The Plantation Tradition

“White southerners elevated defeat into a heroic Lost Cause, their fallen comrades and faltering leaders into saintly figures, their crumbled society into the best place on earth, and their struggle to regain control over their lives and region into a victorious redemption.... Transforming defeat in a heroic cause, made more noble by loss than by victory, resolved some of the humiliation white southerners experienced in the years after the war. But such an artifice could not persist in a vacuum. It required context. That context was the Old South. For if the war was heroic, then so was the cause for which white southerners cast down their lives and fortunes. Recasting the war, they reformulated the Old South.”


The Plantation Tradition in literature applies to works that look back nostalgically to the Antebellum South. The plantation tradition elevated and perpetuated the myth of an idyllic Old South that had its origins in the first attempts by Southern writers to counter the growing abolitionist sentiment of the 1830s to 1850s.

Plantation literature features the following qualities and characteristics:

- The Antebellum South was a place of great tropical beauty. It was a peaceful, bucolic, well-ordered agrarian world.
- Southerners were proud people who were extremely loyal to their region/state.
- They were comfortably at home in a society with a natural order of races and classes in which the benevolent aristocracy possessed the wealth and wisely exercised the political power.
- Southern women were the epitome of womanhood: pure, beautiful, and enchanting, but also strong, resourceful, and resilient.
- Southern men were the Arthurian knights of 19th-century America: they treated women chivalrously; were quick to defend, and willing to die, to protect their honor; patriotic; well-educated; kind and gentle with children; and—especially—solicitous of their slaves.
- The plantation system was like a family, with deep bonds of loyalty uniting white and African American members under the white, patriarchal master. White Southerners loved their slaves and their slaves loved them.
- African Americans were happier and better off under slavery than as freedmen, and the best and wisest of them recognize the natural superiority of white folk. These are the “happy darkies” who are prominent in all works in the Plantation Tradition.
- The South would have continued to be prosperous and peaceful if not for Northern interference. The Civil War was “The War of Northern Aggression.”

The post-Civil War writers most closely associated with the Plantation Tradition are Thomas Nelson Page and Joel Chandler Harris. Thomas Dixon represents the undisguised white supremacist side of the tradition.