

The Hyper-Realistic Depiction of Southern Tradition in Contemporary

American Literature – *A Feast of Snakes*

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Abstract

This paper examines primarily Harry Crews' "A Feast of Snakes" within the framework of contemporary Southern literature, focusing on how violence, madness, and social decay reflect the South's inability to escape its traumatic legacy. The paper aims to demonstrate how modern Southern fiction, while moving beyond traditional romanticized depictions, continues to engage deeply with regional identity, history, and inherited dysfunction. Through the character of Joe Lon, a former football star whose dreams are shattered by poverty, illiteracy, and addiction, the novel explores themes of entrapment, disillusionment, and generational trauma. Violence is not only physical but cultural, shaping all levels of interaction in the rural Southern community. Animal imagery and Darwinian metaphors blur the lines between man and beast, highlighting the instinctual brutality that pervades both personal and communal life. Crews strips away any lingering notions of Southern nobility, presenting instead a bleak, hyper-realistic world where tradition becomes a trap and memory a burden. In doing so, "A Feast of Snakes" serves as both a continuation and a subversion of the Southern literary tradition, portraying a region haunted by the past, paralyzed in the present, and resistant to transformation.

Keywords: violence, mediocrity, tradition, stagnation, the South

Introduction

Since the 1960s, contemporary Southern literature has evolved into a rich and multifaceted field, continuing to engage deeply with the cultural, historical, and psychological complexities of the American South. Though shaped by the forces of modernity and often produced by authors whose ties to the "Old South" are more distant or symbolic than experiential, this body of work remains firmly rooted in the regional consciousness. The legacies of slavery, social hierarchy, violence, and memory continue to resonate across contemporary narratives, proving that the South – both as a physical space and a cultural construct – exerts a powerful influence over those who write within its tradition. Despite generational and ideological shifts, the essence of Southern storytelling – characterized by a blend of realism, myth, and moral unease – remains largely intact. Even in the absence of direct ancestral

memory, today's writers, much like Faulkner or Eudora Welty before them, remain embedded in the South's symbolic landscape, drawing from its codes, traumas, and contradictions.

This paper aims to investigate how contemporary Southern authors remain tethered to this tradition, with a particular focus on Harry Crews as a compelling case study. In *A Feast of Snakes*, Crews embraces and amplifies the foundational elements of Southern Gothic – grotesque imagery, psychological instability, violence, and moral ambiguity – while anchoring the narrative in the rural, economically depressed realities of late 20th-century Georgia. His depiction of Mystic, a fictional Southern town, functions as both a literal and metaphorical representation of decay, capturing a culture trapped in cyclical brutality and spiritual emptiness. The novel becomes a hyperbolic but intensely realistic portrayal of the enduring social, cultural, and existential struggles of the South as this essay will demonstrate, *A Feast of Snakes* upholds the thematic traditions of Southern literature – obsession with place, nostalgia for a corrupted past, and the ever-present undercurrent of violence and madness – thereby affirming the argument that even in the contemporary literary landscape, Southern writers remain haunted by, and in dialogue with, their regional heritage.

1. The Southern Literature of Trauma and Memories

Southern literature has long been recognized as a complex and layered tradition, intricately woven from the recurring motifs of tradition, madness, and violence. These interlocking themes serve not only as narrative frameworks but as deep explorations of the psychological and historical weight carried by the American South. This body of literature reveals a region perpetually shadowed by its past – a past that some writers have attempted to distance themselves from, either through critique or geographical reinvention. Yet even in acts of rejection or denial, the South remains an inescapable presence. This haunting echo continues to shape the moral, cultural, and emotional terrain of its literary landscape.

Saturated with trauma and collective memory, Southern literature bears the imprint of a region defined by its contradictory legacy – from the antebellum grandeur of the plantation era to its violent unraveling during and after the Civil War, through Reconstruction, segregation, and the enduring scars of racial injustice. Whether writers attempt to confront these realities directly or navigate around them, the result is a literary tradition of profound depth – unsettling, politically charged, and emotionally fraught. This section of the paper seeks to examine how the darker aspects of Southern life – its cycles of loss, repression, and historical burden – have produced a literature of immense power, yet one that is undeniably heavy with distress and longing.

Such weight often inspires authors to seek detachment from their origins, yet their work remains deeply entrenched in the very soil they attempt to leave behind.

A defining trait across many canonical Southern texts is a pathological attachment to tradition. This attachment frequently manifests as an obsession, evident in characters who resist the forward momentum of time to preserve a romanticized vision of the past. Figures such as Gerald and Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone with the Wind*, and Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, embody this refusal to relinquish inherited values and customs. Their identities are so deeply bound to the legacy of the Old South that they struggle, and ultimately fail, to reconcile their place within a rapidly changing world. Whether through delusion, nostalgia, or denial, these characters find themselves unable – or unwilling – to adjust to the social and cultural shifts unfolding around them. Instead of evolving with the present, they retreat into the imagined safety of memory. The past becomes a sanctuary, an illusion of order and dignity amidst the chaos of modernity. However, this retreat comes at a cost. The inability to adapt not only isolates them from reality but ultimately contributes to their psychological and existential decline. Their stories serve as cautionary narratives about the dangers of immobilization and the paralyzing effects of historical idealization. In each case, tradition functions less as a foundation for resilience and more as a force of entrapment – a burden that leads not to survival, but to destruction.

As this paper will demonstrate, such portrayals are not isolated but indicative of a broader cultural crisis within Southern identity, one that continues to reverberate in both classic and contemporary literature. The region's literary canon is thus marked by a deep ambivalence: an enduring reverence for tradition paired with an acute awareness of its suffocating effects.

2. *A Feast of Snakes* as a Continuation of Southern Tradition

In a 1978 article, Allen Shepherd issued a compelling caution about engaging with the fiction of Harry Crews, emphasizing the emotionally and psychologically intense nature of his narratives. He notes that: "Reading Crews is not something one wants to do too much of at a single sitting: the intensity of his fiction is unsettling" (61). This observation is particularly apt when applied to *A Feast of Snakes*. This novel lays bare the grotesque underpinnings of Southern culture through its unflinching portrayal of a community spiraling into moral chaos. Shepherd interprets the novel as a visceral critique of the "American ethic [by] setting men, women, children, dogs, and snakes against each other" (Shepherd 60), positioning it as emblematic of Crews' bleak and unrelenting vision of the modern South.

At the center of the novel is Joe Lon Mackey, once the celebrated quarterback of Mystic, Georgia's high school football team. Over the course of four harrowing days, culminating in his psychological unraveling and violent demise, Joe's story becomes a lens through which Crews dissects the existential collapse of both individual and community. Mystic, the small, rural town where the narrative unfolds, functions symbolically as a microcosm of the postmodern South – a place entrenched in historical inertia and plagued by the corrosive effects of economic stagnation, educational impoverishment, and ingrained brutality. Rather than simply revisiting the familiar themes of Southern literature, Crews escalates them to hyperbolic extremes, utilizing grotesque realism as a means to foreground the visceral and often absurd nature of life in the region. The annual Rattlesnake Roundup, the town's most prominent cultural ritual, becomes the narrative's most striking allegory. Not only does it expose the spiritual and moral deterioration of the town's citizens, but it also serves as a metaphor for the South's broader cultural identity crisis. This festival – simultaneously celebratory and barbaric – amplifies the region's historical contradictions, laying bare its struggle to reconcile a decaying heritage with the harsh truths of contemporary life. In this sense, Crews positions himself not merely as an inheritor of the Southern literary tradition but as a fierce amplifier and critic, pushing its thematic boundaries to their most unsettling limits.

Having once aspired to escape the confines of Mystic by pursuing a football career beyond his high school team, Joe is ultimately brought down by a fundamental obstacle: his illiteracy. This shortcoming crushes any chance of mobility or transformation, leaving him mired in a life of frustration, violence, and alcohol abuse. As Allen Shepherd aptly notes, Crews populates his narratives with characters who possess only “slim hopes of escape from life's entrapment” (53). Joe's personal entrapment – psychological, social, and economic – mirrors broader Southern literary motifs, yet it also transcends regionalism, aligning Crews' work with the broader canon of American existential fiction. Although Joe is not without agency, his inability to exert meaningful change on his circumstances results in inertia and self-sabotage.

David K. Jeffrey, in a detailed textual analysis, describes Joe as “trapped in a bizarre and fallen world” (53), a world that mirrors both the absurdity and despair embedded in Southern life. This reading invites us into Joe's fractured psyche, encouraging an understanding of his behavior not merely as brutish but as symptomatic of internalized helplessness and unresolved trauma. The relationship between external pressures and internal collapse becomes key to deciphering Joe's descent into violent madness. Violence, one of the novel's most pervasive thematic elements, is both cultural and existential. In *A Feast of Snakes*, it permeates all layers of experience – between men and women, adults and children, humans and animals. Joe's

violent relationship with his wife, Elfie, is framed with disturbing ambivalence. Despite claiming she is “as good a woman as a man ever laid dick to” (Crews 12), Joe equates life with her and their children to a kind of emotional erosion: “ruined his nerves completely. Hell, he guessed that was to be expected. However, it did not mean he ought to treat her like a dog. Christ, he treated her just like a goddam dog. He could not seem to help it” (Crews 12). This acknowledgment of his own brutality, coupled with an expressed sense of helplessness, reveals the tragic core of Joe’s character – a man overwhelmed by forces he cannot comprehend or master. As the novel draws to a close, this internal chaos finds its ultimate outlet. Joe, overtaken by rage and despair, erupts into uncontrolled savagery. His transformation into a murderous figure by the final scene not only concludes his personal tragedy but also underscores the broader theme of inescapable doom in Crews’ vision of the Southern condition.

The pervasive use of animal imagery in *A Feast of Snakes* serves as a conduit through which characters are stripped of their human veneer, descending into states of primal violence, depravity, and moral disintegration. As Edward C. Lynskey observes, “[man] and beast are made to reverse roles in the novel” (187). However, rather than dismantling the binary between man and beast, Crews merely blurs the boundary, suggesting that the difference is negligible, if not entirely nonexistent. Even minor characters are portrayed with brutal instincts or animalistic traits, reinforcing the idea that savagery is not an aberration but an intrinsic part of human nature. This is further emphasized by Edwards, who remarks: “More importantly, the characters’ actions are equally bestial. Critics are fond of noting how frequently Joe Lon howls. Nevertheless, Joe Lon is not the only brute prowling the Darwinian jungle of Crews’s novel” (69). These exaggerated features are not unjustified, but rather a stylistic amplification of the violence deeply embedded in the Southern experience. Central to this animalistic descent is the obsessive drive for competition, which governs the social interactions within Mystic. Whether through football games, pit bull fights, or the snake hunt, every major event in the narrative is structured around contest, domination, and survival. This Darwinian ethos is made explicit through Joe’s mentally unstable sister, Beeder, who echoes the survivalist dictum framed by Spencer’s interpretation of Darwin’s theory, framed in the catchphrase “survival of the fittest” (Spencer), when she cries: “That hurts. God, it hurts, that everything is eating everything else” (Crews 47). Her outburst captures the essence of the novel’s brutal ecosystem – a place where violence is not just circumstantial but existential. In this grotesque Southern tableau, humans do not merely feast on snakes – they consume one another, both metaphorically and literally. The layers of cruelty, competition, and degradation mirror not just individual descent but the collective brutality inherited from the South’s historical legacy.

From slavery to racism to class-based oppression, violence becomes a cultural inheritance. In this context, Lynskey reads *A Feast of Snakes* as “a dark mirror held up to the national arena” (195), suggesting that what appears as uniquely Southern depravity may, in fact, reflect broader American realities.

Like many Southern literary works that deal with the theme of obsession with the past, *A Feast of Snakes* is haunted by the inescapable weight of the past and the decay of the present. Joe, much like the South itself, finds fleeting consolation in reminiscing about his former glory, clinging to a cyclical view of life that suggests youth and triumph are merely phases: “That is all right. By God, I had mine.” (Crews 7). Nevertheless, beneath this façade of acceptance lies a deep-seated sense of loss, emblematic of the Southern literary tradition's preoccupation with the disjunction between a romanticized past and a bleak, stagnant present. This tension plays out within Joe's internal struggle, where memory becomes both a comfort and a curse.

Trapped in a “constant state of suffocating anger” (Crews 8), Joe is fully aware that everyone bears burdens, “got their load of shit to haul” (Crews 7), but his particular burden is the collapse of a once-promising future. His brief period of dominance as a high school football captain “had been terribly satisfying while it had been going on, but now it lived in his memory like a dream. It had no significance, and sometimes inexplicably, he wished it had never happened.” (Crews 50). This disillusionment underscores how the past, rather than providing stability or pride, becomes a source of bitterness – a reminder of unattainable ideals and wasted potential. Unlike many Southern characters who are consumed by nostalgia, Joe chooses to repress those memories, recognizing that dwelling on them only sharpens the sense of failure that defines his adult life. In this way, Crews crafts a protagonist who not only embodies the collapse of personal ambition but also reflects the broader Southern struggle to reconcile a glorified past with a disillusioned present.

As the narrative progresses, Joe's life spirals further into chaos, hastening his descent into a frenzied madness, catalyzed by a recurring device – alcoholism. From his first appearance, Joe is portrayed as already immersed in a state of drunkenness, having “been drinking most of the day” (Crews 8). Throughout the novel's four-day span, alcohol remains a constant companion as he drifts “lost in the sour mist of bourbon whiskey” (Crews 55). Nevertheless, it is not merely alcohol that seals his tragic fate. Instead, it is the perpetual reminders of his former glory, his lost potential as a football star, and the inability to escape the memory of a life that once promised so much but unraveled into mediocrity and violence.

As Pizer observes, “the burden of the past, a past [...] inseparable from place and family [operates as] a powerful constraining agency”, and thus, characters in Southern fiction are often “haunted by errors, failures, and deficiencies of their former lives” (190). Joe is no exception; the deficiencies

in his life – his lack of education, his emotional instability, his social decline – are mirrored by the sorrows he carries. He grieves over his high school days, his romance with Berenice, and his symbolic status as Boss Snake, a time when “the world was still a place where such things were not only possible but also a great singing joy in the heart.” (Crews 56). However, with the end of his football career and the inevitable progression of life for others, he is left behind: “it took everything with it... If it had meant anything then, he had forgotten what, and merciful God, it meant nothing now. His life had become a not very interesting movie that he seemed condemned to watch over and over again.” (Crews 102).

This profound disillusionment removes one of the last anchors holding his violence in check. Once the structuring influence of football disappears, so too does any semblance of self-control. As Tim Edwards puts it, “His immersion in the savage culture of football allowed him to hone his naturally violent nature to a keen edge.” (72). Without this outlet, Joe is left unable to rationalize his actions or restrain them. His abuse of Elfie, though repugnant to him, feels inevitable: “he could not help it” (Crews 12). Trapped in his own confusion and shame, he begins to speculate that his downfall is the result of some unknown, inherent flaw – that he “had done something [to] deserve it” (Crews 57). In this way, Crews links Joe’s collapse not just to personal failure but to a broader Southern unease, where the past suffocates the present and self-destruction becomes the only perceived path forward.

Joe’s inherited dysfunction extends beyond the family business to include the most destructive legacy of all – a proclivity for alcoholism, passed down from his father. While Big Joe exhibited savage tendencies of his own, he would not hurt any woman, establishing a contrast with Joe Lon’s unchecked brutality. However, Big Joe’s role in the family’s downfall is undeniable. By modeling toxic behavior and precipitating his wife’s suicide, he indirectly sets in motion the events that lead to his daughter’s mental collapse and his son’s descent into violence. In *A Feast of Snakes*, every character – major or minor – plays a part in a web of interrelated traumas, reinforcing a perpetual cycle of depravity, violence, and existential decline.

Conclusion

This paper has aimed to situate Harry Crews’ novel within the broader framework of contemporary Southern literature, highlighting both its continuities with Southern tradition and its departure from romanticized portrayals of the region. Despite the diverse thematic directions taken by modern Southern authors – some critical, others restorative or experimental – the genre remains deeply rooted in its historical and cultural context. In this regard, *A Feast of Snakes* provides a compelling platform to explore the South’s contemporary identity crisis, depicting characters who are unable to

evolve or reconcile with modernity. While the novel shares thematic ground with earlier Southern texts, it lacks the romantic lens or noble melancholy found in those works. Instead, Crews presents a world dominated by self-destruction, apathy, and purposelessness. His hyper-realistic depiction of violence and despair becomes a scathing critique of the South's ongoing struggle to confront and transcend its painful legacy. Through this lens, Crews contributes to the Southern literary canon not by rejecting its traditions but by intensifying them to the point of grotesque exposure, forcing readers to reckon with the region's unresolved tensions and enduring traumas.

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