

*Celebrating the*  
WHIMSICAL & WEIRD



# WRITING IN THE SOUTHERN GOTHIC STYLE

*Understand the origins and nuances  
of this Gothic subgenre to write  
atmospheric tales.*

BY SONYA ALEXANDER

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Writing Southern Gothic tales requires incorporating certain elements that are signatures of this subgenre. Before starting that short story or novel, it's important to know that the Southern Gothic story is the cousin of the Gothic tale. The Gothic narrative emerged from Britain in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, a byproduct of its environment. With the birth of the Industrial Revolution, which introduced advanced technology and vital industries, society was going into unknown territory. Gothic literature clung to the past, dripping with moody atmosphere, old castles, ghosts, and characters experiencing psychological morass. Piggybacking off of this is Southern Gothic prose, stories that are part and parcel of America and the South. The characters often hold onto the past and sometimes belong to societies that are fighting to survive. Death is frequently an overarching theme in these saturnine tales.

## Hallmarks of Gothic Tales

The Gothic story often utilizes the supernatural as a psychological trigger for characters. In Susan Hill's novel *The Woman in Black: A Ghost Story*, the main character, Arthur Kipps, a solicitor, goes to settle an estate in Crythin Gifford and is plagued by incessant strange noises and the apparition of a woman in black. The occurrences at the manor take his mind to the brink. After he uncovers the story behind the woman in black, he leaves with the spiritual veil of the woman in black's misery following him. She won't allow him to live in peace until he's experienced tragedy akin to hers. With this, while eternally trapped in the netherworld, she gets a modicum of retribution.

Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* is bereft of the supernatural, but has plenty of shadows, gloom, and psychological terror. What makes *Rebecca* scary is the *idea* of Rebecca. Maxim de Winter's new wife, who's nameless, lives in her shadow. Once it's believed that Rebecca might have been murdered, the mystery element emerges from the story. This replaces the supernatural aspect but still taps into the dark side of human nature.

## Elements of Southern Gothic Stories

Blending elements of the Gothic genre and the South's cultural and historical vestiges, the Southern Gothic story started captivating readers in the late 1800s. Mark Twain can be considered one of its first authors, and he frequently employed satire. He notably said in *Following the Equator: A Journey Around the World*, "Truth is stranger than fiction," and indeed, some Southern Gothic tales are steeped in fact, not fiction, usually of the true crime ilk. John Berendt's *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* and Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* are perfect examples of the Southern Gothic narrative dipped in real-life incidents.

Unlike some of the dour Gothic tales, Southern literature included humor. But by the early 1900s, it became a more clearly defined genre that demonstrated "literary naturalism" and "dark romanticism." Literary naturalism is a confluence of a character's lineage and environment. *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams and *A Confederacy of Dunces* by John Kennedy Toole are perfect examples of this. Dark romanticism is also an aspect of *Streetcar*.

With Gothic and Southern Gothic literature, the otherworldly or mystical, atmosphere and setting, types of characters, language, and names are key aspects. Let's dive deeper into what to include in a Southern Gothic tale to make it stand out.

## Death and the Supernatural

One of the most important elements is the macabre or the supernatural. The South has rich folklore with various types of undead and ghastly beings, and each region has a different cultural influence and mythology that arises from a murky confluence of societal beliefs and mores. Appalachia has Sasquatch and Hellhounds. The Lowcountry has boo hags and haints. The Louisiana bayou has the Rougarou, vampires, and evil spirits.

A notable Southern Gothic writer who wove a spell on the world with her tale of the immortal vampire

## Celebrating the WHIMSICAL & WEIRD

Lestat is Anne Rice. Her Vampire Chronicles series and Mayfair Witches family saga lure us into the seductive world of the vampire and the craven world of witches, respectively. She incorporates the spiritually copious and complicated world of New Orleans with regional mythology, making her characters extensions of their environments rather than just residents. Part of the charm of New Orleans is that it is beauty on the edge of decay, much like Rice's vampire characters.

With Lestat de Lioncourt, Rice has created the consummate antihero. His bloodsucking is villainous, but his moral quandary is something most can empathize with. Because the South has slavery and Jim Crow in its fabric, as well as class struggle and strained racial dynamics, the question of moral decay is at the center of many Southern Gothic tales. Rice leans into this with her character Louis de Pointe du Lac, a victim of Lestat, as he frequently questions his moral compass and recognizes that his soul is rotting, even if his body isn't. At one point, he considers his newfound existence of eternal night: "The world changes, we do not, therein lies the irony that kills us."

Also set in smoldering New Orleans is Tennessee Williams' critically acclaimed play *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Instead of supernatural elements, there's animalistic sexuality and crumbling morality at its core. The atmosphere is heady with heat, weather-wise and body-wise. *Streetcar* exhibits Stanley's primal nature and Blanche's slowly cracking emotional and mental veneer. New Orleans, like Blanche, is also a pretty maiden that is on the verge of ruin.

### Atmosphere and Setting

Atmosphere is another element inherent in the Southern Gothic story. This can include lighting (artificial or natural), weather, dwelling, and music. Gothic tales, including Southern Gothic ones, often have an interplay of light and dark, mirroring the spiritual struggles of the characters. Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* has the mist-covered moors. William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* has the humid swamp. Both places indicate the disquiet the characters feel and also make the reader feel anxious. Setting is an important part of the Southern Gothic tale because regions like swamps, bayous, plantations, and cotton fields are part of the South's identity.

One cannot write about the South without mentioning the sweltering heat. In Flannery O'Connor's "Good

Country People," a scene takes place in a barn that's described this way: "The sun was beating down on the loft, and it was hot and close up there." This underscores physical discomfort and reflects the mental state of the characters. Southern storms, particularly hurricanes, also play an important role in exhibiting the character of the region and the inner rumblings of the characters. In Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, storms are a centerpiece for displaying a dangerous aspect of the environment and conveying the characters' inner conflicts.

The type of dwelling is tantamount to contributing to atmosphere and reflecting the characters' psychological state. A musty, fetid plantation; a rotting apartment in the French Quarter; a creole cottage across from a cemetery; a shack by the Mississippi River. Place of residence can capture a mood, a moment, a spirit. In Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Fall of the House of Usher," the deteriorating mansion is a shell that houses living beings and echoes their malaise, mental anguish, economic troubles, and moral disintegration. At one point, Roderick Usher elucidates the relationship with his sister and their tenuous mental state: "Madeline and I are like figures of fine glass. The slightest touch and we may shatter." Poe is considered one of the originators of the Southern Gothic story and should be required reading for anyone interested in understanding or writing the genre.

In film, music can play an indelible part in the atmosphere. In the recent hit *Sinners*, music is not only a gateway to the spiritual realm, but it can also conjure spirits, depending on the type of music being played. Music can have the same role in novels, short stories, and plays, emphasizing the preternatural, the grotesque, or the sublime.

Carson McCullers' novel *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* presents music to convey character Mick Kelly's isolation. Classical music defines her; it's what she listens to and what she plays. Most of the people in her town are interested in racy juke joint tunes and the blues. Her choice of music gives her life a diaphanous quality, compared to the grittier state of the town. Eudora Welty's short story "Powerhouse" is about a jazz musician. Jazz is an improvisational type of music, which alludes to him having his own temperament and style. While he does incorporate the regional gospel and blues techniques, Powerhouse's music is just as extemporaneous and elliptical as he is. In both tales, music is a balm, a motivator, and an elixir.

## Eccentric Characters

Most Southern Gothic characters are on the fringe of society. Freaks, eccentrics, outcasts. If the writer is crafting a supernatural tale, it's easy to fashion odd characters. But if the tale is about real people, persons who don't fit the norm should be crafted. Aging, disillusioned actresses, mama's boys, salesmen, witch doctors. Baynard Woods' *Coffin Point: The Strange Case of Sheriff Ed McTeer*, *Witchdoctor Sheriff* would be considered part of the Southern Gothic family. McTeer, white and referred to as the "High Sheriff of the Low Country," took stock in the local Black residents of Beaufort County, S.C., by learning hoodoo, which are spiritual practices from Africa and the Caribbean. He became so confident in his "root" skills that it's said he didn't even carry a gun. Sheriff by day and witch doctor by night makes for a character that has duality, is involved in ghastly practices, and contributes to the critical social and racial kinetics of the area.

Ignatius J. Reilly, the main character of *A Confederacy of Dunces*, is a humorous composite of all the worst traits of a Big Easy native. He's a mama's boy who sees no need to use his education. He's more concerned with how society perceives him, though he doesn't care about his physical appearance. He is a child in a grown man's body and is in denial about his hubris and sad existence. Like some white Southerners' notions about the antebellum era, he refuses to see the error of his ways and his flaws.

## Dialect & Colloquialisms

Another important aspect of the Southern Gothic story is dialect and colloquialisms. This isn't as prevalent in Gothic tales, but the American South is a hodgepodge of cultural influences, and the language reflects that. A Gullah character from Pender County, N.C. in 1960 is going to sound quite different from a Creole from Natchitoches, La., in 1950. Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is set in a predominantly Black backwater town in Florida in the '20s and '30s, which covers part of the Great Depression. Main character Janie's vernacular evokes the time, place, and people of the story. At the end of the novel, she tells Tea Cake, "If you kin see de light at daybreak, you don't keer if you die at dusk. It's so many people never seen de light at all." This is a perfect example of Southern dialect because words have different spellings from the Anglo-English. A Southern Gothic novel or short story that has mostly Black characters,

which *Their Eyes Were Watching God* does, is going to have a different pulse than one involving white characters or other nationalities, primarily because of Black people's history in the South.

## Names

Another key element of Southern Gothic writing is the names of people, places, and things. In Louisiana, names will have a French, Spanish, and Native American influence. Bobby Boudreaux in Gus Weill's *The Cajuns* has a name that reflects his Cajun lineage. Even the town he lives in, Richelieu, mirrors the significance of French colonizers in the region. Big Daddy in Tennessee Williams' play *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is a conventional nomenclature for a Southern character. The Shellmound Plantation in Eudora Welty's *Delta Wedding*, which is set in Mississippi, evokes images of seafood and land. The South, where cotton was king, flourished because of its land, and its people—particularly its enslaved people—have had a symbiotic relationship with it for centuries.

## Southern Gothic Review

In summary, these are the elements to include in a Southern Gothic tale to make it authentic:

- **SUPERNATURAL ENTITIES:** Undead beings or creatures of the night that adhere to regional folklore.
- **ATMOSPHERE & SETTING:** Shadows and light, weather, dwelling, and regional music.
- **OUTSIDER CHARACTERS:** Characters that aren't part of mainstream society, are eccentric, or are stuck in a psychological or spiritual quagmire.
- **LANGUAGE:** The dialect or colloquialisms of an area.
- **NAMES:** The names of people, places, and things signify region and colonization.

Whether you're writing a novel or a short story that explores the inner worlds of characters and settings, stage plays focused on dialogue, or screenplays utilizing visual storytelling, all of these forms are suitable for a good Southern Gothic tale, infused with horror, humor, or dark romance. **WD**

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