

Southern Gothic



in American Literature

Background

- **Sub-genre of the Gothic style**
 - Popular in Europe in 1800s
 - *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley
 - *Dracula* by Bram Stoker
- **Unique to American literature**
 - relies on supernatural, ironic or unusual events to guide the plot
 - uses these to explore social issues and reveal the cultural character of the American South.



Background

- Takes classic Gothic archetypes, such as the monster or the heroic knight, and turns them into American Southerners
 - a spiteful, reclusive spinster
 - an uneducated drunk
 - a quiet, wise lawyer
- Most notable feature is the “grotesque”
 - a character whose negative qualities allow the author to highlight unpleasant aspects in Southern culture.
 - Something in the town, the house, the farm is bizarre and often falling apart



Defining Features

- **Cast of off-kilter characters**

- Broken bodies, minds or souls

- Used to symbolize problems created by the established pattern
- Used to question established pattern's morality and ethical justification

- The “Innocent” is a common character, who may or may not be “broken,” but who often acts as a redeemer for others





Other Specific Features of
Southern Gothic
Freakishness

The Outsider

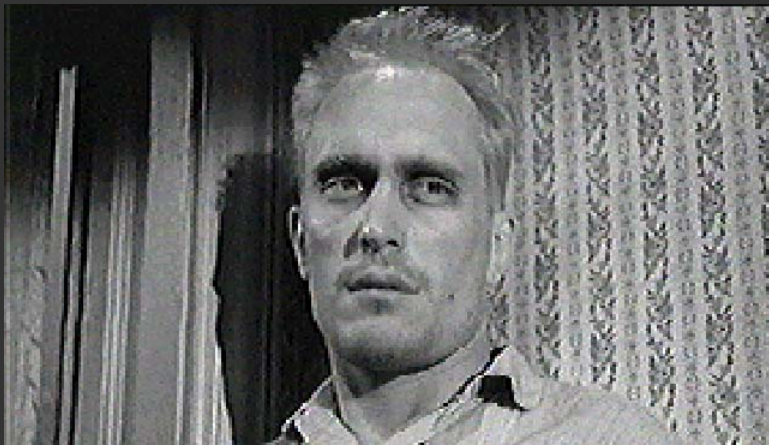
Imprisonment

Violence

A Sense of Place

Freakishness

- In most southern gothic stories, there is an important character who is set apart from the world in a negative way by a disability or an oddity/anomaly, and he/she often has a negative way of seeing the world.



The Outsider



Southern novels are filled with characters who are set a part from the established cultural pattern, but who end up being heroes because their difference allows them to see new ways of doing things that *ultimately* help to bring people out of the “dark.”

Imprisonment

- **This is often both literal and figurative.**
 - Many southern gothic tales include an incident where a character is sent to jail or locked up.
 - There are also Southern gothic characters that live in *fate's* prison.



Violence

- Racial, social and class difference often create underlying tension in Southern gothic novels that threatens, and usually does, erupt in violent ways



A Sense of Place

- You can't read a Southern Gothic novel without understanding what a Southern town "feels" like:
 - old small towns with houses that have front porches with rocking chairs.
 - old downtown with stately but worn-down buildings
 - old friends and family heritages that go way back in years.

