

PALGRAVE
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THE PALGRAVE HANDBOOK OF THE SOUTHERN GOTHIC

Edited by
Susan Castillo Street and Charles L. Crow



The Palgrave Handbook of the Southern Gothic

Susan Castillo Street • Charles L. Crow
Editors

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Introduction: Down at the Crossroads

Susan Castillo Street and Charles L. Crow

The legend of blues musician Robert Johnson, selling his soul to the Devil at a crossroads in the Mississippi Delta in exchange for blues immortality, is one that will resonate with scholars working on the American South and on the Southern Gothic. Given the explosion of scholarship in this area over the last two decades, defining the South and the Southern Gothic is not a task for the faint of heart. In recent years, scholars have moved beyond traditional views of the South and of Southern literature as characterised by a strong sense of place, nostalgia for a lost past and a Lost Cause, and a history of defeat, articulated by white male writers. In her influential 2005 overview of the field of Southern studies, Barbara Ladd comments, ‘At present, southern studies takes shape at crossroads,’ and adds, ‘Inquiry into creole and creolist discourses in the South has taken us into New World, Americas, and African studies.’

In her critical work *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, and her essay ‘Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature’, Toni Morrison makes a compelling case for the necessity of grounding interpretations of American literary texts in their historical and social context, and of acknowledging the uncanny presence of a non-white, Africanist presence haunting American literature. She acknowledges the central paradox underlying American identity: that the Enlightenment ideas on which the country was built accommodate slavery, in that they are defined in opposition to it. She adds that the concept of slavery enriched the country’s creative possibilities, since the dramatic polarity created by skin colour allows the young nation to construct its own identity by elaborating racial difference in order to define itself by what it is not, a ‘fabricated brew of darkness, otherness,

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alarm and desire', and by projecting this abjected darkness onto the bodies of (silenced) African slaves. Morrison continues, 'The strong affinity between the nineteenth-century American psyche and the gothic romance has rightly been much remarked.'¹ Indeed, the gothic form has enabled writers to explore the shadow cast by the uncanny, haunting presence of the nation's others.

It is in the South, though, that this shadow is most starkly defined and most darkly cast across the crossroads. Teresa Goddu states categorically:

The American Gothic is most recognizable as a regional form. Identified with gothic doom and gloom, the American South serves as the nation's 'other', becoming the repository for everything from which the nation wishes to dissociate itself. The benighted South is able to support the irrational impulses of the gothic that the nation as a whole, born of Enlightenment ideals, cannot.²

She advocates the placing of American gothic texts within historical sites of haunting, and discusses the possibilities and perils of looking at texts through a gothic lens, while acknowledging the limitations of the Gothic in resurrecting and representing historical events.³

Indeed, the South is a region that has always been obsessed with crossroads and boundaries, whether territorial (the Mason–Dixon line) or those related to gender, social class, sexuality and particularly race. In the South, ghosts and men in white sheets are real, as are shackles and clanking chains, and the Southern Gothic is a genre that arises from the area's often violent and traumatic history.

How, then, to address the intersections between 'Southern' and 'Gothic'? Eric Gary Anderson, Taylor Hagood and Daniel Cross Turner, in *Undead Souths: The Gothic and Beyond in Southern Literature and Culture*, have recently commented on the need to move beyond the capitalised terms 'Southern' and 'Gothic', viewed as monolithic entities, suggesting that it is more productive and critically fertile to pluralise regional and generic identification 'into multiple, even contradictory forms of what counts as "southern" and as "gothic" all the while unsettling settled ideas of connections between the two'.⁴ Many scholars have focused on the complex intersections between region, nation and hemisphere. Deborah Cohn and George Handley applaud the move in Southern studies away from 'nativist navel-gazing' and evoke the image of a 'liminal south, one that troubles essentialist narratives *both* of global-southern decline *and* of global-northern national or regional unity, of American or Southern exceptionalism'.⁵ Martyn Bone, Brian Ward and William Link, in *The American South and the Atlantic World*,⁶ similarly problematise boundaries of nation and genre in studies of the South.

There are other crossroads in Southern studies. Traditional views of class and ethnicity in the South are being challenged: given the level of racial fluidity there, John Lowe suggests, in his introduction to *Bridging Southern Cultures: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, that 'we may be moving ever closer to an all-embracing sense of southern ethnicity that is more culturally than racially defined'.⁷ Race is one of the most exciting areas in which contemporary scholarship is addressing rigid binary views of racial categorisation and interaction. Previously there existed an almost exclusive focus on relations between African Americans and whites, but Eric Gary Anderson and others are exploring the presence, or indeed the absence, of Indigenous groups in Southern writing.

Another area in which traditional Southern stereotypes are being challenged is that of gender and sexuality. John Howard's landmark study *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History*⁸ and Michael Bibler's *Cotton's Queer Relations: Same-Sex Intimacy and the Literature of the Southern Plantation*⁹ are part of the explosion of texts focusing on the queer South. Kari J. Winter's *Subjects of Slavery, Agents of Change: Women and Power in Gothic Novels and Slave Narratives, 1790–1865*¹⁰ and Patricia Yaeger's *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing, 1930–1990*¹¹ examine representations of Southern women and deconstruct tired stereotypes such as that of the Southern belle.

This collection is organised into five groups of chapters: on Edgar Allan Poe and his legacy; on race; on Southern Gothic spaces and places; on gender and sexuality; and on voodoo, conjure, vampires and monsters.

Poe and his Legacy

Poe's short story 'The Fall of the House of Usher' is in many ways the Ur-text of the Southern Gothic. To say that Poe casts a long dark shadow in Southern Gothic studies is a very considerable understatement. Tom F. Wright argues that situating Poe in terms of the Southern Gothic enables us not only to evaluate the extent of his influence on other writers, but also to address some of the limitations of the category itself. It has often been said that the legacy of William Faulkner, like that of Poe, looms large over subsequent writers, but it is equally true that Faulkner is the inheritor of Poe and the gothic tradition. Richard Gray, in his essay on William Faulkner, describes the ways in which Faulkner and other Southern writers use gothic conventions to subvert the triumphant narratives of American exceptionalism. Paula Bernat Bennett, in 'Dreamland: Antebellum Southern Women Poets and Poe', analyses Poe's legacy, delving into the ways in which his writing served as a template against which Southern writers could articulate concerns about the limitations placed on women in the South, the existence of domestic violence and the dangers related to slavery and slaveholding. Carol Margaret Davison picks up the motif of collapsing mansions and haunted plantation houses as a contact zone between racialised and gendered bodies, an uncanny realm where the past and present come face to face. Edward Sugden, in 'The Globalisation of the Gothic South', argues that the Southern Gothic is not about repression but about spatial compression, in that it seeks to contain and neutralise global forces into certain nodal points, adding that these points are inherently unstable, ultimately exploding Southern claims to cultural homogeneity. He adds that Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher' does precisely this, compressing earlier Southern globalism into its structure only to conclude with the apocalyptic image of the Usher mansion collapsing into the stagnant tarn.

Southern Gothic Space(s) and Place(s)

The second group of chapters focuses on definitions of space and place in the Southern Gothic. Matthew Wynn Sivils, in 'Gothic Landscapes of the South', traces the development of literary tropes such as the swamp in the depiction of Southern landscapes, from their origins in colonial writers such as John Smith

and Garcilaso de la Vega to the present, viewing them as sites of racial and environmental haunting. Janet Beer and Avril Horner, in 'Southern Hauntings: Kate Chopin's Fiction', discuss Chopin's Louisiana as postcolonial space. Sarah Robertson, in 'Gothic Appalachia', describe gothic tropes such as the stereotypical feral hillbilly as well as environmental disasters such as strip mining in order to characterise Appalachian Gothic as a politicised genre, and Appalachia as a site of both exploitation and resistance. Nahem Yousaf, in 'New Immigration and the Southern Gothic', explores the ways in which immigrant writers and characters problematise the geographical and cultural boundaries of the Southern Gothic. Éric Savoy, in 'Flannery O'Connor and the Realism of Distance', discusses spatial and temporal distance in O'Connor's fiction. Bev Hogue, in 'Florida Gothic: Shadows in the Sunshine State', looks at the dark side of a place that is often viewed as a tropical paradise, examining the work of writers such as Francis Parkman, Lafcadio Hearn, Peter Matthiessen, Karen Russell and Jeff VanderMeer. Ivonne M. Garcia, in 'Gothic Cuba and the Trans-American South', discusses Louisa May Alcott's use of gothic conventions and tropes in order to configure Cuba as a double of the South, linking the United States and the Spanish Caribbean through the Gothic. Robert H. Brinkmeyer, in 'A Long View of History: Cormac McCarthy's Gothic Vision', suggests that what he describes as McCarthy's long view of history and its relation to the spaces in which McCarthy's fiction is sited are central to the gothicism of this work.

New Orleans has often been viewed as the archetypal city of the Southern Gothic, a liminal space where rigid racial taxonomies and norms of gender, sexuality and class are called into question. Three chapters look at New Orleans as gothic space from different perspectives. Sherry R. Truffin examines the confluence of New Orleans's geography, history and culture, highlighting its tradition of carnivalesque hedonism and excess. Owen Robinson, in 'George Washington Cable and Grace King', looks at gothic elements in the work of these two New Orleans writers and the ways in which they challenge or reaffirm the conventions of the local colour genre. Finally, Bill Marshall describes four key motifs (the house, skin colour, capitalism and the Jew, and blood) in the work of Francophone New Orleans writers Victor Séjour, Alfred Mercier and Sidonie de la Houssaye.

Race and the Southern Gothic

Given the South's history of chattel slavery, it could be said that race is a motif that underlies every chapter in this collection. A particular focus on race and racial issues, however, can be found in the third group of essays. Michael Kreyling evokes the Southern plantation as uncanny space, referring to William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. Maisha Wester analyses gothic representations of the Haitian Revolution and Nat Turner's revolt, as well as African American appropriations of the Gothic in slave narratives. Emily Clark, in 'The Tragic Mulatto and Passing', traces the roots of this trope to eighteenth-century Orientalism and the extended Caribbean. The law, and its dramatic consequences for the lives of many Southerners, is analysed in Ellen Weinauer's 'Law and the Gothic in the Slaveholding South', in which she casts the law as gothic villain, making the case for the idea that laws concerning slaves haunt the

South, but that paradoxically they ultimately failed to erase the humanity and personhood of slaves. Christine A. Wooley, in ‘Charles Chesnutt’s Reparative Gothic’, discusses issues of slavery and reparation, evoking Chesnutt’s increasingly pessimistic vision as regards the real possibility of racial progress in the South. Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet, in ‘Jim Crow Gothic: Richard Wright’s Southern Nightmare’, looks at gothic elements in this writer’s short story collection *Uncle Tom’s Children*, set in the rural South. Michael L. Manson, in ‘The Turn from the Gothic to Southern Liberalism in *To Kill a Mockingbird*’, discusses how the depiction of Atticus Finch in this iconic *Bildungsroman* presages the controversial vision of the same character in *Go Set a Watchman*.

It is vital to remember that African Americans are not the only group who have experienced racial oppression in the South. Eric Gary Anderson, in ‘Raising the Indigenous Undead’, describes the ways in which Indigenous stories of ghosts and monsters challenge European gothic conventions, with hauntings that bolster anti-colonial stances and enhance the cohesion of communities.

Gender, Sexuality, and the Southern Gothic

A fourth cluster of chapters addresses issues of gender and sexuality in Southern Gothic texts. Kellie Donovan-Condron, in ‘Twisted Sisters: The Monstrous Women of Southern Gothic’, discusses representations of the monstrous feminine and the female grotesque in Southern Gothic texts. Although Ellen Glasgow found many of the tropes and images associated with the Southern Gothic problematic, Mark Graves, in ‘Ellen Glasgow’s Gothic Heroes and Monsters’, describes her use of gothic motifs in order to critique Southern norms related to gender. Dara Downey, in her study of ‘The Gothic and the Grotesque in the Novels of Carson McCullers’, looks at this writer’s work in the context of conventional gothic plots and Bakhtinian theory, describing the social, sexual and racial tensions produced in an intolerant culture. Stephen Matterson, in “‘The room must evoke some ghosts’: Tennessee Williams”, examines the tensions between Romanticism and the Gothic in Williams’s late plays. Michael P. Bibler, in ‘Truman Capote’s Gothic Politics’, analyses the crossroads in this writer’s work where the generic conventions of the Southern Gothic on the one hand, and social and political realities related to sexual and racial oppression on the other, meet and collide.

Monsters, Vampires and Voodoo

In ‘Southern Vampires: Anne Rice, Charlaine Harris and *True Blood*’, Ken Gelder examines the work of these novelists in the context of slavery, plantations and the Civil War, in order to argue that the television series *True Blood* destabilises the vision of Southern whiteness as the privileged, property-inheriting norm. Anne Schroder, in ‘Voodoo and Conjure as Gothic Realism’, challenges traditional readings in which these African diasporic belief systems are relegated to the domain of the unreal in order to argue that the Gothic can be linked to literary realism in representations of slavery. Sarah Ford, in “‘Nothing so Mundane as Ghosts’: Eudora Welty and the Gothic’, examines Welty’s *Delta*

Wedding and the challenge that it poses to both racial and gendered norms, going on to discuss Welty's allusions to Poe's 'The Raven' and the ways in which *The Optimist's Daughter* subverts this trope of avian haunting. Peggy Dunn Bailey, in 'Talismans of Shadows and Mantles of Light: Contemporary Forms of the Southern Female Gothic', proposes three different variants of Southern Female Gothic discourses, the Supernatural, the Realistic and the Supra-natural or Romantic, in order to explore novels by Anne Rice, Dorothy Allison and Daina Chaviano. In 'Shadows on the Small Screen: The Televisuality and Generic Hybridity of Southern Gothic', Brigid Cherry analyses television programmes such as *Carnivale*, *True Blood*, *The Vampire Diaries*, *True Detective* and *American Horror Story Coven* and the ways in which they subvert traditional generic boundaries. Finally, David Greven, in 'The Southern Gothic in Film: An Overview', discusses the existence of pernicious, overly simplistic (and occasionally racist) stereotypes, and explores the ways in which the sub-genre resists this tendency, particularly as regards female sexuality and queer desire.

A caveat: as readers will have seen, organising these chapters into thematic clusters is an enterprise fraught with difficulty, involving diabolical bargains and trade-offs. Many could easily fit under several other designations, but that is perhaps the point. The crossroads in this volume are not isolated ones like Robert Johnson's dark midnight intersection in the Mississippi Delta, but are crossings characterised by movement across many different disciplinary axes, with occasional collisions, conflicts and contradictions, and flashes of valuable and unsettling insight.

NOTES

1. Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (London: Picador, 1992), pp. 36–38.
2. Teresa Goddu, *Gothic America: Narrative, History and Nation* (New York: Columbia UP, 1997), p. 4.
3. Theresa Goddu, *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), pp. 8–10.
4. Eric Gary Anderson, Taylor Hagood and Daniel Cross Turner, *Undead Souths: The Gothic and Beyond in Southern Literature and Culture* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015), p. 4.
5. 'Uncanny Hybridities', in Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn, *Look Away: The US South in New World Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).
6. Martyn Bone, *The American South and the Atlantic World* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2013).
7. John Lowe, ed., 'Constructing a Cultural Theory for the South', in *Bridging Southern Cultures: An Interdisciplinary Approach* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), p. 3.
8. John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).
9. Michael Bibler, *Cotton's Queer Relations: Same-sex Intimacy and the Literature of the Southern Plantation* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009).
10. Kari Winter, *Subjects of Slavery, Agents of Change: Women and Power in Gothic Novels and Slave Narratives, 1790–1865* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992).
11. Patricia Yaeger, *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing, 1930–1990* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

PART I

Edgar Allan Poe and His Legacy

Edgar Allan Poe and the Southern Gothic

Tom F. Wright

Critics have for a long time talked of the ‘problem of Poe’: the difficulty of defining his achievement and its place within the American canon. No gothic writer enjoys a more truly global reputation, readership and influence; yet no writer has been so consistently misunderstood and excluded as an aberrant and even ‘dubious’ figure in the nation’s literary history.¹ Underpinning this reputational uncertainty is the contentious issue of Poe’s Southern identity. Few readers think of him first and foremost as a ‘Southern’ writer. Born in Boston, raised partly in London and associated throughout his short career with the journalistic worlds of Baltimore, New York and Philadelphia, Poe wrote almost nothing about the South, set barely any writings there, and seemed unconcerned with the topics of specific regional history, tradition and custom that form the repertoire of the Southern canon. It has been a commonplace of Poe studies for generations to fixate on the question of whether his writings bear any meaningful imprint of his regional origins, or whether his Southernness offers an illuminating framework through which to read his work.

The issue of Poe’s relationship to the ‘Southern Gothic’ is even more unresolved. Most discussions of the genre do not find a place for his writings, for both thematic and chronological reasons. Many of the key themes of the genre – the importance of family and place, social class, religion and the tragic haunting of slavery – are treated obliquely at best in Poe’s oeuvre. Chronologically speaking, it is also important to consider that he was writing just before the Civil War, a conflict that did so much to galvanise these tropes, and long before the celebrated writers of the twentieth-century Southern Renaissance whose works dominate handbooks such as this one. However, although it is tempting to dismiss the ‘Southern Gothic’ category as an anachronistic or imprecise route into Poe’s writings, the term nonetheless retains a useful instructive value.

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As this chapter explores, Poe's works offer a powerful gothic critique of nineteenth-century society, its values, contradictions and myths – in their spare glimpses of life below the Mason–Dixon line, but perhaps even more visibly in the seemingly placeless depictions of nightmarish aristocratic landscapes. This will be shown to be most evident in two of Poe's most peculiar and influential texts, pieces that best showcase his idiosyncratic concern with classic Southern Gothic issues of familial decay and racial fanaticism: 'The Fall of the House of Usher' (1839) and *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838). Through ambivalent and elusive fictions such as these, Poe became a major influence on later Southern writers, and an author whose response to the South helped to construct a powerful symbolic canvas that later writers and critics would find indispensable and darkly provocative. I suggest that thinking about Poe in terms of the Southern Gothic helps to disrupt periodisation, assists us in perceiving the complex precursors to the twentieth-century Southern literary revival, and allows us to reflect on the limitations of the very term itself.

Poe's Gothic Placelessness

Poe's gothic is at once the most canonical and the most surprising in the American tradition. His tales handle all of the major themes that make up the particular texture of the gothic tradition: the concern with frontier, political utopianism and the spectre of race. Yet whereas Charles Brockden Brown, Nathaniel Hawthorne or even Washington Irving used gothic techniques as a means through which to interrogate society and the state of the nation, Poe's is a notably more inward sensibility. Rather than presenting a depiction of specific sites of historical haunting, his is the Gothic of agonised introspection, dramatising the fragility of personality and sanity, obsessively preoccupied with the ways in which the mind betrays itself and its capacity for evil.

In addressing these universal themes, Poe rarely grounded his works in specific social, political or geographical contexts. It is a commonplace that his fictions take place mostly in an invented 'otherworld', where the surreal and the illusory are the main features of the setting. The landscapes and settings of texts such as 'The Pit and the Pendulum' or the 'Tell-Tale Heart' are monstrously indistinct, and even in the case of those with specific national settings, such as the London of 'The Man of the Crowd' (1840) or the Paris of the Dupin tales 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' (1841) or 'The Purloined Letter' (1845), the sense of place is strangely unmoored, using relatively specific locations as backdrops to intense psychological dramas.

If Poe's tales involve a sense of place at all, that is usually an abstract scene of confinement. According to Flannery O'Connor, the gothic style has at its core a sense of 'pushing its own limits outwards towards the limits of mystery'; Poe's version is one that pushes inwards, folding into tighter and tighter spaces. The gothic interiors of the London schoolhouse of 'William Wilson' (1839), the cellar of the 'Cask of Amontillado' (1846), the baronial towers of 'Ligeia' (1838) or the painstakingly delineated Paris apartment that Dupin

scours in the ‘Purloined Letter’ are always far more the focus of events than the wider cities and landscapes in which they are set. The true topic of the Poe gothic is that morbid introversion, and the true ingredient is the ambiguously symbolist motif of enclosure.

Crucially, this ‘placelessness’ was in no way incidental to Poe’s writings; in fact, it was central to their thematic ambitions. His apparent aim was to transcend region and nation – to strip away locale, history and geography – in search of an idealised realm of pure poetry. As the notoriously mean-spirited obituary of Poe by Rufus Griswold put it, he was ‘a dreamer, dwelling in ideal realms’, and it is true that Poe represented the very condition of placelessness as the gothic predicament in its purest form. He suggests that place is immaterial: that the Gothic is a state of mind, not a state of the Union.

Accordingly, for many generations critics have used Poe’s claim that ‘my terrors are not of Germany but of the soul’ to justify taking an ahistorical approach to his work. In this view, he had little ambition to say anything of substance about the frenetic changes of the republic in which he lived; he was far more of humanist than a chronicler. This purely ‘literary’ approach has certainly taken Poe studies in some highly fruitful directions. T.S. Eliot and Richard Wilbur are only two of the many early twentieth-century critics who presented the author as a symbolist, and in the years since, countless articles and books have attempted to unravel the timeless psychological truths and challenges contained in his fiction.² Late twentieth-century high theory also found much to explore in Poe’s work, most famously in the remarkable sequence of readings of ‘The Purloined Letter’ by Jacques Lacan, Barbara Johnson and Jacques Derrida.³

Another critical tradition has attempted to delve beneath Poe’s deliberate abstraction and place him back into his historical context. Critics in this camp have sought to make clear how, rather than engaging purely with ‘ideal realms’, Poe’s tales and criticism also reveal him to be, in the words of J. Gerald Kennedy, ‘a sharp observer of the vehement but conflicted national culture emerging in his lifetime’.⁴ Influential collections such as *The American Face of Edgar Allan Poe* (1995) have contextualised and historicised the subtleties of his writings to reveal a series of powerful insights into the market revolution, urbanisation, sectional tensions, gender politics and the crisis over slavery.⁵ The result has been a growing acceptance of the fact that, as Teresa Goddu has succinctly put it, ‘the terrors of Poe’s tales are not of the soul but of society’.⁶

It has often proved particularly difficult to relate these texts in any meaningful way to Southern historical realities or sensibilities. Only ‘The Gold-Bug’ (1843) is set in the region, presenting a fragmentary image of the tidal marshlands of South Carolina. Unlike many of his antebellum Southern peers, Poe did not explicitly defend the region’s social customs or heritage, seeming by contrast unattached to the Southern intellectual climate and the planter tradition. As a result, historians have tended to follow W.J. Cash’s verdict in *The Mind of the South* (1941) that Poe was ‘only half a Southerner’.⁷ Yet the literary and political culture of Virginia was undeniably his milieu. Following

an itinerant childhood as the son of travelling actors, prominent Richmond tobacco merchant Richard Allan adopted the infant Poe, and by all accounts bequeathed to his son a powerful Southern gentry identity, later funding his entry to the iconic bastion of Southern intellectualism, the University of Virginia. The South was where Poe came of age, where he first tasted success, where he began his married life and to where he returned in his final years. To his peers he was widely regarded as a Virginia man of letters, particularly identified with the world of the *Southern Literary Messenger*. In one uncommonly sentimental letter to his brother in 1839, Poe declared that ‘Richmond is my home, and a letter to that City will always reach me in whatever part of the world I may be’.⁸

There are a number of ways in which these biographical facts have been seen to imprint his work. At least since the influential recovery of a decisively Virginian Poe in Allen Tate’s 1949 essay ‘Our Cousin, Mr. Poe’, the author’s Southern half has been seen to exert a great pull over his writing. As many writers have pointed out, in terms of commitment and stance Poe’s reviews and journalism frequently gesture towards a recognisably Southern conservatism on issues of the past, perfectibility and progress, in his hatred of abstractions, his apparent scorn for democracy and the mob, and his belief in hierarchy. In this view, his attitudes towards race, gender, class and art can all be traced to habits of mind that aristocratic antebellum Southerners used to invent themselves. Controversies continue over his authorship of notorious anti-abolition reviews during the 1840s, and some critics such as John Carlos Rowe go as far as to claim that ‘Poe was a proslavery Southerner and should be reassessed as such in whatever approach we take to his life and writings’.⁹

Some writers argue that this Southern influence was first and foremost a matter of style and aesthetics. Even if he transcends regionalism, Poe’s concerns and literary techniques are identifiably Southern, in the lyricism and tendency for the lachrymose that he shared with other Southern poets. For example, fellow Virginian Ellen Glasgow recognised him as a product of his region as much through style as worldview, arguing that ‘Poe is to a large extent, a distillation of the Southerner ... the formalism of his tone, the classical element in his poetry, and in many of his stories, the drift towards rhetoric, the aloof and elusive intensity, all these qualities are Southern’.¹⁰

Others see a powerful theme of commentary in his stories’ coded or repressed treatment of issues of race and gender. In this view, although Poe might not seem to talk about Southern writerly concerns, he does so allegorically. It is a point often made that he was never more Southern than in those moments where he is offering a strident critique of the region. A number of Poe’s most influential readers over the years have found him to be entirely anti-Southern. This reading emphasises the fact that Poe left the South as part of a rebellion against the values of Allan, his adoptive father. Given his complex attitudes and uniquely liminal position between class and region, he can be seen as the ideal person to deconstruct the Southern gentleman, and to lay bare the hypocrisies and pathologies on which such an ideology rested.

Both of these strands come together in perhaps Poe's most famous tale, 'The Fall of the House of Usher' (1838), a piece widely seen as one of the founding texts of the 'Southern Gothic'.

The 'House of Usher' and Southern Gentry

'The Fall of the House of Usher' (1837) is primarily a mood piece, and its plot is therefore easily summarised. A traveller arrives at the Usher family mansion to find that the sibling inhabitants are living under a mysterious family curse. Roderick Usher's senses have grown particularly acute, while Madeline has become nearly catatonic. As the visitor's stay at the mansion continues, the effects of the curse reach a terrifying climax, with both Usher siblings dead, and the mansions collapses into two pieces. This simple and haunting closet drama embraces many of Poe's signature motifs: the exploration of abnormal psychological states; an imprecise, almost Germanic, feudal setting; dark humour; violence; and a powerful sense of futility in the face of sin. Its vivid simplicity has made it one of Poe's best-known stories, and among the most anthologised gothic tales in the language. It is a paradigmatic example of a well-made gothic tale whose ambitions lie entirely within the confines of the genre itself. As with all of Poe's tales, the temptation towards a purely psychological reading is strong. Most broadly, the story can be read primarily as an allegory of the male psyche's attempts to confront the inward female.

Yet Poe's ambitions are clearly also more local and historical. This is arguably his most 'Southern' story. Set in a characteristically anonymous dreamscape, it has all the elements that would later come to characterise the Southern Gothic: great house and family falling into decay and ruin; a feverish morbid introspective hero; an ethereal heroine; implications of incest; a pervading sense of guilt propelled from the past. As Lewis P. Simpson has argued, Poe's story amounts to a recognisably 'Southern landscape of nightmare, homeland of a decadent aristocracy of slave holders, and of their descendants, prone to neurotic terrors and violence'.¹¹

Above all, it is the central organising symbol of the once-great ruined mansion that strikes the most familiar Southern Gothic notes. Confronting the desolation of the edifice, the narrator explores his response to its façade of sublime decay:

What was it – I paused to think – what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher? It was a mystery all insoluble; nor could I grapple with the shadowy fancies that crowded upon me as I pondered. I was forced to fall back upon the unsatisfactory conclusion, that while, beyond doubt, there are combinations of very simple natural objects which have the power of thus affecting us, still the analysis of this power lies among considerations beyond our depth. It was possible, I reflected, that a mere different arrangement of the particulars of the scene, of the details of the picture, would be sufficient to modify, or perhaps to annihilate its capacity for sorrowful impression; and, acting upon this idea, I reined my horse to the precipitous brink of a black and lurid tarn that

lay in unruffled lustre by the dwelling, and gazed down – but with a shudder even more thrilling than before – upon the remodelled and inverted images of the gray sedge, and the ghastly tree-stems, and the vacant and eye-like windows.¹²

As Charles Crow has argued, the ‘most common site of the Southern Gothic is the decaying old plantation mansion’, and in this chateau scene Poe reworks the plantation locales of John Pendleton Kennedy and Nathan Beverley Tucker into a broader source of terror and intrigue.¹³ As the landscape calls up plantation images, Poe forces a contemplation of the ‘old time entombed’ through the mansion and the ‘mystery all insoluble’ it contains. The house is master – is ‘alive’ – so Usher insists, its grey stones and the history they contain exerting a ‘silent, yet importunate and terrible influence’ on this symbolic Southern family’s destiny.

The symbolism of this ‘Southern’ edifice can also be read as central to a jeremiad that treats the dying-out of the planter aristocracy. In the 1950s, Harry Levin introduced the idea that the story was an allegory of feudal plantation culture in terminal decline, caught in the vice of inbreeding, degeneracy, neurasthenia and hypochondria.¹⁴ In this reading, the decline of the lineage and edifice of ‘Usher’ can be mapped onto the disintegration of the very ideals of family and culture. Poe’s decision to set his gothic exploration of the moral and mortal fate of the Southern aristocracy in an abstract and timeless landscape only magnifies the sharpness of the depiction, and its potency for imaginative allegorical treatment. In its theatrical fixation on decay and futile reconstruction, the tale becomes a lament for the threatened Southern pastoral ideal, and likewise for the fragile ideals of Southern womanhood.

Other recent readings of this tale as ‘Southern’ present it as a form of dark parody. In this view, the tale is really a gothic burlesque in the mode of Irving – a pastiche whose motive is not lament but satire on the decadence and inevitable decline of the Southern gentry. As many biographical critics have noted, this was a culture with which Poe maintained a complex relationship, and his ambivalent attitudes to the habits and worldview of the gentry helped drive his 1838 tale. For example, as Richard Gray has pointed out, Poe often adopted the carefree manner of the planter-gentleman, falsely assuming an air of privilege and propriety, and ‘was perhaps never more of a Southerner than when he was imitating one: applying himself assiduously to the role of Virginia dandy, even when much of the historical evidence was against him’.¹⁵ Building on these details of Poe’s life, a number of critics have read the tale as a performance of gentry personae, deconstructing the ‘shadow fancies’ at the heart of a hollow cultural pose.

This view has been advanced most forcefully by David Leverenz, who argues that Poe played a ‘trickster’s role at the alienated margin of gentry culture’, constantly invoking the Southern ideal of the gentleman in frequently ironic ways:

Poe inhabits and undermines gentry fictions of mastery, not least by exposing the gentleman as a fiction. Typically, he displays cultivated narrators unable to master