

## “Dark Legacy”: Gothic Ruptures in Southern Literature

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This essay will attempt to answer why the Gothic has been such a durable—and ambiguous—feature in critical discussions of the Southern literary tradition. It will do this by initially (and briefly) sketching some historical and contextual reasons as to why the Gothic plays such an important role in the nation’s, but more specifically the region’s, critical literary practices. It will then look at the critical discussions surrounding some of its chief practitioners (Edgar Allan Poe, William Faulkner, Flannery O’Connor) and analyze what is arguably the chief critical reason for its continued relevance, namely how it engages with and articulates the South’s shameful legacy of slavery and racial segregation. It will conclude by briefly contemporizing the debate and ask if—in a supposedly post-racial, post-regional and most definitely post-Agrarian South—the Gothic has continued relevance to how critical discussions about the region’s literature are conducted.

There is no doubt that the Gothic as a mode or genre, much like many of its representative texts, engenders feelings of dread and confusion among readers due to its inherent ambiguity; as the respected Gothic critic David Punter has rightly observed, the Gothic is a term which has “a wide variety of meanings” (1). This is compounded by the fact that literary Gothic is so often associated with locales imbued with a mysterious antiquity. So how can a nation and a region which is supposedly “historyless,” which lacks ruins, which stresses rationality, progress, optimism and a belief in the future be said to have a Gothic literary tradition? This paradoxical ambiguity has been observed by Donald Ringe who in his study *American Gothic* acknowledges the following about the nation’s founding fathers:

Americans were thoroughly imbued with eighteenth-century thought. They shared a common belief in the primary value of reason, the absur-

dity of mythology, and the danger of superstition. They dismissed ghosts, goblins and witches as the relics of a more credulous age and were proud of the fact that American society had been formed when such phenomena were no longer credited and tales of superstition had been relegated to the nursery...If their writing was to reflect the national experience, it would have to be based on a fundamental rationalism and to depict realistically the actualities of American life. (2–3)

Ringe's study explores the contradictory reasons why the Gothic flourished in a nation that placed such a heavy emphasis on Enlightenment values based around the empirical and the rational. We should note that the politically independent nation is almost as old as the genre itself, especially if we accept the common critical assumption that the literary Gothic came into being with the publication of Horace Walpole's novel *The Castle of Otranto* in 1764. So we encounter our first significant paradox here; the nation that espoused equality and freedom also initiated a Gothic tradition that articulated cultural anxieties about denial and marginalization that was a direct result of the culturally enshrined narratives that were meant to have the opposite effect.

The paradoxes keep revealing themselves if we turn our attention to the South. From its very inception the South created a mythology for itself (one thinks of Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* here with its utopian vision of independent yeoman farmers striving for perfectibility) that was predicated on the vision of a settled, stable and unchanging region based upon agrarian values. The South has always been engaged in its own historical process of mythological construction which counters Ringe's claim in the quote cited above. The old antebellum South was nothing but myth, and its narrative of a supposedly halcyon past concealed all manner of social, familial and of course racial denials and suppressions. All of these progressive cultural narratives naturally have their flipside and the Southern Gothic set to work by exposing their abuses and silences. As Allan Lloyd-Smith has insightfully acknowledged, the Gothic "is about the *return* of the past, of

the repressed and denied, the buried secret that subverts and corrodes the present, whatever the culture does not want to know or admit, will not or dare not tell itself,” and that Southern (and American Gothic for that matter) subsequently “explores the tensions between a culturally sanctioned progressive optimism and an actual dark legacy” (Lloyd-Smith 1,118).

The final two words from Lloyd-Smith’s second quotation (“dark legacy”) are obviously loaded with significance for our purposes here. The “dark legacy” explored by Southern Gothicists primarily had to (and still does) engage with the legacy of slavery which stood as the most obvious rebuke to the nation’s cultural narratives of equality and rationality. The ‘dark legacy’ which still informs the Southern Gothic is therefore racial, political, moral, religious, spatial and even environmental in nature. It is ironic that narratives of liberty (be they political, spiritual or spatial) turn out to be narratives that imprison, and this critical debate continues to frame discussions of the region’s literature. Reason stifles rather than liberates; “darkness” is racial as much as it is moral, and it results in a culturally sanctioned violence; the region’s fabled agrarian idyll provide a palimpsest for Gothic settings but they eventually exhaust themselves which results in dispossession and alienation, and what one critic has referred to as the “God-intoxicated atmosphere” of the South has generated a healthy amount of critical attention as practitioners of Southern Gothic subject their characters to often macabre searches for spiritual salvation (Gray 279).

So whilst Southern Gothic may not have had the ruined castles, mysterious Catholic practices or decaying aristocratic dynasties that were utilized by early European literary Gothicists such as Horace Walpole, Anne Radcliffe or Matthew Lewis it did have its own source of blackness, which was “not simply [identified] with evil but with *racial* blackness” (Lloyd-Smith 45). As an imaginative category “blackness” is therefore the central concern in many of the critical discourses about Southern Gothic. In her analysis of the “recovered” text *The Bondswoman’s Narrative* Teresa Goddu has claimed that the mode

“tells stories of racial desire and dread” and that the Gothic becomes the “mode through which to speak what often remains unspeakable within the American national narrative—the crime of slavery” (63). Goddu continues to make the crucial point that the primary cultural and political anxiety that Southern Gothic seeks to articulate and redress is of course slavery, arguing that “the ghostly origins of the nation” arise from the “oppressive social structure of slavery” and that a foundational theme of Southern Gothic is the revelation that the nation is “built on economic exploitation and racial terror” (63).

Critical consensus reveals that the novel through which these themes—the terrors of racial subjugation, the legacy of slavery, the persistence of historical memory, the ability of a dark past to rupture contemporary reality and distort reconstituted subjectivities—receives its most sophisticated treatment in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. We should acknowledge that although large parts of the novel are set in Cincinnati the location of the acute psychological trauma experienced by Sethe and other significant characters is Kentucky and Georgia. The ghostly personification of Beloved, the daughter of Sethe, who chose to kill her rather than expose her to the horrors of slavery, returns to haunt Sethe and her new family where they are supposedly living as “free” citizens. The reappearance of Beloved of course reminds us of the ideological function of the supernatural and ghosts as they “are never just ghosts; they provide us with an insight into what haunts our culture,” and it allows Morrison to investigate the legacy of slavery by critiquing binarisms such as slave and free, past and present, corporeal and spectral and so on (Smith 153).

Critics have also observed how *Beloved* has made another notable contribution to the Southern Gothic as it shows “American history as a haunted house” (Goddu 63). This achieves two things; Morrison is able to demonstrate through a fragmented and polyphonic narrative structure how the pain of a regional and indeed national trauma can still impede upon individual lives, and it can do that by invading the site (the domestic) that is held up to be an impregnable refuge against

such horrors. For Fred Botting this fact accounts for the novel's enduring appeal; "The haunted house, and the ghostly reminder of transgression which inhabits it, provides the scene for a narrative that moves between the past and the present to uncover, in the interweaving of a repressed individual history with a suppressed cultural history, the external and internal effects of racial oppression" (161).

*Beloved* is also significant in terms of how it contemporized the critical and theoretical approaches to Gothic. This is most evident in how the novel is ripe for what are quite often sophisticated psychoanalytical and postmodernist or poststructuralist readings which focus on the treatment of fragmented subjectivities and how language strains to record (and is perhaps incapable) of documenting the horrors at the heart of the novel. Two ideas from two theorists come to mind here, namely Julia Kristeva's theory of the "abject" and Jacques Lacan's concept of the "Real." For Kristeva the abject can be read as something that "from its place of banishment . . . does not stop challenging its master," and Morrison's novel succeeds in challenging the South's dark "master" narrative of racial subjugation, violence and exclusion (Kristeva 2). Lacan's concept of the Real is arguably more challenging but it allows us to see how the subject matter of *Beloved* demands but also resists representation. Eric Savoy articulates the applicability of the "Real" as follows: "The historical dimension of American Gothic is entirely congruent with the notion of the Real—of the myriad things and amorphous physicality beyond representation that haunt our subjectivity and demand our attention that compel us to explanatory language but resist the strategies of that language" (169). Whilst undoubtedly complex and harrowing the overview of responses to *Beloved* allows us to see how Southern Gothic is able to maintain an engaging historicist interest through its articulation of a deep-rooted cultural anxiety; it also demonstrates Gothic's continued relevance to contemporary critical debates.

We will now jump back in historical terms to consider the critical reception of Edgar Allan Poe. Poe's work demonstrates how the Gothic

mode was ideally suited to the emerging artistic and political consciousness of the region, and he left an indelible mark on the development of the genre in a manner that would reach far beyond the geographical confines of the South. Poe's biography reveals him to be something of a doomed Gothic character, a figure had his own demons and hauntings and whose own relation to the South was somewhat mysterious. In *Southern Aberrations: Writers of the American South and the Problems of Regionalism* Richard Gray claims that Poe was "someone who was not even born in the South but chose nevertheless to perceive himself in Southern terms" and that Poe "played many parts over the course of just over forty years: but the part to which he was most fiercely and consistently attached was that of the Southern gentleman" (2–3). This is significant because [Southern] Gothic is a mode known for its constructiveness, if you will, for its very knowing ability to play with its identity and conventions, to undermine hierarchies and subjectivities, and Poe engaged in exactly the same performative way when creating his own "Southern" identity. Despite this, Poe successfully and repeatedly managed to tap into "many of the secret fears and guilts of his region" (15).

One of the central thematic tensions at the heart of the rise of Southern (and indeed American Gothic) is how it deconstructs cultural narratives which promote an unassailable belief in rational, progressive values. This has been remarked upon by many commentators of the Gothic but it is most succinctly expressed by Alan Lloyd-Smith who claimed that for Poe "the interplay between reason and horror released the energies of his most powerful work," and that the "crisis or breakdown of reason gave Poe his great themes" (67–8). This can be seen repeatedly in his work but it his short stories including *The Fall of the House of Usher*, *William Wilson* and *The Black Cat* that have perhaps attracted the most attention in this regard.

Of course what also cements Poe's place as one of the leading practitioners of Southern Gothic is his treatment of race, of the region's "dark legacy." Eric Savoy is a critic who has offered insightful analysis on this aspect of Poe's aesthetic and he observes that:

. . . several of his most celebrated texts are rightly understood now as a profound meditation upon the cultural significance of 'blackness' in the white American mind. A surprising amount of Poe's work may be said to Gothicize the deep oppression and violence inherent in his culture's whiteness and thus to transform America's normative race into the most monstrous of them all. (182)

For Savoy this process is particularly apparent in a story such as "The Black Cat" in which "blackness allegorizes not merely a personal (or even cultural) melancholia, as it does in 'The Raven,' but the abject underside of a national 'normality'" (Savoy 182). Poe's value to the development of the Southern Gothic can therefore be attributed to his ability to destabilize hierarchies of order and to critique the South's prevailing mythology and narrative. It is perhaps somewhat ironic that Poe was apparently so easily seduced by the myth of the aristocratic South that he adopted its mores and yet his fiction seeks to continually subvert the Gothic practices that this mythology sought to reinforce.

Poe also made significant contributions to the stylistic development of the Gothic as a mode or a genre, innovations that were perhaps initiated by his fascination with the South but which would ultimately have a far greater geographical influence. This has been acknowledged by David Punter who claims that Poe's "greatest contribution was in terms not of themes but of structure and tone in which he has never been surpassed" (202). These elements of structural and tonal innovation are elaborated upon by Botting who claims the following for Poe's legacy:

The various devices, styles and subjects that Poe uses and transforms influence all subsequent Gothic writing: the doubles, mirrors and the concern with modes of representation; the scientific transgressions of accepted limits; the play of internal and external narrations, of uncertain psychological states and uncanny events; and the location of mysteries in a criminal world to be penetrated by the incisive reason a new hero, the detective, have become staples of the Gothic. (122–23)

This leads us onto the figure who stalks the imaginative and critical landscapes of the Southern Gothic, monstrously haunting the creative process and the manner in which we try and talk about the region's literature. We are of course referring to William Faulkner here, the Nobel Prize winning author of such novels as *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*, *Light in August* and *Absalom! Absalom!* and short stories such as "A Rose for Emily" which is so frequently held up as an exemplar of the Southern Gothic tradition. As the Southernist Martyn Bone quite rightly identifies, authors and critics always have to be aware of the "looming presence of Faulkner" (155).

It is perhaps with the creation of Yoknapatawpha County and the series of novels beginning with *The Sound and the Fury* that marks Faulkner's greatest contribution to the development of the Southern Gothic. There is a vast amount of critical material available about his work but our (admittedly extremely brief) focus here will acknowledge two main aspects to this critical practice; his use of geographical representations to develop a usable spatial imaginative repository for the Southern Gothic mode and his highly modernistic use of language which creates the impression that "there is no exit from the darkly illuminating labyrinth of language" (Botting 14.).

Faulkner did set some of his work in locations other than Yoknapatawpha County (novels such as *Soldiers' Pay* and *Mosquitoes* are located in Virginia and New Orleans, for example) but it is the novels set in his postage stamp of soil that do so much to develop the Southern Gothic. Indeed of his nineteen novels "all but five are set, in large part, in a notional county" (Godden 436). The continued importance of this "notional county" to Faulkner's aesthetic allowed him to create a palimpsest of "haunted swamps, lost plantations, and defeated southern towns [that] offer a Gothic landscape comparable to the ruins of feudalism in English Gothic" (Lloyd-Smith 117). Faulkner's fiction charts the progression from pre- to post-Civil War territories, from premodern to modernized, and one of the great "terrors" of his work—aside from the spectral spatial locales highlighted above—is generated by

the economic transformation of the South. Whilst this process may not sound particularly Gothic it resulted in his characters being subjected to phenomena such as alienation, fragmentation and uprootedness which are nonetheless familiar to many Gothic protagonists. This rupture between the past and the present, between a past that was naively imagined and mythologized and a present that is subject to painful social, racial and economic transformations, is an archetypal moment for Southern Gothic where the “dark legacy” of the past clashes with psychological and geographical concerns of the present. Faulkner’s fiction therefore attests to how the Gothic can engage in unfolding cultural debates, as acknowledged by Richard Godden; “Faulkner turns to the painfully protracted creation of a global allegory at the historical moment when *his* South, held together by issues of dependency, comes apart; when its inherently cohering center, a regime of accumulation founded on coerced labor, is abruptly modernized by a regional shift towards a waged economy” (450).

One of the most celebrated and critically discussed aspects of Faulkner’s aesthetic is his use of language. His linguistic innovations and use of highly modernistic tropes such as stream of consciousness and narratives in which events unfold via the perspectives of multiple narrators (the disparity between the cognitive and linguistic ability of such narrators is often striking) does much to add to the Gothic atmosphere of his works. Indeed this can frequently pose a significant challenge for students and first time readers as chronology, genealogy, focalization and setting seem to be enveloped in their very own Gothic-like maze that is impenetrable and disorienting. This linguistic effect is most apparent in *Absalom! Absalom!*, generally acknowledged as his most Gothic text, as skillfully delineated by Richard Gray in the passage below:

Convoluting sentences and a cumulative syntactical pattern create the effect of thought flow, of a consciousness ranging free over the myriad possibilities latent in each moment’s experience, while a disruptive use of

parentheses and grammatical forms, and the continual juxtaposition of contradictory images and suggestions, prevent the reader from absorbing that experience into any preconceived framework of value. . . . Sentences seem to have no end, possibilities of no definite conclusions, and the pervasive effect is one of hallucination or nightmare. . . . This is a language that creates a sense of mystery. It encourages confusion and seems therefore eminently suited to a narrative in which events are divested of logical explanation. (Gray 246–47)

The publication of Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* in 1929 is generally regarded to be the start of the Southern Renaissance, a flowering of imaginative and critical intellectual activity concerning Southern literature that would last until the late 1940s. Alongside Faulkner other key members of the Renaissance included Katherine Anne Porter, Tennessee Williams, Robert Penn Warren and Allen Tate. All of these figures produced prose, poetry and dramatic texts of great merit, but the last two writers listed above are particularly significant because, as members of the Agrarian and Fugitive groups, they had dual roles as author/poets *and* critics and therefore did much to set the terms of what Southern literature subsequently could and could not be. In many ways such groups were reacting to the “abjecting” of Southern society as it was dismissed culturally and ruptured economically (especially the way in which traditional agricultural practices and centers were rendered obsolete) by the developing trends in what was becoming an increasingly corporate America, all of which also seemed to them to be originating out of the North of the country. Groups such as the Agrarians wanted, as their name suggests, to return to fundamentally simple agrarian economic practices which were anti-accumulative; they also wanted a Southern literature that was structured around the key principles of place, community and history.

However, Southern writers who were in the generation immediately following the Renaissance found much to quibble with these formulations, and the critique is carried out most strenuously in the work of

Walker Percy and Flannery O'Connor, with the latter being the main focus of our attention here. Her slim body of work, which included the seminal novels *Wise Blood* and *The Violent Bear it Away* along with a number of short stories, attempts to engage with regional *and* national narratives, and it offers—in a world of deterioration, decay and dislocation—an insight to the potential for spiritual salvation in a Southern landscape that was “God intoxicated” and, especially during the period of her major work, perpetually on the brink of nuclear apocalypse.

Like Poe, O'Connor led a brief (she died in August 1964 at the age of 39 from lupus) but aesthetically accomplished life. Her gender and illness made her something of an outsider, a marginalized condition that was compounded by her faith as a Roman Catholic in a predominantly protestant region. However her faith, and the way it influenced her aesthetic, arguably made the most important contribution to the way in which she contemporized the Southern Gothic. Her emphasis on the potential for spiritual salvation in her cast of grotesque characters ensures that her work transcends any accusation of local color as she repeatedly “signals the potential for spiritual progress” in rapidly changing pastoral and indeed racial landscapes (Watson 217).

The Gothicism of her work can be attributed in large part to the willingness she displayed to engage with regional and national cultural anxieties in a social milieu that was both revolutionary and reactionary, rural and urban and increasingly unstable. She lived in a highly Gothic moment where the dialectic between reason and chaos—perhaps the ultimate catalyst for American and Southern Gothic—was especially pronounced, a point intelligently observed by Jay Watson below:

The paradigmatic O'Connor narrative sets these self-absorbed, self-deceiving figures down in a realistically rendered social landscape, a postwar South characterized by dynamic transformation: new forms of movement and tension between country and city, accelerating class mobility and racial activism, and the breakdown of traditional hierarchies and codes. In this fluid, unpredictable, rapidly modernizing environment, O'Connor's

secular intellectuals and complacent class snobs experience unsettling encounters with a rogue's gallery of subaltern figures no longer content to dwell silently on the periphery of Southern social existence. (209)

These themes are particularly apparent in her debut novel *Wise Blood*, published in 1952, whose principal character Hazel Motes, a “social type O’Connor returned to throughout her career; the rural southerner whose traditional world has collapsed and who is destined for a deracinated life in the postwar—and emergently postmodern—city” (O’Gorman 167). As we have seen sites where meaning and borders collapse are perhaps the archetypal setting for [Southern] Gothic texts, and such implosion is even more pronounced in a society that sought to demarcate itself on strictly formulated mythical, social, racial and economic lines. Susan Castillo is another critic who sees this as the key aspect of O’Connor’s contribution to the Southern Gothic, or grotesque as she terms it. For Castillo *Wise Blood* is “characterized by an aesthetic of liminality,” whose characters “inhabit a fluid realm in which conventional borders are effaced or erased or shrouded in mystery, in which ontological or epistemological certainties no longer exist.” This assessment allows us to see *Wise Blood* as another “abject” text in which sites of meaning are collapsed and cultural hierarchies are inverted, a point also acknowledged by Castillo who claims that the “usual boundaries between human beings, animals, plants and even objects are seen as tenuous” (Castillo 494).

Like many Southern Gothic texts her work seems somewhat anachronistic as O’Connor again and again returns to the potential for spiritual salvation in a world that was increasingly dominated by secularism and scientific rationalism. According to Farrell O’Gorman her faith, like Walker Percy, a fellow Catholic writer from the South, allowed her to “seek out the depths of the immediate world around” her, and it never became a subject for pastiche as it would do as Southern writing took an increasingly postmodern turn in the generations to follow (13). This is not to suggest that her faith resulted in her aesthetic taking on

overly didactic or instructive turn. In fact quite the opposite is true, as evidenced in her short stories such as “The Artificial Nigger” where “the South’s repressed nightmare resurface in gothic forms,” and the reader is “confronted with the instability of racial categories and racialized identities in the South” (Castillo 496). In her novels and short stories O’Connor comes back again and again to metaphors associated with sight, with how mainstream culture sees the South and how her cast of grotesque characters see their region and their changing spiritual and social position within it. This challenge to official narratives by “monstrous” or abject characters is one of her key contributions to the development of the Southern Gothic. She is joined in this project by Eudora Welty whose short fiction especially raises “the possibility of alternative gazes, alternative perspectives” where the possibility for “alternative narratives is raised repeatedly” (Donaldson). In many respects O’Connor and Welty realigned the gaze of Southern Gothic and expanded its parameters.

O’Connor and Welty can be seen as transitional figures in the history of Southern Gothic. The past does of course still inform the present, but Southern authors have increasingly found that they are unable to retreat into a “mythic southern past” (Bone 156). The sacrosanct principles formulated and strictly adhered to by major Renaissance figures (those being community, history and place) are no longer workable, and Bone observes that “few novelists writing about the South feel compelled to glance backward—longingly or anxiously—at the receding shadow of the Dixie Limited” (Bone 164).

This is not to say that Southern Gothic has ceased to exist as a viable mode with which to critique and interrogate cultural anxieties. A brief comparison of the function of the Gothic in the work of O’Connor and Harry Crews reveals how it remains relevant and incredibly flexible, as identified by Bone; “whereas the grotesque in O’Connor’s fiction was bound up with spiritual matters, the corporeal concerns in Crews’s writing are tied to class and poverty” (162). So whilst the Gothicized focus has shifted from the spiritual to the social it is, in the works of Crews,

Barry Hannah, William Gay, Dorothy Allison and Jayne Anne Phillips, to name a few examples, still there, even if the anxieties expressed are now transnational rather than strictly regional. Bone's choice of the adjective 'corporeal' is also significant as it confirms how Southern Gothic fiction is still concerned with the abject, of the physical manifestations of deeper cultural fears about monstrosity and change.

Louisiana, and New Orleans in particular, remain sites which continue to play an important role in the Southern Gothic tradition. Robert Mighall claims that "New Orleans' allegiances make it a temporal and cultural anomaly, a breach in the fabric of time and space" and that, thanks primarily to the vampire-filled work of Anne Rice, it is "probably the place most readily associated with vampires," due primarily to its status as a "repository of pastness" (59–60). Perhaps more than any other American city it has resisted the imposition of rationality and, with via oppositional subcultures such as voodoo, it's still a site where the dialectic between terror and unreason is evident in its cultural artifacts. This is borne out when we consider the popularity of Charlaine Harris's Sookie Stackhouse novels (and the popular *True Blood* television series on which they are based), a series of texts which distort hierarchies in familiar Gothic fashion. For those who prefer the more empirical concerns of the Gothic then James Lee Burke's fiction that is set in post-Katrina New Orleans—specifically *The Tin Roof Blowdown*—reveals how the "dark legacy" still functions in Southern society, especially when the veneer of rationality slips in a community forsaken by the authorities and the city turns into an abject nightmare, where inescapable physical death and decay personify a deeper moral degeneration. As Harris's and Burke's work confirms, "the Gothic is a natural form of reference here, as guilts and fears deeply lodged in the national psyche erupt from this city on the edges of that brave New World and those united states" (Mighall 62).

As the case of New Orleans demonstrates Southern Gothic may no longer have to automatically look back to sustain itself. The region's defeat in the Civil War obviously lent itself to melancholic introspections

and mythologizing tendencies, and whilst the agonized memories which caused that conflict still linger they are now joined with other cultural anxieties and abject spaces that ensures that the genre will continue to thrive in the region. Southern Gothic “is not simply an aesthetic or psychoanalytic category but an unofficial political history and a methodology for hearing the voices of dissent that interrupt narratives of national [and regional] consciousness” and as long as those narratives need disrupting, as long as abject spaces exist which are still able to collapse meaning and articulate the ever present but modified versions of the South’s “dark legacy,” then Southern Gothic will continue to maintain its relevance and importance (Idiart and Schulz 138).

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