

The world of southern gothic literature essay



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Southern Gothic Literature is a distinct subgenre of Gothic literature which draws from the staple elements of mainstream Gothic literature and localizes them to reflect the specific experience of people in the rural South. Some of its notable contemporary writers include William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor whose stories will be discussed in this essay. In understanding the nature of Southern Gothic, it is necessary to briefly explain what characterizes its predecessor.

The classic Gothic literature is an exploration of the supernatural, magical and mysterious set in horrific ruins and infused with an atmosphere of terror (Flora, McKethan, and Taylor 312). It explores three basic themes: paranoia, barbarism and taboo (Flora, McKethan and Taylor 312). In paranoia, it brings to the fore the unknowable and indescribable abyss which is beyond the material world. This theme makes gothic literature it does not readily identify the source of mystery.

Gothic literature also deals with reality but one that is not bound by norms, mores and ethics. As such, it portrays violence and barbarism reflecting a reality with relativistic ethics and behavioral norms. Finally, in exploring taboos, it brings to the surface socio-psychological truths which are repressed and recreates a world with characters that are transgressive, norm breakers. (Flora, McKethan, and Taylor 312).

Generally, traditional Gothic is considered a Romantic reaction against the rationality and certainty of the Enlightenment; thus, it is preoccupied with the unknown and the unacceptable. As the conventions of Gothic become appropriated to specific historical realities, it transforms to a form that

effectively captures the society or generation which it portrays. In the case of Southern Gothic, the main elements of its predecessor are retained with the exception of their original purpose.

Whereas traditional Gothic employs supernatural elements mainly for terror and suspense, Southern Gothic uses these conventions to critique and explore social issues in the American South (“Southern Gothic”). Flora, MacKethan and Taylor suggests that its transgressive quality, pertaining to the prominence of themes such as violence, disability, sexual perversion, and moral corruption, emerged as a protest against the insistence of the South “to establish itself as a great modern slave state” and creating an illusion of “Golden Era” in the American South (313).

Nineteenth century Southern gothic works such as “The Fall of the House of Usher” by Edgar Allen Poe and “Notes on the State of Virginia” by Thomas Jefferson subvert the idea of antebellum rhetoricians regarding the pastoral, idyllic and “glorious utopia” founded on the plantation system (Flora, MacKethan, and Taylor 313).

As a result, the literature from the South paints a landscape that is nightmarish, disintegrating and home to degenerate slave owners and their descendants perpetuating violence, perversion, hypocrisy, moral corruption and racism. This theme of subversion among early Southern gothic writers during the nineteenth century became the springboard for the development of contemporary Southern Gothic writers which include William Faulkner, Flannery O’Connor, Carson McCullers, Eudora Welty, and Truman Capote among others (Flora, McKethan, Taylor 315).

Flannery O'Connor points out three elements of the pastoral gothic, the predecessor of modern Southern gothic, which has shifted meaning as they were adapted in the contemporary situation (qtd in Flora, McKethan and Taylor 315). First, the pastoral plantation in antebellum gothic becomes the distorted and disintegrating rural and small towns of the South. Second, the comic-antics of characters portraying the clash of humor and violence become the alienated and dislocated characters attempting to find meaning in the estranged world of modernity.

Third, the naturalistic depiction of violence and degradation becomes the ambivalent, pervading fear of the unknown which Lewis Simpson pertains to as the "bizarre terror of existence under the conditions of modern history" when the search for a meaningful identity is difficult if not impossible (qtd in Flora, McKethan and Taylor 315). It is clear then that modernity, with all its alienating circumstances, has shaped Southern Gothic as we presently know it.

But it has retained its predecessor's aim of transgressing norms and subverting ideals through deformity, grotesquerie, perversity and violence manifested in the characters, themes, imageries and plots of the stories. There is a tendency to see the revolting features of Southern gothic to be mere monstrosities and predilection for violence, deformity and titillating terror (Martin 153). William Van O'Connor suggests that the reason for the prevalence of grotesque in Southern is clear enough: the old agricultural system depleted the land and poverty breeds abnormality; in many cases people were living with a code that was no longer applicable, and this meant a detachment from reality and loss of vitality" (6). In another defense of the

genre, Flannery O'Connor asserts that in her case, the use of grotesquerie is a way of reacting against the uncertainty and nothingness of modernity and presenting spiritual truth which are impossible to communicate in a world that is not "unfamiliar and extraordinary" (Martin 156).

Further, she adds that if Southern gothic is replete with grotesqueries and deviancies, it is because a writer aims to make blatant before a desensitized audience the distortions caused by the depravity of modern life (O'Connor qtd in Martin 162). The gothic elements of this subgenre are evident in three short stories by two of the most anthologized Southern Gothic writers: Flannery O'Connor and William Faulkner.

In the analysis of the three stories, "A Rose for Emily" by Faulkner and "Good Country People" and "A Good Man is Hard to Find" by O'Connor, the author of this essay aims to justify how these stories reflect the elements of Southern Gothic literature. "A Good Man is Hard to Find" tells the story of a family trip that has gone terribly off course. Bailey, together with his wife, their children and his grandmother, prepares to leave for a road trip when the grandmother expresses her misgivings about the whole plan.

She mentions the recent news about the escape of the serial murder named Misfit and tells his only son that she is afraid they might run into him along the way. Bailey dismisses her and the next morning they head to their destination, Florida. While on the road, the grandmother tells Bailey of a plantation she visited years ago, and the children, fascinated by the old lady's description, demands their father to turn back. Irritated, Bailey agrees

to it. As they struggle through the dust, the grandmother suddenly realizes that the plantation she is referring to is in Georgia and not in Tennessee.

Surprised, she jerks, causing the car to leap to Bailey who overturns the car. A beaten black car approaches the accident and three men emerge. Upon realizing that one of them is the Misfit, the grandmother pleads for her life, calling him one of his sons, as each of the family gets murdered in the woods. Finally, the Misfit shoots the old lady and tells his buddies that it is no real pleasure in life. The outstanding terror in the story culminates, of course, in the mass murder of the family. But O'Connor sustains the terror throughout the story although the conventional gothic elements specifically in the setting are not present.

One key element that makes this possible is the imminent presence of the Misfit which, at the first half of the short story, manifests only in the conversations initiated by the grandmother. The story opens with the mention of his escape and his name surfaces again during the stop in Tower where the restaurant owner says how difficult it is to find a good man those days. The foreboding fear is a foreshadowing of the gruesome end of the story (Martin 164). O'Connor infuses the story with the anticipation of the Misfit to keep the readers at the edge of the seat and prepare them for the eventual meeting of the family and the murderer.

Aside from the terrorizing atmosphere, the characters also portray gothic elements which contribute to the grotesqueness of the story. Although not monstrous or blatantly distorted as in traditional Gothic stories, O'Connor's characters are, nonetheless, real which means that their flaws and

deformities are not euphemized or ignored. The grandmother is described as having “leathery face” while Red Sam’s gut “[hang] like a sack of meal swaying under his shirt (O’Connor “A Good Man” 34, 37). Enjolras points out that O’Connor does not “idealize or glamorize” her characters in order to achieve shock in the story (6-8).

O’Connor also unapologetically portrays the main characters as unlikable people. Although Bandy (2) points out that the delicate and fragile grandmother facing her killers creates sympathy among readers, O’Connor makes sure that before the disturbing scene, the grandmother is portrayed as overbearing and judgmental. The rest of the family is also not spared from O’Connor’s keen and naturalist observation. During the road trip, the actions of Bailey and his entire family reveals what Martin pertains to as the characters’ “spiritual depravity” (164).

The mother is indifferent to what is happening inside the automobile even as her two rambunctious and ill-mannered children, June Star and John Wesley disrespectfully mocks their grandmother’s hometown and go berserk after their father refuses to see the plantation. They join their grandmother in torturing their father to force him to turn back. Martin suggests that their insensitivity seems to demand a “violent correction” (164). True enough, a mishap leads the family to their tragic death. Galloway points out that O’Connor’s use of violence is not for its own sake, but to communicate a religious and philosophical vision (6).

As a Catholic writer, O’Connor portrays how the grace of God reaches people even those who are undeserving. The grandmother’s belated recognition of

the Misfit as one her sons signals that she has achieved a state of grace, a moment of spiritual redemption, despite the violence and death (Galloway 3-4). The gruesome conclusion of "A Good Man" reveals the depravity and the violence that pervades modern life in the South (Blythe and Sweet 2). The randomness of the family's murder is alienating and disorienting. It is a manifestation of the meaningless which account for the grotesqueness of Southern Gothic stories.

However, O'Connor's Christian worldview does not permit her to accept this condition. In fact, she uses the depravity of modern life as a canvas in which she portrays the abounding grace of God. O'Connor says that the distortions in her story are not the kind that destroys, but reveals (qtd in Enjolras 14). The main character in "Good Country People" is a contrast to the grandmother in "A Good Man." As the grandmother sees herself as a respectable Christian, Hulga Hopewell, with her Ph. D in philosophy thinks that by being able to see through surfaces, she is an outstanding nihilist invincible to platitudes and conventions.

Through the characters of Hulga, O'Connor explores people who are blinded to their own blindness. Hulga is described at the beginning as a woman who eschews the optimism of her mother. With her advanced degrees in philosophy, she believes that she can see right through the surfaces of things which has taught her to reject the physical world and the "life of the body in preference for the life of the mind (McFarland 1560). The narrator says of Hulga: "she didn't like dogs or cats or birds or flowers or nature or nice young men. She looked at niche young men as if she could smell their stupidity" (O'Conner "Good Country" 1052).

McFarland points out that Hulga's awareness of imperfection has led her to a rejection of the physical world (1560). Saying that people should accept her—" LIKE I AM"—does not prove that she has accepted herself and her condition (O'Conner " Good Country" 1050). The fact that she changed her name from Joy to Hulga as a rejection of the contradiction of her name and her ugly self reveals her inability to accept incongruity. She resembles her mother, whose optimism and liking for trite aphorisms betray her real attitude towards other's difference and imperfection.

Hulga puts up a defense of rudeness, snobbery, and intellectual superiority to hide her failure to accept that she is imperfect. Beneath the enamored and invincible poise, Hulga hangs on to the possibility of love. This is her vulnerable point. When the Bible salesman expresses interest in her, she makes herself believe that he is not a threat to her because she is in reality threatened by the possibility that love will bare her soul and expose her imperfection. In fact, she detaches herself from the emotion thinking that she will control him—" seduce him"—and transform his embarrassment into something else.

However, her weakness betrays her. McFarland says that when Hulga allows the salesman to touch her artificial leg after making her believe that he is innocent, the act is tantamount to baring her soul to him (1561). The grotesque character of Hulga both literally and metaphorically are manifested in the artificial leg. Hulga believes that she has no illusions, preoccupied only with the truth and able to see right through people. She is exasperated at her mother's hypocrisy and screams at her " Woman! Do you

ever look inside? Do you ever look inside and see what you are not? ”

(O'Connor “ Good Country” 1052).

But, she fails miserably in thinking that the Bible salesman is innocent. As soon as the salesman got her under his spell, he snatches the leg and leaves Hulga without a leg and an eye (for he took her glasses as well). This is a particularly grotesque scene which reflects the distorted character of Hulga as a result of her rejection of imperfection. Without acceptance of one's deformity, grace cannot occur. Once again, O'Connor uses a violence and destruction both in the literal (Hulga's leg and eye) and metaphysical level (Hulga's intellectual illusion) to portray the presence of grace.

In the horror of the situation lies the possibility that Hulga is redeemed. The gothic elements in “ Good Country” is subtle compared to “ A Good Man. ” This is because O'Connor focuses on the deformity and grotesqueness of the character. In contrast, William Faulkner's haunting tale of love that turns perverse has more explicitly Southern Gothic elements than the previous text. “ A Rose for Emily,” tells the story of Emily Grierson, a reclusive woman who becomes the town enigma. Throughout her youth, Emily lived with her tyrant father who refused to let her out.

After the father died, Emily recovers miserably. Not long after she gets involved with a construction worker and becomes the talk of her little town. For weeks, people see the man, Homer Barron around Emily's house, but soon after he disappears. At about that time, Emily is spotted buying arsenic in a drugstore. Suspicions arise as to the whereabouts of Homer. These are

only quelled when Emily dies and a locked room reveals the bones of Homer whose head lies on a pillow with Emily's hair on it.

Faulkner uses death and mystery to explore the theme of disintegrating south. Aristocracy blends with the grotesque and becomes perverse. The order of the old plantation system is now destroyed and it leaves the characters depraved and deformed. Emily's father forces her children to a claustrophobic life which may have led to Emily's distorted view of love. Scherting suggests that Emily's murderous act is a result of an Oedipal desire for her own father, compelling her to replace him with Homer after she becomes an emotional orphan at her father's death (400).

This hint on incest further reveals the extent of perversity that ferments behind the closed doors of the Grierson's. The image of a rotting corpse inside Emily's house reflects this. The Grierson's and their festering mansion haunts the town of a decayed glory. This resonates with Gothic elements of recurring ghosts from the past that refuses to be buried or forgotten. As the town becomes modernized and developed, people are alienated by their irreconcilable past. As such, they are disturbed by the presence of the Griersons.

Emily's cloistered life may resemble the typical Gothic heroine locked and tormented in a ruined mansion, but she is by no means like her. However, she becomes a victim of a society that alienates her as a result of her association with the haunting past. This results to her isolation from an already changing world and her gradual decay into a grotesque character. However, Faulkner's ambivalent treatment of the story invokes both

sympathy and aversion to Emily much like the reaction of reader's to the gothic Frankenstein.

Writers of the Southern Gothic tradition infuses their stories with terror, perversity, violence and grotesquerie not for their own sake but, as the stories reveal, as a means of portraying an experience that is unique to the South, an experience that involves the disintegration of past norms and ideals and the irreconcilable mixture of modernity and their haunting past. The result of this reality is fiction that is ambivalent and inclined to explore the alienating world of the unknown and the uncertain.