

The Southern Gothic Literary Tradition

Gothic fiction is a literary term for a genre whose prevailing mood is terror or suspense, whose setting is an isolated castle or monastery, and whose characters include a hero beset by mysterious or threatening forces. The predecessors to modern horror, gothic novels use ghost stories, madness, vampires, and perversity to develop a pleasant sense of fear in the reader. From the 1790s through the nineteenth century, gothic literature comprised everything from Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe’s macabre stories to Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*. Only in the early to mid-20th century did such writers as Carson McCullers, Flannery O’Connor, Tennessee Williams and William Faulkner use it to explore less supernatural, more earthly monsters, thus pioneering what came to be called the “Southern Gothic” literary tradition.

The “grotesque,” one of the key components of Southern Gothic writing, portrays deeply flawed characters, decayed, claustrophobic settings, or sinister events, often linking them to racism, poverty, or violence. Though grotesque characters or situations can sometimes be hard to take, carefully applied they allow talented writers to exaggerate their material without betraying it. The grotesque can also comment on unpleasant aspects of society without appearing overly preachy.

McCullers used grotesque characters to illuminate universal truths about the human condition. She said, “Love, and especially love of a person who is incapable of returning or receiving it, is at the heart of my selection of grotesque figures to

write about — people whose physical incapacity is a symbol of their spiritual incapacity to love or receive love — their spiritual isolation.”

Hasty critics eventually began applying the gothic label carelessly to all Southern fiction, mistaking every idiosyncrasy of character or setting for the grotesque. McCullers reacted against the overuse of the “Southern Gothic” label in an essay titled “The Russian Realists and Southern Literature.” For her, the roots of Southern fiction were firmly planted in realism, and didn’t depend on supernatural incidents or mysticism. She admired such Russian novelists as Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy and thought they had a lot in common with Southern writers, since citizens in both Russia and the South were defined largely by social class and their relationship to the land.

At its best, Southern fiction applies gothic elements within a framework of social realism. This fiction avoids stereotype by creating unusual characters, and imbues them with qualities that cause the reader to examine the world of the novel and the human experience more closely.