This dissertation proposes that a robust, serious treatment of Southern conservatism can provide readers with effective ways to interpret works of Southern literature. Southern writers have always dealt with issues we might identify as “conservative,” and scholars have shown us three typical ways of Southern writers approaching conservatism. First, some writers have treated conservatism as one of many characteristics of the South; their treatments of conservatism have been part of their descriptive project. Other writers have used conservatism for more didactic, political purposes, whether that be showing the South’s sins or arguing that the South’s conservative character makes it a distinct, and superior, part of the modern American Republic. I argue that we can see a fourth means for how some writers utilize Southern conservatism. Some writers feel a sense of deep and significant alienation from the South, yet they recognize something in it that keeps them from flatly decrying or repudiating it. Many of these writers find in the Southern conservative tradition a means for making sense of how to live in this alienating, disorienting world. But to find the good in the Southern tradition, these writers must critically engage and reinterpret the Southern conservative tradition, taking lessons from its core tenets and applying them to particular exigencies, challenges, and situations in which they find themselves. Ultimately, because these authors are arguing not for a return to the past, but for a critical reappraisal of the usefulness of the past in terms of present exigencies, they must face the possibility of their project’s failure. Further, because Southern conservatism represents a way of thinking so radically at odds with the American vision of progress and infinite possibility, these writers must also face an-
other reality—even if they can succeed in re-interpreting the Southern conservative tradition for the exigencies of their current moment, they are inevitably superfluous, vis-à-vis the culture in which they live.

This project examines three such writers: William Alexander Percy, Walker Percy, and Peter Taylor. These writers navigate their own sense of superfluity and their own idiosyncratic reinterpretations of the Southern conservative tradition in order to find spaces of existential stability and meaning in a changed and changing South. I set up the terms of the argument in the introduction, including providing a brief overview of what “Southern conservatism” is. I then proceed to analyze William Alexander Percy’s memoir, *Lanterns on the Levee*; works from both Peter Taylor’s early and late periods (including his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *A Summons to Memphis*); and two of Walker Percy’s novels, *The Last Gentleman* and *Love in the Ruins*, in terms of how these writers reinterpretations of the Southern conservative tradition allows them to arrive at what intellectual historian and rhetorician Richard Weaver calls a “theory for living” within the contexts of a changed and changing South that marks individuals like these writers as increasingly superfluous.