

Narrative Strategies of Demythologization: Space, Voice, and Repetition in The American Civil War Novel of the Late Twentieth Century (Kantor, Shaara, and Foote)

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ABSTRACT

The American Civil War (1861-1865) occupies a place in the cultural memory of the United States comparable to that of the Second World War in the historical consciousness of Europe, and the historical novel devoted to it has never functioned as a neutral generic exercise but as a contested site for the right to interpret the national past. This article examines a specific and previously under-theorized cluster within the post-1950 American Civil War novel: MacKinlay Kantor's Andersonville (1955), Michael Shaara's The Killer Angels (1974), and Shelby Foote's Shiloh (1952), three works that, unlike most of their contemporaries dealing with the antebellum or Reconstruction periods, place the depiction of combat itself at the centre of the narrative while systematically dismantling the "Lost Cause" mythology inherited from the early twentieth century. Drawing on Roland Barthes's theory of myth as a naturalizing semiological system, Georg Lukács's concept of the "mediocre hero," Avrom Fleishman's and Jerome de Groot's accounts of documentary fidelity in the historical novel, Hayden White's theory of emplotment, and Gérard Genette's narratological categories of focalization and frequency, the study identifies three distinct but structurally convergent demythologizing strategies: spatial displacement from the battlefield to the prison camp (Kantor), multivocal focalization across named historical commanders (Shaara), and narrative repetition within a circular compositional

structure (Foote). The analysis concludes that mid-century demythologizing realism achieves its critical effect not primarily by disputing individual facts of the "Lost Cause" narrative but by restructuring the very narrative mechanisms through which that narrative had been naturalized.

Keywords: American Civil War; historical novel; Lost Cause mythology; demythologization; MacKinlay Kantor; Michael Shaara; Shelby Foote; focalization; narrative frequency; historical memory.

INTRODUCTION

The Civil War between North and South (1861-1865) holds a place in the cultural memory of the United States that can meaningfully be compared with the place occupied by the Second World War in the historical consciousness of the peoples of Europe. More than a century and a half after the fact, the conflict remains one of the principal anchoring points through which American national identity is continually formed and re-examined. For this reason, the historical novel devoted to the Civil War has never functioned in the work of American writers as a simple, ideologically neutral exercise in genre convention. On the contrary, it has served as a battlefield in its own right, a site of ideological struggle over the right to interpret the national past.

The second half of the twentieth century marks a genuine turning point in this literary tradition. Under the combined pressure of the Civil Rights Movement, the social and psychological trauma associated with the Vietnam War, feminist and African-American literary criticism, and the postmodern turn in historiography, both the object of representation and the interpretive approaches applied to it were subjected to radical reconsideration. Where the first half of the twentieth century inherited, largely unchallenged, the romanticized "Lost Cause" myth from local-colour literary tradition and from works such as Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936), writers after the 1950s increasingly turned to the realities of slavery, racial

violence, and collective trauma, placing the long-dominant reconciliationist narrative of popular culture under sustained pressure.

Before turning to individual texts, it is necessary to identify the two principal narratives that had competed for control of the American cultural memory of the war during the near-century following its conclusion. The first is the "Lost Cause" narrative, which crystallized in the American South during the last third of the nineteenth century through the activity of veterans' organizations, the memoirs of Confederate generals, and, later, its canonical form in Hollywood cinema. According to this mythology, the war is interpreted not as a struggle to preserve the institution of slavery but as a clash between a courageous, aristocratic, land-bound Southern civilization and an industrialized, impersonal North; the question of slavery is either passed over in silence or portrayed as a patriarchal and, on the whole, benevolent social institution. The second is the "reconciliationist" narrative, which took shape around 1913-1915, on the eve of the war's semicentennial. In this period national memory consciously shifted its emphasis from the causes of the war to the shared heroism of soldiers on both sides, with the result that the African-American experience of emancipation was effectively excised from the historical narrative. It was precisely this reconciliationist model that shaped the aesthetic principles governing most historical novels of the first half of the twentieth century, Mitchell's among them.

This configuration began to change under the influence of several convergent factors. First, the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s-1960s compelled American society to reconsider racial inequality not as a closed chapter of history but as an unresolved legacy of the Civil War itself. Second, professional historiography associated with the work of W. E. B. Du Bois and, subsequently, with the "new Southern historians," consistently dismantled the myth of slavery as a benevolent institution, exposing its exploitative and repressive economic foundations. Third, the Civil War centennial (1961-1965) coincided precisely with the most acute phase of the struggle for desegregation, lending overt political content to the commemorative

publications and staged historical re-enactments of the period. Finally, from the 1970s onward, a new generation of African-American writers entered the literary field for whom the Civil War and the preceding era of slavery were not merely historical backdrop but the central object through which to articulate ancestral memory and historical origin.

Existing scholarship classifies the resulting corpus of post-1950 Civil War fiction – associated with such writers as Foote, Kantor, Walker, Styron, Haley, Shaara, Vidal, Morrison, and Frazier – along two independent axes: a thematic axis, distinguishing demythologizing realism, racial counter-history, and political-biographical or existential-deideologizing revision; and a generational axis, tracing successive waves from the 1950s through the 1980s. Both classifications capture important dimensions of the corpus, yet neither isolates the specific narrative-structural techniques by which the demythologizing group achieves its effect, nor distinguishes this group on the more precise ground of whether the war itself, rather than its antebellum or postbellum consequences, is directly represented. Kantor, Foote, and, with reservations, Shaara depict the war and its immediate institutions – the battlefield, the high command, the prison camp – directly; Styron, Walker, and Haley instead centre on the decades immediately preceding or following the war. This article isolates the first, war-centred group for close analysis, asking not only what these three writers say about the Lost Cause myth but how, at the level of narrative structure, they say it.

The article is organized as follows. The ‘Literature Review’ situates the study within theories of myth, the historical novel, and narratology. The ‘Methodology’ section explains the corpus selection and the analytic procedure. The ‘Results and Discussion’ section first reconstructs the historical and cultural conditions of the post-1950 shift and then examines Kantor’s *Andersonville*, Shaara’s *The Killer Angels*, and Foote’s *Shiloh* in turn, before offering a comparative synthesis. The ‘Conclusion’ draws out the implications for the theory of the historical novel and for the study of American cultural memory.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical starting point for this study is Roland Barthes's account of myth in *Mythologies*, where myth is defined not as falsehood but as a second-order semiological system that presents a historically and socially conditioned meaning as though it were a "natural," self-evident fact [1]. For Barthes, myth transforms history into nature: it takes a contingent political-ideological construction and displays it as an eternal, unchanging state of affairs. The "Lost Cause" narrative is a textbook instance of myth in precisely this sense, since it presents the Confederacy's war to preserve slavery as a "natural," courageous, and racially neutral act of heroism, thereby naturalizing a specific political-historical configuration. This account supplies the working definition of demythologization used throughout the present study: not the refutation of individual facts, but the re-historicization of what myth has naturalized, the restoration of a contingent, conflictual, and humanly authored condition to material that myth had rendered self-evident.

Georg Lukács's theory of the historical novel argues that the genre's classical achievement rests not on placing "world-historical individuals" such as Napoleon or Caesar at its centre but on constructing a "mediocre," comparatively unremarkable hero situated at the intersection of historical forces [11]. Such a figure renders those forces legible on a human scale, whereas centring the great historical actor themselves risks either excessive monumentalization or an artificially diminished portrait. This criterion proves useful for distinguishing Kantor's and Shaara's otherwise divergent compositional choices, and for showing that both, despite one working through anonymous prisoners and the other through named generals, ultimately satisfy Lukács's underlying demand that history be shown "from below," at human scale.

Avrom Fleishman distinguishes the historical novel according to the degree to which verifiable historical persons and events are incorporated into the fictional text, treating the density of historical fact and the author's reliance on archival sources as the defining criterion of the "classical" historical novel

(Fleishman, *The English Historical Novel*). Jerome de Groot, writing within a more recent theoretical framework, describes the historical novel as a genre constituted by an ongoing negotiation between the “reality effect” and imaginative licence (de Groot, *The Historical Novel*). Kantor’s two decades of archival research into prisoners’ diaries, court records, and congressional investigation materials, together with Shaara’s explicit reliance on letters and official reports acknowledged in his preface, place both authors squarely within the documentary, Fleishman-defined type of historical fiction, sharply distinguishing them from historical fiction that deliberately foregrounds the unreliability of its own documentary basis.

Hayden White’s theory of *emplotment* holds that historical narration is itself already a literary act: the historian imposes on a body of raw facts one of a limited set of available narrative modes like romance, tragedy, comedy, or satire [14]. On this view, the *Lost Cause* narrative emplots the war’s events in the mode of romance, as a story of courageous, tragically fated, morally pure heroes, whereas Kantor and Foote construct their narratives predominantly in the modes of tragedy and, at points, irony. Linda Hutcheon’s concept of “*historiographic metafiction*,” which designates a type of novel that openly foregrounds its own constructedness and calls historical knowledge itself into question, does not, however, apply to the three works examined here [9]. None of the three authors problematizes their own narrating position; each presents the reconstructed events as a reliable, coherent account that merely gathers together multiple points of view. This places the corpus at the “*realist-documentary*” pole of the genre’s typological spectrum, distinct from the *metahistorical* novel that treats historical knowledge itself as an object of play.

Gérard Genette’s *narratology* supplies the two categories most directly applicable to the internal composition of the corpus. Genette distinguishes three types of focalization, zero focalization, in which an omniscient narrator exceeds the knowledge of any character; external focalization, in which the narrator knows less than the character and records only outward behaviour; and internal focalization, in which narration is

confined to a single character's field of knowledge and perception [7]. The classical nineteenth-century historical novel in the Walter Scott tradition relies characteristically on zero focalization and an omniscient external narrator. Kantor, Shaara, and Foote each depart from this convention by adopting a consistently "variable internal focalization," in which each chapter or section is restricted to a single character's perspective, with the focal character changing from section to section. Genette additionally isolates the category of narrative "frequency," distinguishing "singulative" narration, in which an event occurring once is narrated once, from "repetitive" narration, in which an event occurring once is narrated more than once, from different perspectives or by different narrators [7]. This second category proves indispensable for the analysis of Foote's *Shiloh* below.

Three gaps in the existing literature motivate this study. First, scholarship on the post-1950 American Civil War novel typically classifies the corpus by theme or by literary generation but has not isolated the narrower cluster of "demythologizing realism" as a group united specifically by shared narratological technique rather than by shared subject matter or period. Second, although Genette's category of narrative frequency is well established in general narrative theory, it has not previously been applied to explain how a Civil War novel manages the historiographical problem of a single, heavily documented event through repeated, multiply focalized narration. Third, no existing study places spatial displacement, multivocal focalization, and narrative repetition side by side as three structurally distinct but functionally convergent techniques of demythologization operating at different levels of the text setting, character system, and plot organization, respectively. The present study addresses all three gaps through a close comparative reading of *Andersonville*, *The Killer Angels*, and *Shiloh*.

METHODOLOGY

This study applies a combined historical-typological and narratological method of close reading, selected because the

analytic problem it addresses how a shared ideological project (the dismantling of the Lost Cause myth) is realized through structurally distinct compositional means, requires attention both to the cultural-historical conditions of production and to the internal architecture of the individual text.

The corpus consists of three novels: MacKinlay Kantor's *Andersonville* (1955), Michael Shaara's *The Killer Angels* (1974), and Shelby Foote's *Shiloh* (1952). These three works were selected from the broader post-1950 Civil War corpus which also includes Alice Walker, William Styron, Alex Haley, Toni Morrison, Gore Vidal, and Charles Frazier, on the basis of a single, decisive criterion: unlike the majority of their contemporaries, who situate their narratives in the antebellum period of slavery or in the postbellum period of Reconstruction, Kantor, Shaara, and Foote each organize their narrative directly around the war itself, a military prison camp, a specific three-day battle, and a specific two-day battle, respectively. This criterion isolates the group of writers best positioned to dismantle the heroic mythology of combat as such, as distinct from the broader mythology of slavery addressed by the counter-history group.

Each text was analysed according to a fixed three-parameter grid: 1) the spatial and institutional locus chosen to house the war narrative, and its relation to the conventional battlefield setting of Lost Cause fiction; 2) the narrative voice and focalization structure organizing the text, following Genette's categories; and 3) the treatment of documented historical figures and the canonical mythic image attached to each. This grid was applied uniformly across all three novels in order to keep the comparison symmetrical and to allow the three resulting techniques as spatial displacement, multivocal focalization, and narrative repetition, to be identified as operating, respectively, at the level of setting, character system, and plot organization.

Citations in this article are given in parenthetical form directly in the text, identifying author and work. Direct quotations from the three primary novels are kept to a minimum and reproduced only where the exact wording is analytically indispensable; in all other cases the relevant scene or statement is described in paraphrase. Quotations from secondary theoretical

sources follow the same principle. Full publication details for every work cited appear in the References.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section first reconstructs, as necessary interpretive background, the two competing mid-century narratives of the war and the conditions of their post-1950 destabilization; it then examines *Andersonville*, *The Killer Angels*, and *Shiloh* in turn.

As outlined in the Introduction, the Lost Cause narrative and the reconciliationist narrative jointly dominated American popular memory of the Civil War for roughly the first half of the twentieth century, the second effectively absorbing and popularizing the first while further marginalizing the question of emancipation. Read against Barthes's account of myth, both narratives function as naturalizing devices: the Lost Cause naturalizes the Confederate cause itself, while the reconciliationist narrative naturalizes a shared, race-neutral heroism that quietly removes slavery from the causal centre of the conflict. The three novels examined in this study emerge in direct, sustained dialogue with this dual mythology, and each, as the following sections demonstrate, targets it through a different structural lever.

The chronological proximity of Kantor's *Andersonville* (1955) and Shaara's *The Killer Angels* (1974) to, respectively, the early Civil Rights Movement and the war's centennial commemorations (1961-1965) is not incidental. The centennial events, organized by a federal commission with active Southern-state participation, reproduced, as David Blight has shown, the reconciliationist rhetoric of the semicentennial half a century earlier almost without modification: costumed re-enactor parades and staged battle reconstructions occupied the foreground while the question of slavery was deliberately left in silence (Blight, *Race and Reunion*). This discrepancy between officially sanctioned memory and the surrounding political reality of desegregation struggles generated the cultural tension against which the decade's literature was written, whether consciously or not. Commercial conditions reinforced rather than obstructed this

shift. The historical novel of the South remained one of the most commercially successful genres of mid-century American fiction, largely on the strength of the continuing popularity of *Gone with the Wind* and its 1939 film adaptation. It was precisely this market appetite for the plantation saga that allowed novels eroding the traditional myth from within to reach a very large readership.

Kantor's central and most consequential compositional decision is to remove the war entirely from the battlefield and relocate it to a military prison camp, the actual Andersonville stockade in Georgia, where, in little more than a year (February 1864 to April 1865), roughly thirteen thousand of the nearly forty-five thousand Union prisoners held there died of starvation, disease, and unsanitary conditions. This single displacement already performs a demythologizing function before any individual scene is analysed: it substitutes for the heroic mythology of combat an institutional geography of confinement, administration, and slow physical destruction.

The novel opens through the internal focalization of Ira Claffey, the landowner on whose property the stockade is built, who watches the construction of the prison wall and perceives it as a wound inflicted on land he loves. A perception that reframes the war, from its first pages, as violence against the natural landscape and private property rather than as contest of arms. Because Claffey is himself a Southern planter and, in principle, a natural sympathizer with the Confederate cause, his horror at the destruction wrought by his own side's military necessity destabilizes the boundary between "our side" and "the enemy" from the outset.

Kantor extends the same demythologizing logic to Captain Henry Wirz, the historical camp commandant and the only Confederate officer executed after the war for war crimes. Rather than presenting Wirz as a one-dimensional villain, the novel supplies a psychologically detailed backstory like a crippling old wound, a dead wife, children left with distant grandparents, a man in evident psychological distress that does not excuse his later cruelty but renders it explicable in human terms, thereby

dismantling the simplified hero-villain opposition characteristic of Lost Cause fiction.

The prisoners' experience receives comparably sustained attention. Their transport by rail in overcrowded, suffocating cars establishes the war, for this population, as an experience of physical confinement and despair rather than battlefield glory. Once inside the stockade, the arbitrary "deadline" a boundary line roughly twenty feet from the stockade wall, crossing which meant instant execution becomes an institutionalized form of violence: a prisoner named Sigel, in a state of mental collapse, unintentionally crosses the poorly marked line and is shot on the spot. His death is significant precisely because it results not from combat but from administrative procedure, directly negating any romantic conception of death in war.

A further layer of demythologization concerns violence generated from within the prisoners' own ranks. Gangs of prisoner "raiders" prey on their fellow captives, and the vigilante group formed to oppose them, the "regulators," act not independently but with the direct cooperation of Commandant Wirz himself, who supplies rope and space for the raiders' trial and punishment. This episode complicates the moral geography of the novel still further, showing practical collaboration between enemy command and prisoner self-governance that erodes any clean moral boundary between captor and captive.

Kantor renders violence in a bureaucratic register as well as a physical one: Wirz hires two literate prisoners as clerks, promising extra rations, and interviews applicants with cold indifference to their fate, even as thousands starve outside his office, a juxtaposition that exposes the sheer administrative banality underlying mass death. The novel's most powerful set-piece, the public hanging of the raider leaders, is likewise constructed through montage: the execution, watched by more than twenty thousand spectators, is set against the unnoticed deaths, on the same day, of anonymous prisoners whom nobody mourns a contrast through which Kantor exposes the theatricality that even "justice" itself assumes under camp conditions.

Awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1956 and adapted for television in 1996, *Andersonville* replaces the mythology of martial

heroism with a sustained study of institutional violence, administrative routine, and moral erosion achieved formally through its multivocal structure (Claffey, Wirz, and numerous prisoners) and its consistent refusal of any single, authoritative narrating position.

Where Kantor abandons the battlefield, Shaara remains within it, situating *The Killer Angels* at the very centre of the war's most mythologized engagement, the three-day Battle of Gettysburg (1863). His demythologizing strategy operates instead through narrative voice. Each chapter is titled with the name of a historical commander Chamberlain, Buford, Lee, Longstreet, Fremantle, Armistead and narrated through that officer's internal focalization, so that the reader receives the battle not through a single triumphant or tragic vantage point but through a set of mutually contradictory, frequently anxious internal voices on both sides of the line.

General Buford's early assessment of the terrain around Gettysburg, evaluated with cold, near-professional detachment before a single shot has been fired, exemplifies this strategy: the outcome of the coming battle is shown to depend on terrain, sightlines, and road networks essentially impersonal, geographic factors rather than on courage or destiny, in keeping with the novel's broader demythologizing programme.

Colonel Joshua Chamberlain's address to a group of mutinous Maine soldiers constitutes the novel's ideological centre. Chamberlain summons his men to fight not for land or property but for human dignity and freedom, closing with a brief, now widely known formulation of collective purpose. Notably, the speech never mentions slavery or an enslaved person by name, the issue is abstracted into general moral-military discourse rather than tied to any concrete enslaved individual's fate, a limit that marks the boundary of Shaara's demythologization, since the institution of slavery is not so much confronted as quietly bypassed.

The novel's most celebrated combat episode, Chamberlain's bayonet charge after his regiment exhausts its ammunition, is presented not as an act of inspired valour but as cold tactical necessity. His depleted regiment could neither retreat nor hold its

position, leaving a downhill charge as the only viable option. The chaotic, physically undignified reality of the charge itself, stumbling men, incoherent shouting, bodies underfoot stands in sharp contrast to conventional battlefield romance, presenting victory as the product of near-incomprehensible chance rather than predetermined heroism.

Shaara's most striking demythologizing gesture concerns General Robert E. Lee himself, the figure most thoroughly mythologized within Lost Cause iconography as the "marble man." The novel presents Lee as an aging, physically ailing man suffering from heart trouble, injured hands, and mounting anxiety over the prolonged silence of his cavalry commander, even as his own soldiers remove their hats in silent reverence as he passes. This gap between external veneration and internal, reader-accessible frailty is the novel's central demythologizing device: the legendary commander is reconstructed, from within, as an ordinary man afraid of death and uncertainty.

A further dramatic centre is General Longstreet's direct warning to Lee that the planned third-day assault – historically known as "Pickett's Charge" – will fail, a warning Lee rejects. By dramatizing this internal disagreement, Shaara reframes the coming defeat not as an act of fate or enemy superiority but as the consequence of a specific, named individual's decision – one of the novel's sharpest demythologizing moments, since Confederate infallibility is replaced by demonstrable human error.

The death of General Armistead following the failed assault, in which the mortally wounded officer asks to see his old friend, now Union general Hancock, only to learn that Hancock too has been wounded, supplies one of the novel's most lyrical passages; Shaara immediately follows it, however, with a cold statistical report of regimental losses, juxtaposing personal tragedy against bureaucratic casualty counting and thereby setting the war's human and administrative faces directly against one another.

Awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1975 and adapted into the film *Gettysburg* (1993), *The Killer Angels* achieves demythologization through the systematic replacement of a single triumphant narrating voice with competing, fallible internal perspectives a

technique that leaves the underlying “reality effect” of documentary historical fiction (de Groot) intact while dismantling the heroic legend from within.

Shelby Foote’s *Shiloh*, devoted to the two-day battle of April 1862, adopts a distinctive compositional solution: rather than a single continuous plot, the novel consists of seven sequential monologues alternating strictly between Confederate and Union narrators, lieutenant Palmer Metcalfe, captain Walter Fountain, private Luther Dade, private Otto Flickner, sergeant Jefferson Polly, a collective “squad” voice, and, finally, Metcalfe again, now narrating after the battle’s end. This symmetrical structure (Confederate–Union–Confederate–Union–Confederate–Union–Confederate) gives the novel a circular composition in which the first and last chapters, narrated by the same character, frame the beginning and the aftermath of the battle through a single evolving consciousness.

The novel’s opening command debate, in which General Beauregard proposes cancelling the attack out of concern that surprise has been lost, while General Johnston, after consulting his subordinates, ultimately orders the assault to proceed, recalls the later Longstreet–Lee disagreement in Shaara’s novel, but with a crucial difference of focalization: because the scene is filtered through Metcalfe, a nineteen-year-old aide who still idealizes the war, the reader receives the command decision not critically but with something close to relief, showing how myth is perceived from within by a consciousness that has not yet been disillusioned by it, a form of “real-time” rather than retrospective demythologization.

Foote applies his demythologizing method bilaterally rather than to the Confederacy alone. Captain Fountain recalls General Ulysses Grant not as a great commander but as a townsman once nicknamed “Useless Grant,” a man better suited to horses than to his father’s tannery business, who graduated near the bottom of his class at West Point; Fountain further notes the irony that Grant, whose own father was an outspoken abolitionist, had married into a slaveholding family. This detail demonstrates that the Union side, too, occupied no ideologically pure position on the question of race, and it is precisely this bilateral application

that distinguishes Foote's demythologization from a merely one-sided critique of the South.

The novel's most sophisticated compositional achievement is its double narration of General Johnston's death, told twice through two entirely different consciousnesses. It is first rendered through private Dade, himself mortally wounded, who watches from a ravine as the general is helped from his horse, laid beneath a tree, and dies quietly while unable to swallow the brandy offered to him. The same death is narrated a second time, near the novel's end, by Metcalfe, now recounting it causally: Johnston, we learn, had sent away the surgeon who might have saved him to attend to captured Union wounded instead, and consequently bled to death from a wound that a simple tourniquet could have staunched. This double narration (first sensory and immediate, then retrospective and causal-moral) is a direct instance of what Genette terms "repetitive" narrative frequency, and it performs an explicitly epistemological function: the "true" event is constituted not by a single vantage point but by the accumulation of partial, mutually completing testimonies [7].

Genette's category of frequency proves equally productive when applied beyond the level of a single death to a collective event. In the fourth monologue, Union artilleryman Otto Flickner, sheltering in a ravine with hundreds of other soldiers who have fled the fighting, openly admits his own fear rather than concealing it, and observes the surrounding "skulkers" moving from shame to a kind of defiant, even boastful acknowledgment of their own cowardice, a scene that reframes fear itself as a near-universal physiological response to combat rather than a moral failing. The same mass sheltering is then narrated a second time, from the fifth monologue's external, reconnaissance vantage point, as Confederate scout sergeant Jefferson Polly and General Forrest survey the ravine from a distance and estimate several thousand Union soldiers hidden within it. What is, for Flickner, an intimate scene of shared shame becomes, for Polly, cold strategic intelligence about enemy weakness demonstrating that Foote extends narrative repetition from individual tragedy to collective, mass events as well.

The sixth section departs still further from conventional narration, being told entirely in the first-person plural “we”, without naming any individual soldier, so that the entire unit appears as a single collective consciousness. This formal choice carries substantial interpretive weight: it enacts, at the level of grammar itself, the dissolution of individual identity into collective military action, standing in deliberate contrast to the deeply individuated internal monologues of Dade and Metcalfe elsewhere in the novel.

In the novel’s closing pages, Metcalfe recalls his father’s bitter observation that the South carried within itself the seeds of its own defeat an incurable excess of romanticism and misplaced chivalry, the product of too much youthful reading of Walter Scott and Dumas taken too seriously; his father adds that the South loved the past, and loved death itself. Crucially, the father who delivers this critique is himself described as a deeply romantic figure who merely enjoys the pose of cold realism. Foote thus leaves no vantage point entirely outside myth: even the voice that exposes the Lost Cause mythology is shown to be a further product of that same mythological consciousness, a finding directly consonant with Barthes’s account of myth, since here myth is not simply refuted from outside but exposed from within, through its own language [1].

Shiloh thus occupies an intermediate but independent position between Kantor and Shaara: like Kantor, it renders history “from below” through numerous “mediocre” figures (Dade, Flickner, the collective squad); like Shaara, it incorporates major historical figures (Johnston, Grant) but consistently diminishes them through domestic memory and incidental detail rather than sustained interiority. Its distinguishing technique is narratological rather than spatial or purely voice-based: the deliberate repetition of a single central event through two differently positioned consciousnesses, combined with a systematically bilateral critique that spares neither Confederate nor Union mythology.

The comparison across all three novels supports a single underlying pattern, summarized in Table 1. Kantor operates chiefly through spatial and institutional displacement, replacing

the battlefield with the prison camp and thereby substituting bureaucratic, administrative violence for combat heroism. Shaara operates chiefly through multivocal internal focalization, replacing a single triumphant narrating voice with the mutually fallible perspectives of named historical commanders. Foote operates chiefly through narratological repetition, in Genette's technical sense of "frequency," combined with a systematically bilateral critique directed at both the Confederate and Union mythologies.

Table 1. *Comparative demythologizing strategies in Andersonville, The Killer Angels, and Shiloh*

Novel / Author	Central compositional device	Object of demythologization	Distinctive technique
Andersonville (Kantor)	Spatial displacement: battlefield replaced by prison camp	The heroic mythology of combat itself	Institutional and bureaucratic violence; multivocal witnessing across captor and captive
The Killer Angels (Shaara)	Multivocal internal focalization organized by named historical commanders	The "marble man" legend of Lee and the myth of Confederate command infallibility	Psychological interiority; tactical decisions reframed as fallible human choice
Shiloh (Foote)	Circular composition built from seven alternating monologues	Both Confederate and Union command mythologies, applied bilaterally	Narrative repetition (Genette's "frequency"); collective first-person-plural narration

Despite these differences, all three novels share a single structural feature that distinguishes them from the classical, Scott-tradition historical novel: each systematically abandons zero-focalization, omniscient narration in favour of variable internal focalization distributed across multiple, often unreliable or limited consciousnesses [7]. This shared technique

corresponds directly to Lukács's demand that history be represented at human, "mediocre-hero" scale [11], and to White's account of the shift from the romance-mode emplotment characteristic of Lost Cause fiction toward the modes of tragedy and irony [14]. At the same time, none of the three novels problematizes its own narrating position in the manner of historiographic metafiction [9]; each remains within the documentary, "reality effect" framework identified by Fleishman and de Groot, offering the reader a reconstruction it presents as reliable, even as that reconstruction is deliberately fragmented across competing points of view. It is precisely this combination documentary fidelity paired with structural multivocality, that constitutes "demythologizing realism" as a distinct type within the broader typology of the post-1950 American Civil War novel, and that differentiates it both from the earlier reconciliationist tradition it displaces and from the more radically self-questioning metahistorical novel that follows it.

CONCLUSION

This study examined a specific cluster of the post-1950 American Civil War novel united by their direct engagement with the war itself and by their shared project of dismantling the "Lost Cause" mythology that had dominated American popular memory of the conflict for the first half of the twentieth century.

The analysis demonstrated that this shared project is realized through three structurally distinct techniques operating at different levels of the text: Kantor's spatial displacement of the narrative from battlefield to prison camp; Shaara's multivocal internal focalization across named historical commanders; and Foote's narratological repetition of key events, in Genette's technical sense, combined with a bilateral critique directed at both sides of the conflict. Beneath this diversity, all three novels were shown to share a single deeper structural feature, the systematic replacement of the omniscient, zero-focalized narrator of the classical historical novel with variable internal focalization which functions as the formal precondition for their demythologizing effect.

The principal contribution of this study is the demonstration that demythologization in the mid-century American Civil War novel operates less by disputing individual historical facts than by restructuring the narrative mechanisms like space, voice, and frequency through which those facts had previously been organized and naturalized as myth. This finding extends Barthes's account of myth as a naturalizing semiological system into the domain of narratological analysis, showing concretely how a genre-level ideological project is executed through specific, describable compositional choices rather than through thematic statement alone.

A limitation of the present study is its restriction to a single novel by each of three authors drawn from within a single, narrowly defined sub-cluster of the broader post-1950 corpus. Future research might extend the proposed three-part typology of spatial, focal, and narratological demythologization to the racial counter-history group (Walker, Styron, Haley, Morrison) and to the political-biographical and existential-deideologizing group (Vidal, Frazier), in order to test whether the same techniques recur outside the specific constraint of direct battle representation, or whether each thematic cluster develops its own distinct structural toolkit. Further research might also engage more systematically with the historiographical context established by Du Bois, the "new Southern historians," and Blight's account of the Lost Cause–reconciliationist duality, in order to more precisely correlate literary-structural change with the broader transformation of American historical memory across the second half of the twentieth century.

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