Only once, Johnny recalls, did he see a slave struck. But that instance is significant. At the Drake Plantation, as Susanna bent to retrieve a dropped bonnet, exposing the scar on her breast, a young groom, "watched in fascination" and Cousin Bobby Drake hit him, then raised a broadax against the unmoving slave. Johnny leapt for the handle but only Susanna's command stopped their struggle. "A man had almost lost his life for looking at a scar on the breast of this girl," Johnny realized. "He stood appalled at himself and the black moment that had sprung upon him from ambush in this genial place, among the hospitable people who had been so good to him" (446). To Bobby, of course, the groom was no man at all. He was a slave, and that made all the difference. With this incident, the moralist in Johnny took over from the poet who had gloried in the seductive loveliness of that gay sick South.

Ironically, the "grandest dream" of the South was, taken in itself, enchanting. It was to build a "Greek Republic in the soil of America," populated by the "most beautiful women and the most distinguished men in the world," a "culture of power, wealth and democratic tradition" (441). But the myth upon which this dream was founded was the belief that such a culture could be "erected on the toil of ten million slaves." So fervent was that belief that no argument was brooked, no compromise possible. Slavery, the South believed, was right and meet and just and theirs. And before they would see their myth threatened, they would invoke their "sacred right to form a government of their own" (441). The words were spoken, the idea of separation made tangible. Johnny remembered the great stink, even though he couldn't smell it any more. It was time to go back to Raintree County. It was time to go home.

But even in Raintree County, the South follows them. Lincoln had proclaimed that "A house divided against itself cannot stand," whether that house is the union or a dwelling in Raintree County. Susanna owns slaves, a practice Johnny finds despicable and unacceptable. Johnny supports Lincoln, a man, to Susanna, kin to the devil himself and, even worse, she insists, a man tainted by Negro blood. The spectre of miscegenation which has haunted the South and Susanna is raised again.

As one would expect at this time, Susanna accedes to Johnny's demand and frees her two slaves. But Susanna's violent mood shifts

With neither a period to end the flow of his poetic musing nor a structural end of the novel, but with a clear understanding of the oneness of the past, present, and future in life if not in grammar, John Wickliff Shawnessy stands at a new beginning at the crossroads of the National Road and the County Road, and he knows that for him and for America they have become one.

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whites, and, most dangerous of all, that one race could own another and remain sane, as a society or as an individual. The maintenance of this myth brutalized and dehumanized all its people, slave and free, and made them victims of the madness that was the peculiar institution. It split the nation in a Civil War whose cost is still being counted but whose first casualty was our innocence.

Lockridge spends a large part of his novel uncovering the layers of that myth, exposing its inevitable consequences for all those who strove so passionately to sustain it. Susanna Drake, "beautiful and alien," is the vehicle through which Lockridge explicates for Johnny—and for us—the scope of the corruption inevitable to a culture built "over the sinking marsh of human slavery" (439). Susanna, determined to bury the scandal of her birth in the safety of a marriage to Johnny, claims to be carrying their child. Johnny, of course, caught in his own myth of proper heroic behavior, proposes, though he knows the claim is a lie. Susanna, provocatively unclothed, strangely surrounded by her 116 dolls whom she calls her 'children,' accepts, and they are married. Lockridge's use of the events of John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry, his capture, trial, and execution as counterpoint to the betrothal, wedding, and consummation emphasizes the increasingly insistent Southern presence in Raintree County and foreshadows the inevitability of the conflict to come.

As the honeymooners traveled south: "Down the Mississippi, the oldest highway in the Republic, these pilgrims traveled toward a sensual Canterbury. And always this name meant sinful, dangerous, much desired" (430). They arrived in New Orleans to lights and activity and music but, most of all, to a stench which nearly choked Johnny. And this introduction to New Orleans becomes a metaphor for the South: the lights, gaiety, activity and beauty cannot hide the stench of rot which underlays it and corrupts its every stone and soul. One can only, like Johnny, get used to the smell. "Later he had to remind himself that this great human stink was there, always there, and that it would envelop everything he saw and did during the next few months" (431). The stink, of course, is slavery, "the oldest darkest crime in the world" (354) and all the beauty and seductive appeal of the South cannot change it or make it go away. But there was much to admire in the South in that year before the war. The land was beautiful, the horses and houses of the aristocracy magnificent, and the planters gracious and witty and hospitable. Most appealing of all to

better than I have. Yet, my response to the novel on the second reading was more measured than it was after the first. This is not surprising. A few years ago I met a seventh grade classmate of whom I had been much enamored, and my response then too was measured.

The first thing I noted was what particulars had lodged in my memory over that gap in time? To be frank, relatively few details: the footrace, of course; the Raintree and the interesting events which occurred thereunder; the fact that Johnny did not marry Nell; some secondary characters, Garwood Jones, Cash Carney, Flash Perkins; some Civil War scenes; and of course the irrepressible Professor Jerusalem Webster Stiles. Most vividly of all, I remembered the last scene in the book where the Professor, standing on the receding railroad car, wrote his, and Johnny's, initials in the air with his cane—backwards! (That was—and is—almost too clever for me.)

Apart from these details, one other major element stayed fresh in my mind through all those years. As a lad I grew up with the feeling—shared by many of my schoolmates, I believe—that Indiana was a very special place, that we were lucky to be living there. We felt a bit sorry for those in Ohio because they stopped too soon, and we couldn't understand why those in Illinois went too far. I don't know how this deeply-felt loyalty was engendered. It was not caused by raising the state flag each morning and singing the state song, as was done in Texas. It may have been from the teacher reading aloud to us Edward Eggleston's *The Hoosier Schoolmaster*, or the Gene Stratton Porter's Limberlost stories, or hearing the Hoosier dialect poems of James Whitcomb Riley. Whatever the cause, I had learned to love the State, and I loved *Raintree County* for it seemed to explain that loyalty, elevating it to a philosophical plain.

Now when it comes to literary analysis, I think of Winston Churchill's comment when someone said his political opponent Clement Atlee was a very modest man. "Yes," said Churchill, "and he has a great deal to be modest about." I would have you know that I am quite modest about my talent for literary criticism. What I have to offer are merely some reactions to the book from two widely separated readings of it.

One question perplexed me after both readings of *Raintree County*: why was John Shawnessy held in such high esteem both by his old friends and by the community generally? [I am not forgetting that a few people were prepared to lynch him at one point in the story.] He was, in the world's eyes, a failure. His play never got its

## THE SOUTHERN MYTH IN ROSS LOCKRIDGE, JR.'S *RAINTREE COUNTY*

PATRICIA WARD JULIUS

In the mid-nineteenth century, as we all know, the nature of the South and the institution of slavery impinged on the consciousness of the United States as no other issue has, before or since. However, most fictional treatments of this traumatic period in our history examine one side or the other and virtually none acknowledge the myths that surround and define that period. In his vast and panoramic novel, *Raintree County*, however, Ross Lockridge addresses that issue and dissects the myths that, in many ways, perpetuated it. Nearly 45% of the novel is concerned directly with the South and the effects of its mythology. Lockridge spends 225 pages on the story of Johnny Shawnessy and Susanna Drake and on the South's dark responsibility for the events which befell them and their son. He devotes 200 pages to Johnny's experiences in the Civil War. And the consequences of that traumatic event indirectly shape the stuff of the rest of the novel as well. The flesh of Lockridge's story is hung on the skeletal form of one day—a celebration of the 4th of July in 1892 in Raintree County, Indiana. But much of that day—the speeches, the conversations, the memories—centers around acknowledging, reliving, and debating the effects of the war. Johnny, with the rest of the County, dates events by “before the war” and “after the war.” And certainly these facts constitute “Southernness” with a vengeance. However *Raintree County* is essentially a story of myths, of which the Southern myth, the subject of this examination, is only a part.

According to historian Nicholas Cords, “a myth becomes reality precisely when people base their beliefs upon it and act as if the myth were true. In fact,” he writes, “the making of myths is a two-fold process by which a culture structures its world and by which it perpetu-

same fact of life will prevent *Raintree County* from winning its deserved place in American literature. Can you imagine the expressions on the faces of a class of average high school students or college underclassmen on being told that their outside reading will consist of a book of 1,060 pages?

If I were converted overnight into autocrat of this society, one of my first ukase would be to forbid the binding of more than 600 pages in any single volume. One thousand and sixty pages are just too many. The author would probably never have agreed to a sharp limitation, but the question arises for us, would *Raintree County* have been hurt by some radical pruning? I'm inclined to think not. I wish Mr. Lockridge had never read a word written by Sigmund Freud, especially his *Interpretation of Dreams*. These days even my own dreams bore me. To read repeated accounts of the fictional dreams of fictional characters is simply too much. In my opinion, every one could have been deleted and taken nearly 200 pages with them. And I am thankful the publishers insisted on cutting an additional 50-page dream sequence.

Also *Raintree County* contains many philosophical passages which remind me of an experience one summer afternoon perhaps twenty years ago. I was reclining in a lounge chair in the back yard of my home here in East Lansing when I happened to look directly overhead. There, a thousand feet up or thereabouts, a glider was silently circling. The pilot had found an updraft and was using it to gain altitude. The circling continued for about a minute while the craft gained at least another thousand feet and then headed eastward. The philosophical passages in *Raintree County* often seemed to me to interrupt the narrative while the author metaphorically gained altitude.

It is my conviction that the true meanings to be found in any narrative emerge from the actions and words of characters, and sometimes from the settings. This allows the reader the pleasure of discovery, much preferable to being lectured. Having said this, I must confess that philosophical writing has generally had an effect on my mind similar to that of a 17th Century sermon. Others, I am sure, may feel differently.

I would like to refer again to the closing scene in the book where the great character Jerusalem Webster Stiles uses his cane to write his and John Wickliff Shawnessy's initials in the air. Reading this in 1948, I for the first time noticed the similarity of names and concluded that this implied a symbolic identity. Were they two sides of a coin? Which was the obverse—surely John—and which the

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## LARRY LOCKRIDGE'S INFORMAL RESPONSES TO PAPERS ON *RAINTREE COUNTY*

delivered in East Lansing and San Diego and by Dean Rehberger, Douglas Noverr, David Anderson, and Theodore Kennedy. Larry Lockridge, Professor of English at New York University, is a son of Ross Lockridge, Jr.

### Response to Dean Rehberger:

You've given a reading of the novel seemingly unavailable to the critics of 1948. James Baldwin, for instance, got his own career underway with a pan of *Raintree County*. He read it as a very sunny narrative—an affirmation of the American dream, an optimistic fiction that didn't acknowledge the dark underbelly of America. You've argued that another reading is available to us, that the novel contains its own dark or at least problematic reading of American history and politics. Elsewhere you've written that the novel is a critique of the "ideology of nationalism." Certainly it is very critical of race relations in America, and I've always been surprised that Baldwin wouldn't have perceived that racism is portrayed in the novel as what Ross Lockridge called "the mental illness of America."

And, yes, I'd agree that the novel is political in such a way as to have made it an outsider to the canon—though as a partisan I'm always eager to uncover motives for its exclusion that do not pertain to aesthetic judgment. John Shawnessy attempts to "look inward," but social reality, history, and politics always impinge. Shawnessy is the "rememberer" who cannot get on with his own epic poem. He's weighed down by the history and social reality and familial ties of which Dean Rehberger has been speaking. In some notes on his novel, my father said that his protagonist Shawnessy is such a debtor to his own past that he cannot write his way out of it. At the end we don't really know if Shawnessy is going to write that epic. Probably not, in any literal sense.

Certainly when Lockridge began his novel, he thought of it as affirmative. It would be a novel "that Americans need, goddam

## PREFACE

The appearance of *Midwestern Miscellany* XXVI (Spring 1998) marks an important new milestone in the continued evolution of the Society's publication history. With the publication of *SSML Newsletter* 27, Number Three (Fall 1997), the *Newsletter*, as we've known it for more than a quarter-century since its first issue in March 1971 announced the formation of the Society as an organization dedicated to encouraging and promoting the study of the literature of what Sherwood Anderson called his "Mid-America," has ceased publication. In its stead, *Midwestern Miscellany* will appear twice yearly, in the Spring and Fall; it will contain other features in addition to the customary essays; and it will be supplemented by information conveyed by electronic media as well as by special mailed bulletins as we carry on that founding purpose of the Society.

Fittingly, this new direction in the publications of the Society is inaugurated by this issue, in which six members of the Society discuss Ross Lockridge, Jr.'s *Raintree County*, a magnificent interpretation of the Midwest and its people, on the novel's fiftieth anniversary.

Suitably, this issue is dedicated to Toni Morrison, Ohioan, Midwesterner, novelist, Nobel Laureate, and recipient of the Society's Mark Twain Award for 1997.

June, 1998

DAVID D. ANDERSON

### Response to Douglas Noverr:

Douglas Noverr gives a somewhat brighter reading of the novel than Dean Rehberger. I'm sympathetic to both readings, for I think the novel provides for both.

Your emphasis on American history puts me in mind of my father's relationship with his father, Ross Lockridge, Senior, who was an Indiana historian. He took groups of people all over the state, performing what he called Historic Site Recitals. He'd try to evoke the great names associated with cow pastures and other featureless parts of Indiana. His conception of history was based on heroes, on giants in the earth, who can be evoked through memory and especially memorials. So Ross Senior was responsible for historical roadside markers throughout the state. He was known as "Mr. Indiana."

Ross Junior's version of history emphasized instead the irony of memorialization, the difficulty of historical retrieval. Certainly he had a greater sense of loss.

At the same time I think of *Raintree County* as an incorporative novel—not so much an allusive novel. It attempts to retrieve and shore up the great texts of the past through its own version of recitation. It incorporates the great texts of American history, often in counterpoint to elements that might seem to subvert them. For example, the Gettysburg Address is recited in a Chattanooga whorehouse while the hometown sprinter and braggart Flash Perkins dances a jig with a whore. This isn't exactly the context that Ross *Senior* had in mind for these great words of history.

The question that Shawnessy and the Perfessor pose, as constant antagonists, is whether American history is progressive or in decline. The cynical Perfessor intones that all beautiful things are old things. Douglas Noverr cites the phrase "valorous dream." And the novel ends with the phrase, "endlessly courageous dreamer." The Dreamer for Lockridge is not someone who evades history, rather someone who courageously imagines new possibilities within history. This is straight out of Schiller's notion of aesthetic culture. We see it also in Wilde's *Decay of Lying* and Northrop Frye's "myth of freedom." Certainly Shawnessy believes with them that we invent our institutions—they're not here by nature. The bright implication of this is that we could imagine *better* institutions, a more aesthetic human culture; this requires a mythic imagination, an awareness of the old

In honor of  
Toni Morrison

past becomes luminous and usable by the time he says goodbye to the Professor at the train station and meditates on his own life and that of the American republic. Perhaps one implication is that America must become more aware of its own history, however late in the day, to make that history a usable past. But not in its chronological ordering—rather, in its immanent meaning, its pivotal and horrific but sometimes luminous moments.

You mention that the neo-Freudians, the formalists, the Marxists, the deconstructors and postmodernists, and what have you, have largely ignored the novel. It seems to me that they would all have a field day. You note that it has great formal integrity. But it's bursting at the seams in other ways—the violation of chronology, the openendedness, not even a period at the end. We're in a post-formalist era now when such things are valued. *Raintree County* has some frayed edges that might appeal to such critics. We hear much, too, about intertextuality. This is a novel deliberately constructed out of other literary texts as well as the texts of American history. Also, feminist criticism: three of the four narrative perspectives are female—besides Shawnessy, we are put into the minds of his daughter Eva, his second spouse Esther, and the feminist Evelina. Another critic has called this an “ecological novel,” for its passionate evocation of the American landscape and its scorn of industrial blight. So where are the ecocritics when we need them?

I hope Jim Morrison proves a true prophet: he said that *Raintree County* was the novel for the new millennium. We'll just have to wait and see what kind of audience turns out for the centennial celebration of *Raintree County* in the year 2048.

L.L.

Response to Theodore Kennedy:

I hope your daughter finishes the novel.

1,060 pages: the length does work against *Raintree County*. I write about it in terms of what Northrop Frye calls “encyclopedic form.” My father thought of it as a compendium of sorts, making use of a large variety of subgenres. For instance, it makes use of philosophical dialogue, conspicuously of Plato's *Republic*. Most contemporary editors would probably request him to kick such dialogue out. But he thought that it belonged there, feeding also on the Ameri-

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