1 - An Introduction to the Collection

This collection of four essays visits the work of renowned literary artists from the southern United States and Latin America to gain a deeper understanding of their niche genres.

Even though all these 20th century works were written in relatively close parts of the world, their contrasting writing style and subject matter compels us to appreciate them as distinct genres. In the first three essays of this collection, we look at works of literature that exemplify the Southern Gothic, the Southern Grotesque, and the Magical Realism genres. These genres have fascinated the public mind, as their flavor appears everywhere from Hollywood movies to contemporary bestseller novels.

Any writer may attempt to create a bestselling work by borrowing conventions from popular genres. Such writers, however, accomplish little more than cookie-cutter imitations. True literary artists are those who don’t confine themselves to tradition, yet gracefully pay homage to the icons that have influenced them. In the last essay of the collection, we discover a Latin American writer, Carlos Fuentes, as one such literary artist. His short fictional work *The Doll Queen* clearly exhibits Southern Gothic, Southern Grotesque and Magical Realism influences. Notwithstanding, Fuentes politely breaks from elemental characteristics of these genres to create a literary masterpiece that is truly his own.

2 - Southern Gothic

Most people are familiar with the formulaic horror story featuring an old Gothic-styled mansion, beset in a dark and unnerving atmosphere. Things are not always as they appear; death and decay are the only certainty. It often takes a male hero to rescue the damsel in distress. This genre of mystery short stories popularized during the 19th century Victorian era, when off-color subject matter such as sexuality and ethnicity were disguised as vampire or other stories of “monstrosity” (Halberstam 333). Owing to the grotesque and macabre mood of these
stories, as well as the prominently featured Gothic architecture, this writing style is known as the Gothic genre of English literature.

Later in the 20th century, Southern writers such as William Faulkner and Tennessee Williams began experimenting with Gothic writing and contemporary psychology to explore human conflicts. Since their stories are characteristically situated in the South, many of the traditional Gothic scenes are supplanted with Southern settings, and supernatural suspense is replaced with real social tension. Gothic elements are far from gone, however. Southern Gothic writers keep the parent genre’s grotesque and macabre mood, and craftily incorporate other characteristics of the Gothic genre – such as the mysterious mansions and ghosts – using southern synonyms and symbolic references. In particular, Southern Gothic stories often involve a central character with grotesque qualities, which the reader is forced to empathize due to extraordinary circumstances. These characters often find themselves imprisoned physically or in spirit. Even though Southern Gothic fiction deals with local subject matter, it finds widespread appeal because the psychological themes are universal to human nature. Given these significant differences, Southern Gothic has become a unique genre of its own.

One of the most riveting works in the Southern Gothic tradition is William Faulkner’s short story, *A Rose for Emily*. Like other Southern Gothic stories, *A Rose for Emily* is situated in the South, depicting Mississippi’s post Civil War time period (Faulkner 459). In this changing landscape, New South commerce is replacing Old South cotton fields, while hardworking “day laborers” are joining the ranks of the landed upper class (463). Traditional plantation owners, however, can’t ignore their diminishing clout. The arising social tension is only compounded by people’s uneasiness with the increasingly independent role of women in the new society (462). Consequently, when Miss Emily is seen around town with Homer Barron on a recurring basis, it invokes a mixed response from the townspeople. Some women question her “noblesse oblige” as they wonder, “Of course a Grierson would not think seriously of a Northerner, a day laborer” (461). Other ladies are shocked at this “bad example to the young
people” and send the local Baptist minister to talk to her (462). Although the narrator speaks of these women with a touch of humor, it is clear that the narrator is also taking much relish in recounting Miss Emily’s story. The entire story’s tone, in fact, is reminiscent of aging Southern folks talking about old times with whatever details come to them in a non-linear fashion. The post-war Southern setting provides Faulkner and other Southern Gothic writers the proper context to talk about such Southern subject matter.

Despite the localized subject matter, Southern Gothic stories enjoy widespread appeal because of their universal themes. Miss Emily Grierson, for instance, may have belonged to a very rich plantation-owning family, and her actions during the story may be grotesquely outlandish, but the reader is forced to empathize with her because of the universal disposition of human nature. The editors of *The McGraw-Hill Book of Fiction*, DiYanni and Rompf, attribute the reader’s empathy to the way Faulkner’s stories “blend comedy with tragedy and satire with compassion” (DiYanni 458). Tragedy and compassion are of psychological importance to Southern Gothic stories. Since much of human nature revealed in Southern Gothic stories is dark and grotesque, empathy with the characters is essential to prevent the reader from detesting them.

To highlight the dark and grotesque underlining of their stories, Southern Gothic writers like Faulkner employ the dark and grotesque atmosphere characteristic of 19th century Gothic. Gone, however, is the traditional Gothic mansion; taking its symbolic place in *A Rose for Emily* is the Grierson mansion. The narrator describes the Grierson mansion in a state of decay and deterioration not unlike the traditional Gothic mansion:

> It […] had once been white decorated with cupolas and spires and scrolled balconies in the heavily lightsome style of the seventies, set on what had once been our most select street. […] Only Miss Emily’s house was left [now], lifting its stubborn and coquettish decay above the cotton wagons and gasoline pumps – an eyesore among eyesores. (Faulkner 459)
The decay imagery continues into the mansion’s interior as well, described through the eyes of the town aldermen who pay the aging Miss Emily the first visit by anyone in decades: “It smelled of dust and disuse – a close, dank smell. [...] They could see that the leather was cracked; and when they sat down, a faint dust rose sluggishly about their thighs, spinning with slow motes in the single sun-ray” (459). Clearly, the dark and grotesque characteristic of 19th century Gothic runs in the Southern Gothic genre as well.

One of Southern Gothic literature’s unique characteristics is the portrayal of main characters using the same dark and grotesque imagery as their surroundings. The narrator in A Rose for Emily describes the aging Miss Emily in words little different from those of her musty, decaying living room:

Her skeleton was small and spare; perhaps that was why what would have been merely plumpness in another was obesity in her. She looked bloated, like a body long submerged in motionless water, and of that pallid hue. (459)

The characterization of people as a reflection of their deteriorating surroundings, and sometimes their deteriorating state of mind, is a common element in Southern Gothic works.

At the time Southern writers were experimenting with Gothic literature, Sigmund Freud and his contemporaries were researching modern psychology. With such unprecedented advances in modern psychology, Southern Gothic writers paid ever more emphasis on exploring human nature through their writing. The narrator makes a point that Miss Emily was not always old and grotesque, describing her youthful self as “a slender figure in white” who was courted by many young men in her time (461). All those men, however, were apparently turned down by Miss Emily’s domineering father:

We had long thought of them as a tableau, Miss Emily a slender figure in white in the background, her father a spraddled silhouette in the foreground, his back to her and clutching a horsewhip, the two of them framed by the backflung front door. (461)

The horsewhip in the “tableau” is an important symbol of Miss Emily’s strict and possibly abused childhood, where Miss Emily has no choice but to do her father’s bidding. She becomes
so dependent on her father, in fact, that she refuses to acknowledge his death and would not let the town aldermen bury his body for three days (461). Miss Emily’s behavior starting from her father’s death reveals an increasingly clear pattern of psychological problems such as excessive emotional attachment to her dead father and an inability to understand Time.

The most obvious psychological problem inflicting the grotesque Miss Emily is her inability to account for Time. The narrator hints at this when the aging Miss Emily is visited by the town’s aldermen, tasked by the current sheriff to make Miss Emily pay her taxes. Miss Emily, with part of her mind still stuck in the Old South, cannot fathom aldermen directly approaching a Southern lady to pay her taxes (460). “See Colonel Sartoris,” she redirects them, “I have no taxes in Jefferson” (460). As the narrator points out, however, “Colonel Sartoris had been dead almost ten years” (460). Miss Emily’s inability to account for Time is symbolized by “the invisible watch ticking at the end of [her] gold chain” (459). The watch, which is invisible to all except the wearer herself, points to a Miss Emily who is stuck in her own time domain.

Another important object in the story that highlights Miss Emily’s psychological problems is the crayon portrait of her father hung on the parlor wall (459). The dominating image of her father continues to have a repressive effect on her even after her father’s death. The image of her domineering father symbolically highlights two 19th century Gothic elements: the imprisonment of central characters, and ghosts who haunt the living. Miss Emily’s father is not a literal ghost, but his memory haunts her to the point of obsession for him. This obsession proves fatal to Miss Emily’s fiancé Homer Barron, whose image in Miss Emily’s mind increasing shifts from a companion to that of her father. Miss Emily does not want to lose her father again, and her only recourse is to poison her “father image” – Homer Barron – to death. The last part of the story is a disturbing scene where townspeople find Homer Barron in a bed with silver hair in it – implying that Miss Emily had been sleeping in bed with this father figure even years after Homer Barron was dead. The narrator, in his own limited way, is unable to understand why Homer Barron reminds Miss Emily of her father, but Faulkner uses subtle word repetitions to

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draw parallels between Homer Barron and Miss Emily’s father. We find the first such repetition when Homer Barron and Miss Emily begin traveling around town in his buggy: Homer Barron is described as holding a “horsewhip,” the same symbol which describes Miss Emily’s domineering father. The second such repetition is after Homer Barron is found dead: As the townspeople walk through the Grierson household, they find the first floor sporting a crayon portrait of the father “musing profoundly above the bier” while the second floor features Homer Barron with a “profound and fleshless grin” (464). The repetition of words serves as an implicit connection between the characters.

William Faulkner also uses word repetitions to highlight the Southern Gothic element of deterioration. To characterize Homer Barron as a lively and well-to-do contractor, the narrator mentions him and Miss Emily “driving in the yellow-wheeled buggy and the matched team of bays from the livery stable” (461). The use of “yellow” as color imagery aptly describes Homer Barron’s spirited lifestyle. When Homer Barron is discovered dead in the Grierson mansion, however, a pillow is described as “yellow and moldy with age and lack of sunlight” (464). The depreciated use of “yellow” imagery from lively to moldy is of special importance to the story because it contrasts the first time the townspeople found Homer Barron - a lively gentleman driving a yellow buggy - and the second time the townspeople found Homer Barron – dead in a musty, yellow household. In effect, not only the surroundings and minds and bodies of the story fall prey to Southern Gothic deterioration, but even standard elements of English literature such as color imagery can’t escape deterioration.

*A Rose for Emily* is an exemplary work of Southern Gothic, where some Gothic elements are immediately apparent while others are merely symbolic. The Southern subject matter also reoccurs in other Southern Gothic works as well. William Faulkner’s mysterious stories of these grotesque characters have earned him recognition as one of the pioneers of the Southern Gothic genre.
3 - Southern Grotesque

In William Faulkner’s *A Rose for Emily*, Miss Emily Grierson’s psychologically-twisted murder of fiancé Homer Barron was outlandish, but her brutally suppressed childhood forces the reader to have some degree of compassion for her. Characters such as Miss Emily, who invoke a simultaneous sense of disgust and empathy in the reader, are termed grotesque. While some grotesque characters like Miss Emily may commit a lone horrendous act that shocks us, other grotesque characters may appear villains for much of the story. Such villainous characters, however, reveal an instance of goodness, forcing the reader to show compassion towards them as well. Sometimes writers compliment grotesque personalities with physical disabilities and deformities, and often invoke empathy for these characters through the use of humor, irony and satire.

Grotesque characters are most prominently featured in the 20th century genre of English literature known as Southern Grotesque. Since the Southern Grotesque genre is named after its grotesque characters, it is easy to understand why characterization of people plays an important role in its stories. Southern Grotesque works usually depict Southern lifestyle, oftentimes focusing on small-minded country people who believe they understand the world without having experienced it. To underscore the self-content two-dimensional personalities of these characters, Southern Grotesque writers often use humor, satire, and unconventional imagery to describe their character traits. Some Southern Grotesque characters also experience an “epiphany,” when the character is enlightened about the true nature of the world. An epiphany in Southern Grotesque literature is usually violent, and often preceded by a tenuous period of isolation. Grotesque characters are often portrayed as desperate in the face of such violence and isolation, drawing varying levels of sympathy from the reader. The treatment of human nature in Southern Grotesque has spawned numerous memorable characters of English literature.
Flannery O'Connor is one of the most oft-quoted writers in the Southern Grotesque tradition. Having been born and raised in Georgia, O'Connor is able to treat Southern subject matter and lifestyle in great depth. At the same time, her religious and conventional education enables her to extend the heart of her stories to a universal level. Flannery O'Connor’s short story *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* (*A Good Man*) exemplifies her use of the Southern Grotesque writing style to make her stories universal.

*A Good Man*, like other Flannery O'Connor stories, has a distinctly Southern character. While others may not catch it, local readers can relate with the reference to Red Sammy’s numerous one-liner advertisements lining the highway (855). O’Connor’s use of these advertisements serves as an introduction of Red Sammy even before the reader meets him. Red Sammy is a proud veteran, a hard-worker, and a trusting host. In short, according to the grandmother, he is “a good man” (856). The grandmother’s statement, however, is ironic: Red “Good Man” Sammy is also rude to his wife, ties a monkey outside the restaurant for entertainment, and exalts himself as a fine host – negative qualities conveniently ignored by the grandmother (856). Red Sammy’s wife, conversely, represents the socially acceptable role of a wife in the rural South: she is always obedient to her husband, never stops smiling for outrageously rude guests, and shows no element of discontent with her place in life. Without preaching or moralizing, O’Connor shows the disconnect between Southern ideals of a “good man” and real life – a favorite topic amongst other Southern Grotesque writers as well.

Even though Flannery O’Connor’s subject matter is predominantly Southern, the Christian thematic elements in her stories bring a broader dimension to her stories. While talking to an academic audience at Hollins College, O’Connor spoke about the importance of redemption in her Christian worldview, and how this belief plays into her stories (Fitzgerald 1969 p. 107). Even the worst of criminals and bigots, she stressed, can redeem themselves when they prepare to accept their moment of grace. Grotesque characters in O’Connor’s stories typically find this moment of grace through epiphanies, which are characteristic of Southern
Grotesque stories. In *A Good Man*, for instance, the most violently grotesque character in need of grace is the serial killer Misfit. For much of the story, various characters refer to the Misfit as a villain with no moral sense. When the Misfit finally appears in the story, his execution-style murder of two adults and three children only reinforces his image as a villain (861-862). The lone sign that this serial killer is a shade less evil than the devil himself are his manners: he comforts the grandmother when her son cusses her, and he apologizes to the ladies for not wearing a shirt (859, 863). These apparent moments of grace, however, are comic; he's not wearing a shirt simply because his last victim’s clothing did not fit him (859-860).

Notwithstanding the Misfit’s evil deeds, Flannery O’Connor insists, “I don’t want to equate the Misfit with the devil” (Fitzgerald 1969 p.117). O’Connor resists labeling the Misfit as the “devil” because he does accept his true moment of grace in the last scene of the story. Like epiphanies in most Southern Grotesque stories, this one takes place when he and the grandmother are isolated in the woods (Fitzgerald 1969 116). As the Misfit prepares to kill the grandmother, the grandmother suddenly realizes that she is bound to the Misfit through the common ties of humanity (Fitzgerald 1969). She calls the Misfit “one of my babies” as she tries to reach out to him, but the stunned Misfit shoots and kills her instead (863). Even though the Misfit kills the only human who has come to understand him, Flannery O’Connor explains this incident as the Misfit’s moment of grace:

> However unlikely this may seem, the old lady’s gesture, like the mustard-seed, will grow to be a great crow-filled tree in the Misfits’ heart, and will be enough of a pain to him there to turn him into the prophet he was meant to become. (Fitzgerald 1969 p.117)

The grandmother’s gesture of touching the Misfit in realization of his human side is symbolic of the love of Jesus touching his heart. This moment of grace consequently provides the Misfit a hope to turn his life around and redeem himself.

> Even though the grandmother was the catalyst for changing the Misfit’s destiny, she is hardly a saint. She may not have the Misfit’s villainous resume, but she too has a
grotesque personality. Throughout the story, she is shown as an exceedingly self-centered woman who needs to find her own moment of grace before she leaves this life (Fitzgerald 1969). Even when the serial killer Misfit is about to kill the entire family, the self-centered grandmother can only find herself to say, “You wouldn’t shoot a lady, would you?”, as if the lives of her son, her daughter-in-law, and her grandchildren were not as important (859). Her own epiphany lies in her realization that the Misfit is a human being as well. “Why you’re one of my babies,” she exclaims, “You’re one of my own children!” (863). She accepts her moment of grace by doing something that few others could – reaching out to a serial killer’s heart and changing the course of his devastating life.

It is understandably difficult to portray a character like the grandmother as grotesque when there is a Misfit in the story. In order to highlight the grotesque nature of the grandmother, Red Sammy, the grandchildren, and other less villainous characters in the story, O’Connor makes use of the Southern Grotesque technique of reducing characters to two-dimensions without stereotyping them. She often accomplishes this task by invoking humor and satire. Red Sammy, for example, lets two boys fill up their car tank on loan because they “looked all right” (856). These boys, however, never come back to pay for the gas. He relates this story to the grandmother and asks, “Now why did I do that?” (856). The grandmother, without a stint, replies with a typical Southern expression, “Because you’re a good man!” (856). When Red Sam returns the grandmother’s compliment with the appropriately humble response, “Yes’m, I suppose so,” O’Connor makes a jab at these ritualistic Southern expressions by noting, “Red Sam said [this] as if he were struck with [the grandmother’s] answer” (863). By making side remarks about the superficial nature of their conversation, O’Connor is able to portray Red Sam and the grandmother as symbols of small-minded country people.

Flannery O’Connor, despite her illness, found immense popularity as a Southern Grotesque writer within her own lifetime (839). Critics often cite her characters, including the grandmother and the Misfit, as typical grotesques. “The Life You Save May Be Your Own”
debuted as a television production in 1957. “Good Country People” was adapted for the theatre in 1975. Flannery O’Connor success can be attributed to the fascinating characters that blurred the line between “good men” and “devils.”

4 - Magical Realism

Magical Realism is a unique writing style that combines the mundane and the ordinary in a realistic setting to create an extraordinary story. Although Magical Realism exists in various forms between Africa and Latin America, the scope of this collection encourages us to focus specifically on the Latin American genre. Magical Realist works are often set in historically and culturally identifiable locations, but their oral narrative style brings into question “what is ‘real,’ and how we can tell” (Zamora). Traditional ideas of science and psychology are no longer applicable to Magical Realism because it allows for alternate belief systems to account for the stories’ happenings. “Metamorphosis” is one such event in a Magical Realist story where a person or object transforms into a new being, but both the narrator and the characters of the story treat it as a normal event. Magical Realism is very attached to nature; many characters are archetypes that show the clash between nature and modernity. This thematic clash also provides postmodern Magical Realist artists to question the blind quest for modernity in their developing countries. Magical Realism has gained immense popularity in Latin America in recent years, and the works of major literary artists have been translated to English.

Magical Realism is a story with fantastic events but it is markedly different from science fiction, fantasy, gothic and other genres that “defy rational, empirical (scientific) proof” (Zamora). “The crucial difference,” according to one critic, “is that magical realism sets magical events in realistic contexts.” (Zamora).

Death Constant Beyond Love (Death Constant) is a Magical Realist work by Gabriel García Márquez, set in the realistic context. It portrays a coastal village in Latin America called Rosa del Virrey as having many of the same problems as real Latin American coastal
villages – lack of economic development, illegal smuggling at nights, and weak promises of politicians of visit every election year (Márquez 2090). *Death Constant’s* familiar historical and cultural background provides a realistic context for the “magical” events of the story to take place.

García Márquez slips “magical” elements into such realistic settings through the use of a narrative style that is very reminiscent of oral tradition. García Márquez notes that his oral tone was inspired by the way his grandmother used to tell stories: “She told things that sounded supernatural and fantastic, but she told them with complete naturalness” (The Modern World). According Sellman and Deefholts, the seamless fusion of the fantastic and the mundane makes it “impossible to determine where reality ends and the extraordinary begins” (Sellman and Deefholts). It also leads to unconventional plotlines, such as *Death Constant’s* ticking countdown to Senator Onesimo Sanchez’s death. *Death Constant*, like other Magical Realism stories, consistently intertwines what a modern reader would consider real and the fantastic, making the reader “question what is ‘real,’ and how we can tell” (Zamora).

Whereas many genres contain elements of the fantastic, Magical Realism is distinctive because it does not feel compelled to explain such events through modern science or psychology. For instance, the core intrigue behind *A Rose for Emily* is why Miss Emily killed Homer Barron, yet *Death Constant’s* narrator feels no need to explain why a paper butterfly unfolds in midair and slaps itself permanently against a wall (Márquez 2090). Laura Farina and the guards consider it a natural occurrence; the narrator treats it as an insignificant detail. The listener cannot rely on modern science or psychology to explain such events because Magical Realism allows other beliefs to flourish: “Things have a life of their own,” explains Melquíades from García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, “It’s simply a question of waking up their souls” (Márquez, *One Hundred Years*). The literal personification of inanimate objects, along with the mundane treatment of such extraordinary events by both the characters and the narrator, defines *Death Constant* as a Magical Realist work.
The paper butterfly’s transformation into wallpaper is characteristic of Magical Realism’s metamorphosis property. Most Magical Realist works contain a metamorphosis, where an object undergoes a complete transformation. It is an extraordinary event by modern standards, but the characters of the story treat it as ordinary. When Laura Farina wants to pull off the wall impression of a paper butterfly that just turned into wallpaper, a guard remarks sleepily, “It won’t come off. It’s painted on the wall” (2090). Laura Farina readily accepts this tip at face value, even though a modernist would be hard pressed to figure out the cause behind it. Laura Farina’s willingness is explained by Zamora, “In magical realism, events don’t follow our expectations of ‘if/then’. Things often happen without an explanation, or for reasons that we don’t expect” (Zamora). Metamorphosis is usually the best and most commonly spotted element of Magical Realism.

Just as Death Constant shares its writing style with other Magical Realist literature, it covers similar subject matter as well. Carlos Alonso describes contemporary Latin American artists like García Márquez as “postmodernists” who have ascertained that “the goals [of modernization that] their societies were striving for were illusory, and that they should release themselves from the self-imposed pressure and concomitant frustrations under which they labored for countless years” (Alonso 252). García Márquez’s discontentment with modernization appears as irony in Death Constant. In the story’s opening, Senator Onesimo Sanchez, an archetype for political figures with false promises, stands in the center of a dirt-poor village to conduct his ritualistic gubernatorial campaign façade (Márquez 2086). Standing on a platform, he promises “rainmaking machines, portable breeders for table animals, the oils of happiness which would make vegetables grow in the saltpeter and clumps of pansies in the window boxes” (2088). He points to a giant cardboard ocean liner behind the crowd, and continues, “That’s the way it will be for us, ladies and gentlemen” (2088). The irony of the senator’s drama is that the ocean liner is a fictional dream of modernity, covering the mud houses which represent the reality of life. The crowd to which he is delivering his speech has
been increased in number by “renting Indians” (2090). Even the name of the village, Rosa del Virrey, is ironic since the people of the forsaken land have never seen a rose in their life (2090). The illusion of modernity through the words of a publicly elected official underscores García Márquez's his hesitation with Latin American countries’ leadership.

García Márquez's hesitation with modernity explains why *Death Constant* accentuates Magical Realism's thematic triumph of nature over modernity. When the senator arrives at Rosa del Virrey, he begins his speech by saying, “we are here for the purpose of defeating nature” (2087). What the senator really wants, however, is some meaning in his life before he dies six months later (2086, 2091). He finds that meaning when he uncontrollably falls in love with Laura Farina, a beautiful young girl who is described as an “animal of the woods” (2091). The senator is unable to hide his affair for the six remaining months of his life, which destroys his standing in the modern world (2092). The senator's elaborate façade, like his personal rose, was alive through artificial means; it was only a matter of time before the archetypical nature’s girl overpowered him.

*Death Constant* is a short story with most of the Magical Realist elements found in novels. The way it combines fascinating events with the ordinary makes it a very exciting read. While García Márquez and his Latin American contemporaries may be the most popularly translated Magical Realist authors, they are certainly not the only ones writing in this style. African Literature also interweaves the fantastic with the mundane, creating equally fascinating stories waiting to be translated into English.

5 - Carlos Fuentes

*The Doll Queen* by Carlos Fuentes is a short story in which we can find elements of Southern Gothic, Southern Grotesque and Magical Realism. Even though *The Doll Queen* cannot be classified into one particular genre, it stands as a uniquely fascinating fiction in its own right.
Like Southern Gothic and Grotesque literature, *The Doll Queen* focuses on a believable grotesque character who has been imprisoned due to extraordinary circumstances. Like O’Connor’s Hulga, Amilamia has a serious disability that has sealed her fate. *The Doll Queen*’s writing style heavily overlaps with the three genres. Like O’Connor’s short stories, *The Doll Queen* starts as a mundane story that turns progressively unnerving. Where it differs from all the other genres, however, is the narrator’s active participation in the story. Readers, in effect, become closely intimate with the narrator’s feelings through the way he writes. The narrator starts his story in a concise, elegant, and calculated manner: “I went because that card – such a strange card – reminded me of her existence” (487). As the story grows progressively bizarre and unnerving inside Amilamia’s house, the narrator’s speech turns into a stream of consciousness:

Illuminated through the incandescent wax lips of heavy, sputtering candles, the small windowless bedroom with its aura of wax and humid flowers assaults the very center of my plexus, and from there, only there at the solar center of life, am I able to come to, and perceive beyond the candles, amid the scattered flowers, the plethora of used toys: the colored hoops and wrinkled balloons, cherries dried to transparency, wooden horses with scraggly manes, the scooter, blind hairless dolls, bears spilling their sawdust, punctured oilcloth ducks, moth-eaten dogs, grayed jumping ropes, glass jars of dried candy, worn-out shoes, the tricycle (three wheels? No, two, and not a bicycle’s – two parallel wheels below), little wool and leather shoes; and, facing me, within reach of my hand, the small coffin supported on blue crates decorated with paper flowers, flowers of life this time, carnations and sunflowers, poppies and tulips, but like the others, the ones of death, all part of a compilation created by the atmosphere of this funeral hothouse in which reposes, inside the silvered coffin, between the black silk sheets, on the pillow of white satin, that motionless and serene face framed in lace, highlighted with rose-colored tints, eyebrows traced by the lightest pencil, closed lids, real eyelashes, thick, that cast a tenuous shadow on cheeks as healthy as in the park days. (496)

The bizarre scene with “Amilamia the Doll” is fantastic, but it is not Magical Realism since the narrator considers it a fantastic sight.
The parents’ reverence of Amilamia the Doll shows the parents’ obsession with childhood innocence. The narrator feels troubled by the parents’ doll shrine, calling it “a sick cult” (496). Although the narrator is repulsed by the literal doll shrine, he too has created a doll shrine for Amilamia in his mind. He erases “the image of the petrified doll” from his mind by remembering the breathing Amilamia from his childhood instead (496). “The real Amilamia has returned to my memory,” he says, “I have felt, if not content, sane again” (496). The narrator is so closely attached to his childhood memory of this “real Amilamia” that even fifteen years later he is looking for the same seven year old girl playing with little children (491). Ironically enough, both the parents and narrator are obsessed with a static, childhood, doll image of Amilamia in their own ways.

Carlos Fuentes uses Gothic vampire elements to explain the characters’ obsession with the doll image. Throughout the story, we see symbolic references to vampire stories. The narrator is beckoned to a mysterious being through an arbitrary note (487). On his way, his eyes are transfixed on a red traffic light as if it were a vampire’s (290). Most importantly, Amilamia’s name is partially “Lamia,” a vampire in Greek mythology who “stole little children to drink their blood” (Lindemans). Just as Lamia seduces people so she can prey on children, the doll image seduces people so she can destroy the real Amilamia. The characters’ obsession with the doll image consequently leads to the real Amilamia’s imprisonment.

Amilamia’s imprisonment is synonymous to the Gothic characteristic of imprisonment. Just as Miss Emily is imprisoned in the Grierson house by her father’s memory, the real Amilamia is imprisoned in her house by her domineering father. When the real Amilamia opens the front door of her house, her father yells at her, “Don’t you know you’re not supposed to answer the door? Get back! Devil’s spawn! Do I have to beat you again?” (497). This chilling moment amplifies the image of imprisonment to a degree much higher than Faulkner did in A Rose for Emily.
Carlos Fuentes, like Garcia Marquez, is both a writer and a social commentator. As noted in an NPR interview, "In most of his novels and essays, Fuentes has explored the history and cultural identity of Latin America, especially that of Mexico" (NPR). *The Doll Queen* questions the role and treatment of grotesque characters in real life, by highlighting the dark side of societal norms. In this sense, *The Doll Queen* is a celebration of childhood innocence, as well as a warning against its fatal attraction that can destroy adulthood. Fuentes highlights this theme by combining the best of three fantastic genres, while adding elements such as streams of consciousness to enhance the emotional dimension of the stories.

6 - Concluding Remarks

Southern Gothic, Southern Grotesque and Magical Realism are three American literary genres that flourished during the 20th century. They captured the imagination of the modern readers by bring an extraordinary dimension to mundane events in different ways. Critics love analyzing Southern Gothic works for their implicit Gothic symbolism. Readers enjoy Southern Grotesque fiction’s complex characterizations. Magical Realism is a fresh alternative to over-adherence to scientific explanations and Freudian psychology. All three genres are a great way to expose the casual reader to local fiction, while allowing enthusiasts to delve into their literary complexities.

7 - References


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