

The Southerner, Part I

Jean Renoir, Dir. (1945)

Screenplay: Hugo Butler, William Faulkner, Nunnally Johnson

Story: George Sessions Perry

Cinematography: Lucien N. Andriot

Please note: We've retained the southern dialect spoken by the folks in this film, together with its non-standard grammar. However, as always: the Italian in the cineracconto is standard Italian.

This translation document is not a literary translation of the photo-story. It is a tool to assist intermediate-level Italian learners understand the text. In writing our photo-stories, we aim for a fluid, standard Italian, albeit at a high intermediate level. Then we write an English translation – which is naturally at an intermediate level of English – to match it. At times, the English translation retains a little of the Italian syntax, to give students a feel for the Italian language.

The images are an important part of the photo-story. Each paragraph refers to specific images. Even if you don't understand Italian, please read this translation alongside the Italian version on the blog with photos, so that you can have context for the words. Consider as well that these visuals help us to know the movie better: they not only enrich the story, but they also show camera movements, editing, the symbols chosen by the director and thematic ideas. You will also have access to the links to other references in the blog itself. (An underline in the translation document indicates a hyperlink in the photo-story on the blog.) Please see the blog, specifically on the page “How the blog works,” for more information about our translation philosophy and our glossary style.

Summary: Heeding his uncle's dying words, Texas cotton-picker Sam Tucker decides to farm on a stretch of neglected land. Together, Sam, his wife Nona, two kids and Granny contend with adverse weather, hostile neighbors and more. Through it all, their love for each other keeps them going.

We see a wall calendar: it's September. The camera zooms in on the illustration, titled “Autumn”: two wild turkeys and their babies on a bed of leaves in a forest clearing. We hear music, first rousing, then sentimental.

A man's voice says, “This is a little souvenir picture album of my best pal, Sam Tucker, and his kin. Believe me, they don't come no better. This is Nona, Sam's wife.” As he speaks, we see the album.

“And here's Sam's ma, a widow-woman. Ma ain't so young, but her heart's still full of fire. Harmie here ain't no Tucker, just a good friend. These are the youngest of the Tucker clan. Sam's kids: Daisy and Jotty. And here's Sam's granny. She didn't like having her picture took. This one's me. I'm a town man myself. Only come home for fairs and weddings and such. That's why I cherish these pictures so. It makes me feel close to my friends, to look at it.”

Now our story begins. The camera pans across a cotton field, where men and women are hard at work.

It stops at an old man, who is kneeling and picking cotton. Abruptly, he stands up and staggers, making his hat fall off.

“Sam! Sam!” he says, in a daze.

Close by, Sam takes the long bag off his shoulder and hurries over.

“What's the matter, Uncle Pete?”

“It's awful hot!” Pete collapses into Sam's arms.

At Sam's call, Nona puts down her bag and rushes over.

She sits down and holds Uncle Pete in her lap. Sam runs off to get a bag of cotton, which he lays under Pete's head.

“My hat...” he murmurs. Sam reaches over and puts the hat on the old man's head.

“You lie here, Uncle Pete,” he says, picking up a glass jug. “Here's some water.”

“It's my darned old heart.”

“You just lie here, Uncle Pete. I'll finish your row for you,” Sam assures him.

“Much obliged to you, Sam.”

“I gotta take my cotton back, now, Honey.”

“I'll take care of Uncle Pete,” Nona says, taking a bandana out of her pocket. She wets it and dabs it on Pete's face to cool him off.

A truck with tall wooden slatted sides sits at the edge of the field. Two men stand at the top, emptying bags into the truck, which is already filled with white, fluffy cotton. The camera pans over to the weighing station, where some workers are speaking in Spanish. A man in white pants and shirt weighs the cotton as the workers bring it to him. Everyone wears a broad-brimmed hat in the fierce sun.

Sam approaches. “Uncle Pete's sick,” he says. “I'm gonna finish his row.” He leaves.

A woman wearing a straw hat hoists her heavy bag of cotton onto the scale. The man weighs it and turns back to his adding machine.

A group sits in the shade of some trucks, resting and chatting. We see Sam join them. A man with a slight Mexican accent asks him, “Where are you going after the crop's over?”

“I figured I might stay here, get me a bulldozing job. Where are you going?”

“I think I'm going north next year.”

Once again, the camera pans across the cotton field, as mournful voices sing, returning us to Uncle Pete.

Rejoining Nona, Sam asks, “How is he, Honey?”

She shakes her head. “He ain't so good.”

In close-up, we see Pete's wrinkled face and tired eyes. Sweat gleams on his neck. He has his arm over a panting dog. “Work for yourself,” Pete tells Sam. “Grow your own crops.”

“You want some more water, Uncle Pete?” Sam asks. Surrounded by the cotton plants, he seems rooted in the earth.

“Grow your own crops,” insists Uncle Pete. Then he falls silent. Sam and Nona exchange worried looks.

Uncle Pete’s eyes are closed. The dog rests his muzzle on Pete’s still hand, looking up at the dead man.

In the next shot, the little dog sits in a dirt field. Wearing a dark suit, Sam hammers a rough wooden cross into the ground with a rock. The name Peter Tucker is carved into the wood. This is a poor people’s cemetery, overgrown with weeds.

“I wish we could raise him a tombstone,” Nona says sadly, holding a bouquet of flowers. “That’s for folks that got money,” Sam replies, tossing the rock aside.

Nona lays the bouquet on Uncle Pete’s grave, where the dog whimpers forlornly.

“Come here, Zoomy.” Sam picks up the dog.

Their daughter Daisy lays more flowers on the grave, and Granny takes her hand, leading her away.

The small group of mourners leaves the cemetery, heads bowed. A dissolve takes us to the Tuckers walking home.

Jotty complains that his feet hurt, so they stop for a moment, so that Sam can take off his shoes. He asks Nona, “You know that little San Pedro place down near the river?”

“I heard of it. I ain’t never seen it.”

“Well, that belongs to the boss, too. Old Ike at the commissary was tellin’ me it was for rent. Been layin’ out there now for three years. It should be as rich as mud. In the old days, old man Corinth used to raise the best crops in the country on it.”

Nona comments, “If it’s been layin’ out all that time, it’ll take a whole year to clear it off.”

“Yeah,” Sam admits.

Sam is holding the dog, with Jotty’s boots slung over his shoulder. “I reckon I could ask old man Neward for his mules,” he says. “He don’t ever hardly use ‘em, no how. As for seeds and fertilizer, I bet I could make a deal with Harmie. And as for a plow, there’s that old one of Pa’s been layin’ out in Ma’s backyard ever since he died. Ain’t been used for nothin’ but roostin’ chickens on.” He takes off his hat and sets it back on his head. “I’m gonna ask the boss about it,” he decides.

“Askin’ don’t do no harm,” Nona agrees.

“No, after all, the boss is a pretty good guy. We’ve always been friends.”

It’s time to move on. Nona steps into the road, and calls, “Jotty, Sis, Granny... come on!”

As the family continues towards home, led by Jotty in his bare feet, Sam strides forward with a big grin, Uncle Pete’s last words on his mind: “Grow your own crops.”