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"It's All Now You See"

Dystopian Elements in Southern Gothic Fiction as Tools of Social Criticism

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ABSTRACT

Die Arbeit vergleicht die formellen und narrativen Methoden mit deren Hilfe dystopische und Southern Gothic Texte soziale Kritik äußern, wobei besonderer Fokus auf US-amerikanischer Literatur liegt. Nach der Definition beider Gattungen konzentriert sich die Analyse in ihrem Vergleich auf sowohl sekundäre als auch primäre Texte und ist in zwei Teile geteilt: 1) Formale Aspekte wie narrative Struktur und 2) von beiden Genres behandelte Schlüsselthemen. Beide Teile heben soziale Kritik als roten Faden innerhalb der Primärtexte hervor und zeigen die ähnliche Herangehensweise beider Gattungen an diese. Das Ergebnis weist eindeutig darauf hin, dass Southern Gothic Texte auf sehr ähnliche Weise mit sozialer Kritik umgehen wie Werke der dystopischen Fiktion, was eine Re-kontextualisierung beider Literaturen mithilfe von Gattungstheorie ermöglicht und schlussendlich die Schwächen der Genre-Kategorisierung hervorhebt.

The thesis aims to compare the formal and narrative ways in which Dystopian and Southern Gothic texts employ social critique, with special focus on US American literature. After defining both genres, the analysis concentrates on both secondary and primary texts in its comparison and is split in two parts: 1) Formal aspects, such as narrative composition and 2) key themes explored in both genres. Both parts highlight the common theme of social criticism across the primary literature discussed and show the similar approaches the two genres take. The result indicates clearly that Southern Gothic texts engage in social criticism very similarly to works of Dystopian fiction, which allows for a re-contextualization of the two literatures through genre theory and ultimately highlights the weaknesses of genre categorization.

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INTRODUCTION

The Deficits of Genre Categorization

“To define is to limit.”¹ As a much-parroted quote from Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, this sentiment summarizes a very specific perspective on art and culture, which rejects the notion of clear definitions in favour of creative freedom and a multitude of interpretative possibilities. In practice, however, this romantic notion of letting art speak for itself is not a viable basis for the effort of understanding a society’s creative output and its cultural impact. Thus, literary studies may consider Wilde’s declaration when analysing its various subjects, but it cannot hope to adopt it as its main doctrine, nor would it be advantageous to do so. As such most spheres engaging with literature resort to organizing and defining groups of the texts they work with – this includes the complex concept of genre.

Standing in front of a wall of bookcases offering entertainment, education and anything in-between, the most avid reader and the novice alike orientate themselves in bookstores around the world after the one or two words summarizing the content of a text, written above the piles of novels, poetry, anthologies, etc. Terms such as ‘Romance’, ‘Horror’, ‘Adventure’ and others ease the pain of choice and at the same time prepare the mind for what to expect roughly. Although these generalizations aren’t ultimately reflected in the strict academic treatment of the literature they seek to describe, an attempt to form organized literary groups to inform the methodological approach with which they are interpreted is nonetheless part of any literary field, although these categories are often separated by much more permeable barriers than the ones dominating the popular market.

Nonetheless, in the vein of Oscar Wilde’s quote, it is not only productive but essential to the analytical process to question this framework and our use of it. For this genre theory offers one set of tools to re-think common categories based on patterns that are perhaps recognizable, but rarely set in stone. In fact, the question may arise whether such allocations could perhaps do more harm than good by limiting the ways in which literary works are talked about and treated academically as well as in popular culture. Moritz Baßler addresses this issue in the manual for genre theory, *Handbuch Gattungstheorie*, highlighting that classifying a text as belonging to a specific genre is already a first act of interpretation – an

¹ Wilde, Oscar: *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Richmond: Alma Classics 2017, p. 178.

idea explored earlier by Gérard Genette as well.² Baßler considers this tendency of working with a fixed definition of a genre and searching for specific shared attributes within texts to justify their common label a less productive method of interpretation than treating genre classifications as indications of intertextual references.³ He writes that genres are, from the perspective of literary studies, first and foremost “text corpora”, i.e. groups of texts perceived as belonging to the same category, containing central works considered to be “classics” of the genre which set the parameters by which other texts are deemed to either belong to this group or not, and that new genres develop historically when a number of works show certain commonalities and receive a label to signify them as part of the same category.⁴ Thus the aforementioned concept of genre categorization being an act of interpretation becomes relevant, as a text labelled with a genre title is then immediately compared to other works belonging to this classification.⁵

But how can such definitions be rethought? This thesis aims towards that with the help of comparative efforts by taking the literary output of two distinct and seemingly unrelated genres and pointing out the numerous commonalities between them, creating a new context through which these texts can be interpreted. As the title suggests, the two literatures subject of this comparison are that of the Dystopia and the Southern Gothic, which at first appear fully separate phenomena, but reveal a great number of parallels in their narratives at a closer look. The similarities, to be explored in detail throughout this thesis, prove to harbor a fundamental, underlying connection binding them together through more than mere coincidence, which takes on the form of socially conscious critical commentary.

To understand the parallels between dystopian and Southern Gothic narratives, it is thus helpful to look at them through the methodological lens of genre theory, which may assist in gaining further insight into the function of social criticism within both literatures and why they should be considered more closely related in academic circles than they currently are. In its essence this academic endeavor may offer an example of re-contextualizing works of a specific genre, urging readers to interpret them beyond the limitations of their perceived categories and encouraging cultural and literary studies to examine texts not based solely on

² Baßler, Moritz: Interpretation und Gattung. In: Zymner, Rüdiger (ed.): Handbuch Gattungstheorie. Weimar: J.B. Metzler 2010, p. 54-56, here p. 54.

³ Baßler, Moritz: Intertextualität und Gattung. In: Zymner, Rüdiger (ed.): Handbuch Gattungstheorie. Weimar: J.B. Metzler 2010, p. 56-58, here p. 57.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Baßler: Interpretation und Gattung, p. 54.

their form and plot, but on their impact and possible function within a larger social and cultural framework.

In this sense, the similarities in narrative structure and key themes addressed between dystopian and Southern Gothic fiction invite a closer examination of the two genres at large, which then supports the analysis of specific texts. Thus, a new understanding of both as socially conscious literatures is gained once they are released of the stricter boundaries set by labels like ‘Science Fiction’ and ‘Gothic’. The aim of this thesis is not to fully extract neither the Dystopia nor the Southern Gothic from the aforementioned categories, as their affiliation with these is clearly substantiated – however, a case is to be made for the ways in which the interpretations of texts is influenced and even limited by the mere association with their respective genres, as Baßler describes. Interestingly, some authors seem to agree with this and make a conscious effort to distance themselves from certain genre categories: Margaret Atwood, for example, refuses to label her writing as “Science Fiction” and instead uses the term “speculative fiction”, which has been theorized by other writers such as Ursula K. Le Guin to stem from her fear of being ostracized within literary circles.⁶

Applying this ‘re-contextualization’ to dystopian and Southern Gothic texts reveals how their analysis has been restricted by their respective categorizations. Although Baßler states that a literary work can belong to multiple genres, since different texts can be compared to each other in various ways, it is apparent that both Dystopia and the Southern Gothic have only rarely been contextualized through different categories in academic circles in order to gain more insight on them, as most dystopian narratives are seen through the filter of Science Fiction and most Southern Gothic through the Gothic. However, a great number of works can instead be considered what Baßler calls “hybrid texts”, consisting of attributes found in multiple different genres,⁷ which highlights that the notion of genre purity isn’t appropriate when approaching such works, making an interpretation beyond genre categories necessary to find the true connection between these narratives. But is social criticism truly as prevalent in both literatures as to warrant it to be considered their common theme? A brief

⁶ Mancuso, Cecilia: Speculative or science fiction? As Margaret Atwood shows, there isn’t much distinction. In: The Guardian, 10.08.2016.

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/aug/10/speculative-or-science-fiction-as-margaret-atwood-shows-there-isnt-much-distinction>, 15.01.2025.

⁷ Baßler, Moritz: Gattungsmischung, Gattungsübergänge, Unbestimmbarkeit. In: Zymner, Rüdiger (ed.): Handbuch Gattungstheorie. Weimar: J.B. Metzler 2010, p. 52-54, here p. 52.

consideration of their conceptions may offer insight into this point and justify the comparative efforts of this thesis.

The future as a source of near endless potential for change has always held a special fascination for humans, regardless of time, location or society – be it Plato's *Republic*, *The Book of Revelations* or *The Communist Manifesto*, literature is full of examples of writers and philosophers imagining what possible alternatives to their present realities may hold for coming generations.

Belonging to this tradition, Thomas More's *Utopia* is a foundational piece of texts preoccupied with alternative societal structures and is today considered one of the main works of utopian studies. Utopianism, defined by Lyman Tower-Sargent as "social dreaming",⁸ invites the reader to engage with their own social reality from a new perspective by being confronted with an alternative version to it, which is considered by the author to be the more desirable of the two. But as the Western world was faced with various difficulties throughout its progressing history, Utopia was more and more associated with a naïve optimism unfit for true criticism. Instead, its dystopian counterpart took on the role of the preferred fictive mode of politically and socially conscious commentary and rather than displaying a nostalgic sense for a 'better time' or 'better version' of current society, the literature took to depicting an alternative form of the author's environment, which is determinedly less preferable in its differences, but not so much changed that it can't be recognized as a possible consequence of contemporary tendencies. This 'literary pessimism' has been popular with writers of fiction seeking to highlight the issues they observe around them.

Seemingly unrelated but still comparable is the establishing of the Gothic mode in US-American Southern literature after the Civil War. Writers see themselves confronted with a culture unable to free itself from the idealized image of the region's antebellum time, juxtaposed with the realities of racism, poverty and misogyny. As such, similarly to how Utopia and Dystopia are related, Southern Gothic stems partially from the myth of the Lost Cause perpetuated by Southern culture during the late 19th and early 20th century and gives rise to a number of works focused on dissecting the South's past and present in order to inspire a future less plagued by such issues.

⁸ Tower-Sargent, Lyman: The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited. In: *Utopian Studies* 5/1, 1994, p. 1-37, here p. 9.

However, the discursive nature and clear prevalence for social commentary and critical observations both the dystopian and the Southern Gothic genre demonstrate, are not a result of mere coincidence. Aesthetic conventions may separate the two on the surface, but a closer analyzation of narrative conventions and thematic foci will show how appropriate a direct comparison of works from both literatures in fact is and what this reveals about the ways in which we define, categorize and interpret socially conscious fiction. This thesis aims to highlight the parallels between dystopian and Southern Gothic texts, how they possibly came to be and in what ways they may serve the same function of social criticism. Seeing as dystopian studies has done a great deal of work over the past decades to define the genre and lay bare its structural and narrative practices, these academic texts will serve as an analytical framework through which to interpret literary examples of the Southern Gothic, which has not been afforded the same amount of scholarly attention so far. By approaching Southern Gothic texts via the theories offered by dystopian studies, not only their formal and thematic parallels are revealed, but their function as socially and ideologically critical fiction as well, which this thesis claims is a far more prominent commonality between the two genres than may first appear.

Past, present and future: These play a major role in the stories of dystopian and Southern Gothic narratives. A (re-)examination of the past as a possible source of the issues found in the present with the intent to facilitate a better future – this can be considered an underlying pattern of the two genres discussed, working as a common thread amongst the works serving as examples in the following chapters. By referring to the analytical frameworks offered by genre theory and its contributions such as those by Baßler, this thesis offers a close comparison of two seemingly separate literatures with the aim of revealing the intricate relationship between the two, inspiring a new approach to both their individual and combined interpretations.

CHAPTER I: THE POTENTIAL OF OPTIMISTIC PESSIMISM

The Future as Warning in Dystopian Thought

Most readers associate the Dystopia with other categories such as Science Fiction or Post-Apocalyptic Fiction, regarding it as a subcategory of a larger literary corpus. However, as the academic work with a focus on such texts gained more and more traction during the 20th century, so did the understanding of the Dystopia as an independent, complex school of writing, which is not merely a brand of popular fiction with the sole aim of entertainment but displays an intricate set of philosophical and sociological questions pertaining to the author's real environment. Since then, dystopian studies have shown that literary works of this kind do not only exhibit thematic similarities, but specific structural parallels as well, inspiring scholars to examine and compare the narratives more closely to gain further understanding of the genre as a whole and resulting in the realization that the function of social criticism is not merely a byproduct of the interpretation of specific works, but a much more essential aspect of the dystopian genre itself.

The literary conventions used by dystopian fiction, which separate it clearly from aforementioned categories like Science Fiction via social and/or political commentary embedded in its texts, are inseparably linked with the broader concept of dystopian thought. The exact time of its establishment, however, is hard to pinpoint. Most agree that it originated with its philosophical opposite, the Utopia; although academics like M. Keith Booker are of the opinion that utopian thought dates back to ancient times and can be found in works such as Plato's *Republic*, for instance, the general consensus on its beginnings agrees on Thomas More's *Utopia* as the first distinctly utopian work, a novel centering around a narrator who finds a society completely different from the one More himself lives in, strongly implying it to be the more desirable of the two, thus showing an example of extratextual critical intent.⁹ In his book *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature* Booker cites Karl Mannheim to explain this function, which he himself deems essential to utopian thought: Mannheim describes Utopia as a "complex of energies that work for change in society", while he

⁹Booker, M. Keith: *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature. Fiction as Social Criticism*. Westport: Greenwood Press 1994, p. 4-5.

considers ideology a “complex of energies acting to preserve and support the existing order of things”, invoking the Marxist tradition of ideology as false consciousness.¹⁰

The shift towards its perceived opposite, dystopian thought, happens, according to Booker, as modern thinkers become suspicious of utopian ideals, suspecting they may in fact work in favor of the status quo, despite the criticism inherent in them.¹¹ Gary Saul Morson summarizes this by stating, that utopias are perceived to be an escape from history and dystopias an escape towards it; in other words, the latter becomes a confrontation with a specific political and social reality.¹² Nevertheless, scholars like Gregory Claeys believe the two concepts to have been linked all along, arguing that More’s *Utopia* is technically based on a certain social group’s perceived dystopia and itself appears dystopian to a modern audience,¹³ blurring the lines between the two and thus contributing to the difficulty of finding clear definitions.

Booker sees the preference of dystopias even more clearly in the Western literature of the late 20th century, where he considers utopian thought to be seen as reactionary and closer to escapism, rather than engaging in social and political commentary, for which he cites theories by Mark Hillegas and Robert C. Elliott as possible explanations, naming contemporary anxieties and political developments of the 20th century as potential causes leading to a skeptical approach towards Utopia;¹⁴ he also writes that dystopias have become more prominent in the Western cultural consciousness thanks to recent history, like World War II, the Soviet Union and the Cold War, causing the literature of this time to deem utopias either impossible or even undesirable¹⁵ - a point which Tom Moylan agrees with in his later book *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia*.¹⁶

The Marxist critic Frederic Jameson, however, does not agree with the shift towards dystopian thought: He sees the utopian notion of a preferable alternative future as necessary to empower political action in the present, rather than an escape from reality, because it maintains the possibility of a world better than the current one; dystopian thought, in turn,

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 3.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., p. 4.

¹³ Claeys, Gregory: *Dystopia: A Natural History. A Study of Modern Despotism, Its Antecedents, and Its Literary Diffractions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2017, p. 6.

¹⁴ Booker: *Dystopian Impulse*, p. 16.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Moylan, Tom: *Scraps of the Untainted Sky. Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia*. New York: Routledge 2018, p. xi.

is considered by Jameson to be less politically responsible.¹⁷ Differing views in the dystopian and utopian genre such as these have made it almost impossible to separate the two fully in academic examinations of them, which has in turn influenced writers in their creative approach.

Booker embraces this fact in his analysis and argues in favour of utopian and dystopian thought not being treated as diametrical opposites. He considers both to be part of the same project, as utopian visions of an ideal society often already suggest a criticism of the present and dystopian warnings of “bad utopias” still allow for the possibility of “good utopias”.¹⁸ The key difference between the two lies in their critical approach, with utopian thinking being based on a critique of the present and dystopian thinking relying on the critique of possible inadequacies in the future, with dystopian fiction depicting social and political issues in a future setting, which can be identified as developments of present problems, as Booker summarizes Andrew Ross’ views on the subject.¹⁹

The first and most widely accepted definition of Dystopia stems from Lyman Tower Sargent’s essay *The Three Faces of Utopia Revisited*:

Dystopia or negative utopia – a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which the reader lived.²⁰

Despite this seemingly successful attempt at clarification, Tom Moylan explains in *Scraps of the Untainted Sky* that although the genre received closer academic attention from the 1950s and 1960s onwards, analyses of dystopian writing continued to be less precise than texts on Utopia and the related category of Science Fiction at first, resulting in a prevailing lack of clarity on the terms used even today, aided by the use of the terms Dystopia and Anti-Utopia as synonyms.²¹ Seeking more coherence for the future of dystopian studies, Moylan goes to great lengths to differentiate between the two, consulting essays by different dystopian and utopian scholars in combination with his own interpretations to draw a clearer line between Utopia, Anti-Utopia and Dystopia.

¹⁷ Booker: *Dystopian Impulse*, p. 3.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

²⁰ Tower-Sargent: *Three Faces*, p. 9.

²¹ Moylan: *Scraps*, p. 122.

For this he tries to reconstruct where the confusion surrounding the genre emerged, re-tracing the steps dystopian studies took before it became what it is today. First, he identifies the fact that anti-utopian and dystopian texts emerged almost simultaneously as an important clue, with many works using the first term to refer to such narratives and loosely defining it as an attack on or refusal of Utopia.²² Moylan states that one of the earliest looks at this writing are the essays *From Utopia to Nightmare* by Chad Walsh and *Anti-Utopian Fiction* by William Gordon Browning, both from the late 1960s and both signifying major steps in the academic legitimization of utopian and anti-utopian literature; to summarize, both Walsh and Browning categorize these texts as “useful warnings leading to a utopian response to existing social conditions that would prevent the outcomes portrayed”,²³ seeing in them an inherent function beyond that of mere entertainment. They do not, however, distinguish between Dystopia and Anti-Utopia, setting a precedent for later interpretations such as by Irving Howe and Mark Hillegas, who both leave out the term Dystopia almost entirely in their essays on the topic.²⁴

The ambiguity surrounding the dystopian genre began to dissipate somewhat in the 1970s, thanks to such efforts as Tower-Sargent’s specification of Utopia as texts rendering a “good place” and Dystopia as rendering a “bad place”, reserving the term Anti-Utopia for works clearly directed against the first.²⁵

Moylan’s own interpretation, based on the work done before him, sees a definitive difference between Dystopia and Anti-Utopia: Instead of categorizing the first as the opposite of Utopia, he accredits it with a more open form, not fully compatible with the strict binary of Utopia vs. Anti-Utopia, as it draws on politically charged hybrid textuality, lies between the historical antimonies of Utopia and Anti-Utopia and draws on certain textual qualities of both of these subgenres.²⁶ Narratives with the sentiment of there being no – or only very little – hope for positive change are here recognizable as being anti-utopian, whereas dystopian texts harbor utopian possibilities.²⁷ Proceeding to combine these terms, in order to offer a more precise vocabulary for future analysis, he describes the Anti-Utopian Dystopia as a narrative in which the hegemonic power is not fundamentally challenged, with

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., p. 126.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 127.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 147.

²⁷ Ibid., p. xiii.

the best outcome being the recognition of the individual's integrity and the Utopian Dystopia, a text which allows for the recognition of collective resistance at least and sometimes even possible victory achieved by the opposition.²⁸ Moylan concludes by stating that all dystopian works feature a pessimistic look at the most undesirable of future social alternatives; some hold onto utopian tendencies through hope, others adhere to an anti-utopian sentiment that leaves no room for potential change, while a number display a more ambiguous position.²⁹ Therefore, Dystopia does not simply mean 'Anti-Utopia', but describes texts with both utopian and anti-utopian elements.³⁰

This becomes the analytical basis for his later work together with Raffaella Baccolini, in which they provide a structural framework describing dystopian narratives and their formal conventions, described by Baccolini and summarized by Moylan in *Scraps of the Untainted Sky* as follows: Contrary to a typical utopian narrative, in which a visitor is guided through a newly discovered utopian society, the dystopian counterpart begins directly within the world serving as the setting. However, an element of textual estrangement remains, thanks to the narrative focus on an unsatisfied protagonist questioning the dystopian society they live in.³¹

The text is then made up of two distinct narratives: The narrative of the hegemonic order, followed by a counter-narrative of resistance. The first opens sans further introduction within the dystopian society with a protagonist already immersed in the social order. The latter interrupts this by depicting the growing malcontent of this main figure, resulting in their perceived alienation from the community they are a part of. The dissatisfaction grows into an awareness of the wrongs perpetuated by the dystopian system and culminates in rebellious action, leading to a climactic event that either changes or at least challenges the dystopian society in some form.³² In this way the narrative relates the ways in which the dystopian social system operates to the protagonist's individual experience as a part of it,³³ which serves to not only expose the reader to a possible negative future based on current norms, but also forces them to relate to the resistance against it on a personal level. Tom Moylan expands on the possible narrative outcomes described briefly by Baccolini by splitting them

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 147.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., p. 148.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., p. xii.

into two possible developments: Either the existing power structure crushes the rebellion and consequently the protagonist themselves, ending on a rather bleak note while still framing their defeat as an act of heroism, or the main character joins an oppositional collective; the second option may then still either end in heroic failure, lead to the establishing of a sort of ‘liberated zone’ mostly free of the oppressive system or conclude in a political movement with the potential to end the dystopian regime.³⁴

After describing the structural elements of dystopian fiction as such, they proceed to analyse its further development into what they refer to as the Critical Dystopia, a sort of contemporary subcategory explored in detail by Moylan and Baccolini in their book *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*.

Once the literary interest in the Dystopia declined in the late 1960s and 1970s, writers like Octavia Butler and Ursula K. Le Guin returned to it in the 1980s, transforming it into the Critical Dystopia through the conventions of Feminist Criticism.³⁵ The expression itself comes, again, from Tower-Sargent and covers texts that adhere to the pessimism typical for dystopias but refuse the anti-utopian direction by holding out hope for a possible utopian future.³⁶ Sargent first uses it in his essay *The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited*, after which many other dystopian scholars expand upon it, resulting in a loose definition:

[...] “a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as worse than contemporary society but that normally includes at least one eutopian enclave or holds out hope that the dystopia can be overcome and replaced with a eutopia” [...].³⁷

Moylan and Baccolini expand upon this a little further:

In our work, we read critical dystopias as texts that maintain a utopian impulse. Traditionally a bleak, depressing genre with little space for hope within the story, dystopias maintain utopian hope *outside* their pages, if at all; for it is only if we consider dystopia as a warning

³⁴ Ibid., p. xii-xiii.

³⁵ Baccolini, Raffaella/Moylan, Tom: Dystopia and Histories. In: Baccolini, Raffaella/Moylan, Tom (ed.): *Dark Horizons. Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*. New York: Routledge 2003, p. 1-12, here p. 6.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 7.

³⁷ Ibid.

that we as readers can hope to escape its pessimistic future. This option is not granted to the protagonists of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or *Brave New World*. Winston Smith, Julia, John the Savage, and Lenina are all crushed by the authoritarian society; there is no learning, no escape for them. Conversely, the new critical dystopias allow both readers and protagonists to hope by resisting closure: the ambiguous, open endings of these novels maintain the utopian impulse *within* the work. In fact, by rejecting the traditional subjugation of the individual at the end of the novel, the critical dystopia opens a space of contestation and opposition for those collective “ex-centric” subjects whose class, gender, race, sexuality, and other positions are not empowered by hegemonic rule.³⁸

Moylan and Baccolini maintain that, stylistically, the Critical Dystopia sets itself apart mainly by employing the literary device of ‘genre blurring’, which is described as an act of borrowing specific conventions from other genres in a self-reflexive manner, resisting genre purity in favor of a hybrid text that renovates dystopian fiction by making it formally oppositional.³⁹ For this the Critical Dystopia draws on feminist criticism of universalist assumptions such as the idea of a ‘fixed’ or singular truth and neutral or objective knowledge.⁴⁰ Here the notion of an ‘impure’, i.e. ‘blurred’ genre represents the rejection of a hegemonic ideology reducing everything to a global monoculture.⁴¹ The 1990s then, inspired by the feminist dystopias of the time, further transform the Critical Dystopia by resisting both dominant and oppositional orthodoxies, mainly through an exploration of agency. As a result, newer dystopian narratives critique present systems while also investigating ways to transform them without limiting themselves to compromised left-centrist solutions.⁴²

In terms of social critique, Moylan considers it an integral part of the Dystopia in general, stating that it “produces challenging cognitive maps of the historical situation by way of imaginary societies that are even worse than those that lie outside their authors’ and readers’ doors”⁴³ and names the impact a social system has on the lives of regular people a crucial element found in all dystopian texts.⁴⁴ He goes on to describe what he calls “dystopia’s

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 7-8.

⁴² Ibid., p. 8.

⁴³ Moylan: *Scraps*, p. xi.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

foremost truth”, consisting of an ability to reflect the causes of a social and ecological evil as systemic, the creation of alternative worlds in which the author’s present can be represented in a way that foregrounds its economic, political and cultural dimensions and the refusal of dystopian texts to adhere to a “functionalist/reformist perspective” both politically and formally, meaning that no single practice can be identified as the root problem and no single element changed to fix the entire system.⁴⁵

Dystopian studies at large mostly agree with Moylan on the genre’s critical function: Robert O. Evans, for instance, insists that a warning to the reader about a possible future, encouraging political and social action in the present, is a defining characteristic of dystopian texts.⁴⁶ Tower-Sargent himself, on the other hand, tends to disagree by arguing, that using an author’s intention as a defining characteristic of a genre poses serious problems, since it is not always clear to the reader; intention, therefore, cannot serve as a basis for defining a genre, although it must be taken into account as an important factor.⁴⁷ But as the social and political significance of dystopian narratives have always been recognized and discussed according to Moylan,⁴⁸ it is not wrong to consider dystopian thought and critical intent to be going hand in hand.

Conclusively, the dystopian genre displays a clear interest in the act of social criticism, which it embodies through thematic and structural means within the narratives belonging to its corpus. Despite a lack of a common consensus on their exact definitions making detailed analysis difficult, books like those by Moylan and Baccolini have contributed to clarifying the terms used by contemporary dystopian studies, furthering academic attention towards the genre and allowing for comparisons such as is the subject of this thesis. Nevertheless, although the impact of historical developments on the genre have only been addressed briefly in this summary of dystopian studies, the following chapter shows how significant they truly are. As a fiction with the imperative to comment on a given social reality, dystopian narratives do not exist in a vacuum and are often intrinsically linked to history – a fact some dystopian scholars have recognized and made the main object of their work. The relationship between history, literature and genre interpreted through the context of the

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Tower-Sargent: *Three Faces*, p. 6.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Moylan: *Scraps*, p. 122.

Dystopia offers further insight into the nature of social criticism in the dystopian and the Southern Gothic genre and their complex relationship as linked literary phenomena.

CHAPTER II: HISTORY AS LITERARY INFLUENCE

Slave Narratives, Dystopia and Genre Theory

As dystopian studies have determined certain thematic and structural parallels which make up the narratives belonging to the dystopian genre, newer scholars have gone a step further in their interpretations, with attempts to identify other literary categories or movements that may have contributed to this development or may be similar enough in specific aspects to justify a genetic comparison, thus trying to embed the Dystopia into a larger literary history. Moylan and Baccolini's *Dark Horizons* offers a great variety of examples for this as they seek to combine the efforts of multiple scholars to reveal new facets of dystopian fiction. One of the most interesting chapters is written by Maria Varsam and focuses on the dystopian genre and its relationship with slave narratives – two literatures seemingly independent from each other, which Varsam, however, considers to be closely related. She bases her theory on the concept of what she calls the 'Concrete Dystopia', adapting the term from Ernst Bloch's idea of 'Concrete Utopia', which describes "the utopian potential of reality in the future";⁴⁹ 'Concrete Dystopias', therefore, take on the opposite meaning and express the negative potential of the future. She defines Concrete Dystopias as (historical) events that inform the content of utopian and dystopian fiction, as they inspire the author to address the possibility of history repeating itself.⁵⁰ However, these events aren't necessarily bound to one specific period – undesirable historical phenomena such as slavery, genocide or political dictatorship can be found at multiple times in many different societies and are thus a "potential reality",⁵¹ as Varsam puts it, which may occur if certain circumstances are given for it to arise in any setting.

She goes on to state that most fictional dystopias have elements taken from history, being directly inspired by lived realities. In taking specific phenomena or practices from the past and adapting them in a futuristic setting, the relationship between past, present and future is analyzed within the context of such Concrete Dystopias as the aforementioned 'potential realities'; Varsam exemplifies this by quoting George Orwell and Margaret Atwood, two

⁴⁹ Varsam, Maria: Concrete Dystopia: Slavery and Its Others. In: Baccolini, Raffaella/Moylan, Tom (ed.): *Dark Horizons. Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*. New York: Routledge 2003, p. 202-223, here p. 207-208.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 209.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 208.

well-known dystopian writers, with the first expressing his fear of the possibility that the political and social structure of totalitarianism may arise “anywhere”.⁵² Margaret Atwood, too, reminds the public again and again that the oppressive practices implemented by the dystopian regime in *The Handmaid’s Tale* are not fictional but were taken from real historical examples during her writing process and that there remains a potential for them to be used again.⁵³ Here Varsam argues, that this aspect of dystopian novels enables the reader to reflect on the process of history itself; quoted by Varsam, Raffaella Baccolini argues here that in works such as *The Handmaid’s Tale* this reflection does not result in a “nostalgic desire” for a future based on similar patterns as the past, but to a critical treatment of history and its continued legacy in the present.⁵⁴

What makes slavery especially interesting in this regard, is the fact that it functions as a historical inspiration to dystopian writers in the form of a Concrete Dystopia – as defined by Varsam –, while also being featured in a number of dystopian texts drawing mostly on other historical events in order to enhance the understanding of the depicted regime as inhumane; as such it is most often depicted as “a form of “totalitarian” oppression”⁵⁵ in dystopian fiction and can be considered a key theme of the genre.

However, whereas Varsam limits her theory to history having informed both dystopian and slave narratives, genre theory offers an opportunity to connect them on a more substantial level. In *Handbuch Gattungstheorie* Moritz Baßler defines what is referred to as a ‘Formzitat’, i.e. a “quotation of form”, which describes a text taking on the structure of another.⁵⁶ Baßler considers genres to be a chain of such quotations, because the use of a genre always contains intertextual references to earlier texts of said genre.⁵⁷ Slave narratives function as such intertexts with Dystopias adopting their underlying function of social commentary and referencing the specific thematic and structural narrative devices used to fulfil it, while simultaneously changing details pertaining to content and diegesis like time, space, etc. – a practice typical of a ‘Formzitat’, according to Baßler.⁵⁸

⁵² Ibid., p. 209.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 210.

⁵⁶ Baßler, Moritz: Formzitat und Gattung. In: Zymner, Rüdiger (ed.): *Handbuch Gattungstheorie*. Weimar: J.B. Metzler 2010, p. 50-52, here p. 50.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 51.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

While offering a closer look at the parallels between slave and dystopian narratives, Varsam focuses her comparison on Critical Dystopias of the 20th century, which she considers to showcase themes often found in neo-slave narratives.⁵⁹ She states that a “preoccupation with obtaining freedom”⁶⁰ works as a common thread between both classical and neo-slave narratives and dystopias, with texts written by women centering this subject around issues of reproductive freedom and bodily autonomy, using Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* and Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* as main examples throughout her analysis. Both works can be identified as Critical Dystopias and spend most of their narratives depicting the dystopian society in detail, highlighting how it prevents characters from obtaining their freedom, instead of following the structure of classical dystopias featuring a narrative of the hegemonic order and a counter-narrative of resistance, while also making use of genre hybridity to convey their ideas: *The Handmaid’s Tale* uses the stylistic conventions of a diary novel to portray its dystopian narrative, while *Kindred* emulates slave narratives for its Science Fiction story of time travel.

When examining how the freedom sought by the protagonists is actually withheld within the narrative, Varsam refers to Louis Althusser’s definitions of Repressive and Ideological State Apparatuses to explain the different practices used to ensure obedience in both slave narratives and dystopias:

To achieve such compliance, the forces of power enlist a range of practices that attempt to sublimate desire and eradicate hope via the violent practice of what Louis Althusser calls “Repressive State Apparatuses” – the army, the police, the courts, and the prisons. But fear of violence is not always sufficient, as desire for freedom is impossible to eradicate. To this purpose, then, are put further “Ideological State Apparatuses” – religious, educational, legal, political, and cultural institutions (145). If women are made to believe that everything in their society is as it should be and unchangeable, then there will be no desire for change or revolt. In dystopias as much as in slave narratives, this “belief” that change is futile leads many to accept the given reality and their place within it – though unsurprisingly, in both it is the narrator who resists such complacency and refuses the displacement of desire and the loss of hope.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Varsam: *Concrete Dystopia*, p. 203-204.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

The fact that such texts refer to actual political theory is not a coincidence or a solely stylistic choice. Varsam explains that slave narratives, as a form of autobiography, historically served the purpose of critique and education, exposing the public to the practice of slavery from a victim's perspective and urging readers to oppose it on all levels; she further finds the intent of shining a light on certain social and systemic practices the author deems to be negative in a critical fashion to be a commonality between slave narratives and the dystopian genre, which exhibits clear signs of a critical function.⁶² She identifies this as the communication of moral values, deeming it essential to both dystopian and slave narratives and analyzes through which literary devices it is achieved.

Much of the ideology conveyed in both texts hinges on the depicted oppressive system being considered a firm negative by the reader, which is conveyed through their identification with the protagonist, who is often the narrator.⁶³ The audience is asked to take on the protagonist's perception, meaning that they experience the character's environment not as a neutral outsider, but with the understanding that this society is undesirable.⁶⁴ In *The Handmaid's Tale* this effect is cemented through the stylistic device of a diary told from a first person perspective, and the heroine of *Kindred* encounters the reigning norms of plantation life as a time traveler from a future which mostly understands this history to be tragic.⁶⁵

Additionally, Varsam states that the practice of conveying moral values and ideology is achieved formally via defamiliarization, which serves the process of identification without requiring the reader to fully grasp the author's intention.⁶⁶ This stylistic strategy is mainly utilized in dystopias in the form of a futuristic setting and fulfills the purpose of emphasizing conditions that already exist, but aren't fully recognized as explicitly harmful; it serves as "a bridge between certain elements of reality and fiction",⁶⁷ allowing for a comparison across time and space and pushing the audience to critique the historical process.⁶⁸ This aligns with the concept of historical events as 'Concrete Dystopias' directly serving as an influence on fictional dystopias, reflected in the earlier discussed statements made by some authors about

⁶² Ibid., p. 211.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 213.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 210.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 205.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 206-207.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

the relationship between their work and historical reality: Orwell openly refers to *1984* as a critique of the kind of totalitarianism that has the potential to occur regardless of nation or time,⁶⁹ Atwood repeatedly underlines her statement about the oppressive practices in *The Handmaid's Tale* being taken from actual history,⁷⁰ and in *Kindred* the juxtaposition of the protagonist's experiences in the modern day United States and early 19th century Maryland serve to address the evils of slavery directly.

Concerning the educational purpose of slave narratives, Varsam recognizes the depiction of violence as another parallel to dystopias: Documenting conditions in order to change the public's perception, violent acts inflicted upon slaves in slave narratives serve to highlight the cruelty of slave owners and not merely to shock readers, while in dystopian texts the explicit threat of violence ensures obedience in a similar way as is practiced on antebellum plantations.⁷¹ Additionally, going by the definition of slavery as "a relation of domination"⁷² suggested by Orlando Patterson and used by Varsam in her essay, dystopias feature this frequently, with rebellion against the status quo and the refusal of one's oppressed status resulting in punishment and even death.⁷³ This is not exclusive to Critical Dystopias, as some of the other points Varsam addresses have been, but can be found from the establishment of the genre onwards: *1984*, *We*, *The Handmaid's Tale* and even more recent examples like *The Hunger Games* series all include violence - mostly enacted by Repressive State Apparatuses – as an incentive to remain obedient.

Later in her essay, Varsam specifies gendered violence and the loss of reproductive freedom as common forms of the violence present in slave narratives and dystopias: Women are constantly threatened with rape by male figures who are in control of them, be it slave owners or the Commanders in *The Handmaid's Tale*, and are often forced to conceive and then separated from their children or prohibited from reproduction at all.⁷⁴ By pointing to the novel *Kindred*, Varsam points out that numerous people of colour living in the United States today are direct descendants of this condition, as the protagonist Dana learns through her time travel that her ancestor is an enslaved woman who was assaulted by her master.⁷⁵

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 209.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 212.

⁷² Ibid., p. 210.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 212.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 212-213.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 217.

Varsam refers to Patterson's theory on natal alienation as a means to control and oppress women and their families for this, resulting in social and familial ties existing but being neither legally nor morally binding.⁷⁶ In *Dystopia*, this is supported by a quote from *The Handmaid's Tale* as an example of the separation of mothers and children as tools of control; in this part the protagonist Offred remembers her daughter from before she became a Handmaid, who was taken away from her forcibly:

She fades, I can't keep her here with me, she's gone now. Maybe I do think of her as a ghost, the ghost of a dead girl, a little girl who died when she was five. [...] I lie, lapped by the water, beside an open drawer that does not exist, and think about a girl who did not die when she was five; who still does exist, I hope, though not for me. Do I exist for her? Am I a picture somewhere, in the dark at the back of her mind?

They must have told her I was dead. That's what they would think of doing. They would say it would be easier for her to adjust.

Eight, she must be now. I've filled in the time I lost, I know how much there's been. They were right, it's easier, to think of her as dead. I don't have to hope then, or make a wasted effort.⁷⁷

In the final part of the chapter, Varsam expands on neo-slave narratives specifically and its relationship to dystopias: Referring to Ashraf H. A. Rushdy's definition of the former in the *Oxford Companion to African American Literature*, she writes that despite variations within the genre, these texts have a common interest to establish slavery as a historical phenomenon with "lasting cultural meaning and enduring social consequences",⁷⁸ considering it a "living present",⁷⁹ instead of an aspect of the past, before proceeding to describe how this aspect is found in dystopian narratives like Butler's *Kindred* as well. The protagonist Dana, travelling in time between 1970s Los Angeles and an early 19th century plantation in Maryland, slowly comes to recognize how the effects of slavery can be felt even in the present and on a more personal level she "discovers firsthand the constraints that determined the choices slave women were forced to make [...], and, as a result, she reaches an understanding of her own

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 214.

⁷⁷ Atwood, Margaret: *The Handmaid's Tale*. New York: Ballantine Books 1987, p. 83-84.

⁷⁸ Varsam: *Concrete Dystopia*, p. 217.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

responsibility in the legacy of this past and a new understanding of her identity in the present.”⁸⁰

As a final point regarding Varsam’s text it is important to this thesis to emphasize once again her belief that the communication of certain values and ideologies she compares in slave narratives and dystopian texts clearly reflects the intent of social critique in both genres.⁸¹ Just as slave narratives were often written to persuade the public of the evils of chattel slavery, most dystopias aim to condemn specific political and/or cultural practices – Varsam sees an important link between the two in the fact that this social critique is not an inherent part of the respective literary traditions these genres come from, but are essentially unique to them amidst the broader categories they may be filed under: The critical reflection of society is an important aspect of slave narratives, even though it isn’t a necessary element of neither autobiographical nor historical novels and the same goes for Dystopia and Science Fiction.⁸² Therefore, their extratextual function and the literary conventions through which it is achieved serves as common ground between slave narratives and dystopian texts, marking them as related.

But the Dystopia isn’t the only form the specific kind of social criticism found in slave narratives has developed into, just as slavery itself has informed the literary landscape of the United States at large as a Concrete Dystopia, i.e. a form of historical influence on literary fiction. Stemming from the cultural tradition of the South, which is widely considered as the epicenter of chattel slavery and slave narratives alike, the Southern Gothic cannot be understood as entirely genetically separate from either. Chapter III engages with the link between slave narratives and Southern Gothic texts, which mirrors the relationship between the former and dystopias explored in this part.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 217-218

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 211.

⁸² Ibid.

CHAPTER III: Slavery and Southern Literature

Varsam's Theory Expanded

If the theory of a genre being related to slave narratives as a 'Formzitat' is thus applicable to dystopian fiction, it may be relevant to other literary categories as well. Of course, it wouldn't be scientifically productive to analyze randomly selected genres for such a connection, but even a superficial consideration of the Southern Gothic is enough to expose a plethora of thematic as well as formal parallels, as it continues the slave narrative's tradition of examining US or, more specifically, Southern history in a more critical way and shares an exploration of common themes with it such as race, class and gender, which is in part explained by the proximity of the two literatures to slavery in the South. Conclusively, if the Southern Gothic is revealed to be linked with slave narratives similarly to how dystopian texts are, it would explain why works belonging to the Southern Gothic and the dystopian genres are as comparable as this thesis aims to prove them to be. In short, repeating Varsam's analytical process with slave narratives and Southern Gothic texts, creates an interesting opportunity to draw direct thematic and structural comparisons between the latter and dystopian works, which may result in a closer understanding of the two and the interconnectedness of different literary corpora at large. However, the object of this chapter is to give an overview of how Varsam's theory applies to Southern Gothic with literary examples used to highlight this relationship in a more general sense. Chapter IV will take the ideas presented here and enrich them with a more detailed analysis of the works discussed, offering a closer look at the texts themselves and illustrating the statements made in this part through additional insights and quotes. For now, though, a broader interpretation of the literary examples serves to outline the connection between slave narratives and the Southern Gothic based on Varsam's work.

But what exactly is Southern Gothic literature and what sets it apart as a regional variation of the more well-known American Gothic with its own conventions, traditions and narrative functions? For it is these which justify Southern Gothic's comparison to Dystopia, over an exploration of Gothic texts in general.

Haunting Histories: Southern Gothic Literature and The South's Cultural Landscape

If the genre of Dystopia struggles with clear definitions owing to a lack of or muddled academic attention, the Southern Gothic is even less precise. However, despite superficial and sometimes even contradictory papers written on the subject, an understanding of the genre can still be gained, which may suffice to grasp its key markers.

In *Critical Insights: Southern Gothic Literature* – one of only few extensive works on the genre as a whole – Bridget M. Marshall explains that the term ‘Southern Gothic’ itself was originally meant derogatively, when it was first used by Ellen Glasgow in reference to the works of Erskine Caldwell and William Faulkner, which she considered to be filled with “aimless violence”.⁸³ Over time, however, some authors began to claim it openly, distancing it from outright negative connotations.

Stylistically the genre is especially recognizable for its unique way of blending realism and the grotesque through the lens of Southern culture, history and everyday life. Quoting Lewis Simpson and David Punter, *The Companion to Southern Literature* describes it as a representation of life in the South as an outright “horror story”,⁸⁴ where the South becomes a symbol of the disorder and depravity of the modern age at its worst.⁸⁵ Punter and Glennis Byron summarize the thematic tendencies of the Southern Gothic to be an investigation of “madness, decay and despair, and the continuing pressures of the past upon the present, particularly with respect to the lost ideals of dispossessed Southern aristocracy and the continuance of racial hostilities”.⁸⁶

Genetically, most scholars agree on the genre having sprung mainly from two US-American literary traditions: Gothicism and Naturalism. This is owed mostly to the history of its conception, which highlights how Southern writers began to combine gothic and naturalistic conventions to comment on their environment. An environment which has separated itself culturally from the rest of the nation to such a degree, that it gave rise to a locally highly specific literature, which is nonetheless often read by and related to by a larger audience – a

⁸³ Marshall, Bridget M.: Defining Southern Gothic. In: Jay, Ellis (ed.): *Critical Insights. Southern Gothic Literature*. Ipswich: Salem Press 2013, p. 3-18, here p. 3.

⁸⁴ Boyd, Molly: Gothicism. In: Flora, Joseph M./Mackethan, Lucinda H. (ed.): *The Companion to Southern Literature. Themes, Genres, Places, People, Movements, and Motifs*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press 2002, p. 311-316, here p. 316.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 315-316.

⁸⁶ Marshall: *Defining Southern Gothic*, p. 3.

fact reflected by the acclaim and popularity of such Southern authors as William Faulkner, Tennessee Williams and Mark Twain. But how is the region to be understood in order to analyze its artistic fruits?

First it is important to note that the term of ‘the South’ often refers to a cultural South, rather than a strictly geographical one, rooted mainly in the region’s collective history before, during and after the Civil War and understood today to mainly consist of the states which made up the Confederate Army during that time, with neighboring states sometimes being counted among them, despite their differing political position during the war. The idea of the South being somewhat separate from the rest of the country is not new – Christopher J. Walsh points out that it has very early on created a sort of mythology for and of itself, as texts such as Thomas Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia* attest to.⁸⁷ *The Companion to Southern Literature* offers a cohesive summary of how the South is possibly to be viewed when engaging with its culture, history and social conventions:

The boundaries of the South cannot be contained by state borders. Beyond geography, there is a southern mind [...], and exploring that mind is not an invigorating challenge but an important one, not only for southerners but for all Americans.

No one is a Midwesterner or Easterner in quite the same way that a southerner is a southerner. History has set the South apart – a history defined centrally by the tragedy of chattel slavery. Southern apartness does, however, belong to the whole. To learn about the South is to explore the roots of the racial struggle that remains the nation’s continuing conundrum.⁸⁸

Here the South is defined as a part of the larger nation reflecting some of its core issues, but still separate from it at the same time. Marshall seems to agree when she quotes Teresa A. Goddu in *Critical Insights*, who describes the South as a national ‘Other’, a “repository of everything from which the United States wants to distance itself”,⁸⁹ even though the past refuses to remain suppressed and continues to exert influence over the present. Fact is, that the Civil War and its consequences cement the South as a region set apart, with the term

⁸⁷ Walsh, Christopher J.: “Dark Legacy”. *Gothic Ruptures in Southern Literature*. In: Jay, Ellis (ed.): *Critical Insights. Southern Gothic Literature*. Ipswich: Salem Press 2013, p. 19-34, here p. 20.

⁸⁸ Flora, Joseph M./Mackethan, Lucinda H. (ed.): *The Companion to Southern Literature. Themes, Genres, Places, People, Movements, and Motifs*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press 2002, p. xx.

⁸⁹ Marshall: *Defining Southern Gothic*, p. 12.

carrying social, political, historical, cultural, economic and even geographical implications in its use.

These factors are reflected in its literary tradition as well, resulting in a local bibliography, which is very distinct from the rest of the country, as is pointed out in the *Companion to Southern Literature*:

We do not, of course, study southern literature only because of its presentation of racial history in intensely dramatic terms, but also because the South has had in abundance what Flannery O'Connor has called "Manners" – speech, traditions, codes, a shared history that gives southern writers a richly concrete world. These manners have impacted the ways in which southerners have related to gender and class issues. Southern writers have explored a range of issues and themes – though race is almost always implied in the configuration.⁹⁰

Thus, a large part of Southern Gothic's thematic orientation can be identified as fairly typical of Southern literature, although its approach marks it as unique. In this regard it owes a great deal to the time of the Southern Renaissance, a localized literary movement during the first half of the 20th century with a critical re-examination of Southern history and an interest in literary experimentation at its core.⁹¹ During this time the depiction of Southern conditions became more realistic and many works sought to address social conflicts and cultural weaknesses; a possible explanation for this revival of the region's literary output is that authors saw themselves standing at the boundary between traditional Southern agrarian values and modern industrial developments, with a nostalgia for the past juxtaposing a critical distance from it.⁹² Different historical events and social factors may have contributed to this, but other theories also emphasize the re-evaluation of women authors and texts written by people of colour as a main component.⁹³ In content as well as form, a great number of works making up the Southern Renaissance were heavily influenced by broader movements such as Naturalism and Modernism, with William Faulkner being a notable

⁹⁰ Flora/Mackethan: *The Companion to Southern Literature*, p. xx.

⁹¹ Folks, Jeffrey J.: *Southern Renaissance*. In: Flora, Joseph M./Mackethan, Lucinda H. (ed.): *The Companion to Southern Literature. Themes, Genres, Places, People, Movements, and Motifs*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press 2002, p. 835-840, here p. 835.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 835-836.

example of a Southern writer being considered one of the leaders of literary Modernism in the United States.⁹⁴

However, this new interest in Southern history and a distinctly more critical approach to it also leads to a changed understanding of the Southern literary tradition, dividing it roughly into antebellum and postbellum categories, reflecting the differences in the ideological and cultural landscape before and after the Civil War. As *The Companion to Southern Literature* points out, although antebellum Southern writing is marked by a romantic depiction of society at the height of slavery, the narrative theme of an individual's needs being sacrificed to 'the greater good' and a belief in the rational order of things, i.e. 'natural law', subconscious criticism still made its way into the works of some very prominent authors, such as Edgar Allan Poe, Thomas Jefferson and Henry Clay Lewis; furthermore, despite the largely idealized treatment of the South, distinctly critical literary phenomena like slave narratives and humorist fictions still had room to establish themselves, although mainly at the fringes.⁹⁵

Postbellum writing sees a similar contradiction in the two major directions of its development. The myth of the 'Lost Cause' inspired some authors like Thomas Dixon Jr. and Margaret Mitchell to base entire novels on a nostalgic view of the Old South, refusing any critical discourse on issues such as slavery. Contrary to this stand texts by Southern writers who are re-contextualizing the culture they belong to and landing on a very different view of present as well as past Southern society, which include Mark Twain and Charles Waddell Chesnutt amongst others.⁹⁶ The Gothic genre lends itself well to convey this in their works, as the elements of horror such narratives display go hand in hand with the brutal reality of slavery and its legacy – this makes up a part of the literary tradition from which the Southern Gothic stems.

Flannery O'Connor – herself a notable author of the genre – recognizes three predecessors of modern Southern Gothic fiction: First, the dark romances of the traditional Gothics, to which she counts antebellum Plantation Gothic featuring failures of the Southern honor code, distorted family relationships and community pressures.⁹⁷ Second is what she refers to as the comic-grotesque tradition, identified by an ambivalent clash between violence and

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 836.

⁹⁵ Boyd: Gothicism, p. 313.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 314.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 315.

humor and lastly the literature of the Naturalists, who offer a “clinically direct presentation of the urges and violent actions of primitive characters”.⁹⁸

Academic work on the genre has mainly focused on it within the context of this Gothic tradition, planting it firmly within this literary category. In *Critical Insights* Marshall writes that the Southern Gothic, after having sprouted from the earlier American Gothic in the mid 19th century as a localized form, follows certain elements essential to Gothic plots, though with a few substitutions owed to a focus on the region’s history of slavery, but still exhibiting a typical fixation on the grotesque and a tension between realistic depictions and the supernatural.⁹⁹ These substitutions concentrate on three main points, according to her: First the typical Gothic setting changes from predominantly foreign (European) countries to the familiar environment of the home, i.e. the South, with plantations standing in for Gothic castles and manors.¹⁰⁰ Next the fallen aristocrat as the most common Gothic villain is replaced by the plantation owner or ‘Southern aristocrat’,¹⁰¹ and lastly the damsel in distress featured most prominently in Gothic texts is still found in some Southern Gothic works in the form of the ‘Southern Belle’, but nevertheless loses much of the narrative attention to the villain, who becomes a victim of their own debauchery.¹⁰² With substitutions such as these the text is immediately recognizable as a local Southern story, while still keeping in line with the most important conventions of classical Gothicism.

Expanding on this, *The Companion to Southern Literature* recognizes that the Southern Gothic belongs to the Gothic tradition while also highlighting how it evolved further to become its own literary category. Apart from the classical Gothic, its Southern form borrows three important elements from the Gothic Revival novels of the Victorian era, which are often more complex than their predecessors: Linda Bayer-Berenbaum lists them as 1) “an intensification of consciousness”, 2) “an expansion of reality” and 3) “a confrontation with evil”.¹⁰³ As such, the Gothic mode utilized by Modernist writers during the Southern Renaissance is often “characterized by grotesque characters and scenes, explorations of abnormal psychological states, dark humor, violence, and a sense of alienation or futility”,¹⁰⁴

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Marshall: *Defining Southern Gothic*, p. 4-5.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 5-6.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 9.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 11.

¹⁰³ Boyd: *Gothicism*, p. 312.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 311.

which are reflected in similar myths of Southern society marked either by an inbred, patriarchal plantation aristocracy following racist ideologies and falling into ruin at the hands of democratic progress thanks to its own intransigence, or an inbred lower class community living in extreme isolation, educational ignorance, religious fundamentalism, racial intolerance, perversion and violence.¹⁰⁵ Here the differences between the classic and the American Gothic become clear as the latter offers a more in-depth look at psychological extremes, focusing on an individual's mental state in reaction to deviances of common existence, like the supernatural or pseudo-supernatural.¹⁰⁶ Southern Gothic's status as a localized branch of the American Gothic is especially well reflected in novels such as *Beloved*, which structures the narrative around the personal experiences, inner thoughts and memories of its characters while featuring the supernatural as a metaphorical ghost story. However, owing to the genre's affinity towards literary Naturalism, supernatural elements aren't included as overtly in many other texts, but are alluded to subtextually. In *To Kill A Mockingbird*, for instance, the figure of Boo Radley is never directly implied to be a supernatural entity, but the role he inhabits within the story makes his presence in the small town comparable to that of a haunting. William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* on the other hand, uses language rather than plot to refer to the supernatural, especially when describing the protagonist Thomas Sutpen, who is likened to a demon and often associated with hellish imagery by some of the book's narrators; this tendency is established from the very beginning of the novel when Sutpen's arrival in the rural Southern community is first described:

Out of quiet thunderclap he would abrupt (man-horse-demon) upon a scene peaceful and decorous as a schoolprize water color, faint sulphur-reek still in hair clothes and beard, with grouped behind him his band of wild [n*ggers] like beasts half tamed to walk upright like men, in attitudes wild and reposed, and manacled among them the French architect with his air grim, haggard, and taller-ran. Immobile, bearded, and hand palm lifted the horseman sat; behind him the wild blacks and the captive architect huddled quietly, carrying in bloodless paradox the shovels and picks and axes of peaceful conquest.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 312-313.

¹⁰⁷ Faulkner, William: *Absalom, Absalom!* London: Vintage 2005, p. 3.

Contemporary Southern studies has since relented some of the focus on the Gothic branch of Southern Gothic literature and explored what it owes to its other notable relative, Naturalism or Realism. First problems appear, however, when trying to discern between the two terms, as both are used in academic texts on the genre, sometimes even synonymously, with no common consensus on which of the two had the bigger impact; of course, it should be noted that some scholars use the term ‘realism’ in its more literal definition, rather than in referral to the specific artistic movement. Marshall’s text in *Critical Insights* offers an example of this with one part dedicated to Realism and the Southern Gothic, as she credits the genre with successfully intertwining the “horrors of the fantastic” and the “realism of the mundane”.¹⁰⁸ She points out, that realistic writing and the Gothic co-existed in the literary landscape of the United States, with authors often using both; Southern Gothic works are no exception, engaging with the “agonizing realities of everyday life”, as she quotes critic Peggy Bailey, using Gothic tropes.¹⁰⁹

The Companion to Southern Literature, however, refers to literary Naturalism as a direct influence on the Southern Gothic, writing that Faulkner himself is considered to stem from the Naturalistic tradition, despite Southern authors in general not being considered Naturalists until the 1930s and even then, the label is used pejoratively.¹¹⁰ The key feature of Naturalism is the absence of divine providence, with the events often a result of blind chance and the reader left with a sense of inevitability and a distinct detachment from the narrator.¹¹¹

A notable defender of the Southern Gothic’s association with Realism is Carson McCullers, who has authored some of the most important novels of the genre. In her essay *The Russian Realists and Southern Literature* published in 1941, she even goes so far as to distance it from the Gothic, arguing that the term is ill-used to describe the Southern Gothic, because they are far less similar in their essence than many believe. According to her, the effect of invoking horror, beauty and emotional ambivalence may be comparable, but it is achieved through different means, with the Gothic referring to romantic or supernatural elements and

¹⁰⁸ Marshall: *Defining Southern Gothic*, p. 15.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Flora, Joseph M.: Naturalism. In: Flora, Joseph M./Mackethan, Lucinda H. (ed.): *The Companion to Southern Literature. Themes, Genres, Places, People, Movements, and Motifs*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press 2002, p. 530-531, here p. 531.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 530.

the Southern Gothic using a "particular and intense realism".¹¹² In this, she states, modern Southern writers are most indebted to the Russian Realists, such as Dostoyevsky: McCullers believes that the social circumstances under which these literatures came to be are similar, resulting in the "cheapness of human life" as a general approach to life and suffering becoming a dominant characteristic of both.¹¹³ The respective authors' contemporary societies are both marked by poverty and a clear division of classes and both Southern as well as Russian people are attributed with similar stereotypical traits, often being seen as hedonistic, imaginative, lazy and emotional.¹¹⁴ The mentioned "cheapness of life" is a direct result of these social conditions and describes the attitude towards the people's environment and their social and personal circumstances, with material things having an exaggerated value and human beings perceived as "plentiful",¹¹⁵ as children are constantly born and buried; thus, she writes, life is perceived mostly as a struggle for survival. Spiritual experiences and higher instances such as death are inconstant and too complex, whereas material goods are simple and stable. The moral attitude is often rooted in apathy, as people are neither considered good nor evil, only "unhappy and more or less adjusted to their unhappiness".¹¹⁶ Amongst these conditions, McCullers believes that Southern writers reacted to their surroundings in a similar vein to the Russians, focusing on the bleak reality around them with an interest in accuracy and refusing the "role of emotional panderer between the truth as it is and the feelings of the reader".¹¹⁷

Although she stresses the futility of comparing Southern writers and the Russian Realists based on "artistic merit",¹¹⁸ McCullers sees clear parallels in their approaches to certain subjects, the most prominent of which is their depictions of cruelty, that both literatures are often criticized for.¹¹⁹ But seeing as cruelty and violence have always been subject to literature (here she names ancient Greek tragedies and the Old Testament as examples), she proposes that the shock evoked must be caused by the specific way these themes are addressed: McCullers explains that both literatures mainly refer to "bold and outwardly

¹¹² McCullers, Carson: *The Russian Realists and Southern Literature*. In: McCullers, Carson: *The Mortgaged Heart*. London: Penguin Books 2018, p. 250-256, here p. 250.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 252.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 256.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 255.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 250.

callous”¹²⁰ juxtapositions in their depictions of cruelty and violence, namely between the tragic and the humorous, the immense and the trivial, the sacred and the bawdy and the whole soul of a man and a materialistic detail. Many readers are repelled by such trivializations of suffering, especially when they are more accustomed to texts where the aesthetic depiction matches the emotional gravity; when the author refuses this responsibility, their work appears as cynical and often confuses and even offends the audience, because the depiction of emotionally grave events in an offhand manner leads to an unclarity of values.¹²¹ As an example, McCullers draws a comparison between Marmeladow’s funeral supper in *Crime and Punishment* and Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*, to highlight the way in which they both combine farce and tragedy.¹²²

To summarize, the Southern Gothic genre as a local phenomenon stems from a rich literary and cultural history, with authors who are willing to combine the seemingly paradoxical traditions of the Gothic and Naturalism, finding a commonality in their potential to offer critical commentary on social issues. Stylistically the genre proves to be a fascinating mix of the two: Some works offer realistic descriptions to depict supernatural phenomena, while others use a language marked by Gothic conventions to narrate realistic stories – both, however, show a critical interest in the region’s history and its impact on Southern life. But the Gothic and Naturalistic traditions have only helped to shape a genre, that finds much of its conception with the slave narrative.

The Southern Gothic and the Literary Tradition of the Slave Narrative

Marshall writes in *Critical Insights* that “America’s history of slavery, racial violence and racial inequality lie at the heart of the Southern Gothic”,¹²³ thus addressing its most elementary connection to classic slave narratives.

Just as in dystopian fiction, stories centering on the loss and attainment of freedom conveyed through the literary device of genre hybridity are found throughout the Southern Gothic, with many works authored by women. Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, for example, depicts the

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 251.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Marshall: *Defining Southern Gothic*, p. 11.

Gothic ghost story of a haunting in the characters' present and their past experiences living on a plantation before escaping, harkening back to classic slave narratives. The majority of the novel conveys the protagonists' lived experiences as victims of oppression and their struggles to free themselves, both from their pasts and the haunting exerting control over their lives, making the text comparable to the Critical Dystopias Varsam explores in its intricate combination of different genre conventions.

The Color Purple by Alice Walker follows a similar pattern: Combining the form of the epistolary novel with its story of a Black woman obtaining independence from her abusers – another call back to traditional slave narratives –, the text is another example of genre hybridity with a focus on a character, whose freedom is limited by social norms and systemic factors. Although Walker doesn't utilize genre blurring quite as intricately as Morrison, the epistolary form reflects Varsam's point of narratives communicating moral values via the reader's identification with the protagonist(s) – a feat Morrison achieves mainly through what she refers to as 'rememories', which can be described as bursts of repressed memories revealing details about the characters' traumatic pasts that have resurfaced.

In fact, Southern Gothic texts in general tend to focus on specific characters who are personally involved in the story to act as narrative voices, rather than having an omniscient narrator and works such as Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*, which is based on the author's childhood, show how the lines between autobiography and fiction are sometimes blurred within the genre. Furthermore, many novels by William Faulkner zero in on the aspect of the narration being driven by personal retellings of individuals and how this can influence and shape the reader's understanding of events, including moral and ideological values attributed to the characters' actions and environment – especially *Absalom, Absalom!*, with its multiple different first person narrators who often contradict each other, builds upon the subjectivity of different perspectives and the resulting changes made to the audience's perception.

Interestingly, in the case of both *Beloved* and *The Color Purple* what aids their narrative and linguistic forms in this identification process is also what furthers Varsam's argument of communicating moral values via defamiliarization. The same 'rememories' Morrison uses to show her characters' inner workings to the reader, also lead to a break in submersion by being achronological, unannounced and often unclear or confusing, just like real resurfacing traumatic memories would be. Paired with the instances of sudden supernatural occurrences

in an otherwise naturalistic narrative, the reader is both drawn in and thrown out of the story over and over again by the same literary and stylistic devices, leading to full immersion and a distanced perspective at the same time, which supports the moral education Varsam writes about in her text.

The Color Purple shows similar tendencies in this regard, as its stylized use of language mimicking the protagonist's own speech through letters at once forces identification with her and distances the audience with a particular verbal expression unfamiliar to most readers in a literary context. Again, the narrative encourages to sympathize with its main character while simultaneously breaking the illusion of being submerged in a fictional story.

However, defamiliarization through language is even more prominent in two of Faulkner's novels, *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Sound and The Fury*, where the changing point of view, contradictory accounts of the same event, palpable animosity between characters and challenging flow-of-consciousness-style all contribute to the reader being tasked to form their own understanding of events through critical thinking. With its narrative and linguistic style, the text encourages identification with the characters and their innermost thoughts while also necessitating a more distanced, analytical look.

Thus, identification with the characters and the device of defamiliarization support the educational purpose Varsam attributes to slave narratives and dystopias in the same way when applied to works of the Southern Gothic. But the parallels don't end here: The depiction of violence and oppressive social structures based on domination Varsam describes, explored in the previous chapter, are both just as relevant to the Southern Gothic. Although the violence depicted in some texts of the genre has been perceived by many critics to be unnecessary and a mere act of provocation, it often serves the same purpose as in slave and dystopian narratives. Referring to an argument made by Lesley Ginsberg, Marshall points out that the picture of a helpless figure at the mercy of a ruthless tyrant is common both in Southern Gothic and abolitionist texts.¹²⁴

The cruelty Sethe, Paul D and other former slaves are subjected to in the 'rememories' of *Beloved* are comparable to the educational function of exposing the violence of slavery in classic slave narratives, despite there being no autobiographical claim. Even the violence Sethe herself inflicts upon her child when she is faced with the possibility of having to return to the plantation she escaped from, is a direct result of the conditions slaves live under, as

¹²⁴ Marshall: Defining Southern Gothic, p. 12.

she would rather see her children dead than under the control of the slave owners. Furthermore, Morrison's text thematizes how slavery exerts influence over a community as a traumatic event even beyond its official end by using a haunting as an allegorical parallel to the characters' recalling and trying to work through their pasts.

Likewise, the violence Celie and other women experience in Walker's novel shines a light on how vulnerable Black women within economically challenged communities are to abuse by men, which is often inflicted to ensure the behavior expected of them; at the same time the fate of Sofia, an opinionated Black woman who refuses to work as a nanny for the mayor's wife and is thus unjustly imprisoned, highlights the systemic side of the violence people of colour endure at the hands of their white neighbours and how this acts as a tool of control.

Furthermore, although novels such as *Absalom, Absalom!* may not focus on slaves specifically, as much of the story is told by members and friends of the Sutpen family, the narrative still centers on an abusive figurehead exerting authority over other characters, which often includes acts of violence. Referring once again to the definition of slavery as a "relation of domination"¹²⁵ used by Varsam in her essay, this reflects such a power imbalance quite poignantly.

And just as is the case with Critical Dystopias and neo-slave narratives, many Southern Gothic works focus on or include a female perspective, making gendered violence a key theme especially in texts authored by women. Although *Beloved* addresses slavery from multiple victims' perspectives, the narrative's focus lies on Sethe and her daughter Denver and their relationship and experiences as Black women. In her book Morrison intentionally places emphasis on a woman's, specifically a mother's, experiences and the violence she endures and inflicts, making it comparable in this respect to dystopian works such as *The Handmaid's Tale*.

The Color Purple, on the other hand, features gendered violence, especially in the form of sexual abuse, less as a past trauma and more as the present reality of its characters throughout the narrative, showing how women from vulnerable communities are often dependent on the same male figures that abuse them. Celie is repeatedly abused first by her father figure and later by her much older husband and even loses her two children when they are taken away

¹²⁵ Varsam: Concrete Dystopia, p. 210.

from her, just has Offred and her daughter and any future children of hers are separated in Atwood's story.

Both *Beloved* and *The Color Purple* exemplify, that Southern Gothic texts feature some of the same themes centering around gendered violence Varsam finds in slave narratives and dystopias, such as natal alienation, social isolation, systemic abuse and past trauma, i.e. history as a living present. Even texts written by men like *Absalom, Absalom!*, which do not feature an explicit focus on women's experiences, still address gendered violence and bodily autonomy in a strictly patriarchal social order: Faulkner's protagonist Thomas Sutpen clearly only values or even acknowledges women for their potential to bear him a male heir, which ultimately results in his downfall, cementing the narrative's condemnation of the character's actions and ideology, when he is shot and killed by Wash Jones, the father of a teenage girl Sutpen impregnated and cast aside after giving birth to a girl.¹²⁶

The final point highlighting the connection between slave narratives, dystopias and the Southern Gothic pertains to Varsam's analysis of how the first two show an interest in the mentioned portrayal of slavery as a "living present",¹²⁷ illustrating her theory with the example of Butler's *Kindred*, as summarized earlier. This tendency is especially well observable in *Beloved*, although with some narrative differences: Instead of using conventions associated with Science Fiction like Butler does, Morrison utilizes her concept of 'rememories' to jump between timelines in her narrative and reveals how moral absolutism often has no place when judging oppressed people's actions. Over the course of the novel, it is slowly revealed how and why Beloved died, causing her to haunt her mother and sister, with characters showing varying degrees of empathy and understanding for Sethe's actions, thus urging the reader to go through a similar process as Butler's heroine, coming to understand how difficult the conditions under which such choices were made truly were and how far-reaching the consequences are.

Neither does *The Color Purple* shy away from addressing how the legacy of slavery contributes to the continued mistreatment of Black communities, specifically Black women, despite the historical reality itself barely addressed directly within the text. For instance, in a letter Nettie writes to her sister Celie she describes going to New York for the first time

¹²⁶ Faulkner: *Absalom, Absalom!*, p. 185.

¹²⁷ Varsam: *Concrete Dystopia*, p. 217.

and seeing a thriving Black community, emphasizing the different historical developments between the North and the South:

Listen, Celie, New York is a beautiful city. And colored own a whole section of it called Harlem. There are colored people in more fancy motor cars than I thought existed, and living in houses that are finer than any white person's house down home. There are more than a hundred churches! And we went to every one of them. And I stood before each congregation with Samuel and Corrine and the children and sometimes our mouths just dropped open from the generosity and goodness of those Harlem people's hearts. They live in such beauty and dignity, Celie. And they give and give and then reach down and give some more, when the name 'Africa' is mentioned.¹²⁸

Thus, the concept of slavery being socially and culturally relevant even many years after its abolition, which Varsam considers a commonality between neo-slave narratives and Critical Dystopias, serves as another clear similarity between those two genres and the Southern Gothic.

However, amidst all the congruities between the three literary categories compared in this chapter, Varsam's reference to Althusser offers the first significant difference between slave narratives, dystopias and the Southern Gothic, aside from the superficial. In the case of the latter, Repressive State Apparatuses are often either hinted at or left out of the narrative completely, with many settings almost taking on the feel of a post-apocalyptic wasteland, where official state branches don't quite reach, like the poverty stricken smalltown in Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood* or the descriptions of the town as desolate and mostly ruled by the inhabitants' personal sense of justice in *Absalom, Absalom!*, which differs greatly from the detailed descriptions of systemic frameworks found in dystopian works.

Nevertheless, some texts do feature encounters with government forces such as the police, which highlight the systemic nature of the oppression commented on within the narratives. *Beloved*'s descriptions of chattel slavery include allusions to its legality and status as state-sanctioned upheld by official forces such as overseers and Morrison writes in a foreword to the novel that the character of Sethe was directly inspired by Margaret Garner, an enslaved woman, who was arrested for killing her child in an attempt to prevent a return to their former

¹²⁸ Walker, Alice: *The Color Purple*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson 2017, p. 121.

master's plantation, becoming a "cause célèbre in the fights against the Fugitive Slave laws, which mandated the return of escapees to their owners."¹²⁹

The Color Purple refers to Repressive State Apparatuses with a subplot focusing on Sofia, who is incarcerated after refusing a job offered by the mayor's wife:

Sofia and the prizefighter and all the children got in the prizefighter car and went to town. Clam out on the street looking like somebody. Just then the mayor and his wife come by.

All these children, say the mayor's wife, digging in her pocketbook. Cute as little buttons though, she say. She stop, put her hand on one of the children head. Say, and such strong white teef.

Sofia and the prizefighter don't say nothing. Wait for her to pass. Mayor wait too, stand back and tap his foot, watch her with a little smile. Now Millie, he say. Always going on over colored. Miss Millie finger the children some more, finally look at Sofia and the prizefighter. She look at the prizefighter car. She eye Sofia wristwatch. She say to Sofia, All your children so clean, she say, would you like to work for me, be my maid?

Sofia say, Hell no.

She say, What you say?

Sofia say, Hell no.

Mayor look at Sofia, push his wife out the way. Stick out his chest. Girl, what you say to Miss Millie?

Sofia say, I say, Hell no.

He slap her.

[...]

Sofia knock the man down.

The police come, start slinging the children off the mayor, bang they heads together. Sofia really start to fight. They drag her to the ground.

[...]

What the prizefighter do in all this? I ast Sofia sister, Odessa.

He want to jump in, she say. Sofia say No, take the children home.

Police have guns on him anyway. One move, he dead. Six of them, you know.

[...]

¹²⁹ Morrison, Toni: *Beloved*. London: Vintage 2016, p. xi.

When I see Sofia I don't know why she still alive. They crack her skull, they crack her ribs. They tear her nose loose on one side. They blind her in one eye. She swole from head to foot. Her tongue the size of my arm, it stick out tween her teef like a piece of rubber. She can't talk. And she just about the color of a eggplant.¹³⁰

Walker goes to great lengths in this passage to convince the reader of this occurrence's injustice by indicating that the request made by the mayor's wife was not made in good will, but an attempted demonstration of power, which Sofia refused to acknowledge, resulting in an unproportionately severe punishment.

Aside from Repressive State Apparatuses, the effects of their Ideological counterparts are again more similar between dystopian, Southern Gothic and slave narratives. Recalling Varsam's explanation of Althusser's theory, the belief in the futility of change leads to resigned obedience in dystopias and slave narratives, with the protagonist breaking from this pattern and refusing complacency and hopelessness; this structure applies to many Southern Gothic texts, although the plot itself often focuses on the social and cultural level, rather than political or institutional. *Beloved* offers a fascinating, seemingly paradoxical example of this: Although Sethe has acted as the protagonist of a slave or dystopian narrative would in the events preceding the plot of the novel by escaping enslavement, she neglects to do so during her haunting, instead accepting it as an unchangeable reality caused by her own actions. It is her daughter Denver who acts in her mother's place, stopping *Beloved* with the help of her community.

The Color Purple is slightly more straightforward, showing the character development Celie goes through, which culminates in her breaking free from her abusive marriage and becoming financially and socially independent after forming close bonds with the women around her and inheriting the means to leave her husband, earning money as a seamstress. There are, however, Southern Gothic works that go a step further, commenting on the ways in which Ideological and Repressive State Apparatuses are interconnected. In *To Kill A Mockingbird* for instance, the justice system is directly influenced by the racist ideals and norms of the white community, despite being officially presented as unbiased, which ends with a Black man, Tom Robinson, being found guilty by a white jury, regardless of the much

¹³⁰ Walker: *The Color Purple*, p. 80-82.

more compelling argument to be made in favour of his innocence; his lawyer Atticus Finch says this to his son Jem after being asked how the jury could have possibly convicted Tom:

‘If you had been on that jury, son, and eleven other boys like you, Tom would be a free man,’ said Atticus. ‘So far nothing in your life has interfered with your reasoning process. Those are twelve reasonable men in everyday life, Tom’s jury, but you saw something come between them and reason. You saw the same thing that night in front of the jail. When that crew went away, they didn’t go as reasonable men, they went because we were there. There’s something in our world that makes men lose their heads – they couldn’t be fair if they tried. In our courts, when it’s a white man’s word against a black man’s, the white man always wins. They’re ugly, but those are the facts of life.’¹³¹

So, despite clear differences in the treatment of Repressive and Ideological State Apparatuses found in slave narratives, dystopias and the Southern Gothic, they still display similar themes of oppression and serve what Varsam refers to as the educational purpose and the communication of moral values in these narratives.

The analysis presented in this chapter thus clearly indicates that the relationship Varsam identifies between slave narratives and dystopias – especially Critical Dystopias – is mirrored in the relationship between slave narratives and Southern Gothic texts, which leads to the conclusion that this connection expands onto Southern Gothic and dystopian works, offering a possible insight into the many similarities found in relation to these two genres, which will be explored in the following pages of this thesis.

¹³¹ Lee, Harper: *To Kill a Mockingbird*. London: Arrow Books 2010, p.243.

CHAPTER IV: STRUCTURAL AND THEMATIC PARALLELS

A Direct Comparison of Dystopian and Southern Gothic Works

To summarize the previous chapters briefly before diving deeper into the specific parallels between the dystopian and the Southern Gothic genre, three major points are now clear that are necessary for a more detailed analysis: 1) Dystopian texts are not only thematically connected but repeat specific structural elements as well; 2) The genre owes many of its key markers to slave narratives; 3) A closer look reveals a similar relationship between slave narratives and the Southern Gothic, offering more insight into the connection between the latter and Dystopia.

The third point has been addressed in the previous chapter on Varsam's theory and reveals the first major connections between Southern Gothic texts and Critical Dystopias, both in narrative structure and thematic parallels, functioning as a sort of first look at the following analysis offered in this chapter. However, the correlations and their underlying functions between the Southern Gothic and the dystopian genre are so extensive, that they invite further examination beyond the specific literatures interpreted in the previous two chapters; thus, the following comparisons serve to build upon Varsam's ideas, deepening the previous analysis and extending the investigation to include the two literatures as a whole. As such, certain aspects touched upon earlier may be repeated in this chapter, although closer interpretation of the texts themselves, new angles and additional insights have been added. Now that a basic justification for a direct comparison between Southern Gothic and dystopian fiction has been established, it is time to hone in on the many correlations between the two literatures. What follows is a thorough analysis of both narratives in relation to their approach to social criticism, divided into two sections: structural and thematic elements. This differentiation highlights that the two genres don't simply show a shared interest in abstract ideas, but mirror the same narrative concepts told via similar literary devices and with similar intent, despite apparent differences, which proves these parallels to be more than mere coincidence.

4.1. Narrative as Form: Structural Similarities between Dystopian and Southern Gothic Texts

As touched upon in Chapter I, works such as *Scraps of the Untainted Sky* have aimed to define dystopian narratives in recent years and offer a helpful basis for understanding the larger structure of such texts. Many of their narrative elements are applicable to works belonging to the Southern Gothic genre – this is not incidental. The similarities in composition suggest a much more meaningful link between the two and by examining them further, it becomes clear that they share a broader function which expands beyond the artistic into the sphere of social commentary. After dissecting their most prominent common origins, a closer look at their structural parallels serves to highlight one significant way in which dystopian and Southern Gothic texts are comparable.

Explained in the first chapter detailing the work modern dystopian studies has done so far on understanding the genre, the structural blueprint containing a narrative of the hegemonic order and a counter-narrative of resistance described by Baccolini, is just as applicable to works belonging to the Southern Gothic, although variations exist.

Firstly, a large number of Southern Gothic texts begin almost in medias res in the midst of a rural, southern community serving as the main setting, before shifting the focus to a protagonist, who is not technically considered an outsider. Through their eyes the society is shown via scenes of everyday life, interactions between characters and established social norms – the reader becomes privy to the inner workings of a community by taking on the perspective of one of its members, omitting lengthy descriptions serving as exposition, and instead engaging in seemingly unimportant details of a daily routine.

Despite being an insider, the protagonist shows early signs of discontent regarding their surroundings, particularly social norms dictating much of their expected behaviour. This discontent grows and manifests itself as an action of dissent, which challenges the norms of the community and either inflicts change upon the social order directly or leads to the characters – and consequently the reader – questioning the way in which their society works. This narrative blueprint, which mirrors the one defined by Baccolini, may appear somewhat abstract, but is easily exemplified by specific literary examples.

To Kill a Mockingbird places the reader within the confines of an economically disadvantaged rural town in Alabama and tells its story from the perspective of Scout, a

young girl navigating social life and the discrepancies between the way she wishes to live, and the expectations placed upon her by the community, causing dissatisfaction with the norms she encounters. As the protagonist she engages in multiple small acts of rebellion against these, such as behaving in a manner not considered ‘befitting of a young lady’; however, the more significant act of dissent is carried out by her father Atticus when he decides to become Tom Robinson’s lawyer, a Black man accused of raping a white woman. Despite knowing that this will cause him to fall into disfavour with the rest of the town and most likely end in a lost case, Atticus decides to hold onto his belief that every person deserves equal treatment before the law, regardless of social status or skin colour. Him and his two children are confronted with active resistance from other characters refusing to accept his idealistic views, which includes physical violence and social exclusion. Interestingly, Lee connects Scout’s personal brand of rebellion and her father’s dissent through some of the other characters, who see these two failures to adhere to dominant cultural norms as the results of a general moral failure Atticus and subsequently his children are guilty of. In one scene their unsympathetic neighbour Mrs. Dubose scolds Scout for not wearing a dress, immediately followed by a condemnation of her father’s ideals:

‘And *you* –’, she pointed an arthritic finger at me – ‘what are you doing in those overalls? You should be in a dress and camisole, young lady! You’ll grow up waiting on tables if somebody doesn’t change your ways – a Finch waiting on tables at the O.K. Café – hah!’

I was terrified. The O.K. Café was a dim organization on the north side of the square. I grabbed Jem’s hand but he shook me loose.

‘Come on, Scout,’ he whispered. ‘Don’t pay any attention to her, just hold your head high and be a gentleman.’

But Mrs Dubose held us: ‘Not only a Finch waiting on tables but one in the court-house lawing for [n*ggers]!’

Jem stiffened. Mrs Dubose’s shot had gone home and she knew it.

‘Yes indeed, what has this world come to when a Finch goes against his raising? I’ll tell you!’ She put her hand to her mouth. When she drew it away, it trailed a long silver thread of saliva. ‘Your father’s no better than the [n*ggers] and trash he works for!’¹³²

¹³² Lee: *Mockingbird*, p.112-113.

Thus, the novel highlights how oppressive norms regarding different aspects of cultural life, in this case gender roles and race, are most often upheld by the same individuals and social groups, while simultaneously putting Scout's and Atticus' rebellions on equal footing. His rebellion, however, is crushed by the dominating social order via the legal system, when Robinson is found guilty despite overwhelming evidence pointing to the contrary, even ending with his death in prison. Despite this failure, Atticus is hopeful that the community has begun to question not only the systemic racial prejudice exhibited during the trial, but their own actions and attitudes as well:

'Tom's jury sho' made up its mind in a hurry,' Jem muttered.

Atticus's fingers went to his watch-pocket. 'No it didn't,' he said, more to himself than to us. 'That was the one thing that made me think, well, this may be the shadow of a beginning. That jury took a few hours. An inevitable verdict, maybe, but usually it takes 'em just a few minutes. This time –' he broke off and look at us. 'You might like to know that there was one fellow who took considerable wearing down – in the beginning he was rarin' for an outright acquittal.'

'Who?' Jem was astonished.

Atticus's eyes twinkled. 'It's not for me to say, but I'll tell you this much. He was one of your Old Sarum friends...'

'One of the Cunninghams?' Jem yelped. 'One of – I didn't recognize any of 'em... you're jokin'.' He looked at Atticus from the corners of his eyes.

'One of their connexions. On a hunch, I didn't strike him. Just on a hunch. Could've, but I didn't.'

'Golly Moses,' Jem said reverently. 'One minute they're tryin' to kill him and the next they're tryin' to turn him loose... I'll never understand these folks as long as I live.'¹³³

Although no direct change to the social order has occurred, an obvious shift in the characters' attitudes has taken place, marked additionally by a seemingly unrelated occurrence: Boo Radley, representing the repressed injustices inherent in the social order of the rural South, isn't quite re-integrated by the end of the narrative, but has once again re-entered the awareness of the community and is no longer a taboo subject to be ignored. In

¹³³ Ibid., p. 245.

this way, the novel shows a clear counter-narrative with a maintained hopeful impulse after Baccolini.

However, the implementation of the described narrative framework isn't always as straightforward as it is in Harper Lee's novel. In numerous other Southern Gothic works the act of dissent is either chronologically shifted towards the end, making it not the main focus of the story, or even split into multiple smaller events; as such, works such as these bear a closer similarity to Critical Dystopias. In *The Color Purple* for example, Celie's rejection of the life imposed upon her happens much later when she leaves her husband to start a career as a seamstress with Shug Avery's help towards the end of the book; the majority of the text before that devotes itself to the intricate ways in which rural southern, economically challenged and predominantly Black communities are navigated by the women belonging to these social groups. However, if compared to the earlier example, this is explained easily enough: Both works share a clear interest in dissecting the racism prevalent in the rural South, but for the white protagonists of Lee's novel it takes siding with a Black man as an act of rebellion to illustrate this effectively, whereas Alice Walker does so by dedicating a large part of the text to the process of identification between the reader and her characters, made up mostly of poor Black women. Although different in their implementation, both texts utilise the same narrative blueprint to further their aim of social critique.

There are of course narrative discrepancies between the two genres as well. The main difference between dystopian and Southern Gothic works is of course the temporal setting: One is set in the future, the other in the past. However, even this serves to highlight a common theme between the two, as it finds its function in serving the method of defamiliarization through setting. Most Southern Gothic stories are set in the pasts of their respective authors, be it near or distant, which is heavily implied to be shaped by an even further past, usually the antebellum South and/or the Civil War – a past haunted by its past. This implication of temporally distant events influencing the present can be traced beyond the actual text, since the social norms and conventions criticised by the narrative can often be found in the author's present as well, linking the historical past of the South, the setting of the text and its author's present together to highlight how socially and systemically perpetuated evils such as racism, misogyny and classism continue to worsen the conditions of past, present and potentially future communities. This, of course, harkens back to the

concept of portraying history as a living present, identified by Varsam in relation to neo-slave narratives.

Adding to the concept of defamiliarization, a term coined by the Russian Formalists¹³⁴ and touched upon in an earlier chapter, is the use of this device through language in several Southern Gothic texts, with authors consciously alienating the reader through their writing, for which William Faulkner poses an extremely fitting example, as indicated before. His use of achronological, often contradictory accounts of the same events by different characters and complex flow-of-consciousness style distance the audience from the plot itself, allowing for a more sceptical look at the story told. This is illustrated within the first two chapters of the novel: The first is told by the character of Miss Rosa, an elderly recluse who is the only narrator to have been personally present during the events told throughout the book, giving a sort of summary or overview of Thomas Sutpen's life in Jefferson and the death of Charles Bon, his daughter Judith's fiancé killed by her brother Henry. However, in the second chapter told by Mr. Compson – the son of a General who served with Thomas Sutpen during the Civil War, but who never knew any of the characters mentioned himself –, he reveals that Miss Rosa is not as reliable a narrator as one may think:

So Miss Rosa did not see any of them; she had never seen (and was never to see alive) Charles Bon at all; Charles Bon of New Orleans, Henry's friend who was not only some few years older than Henry but actually a little old to be still in college and certainly a little out of place in that one where he was – a small new college in the Mississippi hinterland and even wilderness, three hundred miles from that worldly and even foreign city which was his home – a young man of a worldly elegance and assurance beyond his years, handsome, apparently wealthy and with for background the shadowy figure of a legal guardian rather than any parents – a personage who in the remote Mississippi of that time must have appeared almost phoenix-like, fullsprung from no childhood, born of no woman and impervious to time and, vanished, leaving no bones nor dust anywhere – a man with ease of manner and a swaggering gallant air in comparison with which Sutpen's pompous arrogance was clumsy bluff and Henry actually a hobble-de-hoy. Miss Rosa never saw him; this was a picture, an image. It was not what Ellen told her [...].
[...]

¹³⁴ Varsam: *Concrete Dystopia*, p. 205.

The town believed that Henry's action was just the fiery nature of youth, let alone a Sutpen, and that time would cure it. [...]

That's all Miss Rosa knew. She could have known no more about it than the town knew because the ones who did know (Sutpen or Judith: not Ellen, who would have been told nothing in the first place and would have forgot, failed to assimilate, it if she had been told Ellen the butterfly, from beneath whom without warning the very sunbuoyed air had been withdrawn, leaving her now with the plump hands folded on the coverlet in the darkened room and the eyes above them probably not even suffering but merely filled with baffled incomprehension) would not have told her anymore than they would have told anyone in Jefferson or anywhere else.¹³⁵

Not only is it made clear to the reader that the narrators themselves are unreliable, contradicting each other many times, but the convoluted language Faulkner writes his novel in makes it even more difficult to fully grasp the plot in all its details, forcing the audience to consider new information very carefully.

Defamiliarization is also achieved through the seemingly paradoxical combination of humour and violence to help the reader achieve a critical distance from the narrative – a technique more famously employed by Bertolt Brecht, as Booker points out in *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature*.¹³⁶ The juxtaposition of these two perceived opposites causes a sort of cognitive dissonance within the audience, breaking the illusion of being immersed in a fictional story and allowing them to relate certain textual elements to their own reality through a critical lens.

The most effective example of this is Flannery O'Connor's novel *Wise Blood*, which features the intertwining of violence and comedy to a grotesque degree. Depicting a cutthroat, bleak society, that only adheres to some religious practices or habits on the surface, and superimposing a satirical tone onto it, reveals the hypocrisy of negative social norms justified through religious tradition. O'Connor illustrates this point for instance by juxtaposing serious, existential ideas expressed by the main character Hazel Motes with the disinterested reactions of other characters, who often seem to make fun of or ignore him; in one scene Motes contemplates a religious sign on the side of the road and offers his thoughts on the concept of sin to a truck driver who is only waiting for him to stop blocking the road:

¹³⁵ Faulkner: *Absalom, Absalom!*, p. 74-80.

¹³⁶ Booker: *The Dystopian Impulse*, p. 19.

The road turned and went down hill and a high embankment appeared on one side with pines standing on it, facing a gray boulder that jutted out of the opposite gulley wall. White letters on the boulders said, WOE TO THE BLASPHEMER AND WHOREMONGER! WILL HELL SWALLOW YOU UP? [...] Haze's car was stopped and his eyes were turned toward the two words at the bottom of the sign. They said in small letters, 'Jesus Saves.'

He sat looking at the sign and didn't hear the horn. An oil truck as long as a railroad car was behind him. In a second a red square face was at his car window. It watched the back of his neck and hat for a minute and then a hand came in and sat on his shoulder. 'What you doing parked in the middle of the road?' the truck driver asked.

Haze turned his fragile placed-looking face toward him. 'Take your hand off me', he said. 'I'm reading the sign.'

The driver's expression and his hand stayed exactly the way they were, as if he didn't hear very well.

'There's no person a whoremonger, who wasn't something worse first,' Haze said. 'That's not the sin, nor the blasphemy. The sin came before them.'

[...]

The driver put both his hands on the window and gripped it. He looked as if he intended to pick up the car. 'Will you get your goddamn outhouse off the middle of the road?' he said.

'I don't have to run from anything because I don't believe in anything,' Haze said. He and the driver looked at each other for about a minute. Haze's look was the more distant; another plan was forming in his mind. 'Which direction is the zoo in?' he asked.

'Back around the other way,' the driver said. 'Did you escape from there?'

'I got to see a boy that works in it,' Haze said. He started the car up and left the driver standing there, in front of the letters painted on the boulder.¹³⁷

But also works such as *As I Lay Dying* or *Child of God*, which are decidedly less comical than O'Connor's novel, utilise satire to release the reader of their immersion with similar intent. In Faulkner's text the character of Vernon Tull describes how his mother came to die in a way clearly exhibiting the dry tone bordering on the humorous often found in Southern literature:

"She's a-going," he says. "Her mind is set on it."

¹³⁷ O'Connor, Flannery: *Wise Blood*. London: Faber and Faber Limited 2008, p. 50-51.

It's a hard life on women, for a fact. Some women. I mind my mammy lived to be seventy and more. Worked every day, rain or shine; never sick a day since her last chap was born until one day she kind of looked around her and then she went and taken that lace-trimmed night gown she had had forty-five years and never wore out of the chest and put it on and laid down on the bed and pulled the covers up and shut her eyes. "You all will have to look out for pa the best you can," she said. "I'm tired."¹³⁸

As a technique employed by numerous authors interested in literary social criticism, such as the aforementioned Brecht, the method of defamiliarization is found in works of the dystopian genre too. Booker highlights its use and explains how dystopian narratives focus their critique on a spatially and/or temporally distant setting, i.e. a futuristic society, which then offers a fresh perspective on problematic social and political practices that haven't been questioned sufficiently.¹³⁹ According to him this use of setting links dystopia and Science Fiction, two genres that are often treated as belonging to the same literary sphere.¹⁴⁰ However, he points out that the inclusion of clear social criticism in relation to the setting is inherent only to dystopian fiction – by depicting a possible future society based on present tendencies and showing it to be increasingly undesirable, tangible social critique becomes basically unavoidable, making it the root of dystopian fiction, whereas Science Fiction may speculate on futuristic outcomes solely for the sake of entertainment and in many cases not even base its societies on reality at all.¹⁴¹ Defamiliarization then becomes a tool of social criticism in the hands of the dystopian author – a future shaped by the present, which is simultaneously the past.

Analysing the use of setting in both dystopian and Southern Gothic texts reveals how both genres connect the past, present and future of a given society by focusing on social and systemic issues found in all three, thus making their critique the main subject of their narratives. The criticism found within the fictional world reaches beyond the confines of its pages and urges the reader to apply it to their own reality, similarly to the educational purpose Varsam attributes to slave narratives. Despite the obvious differences in the implementation of this principle, such as the use of speculation in Dystopia where Southern Gothic often

¹³⁸ Faulkner, William: *As I Lay Dying*. New York: Norton & Company 2010, p. 18.

¹³⁹ Booker: *The Dystopian Impulse*, p. 19.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

draws on actual lived experiences, i.e. historical and biographical accounts, the critical function remains the same. Still, some dystopian texts lend themselves to the comparison with Southern Gothic works much more poignantly than others.

Just as Varsam recognized that Critical Dystopias are especially well suited to the comparison with slave narratives, works belonging to this subcategory show a remarkable number of parallels to Southern Gothic texts. To repeat the definition of Critical Dystopias from a previous chapter briefly, the term was coined by Lyman Tower-Sargent to describe the wave of dystopian fiction published in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s by authors such as Octavia Butler, Margaret Atwood, and Ursula K. Le Guin, who use the genre to address socio-political realities in a critical way.¹⁴²

A key element of the Critical Dystopia is its utopian impulse, or “eutopian enclave”¹⁴³ as Tower-Sargent calls it, which can be described as a trace of optimistic possibility despite a bleak setting and plot, i.e. a hopeful impulse maintained within the narrative itself. This marks a distinctly new development within dystopian literature: Where classical dystopian texts such as *1984* and *Brave New World* leave little to no room for hopeful interpretations and only outside the text if at all, works identified as Critical Dystopias allow both the reader and the characters to hope by having ambiguous endings concerning the future of their dystopian societies;¹⁴⁴ Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a fitting example, as it ends with the implication of the protagonists escape into freedom thanks an organized resistance group. Through the consideration of specific literary examples it becomes clear that Southern Gothic texts engage in this ‘hope’ as well: Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* is often considered to end on a rather tragic note with the death of all but one member of the Sutpen family line, but depending on how it is interpreted, it can be read as somewhat hopeful in two different ways: For once, the end of the Sutpen family could be considered a triumph, because the sole motivation of the main antagonist Thomas Sutpen – the establishing of a racially ‘pure’ white dynasty – ultimately ends in failure when the only remaining carrier of his bloodline, Jim Bond, is a mentally handicapped boy of mixed race – hardly the kind of successor he would consider worthy, seeing as he abandons his first wife after learning of her racially mixed heritage.¹⁴⁵ On the other hand, the Sutpen dynasty can be viewed not as having ended,

¹⁴² Baccolini/Moylan: *Dystopia and Histories*, p. 2.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ Faulkner: *Absalom, Absalom!*, p. 265-266.

but as being ‘cleansed’, as in freed from the ideals of its patriarch rooted in white supremacy. The last remaining Sutpen is the exact opposite of what Thomas had in mind, subsequently ending any ambitions adhering to racist, ableist, sexist and classist ideologies. Although both interpretations fit the description of the utopian impulse maintained largely outside of the text as is the case with classical dystopias, the reader’s perspective on the downfall of the Sutpen dynasty is echoed by a side character of seemingly less importance. In the last chapter of the novel Quentin, the figure in charge of putting together the history of the Sutpen family, tells his friend Shreve what he has found out; Shreve then gives his opinion on the events and their consequences on the final pages of the book:

“You’ve got one [n*gger] left. One [n*gger] Sutpen left. Of course you can’t catch him and you don’t even always see him. But you’ve got him there still. You still hear him at night sometimes. Don’t you?”

“Yes,” Quentin said.

“And so do you know what I think?” Now he did expect an answer, and he got one:

“No,” Quentin said.

“Do you want to know what I think?”

“No,” Quentin said.

“Then I’ll tell you. I think that in time the Jim Bonds are going to conquer the western hemisphere. Of course it won’t quite be in our time and of course as they spread toward the poles they will bleach out again like the rabbits and the birds do, so they won’t show up so sharp against the snow. But it will still be Jim Bond; and so in a few thousand years, I who regard you will also have sprung from the loins of African king. Now I want you to tell me just one thing more. Why do you hate the South?”

“I don’t hate it,” Quentin said, quickly, at once, immediately; “I don’t hate it,” he said. *I don’t hate it* he thought, panting in the cold air, the iron New England dark; *I don’t. I don’t! I don’t hate it! I don’t hate it!*¹⁴⁶

Although Shreve’s vision doesn’t fully read like a happy ending from the protagonists’ perspective, Faulkner nevertheless ends his novel with the implication that in the future even the South will be forced to let go of racial hierarchies, because the concept of race will become more and more unclear with time – an implication allowing for a certain amount of

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 378.

utopian hope, expressed by a character who takes on the perspective of the audience intratextually as an outsider to the events told.

There are, however, examples of Southern Gothic works which place the utopian impulse within the narrative much more clearly, letting their characters engage in optimism overtly, instead of leaving the story with an ambiguous sense of hopefulness.

Beloved harbours such a hopeful impulse, as Morrison implies a better future for the younger generation of her characters after the Black community helps Sethe and re-integrates her daughter Denver into their midst, ending her isolation and loneliness. However, despite Sethe being supposedly freed from *Beloved*'s influence in a sort of exorcism, she doesn't fully recover by the end of the book and remains bedbound. When asked by Paul D how her mother is doing, Denver even answers: "I think I've lost my mother, Paul D."¹⁴⁷ Nevertheless, although the narrative may end in a bittersweet, almost tragic moment of intimacy between Paul D and Sethe, it still allows for a considerable amount of utopian hope:

"I'm tired, Paul D. So tired. I have to rest a while."

Now he knows what he is reminded of and he shouts at her, "Don't you die on me! This is Baby Suggs' bed! Is that what you planning?" He is so angry he could kill her. He checks himself, remembering Denver's warning, and whispers, "What you planning, Sethe?"

"Oh, I don't have no plans. No plans at all."

"Look," he says, "Denver be here in the day. I be here in the night. I'm a take care of you, you hear? Starting now. First off, you don't smell right. Stay here. Don't move. Let me heat up some water." He stops. "Is it all right, Sethe, if I heat up some water?"

"And count my feet?" she asks him.

He steps closer. "Rub your feet."

[...] "Paul D?"

"What, baby?"

"She left me."

"Aw, girl. Don't cry."

"She was my best thing."

Paul D sits down in the rocking chair and examines the quilt patched in carnival colors. His hands are limp between his knees. There are too many things to feel about this woman. His head hurts. Suddenly he remembers Sixo trying to describe what he felt about

¹⁴⁷ Morrison, Toni: *Beloved*. London: Vintage 2016, p. 314.

the Thirty-Mile Woman. “She is a friend of my mind. She gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order. It’s good, you know, when you got a woman who is a friend of your mind.”

He is staring at the quilt but he is thinking about her wrought-iron back; the delicious mouth still puffy at the corner from Ella’s fist. The mean black eyes. The wet dress steaming before the fire. Her tenderness about his neck jewelry – its three wands, like attentive baby rattlers, curving two feet into the air. How she never mentioned or looked at it, so he did not have to feel the shame of being collared like a beast. Only this woman Sethe could have left him his manhood like that. He wants to put his story next to hers.

“Sethe,” he says, “me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow.”

He leans over and takes her hand. With the other he touches her face. “You your best thing, Sethe. You are.” His holding fingers are holding hers.

“Me? Me?”¹⁴⁸

Despite Sethe’s obvious state of distress and exhaustion, the lack of guarantee for her recovery and the reminder that past traumas have not been left behind by either of them, the audience as well as the characters are still left with a feeling of hope for a better future.

A little more romantic in its vision, *The Color Purple* features one of the most positive endings in the genre when Celie and her sister Nettie reunite and live independently from their previous oppressors, submerged in a supportive and loving community. This is highlighted by Celie addressing her last letter not to Nettie, as she started doing halfway through the narrative, but once again to God, though with a markedly different tone: “Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God. Thank you for bringing my sister Nettie and our children home.”¹⁴⁹ She even ends this final address with “Amen”,¹⁵⁰ instead of her name as is usually done in a letter, giving it the tone of a sort of prayer or spiritual celebration. This may very well be the most optimistic finale of a narrative belonging to the Southern Gothic genre, ending the story on a rather utopian sentiment.

Still, this hopeful impulse described in relation to both the dystopian and the Southern Gothic genre is not to be confused with a traditional ‘happy ending’ – it simply highlights the ways

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 320-322

¹⁴⁹ Walker: *The Color Purple*, p. 259.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 261.

in which these texts allow for possible solutions to the social issues their characters are subjected to, however imperfect they may be. Constance Penley even goes so far as to describe Critical Dystopias as “suggesting causes rather than just identifying symptoms”,¹⁵¹ which is true for the Southern Gothic as well: Depending on the interpretative effort exerted by the reader, the earlier mentioned literary examples allow for much less depressing possibilities concerning their endings than the bleakness of the narratives may suggest and even imply to the audience how this tentative optimism comes to be. Thomas Sutpen, the villain of Faulkner’s story, fails to achieve his ambitions precisely because of his violent nature and harsh prejudices, which lead him to mistreat the people around him, resulting in not only his murder but his family’s deaths as well. Walker’s protagonist Celie gains a peaceful life after standing up to her abusers. And once the neighbors come together to help free Sethe of *Beloved*’s spirit in Morrison’s novel, her daughter gets to grow up in a community welcoming her as one of their own, affording her a better future despite her mother’s sacrifice. Instead of placating the audience with a soothing ‘feel-good’ ending, the hopeful impulse in these narratives encourages the reader to consider how the issues addressed in the depicted societies may be dealt with or prevented, linking the Southern Gothic and Critical Dystopia through this shared feature.

The next key feature of the Critical Dystopia is the practice of genre blurring or genre hybridity addressed in the earlier re-interpretation of Varsam’s theory, which acts as another commonality between Southern Gothic and dystopian texts. Southern Gothic itself could even be viewed as a result of genre blurring, since it is a byproduct of traditional Gothic Horror meeting a more naturalistic approach in the development of US American literature. This is reflected in specific works too, as many feature both supernatural, gothic elements while still maintaining some of the narrative and stylistic conventions of Naturalism, such as *Beloved* for instance. But aside from this, specific Southern Gothic works engage in genre hybridity similarly to how Critical Dystopias do within their narratives.

To add to the points made in Chapter III, *Beloved* blends the ghost story with elements of the slave/survivalist narrative. As such it contains a haunting on two levels: The actual ghost of Sethe’s child Beloved, which can be considered a victim of the legal system put in place to uphold chattel slavery, and the protagonists’ past trauma living and working on a plantation against their will, depicted to the reader as the ‘rememories’. The ghost story as

¹⁵¹ Baccolini/Moylan: *Dystopia and Histories*, p. 3.

well as these short, achronological episodes framed as memories resurfacing after a prolonged period of suppression, embody the trauma of slavery from the victims' perspective, having been repressed and thus returning in a deformed, 'monstrous' shape to claim the attention it was denied up until this point due to the priority of survival. In this way the ghost story and the slave/survivalist narrative play into and feed off each other to highlight the key theme of slavery as trauma. Morrison makes it clear from the very beginning of the book, that the characters' histories and the supernatural activity caused by a dead child killed by her mother Sethe, an escaped slave, to prevent her from being taken back to the plantation, are parallels addressing the common theme of unresolved trauma; in a scene where Sethe tells Paul D – himself a former slave from the same plantation as her, Sweet Home – how she was abused while pregnant by having her 'milk stolen' and whipped, the ghost interrupts their intimate moment, causing the entire house to start shaking:

Would there be a little space, she wondered, a little time, some way to hold off eventfulness, to push busyness into the corners of the room and just stand there a minute or two, naked from the shoulder blade to waist, relieved of the weight of her breasts, smelling the stolen milk again and the pleasure of baking bread? Maybe this one time she could stop dead still in the middle of a cooking meal – not even leave the stove – and feel the hurt her back ought to. Trust things and remember things because the last of the Sweet Home men was there to catch her if she sank?

The stove didn't shudder as it adjusted to its heat. Denver wasn't stirring in the next room. The pulse of light hadn't come back and Paul D had not trembled since 1856 and then for eighty-three days in a row. Locked up and chained down, his hands shook so bad he couldn't smoke or even scratch properly. Now he was trembling again but in the legs this time. It took him a while to realize that his legs were not shaking because of worry, but because the floorboards were and the grinding, shoving floor was only part of it. The house itself was pitching.¹⁵²

Comparable to this is Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*: As Baccolini and Moylan point out, the novel draws on the form of a diary, survivalist Science Fiction and slave narratives.¹⁵³ Here too the deep dive into the psychology of a character living in a dystopian

¹⁵² Morrison: *Beloved*, p. 21.

¹⁵³ Baccolini/Moylan: *Dystopia and Histories*, p. 7.

world inspires the audience to form connections between the society depicted and trends found within their own political and social reality.

Additionally and as stated before, *The Color Purple* blends the epistolary novel and the family saga within the Southern Gothic genre, causing two main effects, which may seem contradictory at first: The epistolary form makes the subjective perspectives of the protagonists much more tangible to the reader and forces them to identify and sympathize with them, regardless of racial, gender or other differences – owed to the genre’s relation to the slave narrative, as explored in a previous chapter –, whereas the elements of the family saga point out the interconnectedness between all the figures and the community in which they live, highlighting broader ideas about life as an economically disadvantaged, Black, female minority in the rural South. Both forms work together to force the novel’s larger audience to confront itself with the ways in which a given society oppresses certain groups in often unseen ways and what effects this may have on the community as a whole. The main point of this specific type of hybridity, which centers its narrative form, is to urge the audience to identify fully with the protagonist Celie and by extension the community she represents, as the reader is pressured to experience the social environment portrayed through the eyes of characters, who have been oppressed by it consistently. Even stylistically Walker refuses to gently guide the reader to their own conclusions, instead embodying the voice of her main character Celie – a Black woman abused since childhood by the men she financially depends on – fully, leaving little to no room for any sympathy towards her oppressors, as Celie’s first letter of the book demonstrates:

Dear God,

I am fourteen years old. ~~I am~~ I have always been a good girl. Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me.

Last spring after little Lucious come I heard them fussing. He was pulling on her arm again. She say Naw, I ain’t gonna. Can’t you see I’m already half dead, an all of these children.

She went to visit her sister doctor over Macon. Left me to see after the others. He never had a kine word to say to me. Just say You gonna do what your mammy wouldn’t. First he put his thing up against my hip and sort of wiggle it around. Then he grab hold my titties. Then

he push his thing inside my pussy. When that hurt, I cry. He start to choke me, saying You better shut up and git used to it.

But I don't never git used to it. And now I feels sick every time I be the one to cook. My mama she fuss at me an look at me. She happy, cause he good to her now. But too sick to last long.¹⁵⁴

This short introduction into the story is designed to compel the audience into sympathizing with Celie above any other characters. Her addressing God with a plea to explain why she is in the position she finds herself in, shows a desperation to find answers with a higher instance that is still very child-like in its confusion and the first information we receive about her is her age, which firmly establishes that the following events are happening to a truly innocent party incapable of fully grasping her own tragic situation, highlighted by the struck through 'I am' before re-wording the proclamation of her own goodness as 'I have always been'. Additionally, spelling mistakes and a stylized use of language are used to make Celie's character tangible, making the graphic description of her rape even more difficult to get through. Walker combines the epistolary form with a highly specific writing style to fully relay her protagonist's inner world, thus forcing the reader to identify with her as an individual and her experiences as a victim of oppression, consequently mirroring Varsam's observations on slave narratives and dystopias.

Similarly to how *The Color Purple* employs genre blurring, *The Handmaid's Tale* combines the narrative form of the diary with the genre of science fiction, resulting in a structure that features the blueprint of a narrative of the hegemonic order and the following counter-narrative in a more complex manner, barely even adhering to it at all. The focus is not on the systemic ways in which the dystopian society functions – although it is heavily explored within the novel – but on the subjective experience of an individual who has fallen victim to this political order, namely the female protagonist Offred. Atwood expands the way in which dystopian fiction is written and urges the reader to identify with her characters on a much more personal level, heightening the critical effect.

It becomes clear that genre blurring in the hands of such Southern Gothic authors becomes more than a mere stylistic choice – it functions as a tool to enhance the critical treatment of the described social setting. Thus, both Southern Gothic and dystopian fiction feature

¹⁵⁴ Walker: *The Color Purple*, p. 3.

examples of genre blurring with the intention of structuring their narratives in a way to elevate their social criticism by drawing on other literary genres and forms.

As such, it is but one aspect in the numerous structural patterns, formal tools and literary devices explored in this chapter, which serve to highlight the connection between dystopia and the Southern Gothic through direct comparisons. These may seem abstract at first, but by applying them directly to specific literary examples of Dystopia and the Southern Gothic, the parallels between the two genres become clear. Additionally, if interpreted in more detail, they highlight the function of social criticism as the underlying motivation within both categories, which is reflected in the thematic similarities of both literatures as well. The following part offers a list of these with detailed explanations pertaining to their forms and functions, serving as another overview intended to clarify the many correlations between these two seemingly unrelated genres.

4.2. Narrative as Story: Key Themes shared by Dystopian and Southern Gothic Texts

Just as the structural elements discussed previously, the key themes found in dystopian and Southern Gothic narratives often contribute to the function of social criticism within the texts, mirroring different aspects of reality in their plots and stories, which reflect some of the most dominant elements occupying social and political consciousness throughout (US American) history. However, not only is the fact that both literatures address such themes testament to their shared intent of social critique, but the specific ways in which they are treated invite further comparison as well, highlighting the similar strategies used by dystopian and Southern Gothic narratives to comment on the author's present environment. The following chapter summarizes a conclusive list of these key themes and analyzes how they are treated within both genres and how this is a manifestation of social commentary.

The Timelessness of Social Conditions: The Role of Technology and its Implications

Owing to the differences in setting when comparing dystopian and Southern Gothic works, one of the most glaring differences is of course the use of technology, which is a key theme especially of the former, but does nonetheless play an important, if often overlooked, narrative role in the latter, that becomes clearer after directly comparing the two.

In the case of dystopian texts, the surface function of technology is that of an indicator of the futuristic backdrop, reminding the reader of the chronology while still referencing familiar elements. However, Booker argues that the treatment of science and technology offers great insight into the moment narratives shift from utopian to dystopian, as these play a part in both.¹⁵⁵ According to him technological advancement and science already hint towards possibly harmful progressions for society by the 19th century, arguing that the process of mechanization, which showcases humanity's power over nature, led to "an industrial revolution in Western Europe that made worldwide imperialism a practical reality even as it proved to be anything but liberating for the masses of exploited European workers

¹⁵⁵ Booker: *The Dystopian Impulse*, p. 5.

who suddenly found themselves harnessed to machines in the service of industry.”¹⁵⁶ Thus, industrialization and its effects mark a definitive turning point for many writers from an optimistic outlook on technology and science towards a more pessimistic one, inspiring many dystopian narratives of the time. *Brave New World*, for instance, depicts great scientific advancements, such as in the field of genetical engineering, but by showing them used in support of the dystopian social order based on an ideology rooted in capitalism and eugenics, Huxley highlights how technological and scientific advancements can be used as tools of oppressive powers, especially if ethical concerns are neglected. Similarly, the progress depicted in *We* – a novel written in the 1920s – including spacecrafts, great architectural designs made entirely of glass and complex neurological procedures only serves the totalitarian regime of the One State, instead of being used for the improvement of the people’s living conditions. In fact, most dystopian works follow this pattern, including *1984*, *Fahrenheit 451* and Butler’s *Parable*-series.

Where technology and science are described explicitly in dystopian narratives to express the functions explained before, Southern Gothic texts often refuse such an overt implication of chronological setting, either only mentioning details pertaining to technology and science or avoiding them altogether. On one hand this supports the technique of defamiliarization through time analyzed earlier, as it places the narrative firmly into a past virtually devoid of modern technology used in everyday life; on the other hand, a lack of technological comforts the characters should, in theory, be familiar with in stories where the date is at least roughly indicated highlights the advanced rates of poverty many rural Southern areas struggle with. But the more interesting aspect is a feeling of ‘timelessness’, achieved by a refusal to portray appropriate technological progress – this results in the reader’s awareness of a vague past the narrative takes place in, but not being able to orientate themselves further chronologically or historically. Thus, the author creates a paradoxical space where the past encompasses the present and even the future through its undefined vastness, causing the criticism voiced within the text to appear of extensive relevance, while simultaneously symbolizing a lack of social and ideological progress via a missing technological one, resulting in an almost mythological quality.

The characters in Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*, for example, are often described as using technologies that would hint at a much more distant past than the story is actually set in; this

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 6.

is sometimes justified by their economic situation, but not enough to fully convince the reader. For instance, despite the story taking place in the early 20th century, when clocks and watches are hardly considered a rare luxury even in rural areas, the patriarch of the Bundren family, Anse, tells the time in a more archaic manner at one point: “When the shadow touches the steps he says “It’s five oclock.””¹⁵⁷ The lack of technology is never elaborated on, contributing to the sense of ambiguity around the time Faulkner sets his novel in.

With the descriptions of houseboats, fishing gear and shacks thrown together out of old driftwood and other trash found along the riverbank, the setting of *Suttree* is much more reminiscent of Southern novels such as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The meeting between the protagonist Suttree and a Native American fisherman wouldn’t be amiss in a book authored by Mark Twain, offering an illustration of ‘outsiders’ seemingly down on their luck but still holding a sort of grim whimsical appeal:

On his run downriver in the morning he watched for the Indian’s skiff. He saw it swinging loosely below the sheer rock of the south shore. Trash hung in the vines all down the face of the bluff and a thin Faultline angled up and switched back until it gained the rim of a cave a hundred feet above the river. Up there watching was the fisherman. Suttree raised his hand. The figure on the cliff gestured back. Suttree eased the oars into the river and went on.

When he came back upriver the Indian was cleaning fish on a rock at the foot of the bluff. When he saw Suttree he stood up and looked up at the cave and wiped his hands on the sides of his jeans.

Suttree eased the skiff alongside the rock and shipped inside the oar. There was a shallow pool among the rocks and from the bottom countless fish heads stared up through the silty water to the streaked sunlight of a world dead to them. Coiled viscera ebbed in the murk and a few tins gave back a baleful light. Howdy, he said.

Hey, said the Indian.

How’s it going?

Okay

I saw that blue cat down at Turner’s. I dont see how you got it in the boat.

Yeah, said the Indian.

¹⁵⁷ Faulkner: *As I Lay Dying*, p. 19.

Suttree looked out over the water and he looked up at the Indian again. A tall and ocherskinned stranger in a pair of busted out brogans, the sorry clothes, the stove knees and elbows not patched but simply puckered shut with crude stitching. Pinned to his shirt and joined by their weighted wire he wore a pair of china eyes that had once swung in a doll's skull.¹⁵⁸

The reader wouldn't be amiss to imagine this scene to be set in the late 19th century, especially considering that the time the story is set in is only stated once within the entire book, with other indications being few and exceedingly vague. Only at the beginning of his novel does McCarthy refer to the date: "Market Street on Monday morning, Knoxville Tennessee. In this year nineteen fifty-one."¹⁵⁹ Of course, McCarthy sought to represent the simplistic lifestyle of the drifters his novel focuses on, but aside from the mention of telephones and the odd car or two there is no modern amenity to be found between the almost 600 pages of the book, which strongly suggests a further intent – the illusion of time having stopped for the characters and an undefined past reaching further into the present than expected.

Even more deliberate in its effect is Donald Ray Pollock's *The Heavenly Table*: The plot of three brothers setting out to emulate their favourite Wild West novel and becoming outlaws, riding on horses, and committing robberies armed with revolvers and the occasional shotgun, would suggest the time to be around the 1870s, but it is in fact set well after the First World War. As the Jewett brothers embark on their fantasy and rob one bank after another, their environment begins to engage in the romantic notion of a newly revived Wild West as well:

Every newspaper in America featured tales written about the outlaws and their crimes. From time to time, the brothers managed to get hold of one lying around somewhere, and the black-and-white drawings of their faces nearly drove Chimney crazy the first few times he saw them, since he was made to look like a sneaky, bucktoothed rodent, Cob a fat, goofy baby, while Cane was always portrayed as some sort of devilish ladies' man. Disregarding the facts, several of the more liberal publications began to twist the crime spree into a romantic saga, due in part to a hysterical widow's claim that the oldest had handed her a bouquet of

¹⁵⁸ McCarthy, Cormac: Suttree. London: Pan Macmillan 2010, p. 269.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 79.

sweet Williams and a fifty-dollar gold piece after they watered their horses at her well in Chapel Hill.¹⁶⁰

The brothers' adventure is juxtaposed with chapters centering around other characters encountering the unflinching change that is slowly marking the present. The elderly farmers Eula and Ellsworth, for instance, are faced with it after their son Eddie seemingly disappears one night and Ellsworth endeavors to ask around for him at the local store:

He hadn't even placed his order yet when the storekeeper mentioned the army training camp the government was building on the edge of Meade, the county seat fifteen miles to the east. "Why they doing that?" Ellsworth asked.

"'Cause of the war," Parker said. In all the years Ellsworth had known the storekeeper, he had never seen him without something stuck in his mouth, and today he was sucking on what appeared to be a pink rubber eraser, but could just as easily have been the tongue of some small animal. He took off the green eyeshade he wore and scratched at his head. A few flakes of dandruff floated down onto the counter.

"What war?" Ellsworth said.

Behind him, Ovid spoke up. "Hell, Fiddler, the country declared war on Germany back in April. You didn't know that?"

"Well, I knew they was fightin' going on somewhere, but I didn't know we was in on it."

"Sure we are," Augustus said. "A couple of them Baker boys have already signed up."

[...]

He had wanted to inquire about Eddie, ask if anyone had spotted him around, but figured that would just open up the door to another insult so he let it go. However, on the way back home, nodding to himself and occasionally spitting great wads of phlegm that stuck like glue to Buck's wide, sweaty rump, Ellsworth put two and two together in his own slow way. Somehow, Eddie had heard about that army camp.¹⁶¹

A later chapter focusing on Ellsworth summarizes the sentiment shared by many inhabitants of the rural area the story takes place in:

¹⁶⁰ Pollock, Donald Ray: *The Heavenly Table*. London: Vintage 2017, p. 132.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 29-30.

Now, staring across at the huge camp, still under construction but already filled with hundreds of soldiers and trucks and horses – even a flying machine, only the second one the farmer had ever seen in his life, circling like a buzzard above it all – he grew nervous. There were forces at work down there along the river that would intimidate almost anybody. And not just there, either. Why, just a couple of hours ago, he had seen a woman dressed in men's trousers driving a Ford Coupe out along the Huntington Pike all by herself. As he watched the airplane make one more pass over the camp and then land on a flat strip of ground outlined in whitewash, Ellsworth rubbed his chin and recalled standing around the stove in Parker's store one night last winter and someone, maybe Tick Osborne, saying that these were what people called "modern times." Most of those gathered there were in agreement that the world now seemed head over heels in love with what the tycoons and politicians kept referring to as "progress," but before they could begin arguing the pros and cons of exactly what that was going to mean in the long run, Jimmy Beulah spoke up and said, "'End times' is more like it."¹⁶²

Pollock paints a vivid picture of a society facing great changes to their way of life, the exact nature of which is hardly understood by the people confronted with them, while including a parallel tale of reenacting an imagined, idealized past, thus highlighting the nostalgic tendency of a community prone to isolation and stagnant habits. With this the author attempts to blur the lines between a romanticized past and an uncertain future clashing in a chaotic present.

Despite differences in the exact way the discussed texts present the reader with a sense of 'timelessness' through technology or lack thereof, the tendency of obscuring the boundaries between past, present and future is featured in all of them, making it a common theme. Furthermore, although the depiction and resulting function of technology and science are rather different in dystopian and Southern Gothic works, the critical intent with which they are employed can be observed in both and are arguably comparable thanks to the parallel themes of technological and social progress. Moreover, technological advancements can offer additional insight into the economic and social hierarchies dominating a given society through the access to them – this leads to the question of class as a strict social hierarchy, which constitutes another thematic aspect explored within the dystopian and Southern Gothic genre, often including a vital layer of critical commentary.

¹⁶² Ibid., p. 38-39.

Political Theory in Fiction: Class Criticism and Social Hierarchy

As the Marxist critic Frederic Jameson points out, all class consciousness is utopian in nature.¹⁶³ However, Booker addresses a theory offered by Robert C. Elliott, which proposes that the 20th century not only leads to a growing skepticism towards social and political utopianism, but an actual fear of its realization, owed to a “suspicion of utopian concepts themselves.”¹⁶⁴ Claeys offers a specific example when he quotes Adam Hochschild in *Dystopia: A Natural History*, who explains “how ‘the promised Utopia’ of the USSR ‘rapidly became quite the opposite’”,¹⁶⁵ supporting Elliott’s vision of a nightmarish realization of Utopia. Conclusively, once the Soviet Union revealed itself to be just another totalitarian regime instead of a vehicle for utopian hope, it didn’t take long for it to inspire dystopian writing as another form of Concrete Dystopia. This prompts a unique perspective on class criticism, where many authors seek to condemn communist political systems while simultaneously doing the same with classicist ideals most commonly associated with capitalism. The original English translator of Zamyatin’s *We*, Gregory Zilboorg, writes in a foreword, that the issues pointed out in the novel are “as poignant under Bolshevik dictatorship as [...] in Ford’s factory.”¹⁶⁶ Freud offers a possible explanation for this in his critique of Soviet Communism as a ‘narcissism of minor differences’, stating that communal energies of totalitarian systems are held together by the hatred of a marginalized group, rather than the love of common ideals, as it would be expected of a utopian society¹⁶⁷ - a theory reflected in many dystopian narratives.

Irving Howe argues in an essay on the fiction of what he calls Anti-Utopia from 1962, that instead of merely pointing out the communist project for the failure it turned out to be, works now categorized as classical Dystopias – amongst them *1984* and *Brave New World* – interrogate Utopia not with the aim to destroy its core ideas, but to free the political Left from Stalinist tendencies.¹⁶⁸ Howe believes that thanks to its critical nature, dystopian fiction

¹⁶³ Booker: *The Dystopian Impulse*, p. 3.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁶⁵ Claeys: *Dystopia*, p. 264.

¹⁶⁶ Zamyatin, Eugene: *We*. New York: E. P. Dutton & Company 1924, p. v.

¹⁶⁷ Booker: *The Dystopian Impulse*, p. 10.

¹⁶⁸ Moylan: *Scraps*, p. 124.

has the potential to function as a powerful warning to the Left in order to revive and strengthen its utopian dream.¹⁶⁹ Thus dystopian authors are able to depict real life communism as just another vehicle for totalitarian rule, while also drawing on its ideas of class consciousness and criticizing capitalist practices.

Orwell's novel *1984* is probably one of the most well-known examples of this: Where Phillip Rahv considers it to be a critique of the Left and its failed utopian project specifically,¹⁷⁰ Gaylord LeRoy sees it as condemning the evils of both communism and capitalism.¹⁷¹ The narrative features an entire social group considered to be lower than the one the protagonist belongs to, despite the regimes insistence on promoting equality and conformity among its citizens; called the Prols, they are even named after the class which communist utopian efforts focused on, the proletariat – but in this dystopian system they are considered the 'lowly masses', living in extreme poverty separated from the rest of society, forced to resort to any means necessary to earn money and with no hope of improving their situation. Here Orwell most likely points out the Soviet Union's hypocrisy in its promise of advocating for the working class, supporting Rahv's claim. The novel does, however, offer grounds for LeRoy's interpretation as well, seeing as it describes the economy of Oceania to be a system in which the work of many benefits the few residing at the top of the social and political hierarchy – an order that can be associated with both Soviet communism and Western capitalism.

Huxley's *Brave New World* is far less ambiguous in its critical approach, described by Adorno as a "nightmare vision" of commodity-driven capitalist society.¹⁷² The dystopian order is based on a sort of caste-system, justified through ideology and science and heavily inspired by capitalist ideas of manual labor as necessary but unworthy of any prestige, keeping the workers performing it within the lower reaches of the hierarchy, despite their contributions forming the base on which the rest of the society is built.

Additionally, class struggle based on a scarcity of resources is a key feature of Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, showing how a society is divided through differing economic means, equating these to social standing; the story shows how systemic this oppression is by depicting the ways in which public services either refuse to help the most vulnerable, poverty

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 122.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Ibid.

stricken communities or even actively contributes to their suffering, exploiting their influence for personal gain in acts of corruption. Butler's tale of a Critical Dystopia is notably rooted in a denunciation of unethical capitalist economic and political practices prevalent in Marxist criticism.

The Southern Gothic genre engages in such commentary on class as well, although it doesn't address specific economic and political systems like communism or capitalism as directly as dystopia does. Rather it derives much of its approach from the Gothic tradition, which is familiar with the inclusion of class consciousness in its social criticism, despite many works pre-dating fully articulated Marxist ideas. According to Northrop Frye, popular fiction helps indoctrinate new members with the accepted norms and customs of a particular society – Gothic fiction, however, highlights and criticizes the failures and distortions in them.¹⁷³ Through this process, Gothic novels tend to exhibit a form of "cultural self-analysis",¹⁷⁴ as Punter describes it in the *Companion to Southern Gothic Literature*, satirically exposing failed or flawed social structures.

Postbellum Southern writing partially adopts the critical approach of Gothic fiction, as Southern writers began to view contemporary as well as past Southern society in a different light, addressing the shortcomings of both.¹⁷⁵ Considering the fact that antebellum Southern society was based on a strict hierarchy, which adopted an aesthetic of European nobility and upper-classism, even going so far as to call the upper economic group 'Southern aristocracy', it is fitting that the values associated with this are identified and criticized within the concept of class struggle by postbellum writers – a group to which Southern Gothic authors belong as well. Works such as Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof* depict the decaying remnants of the Southern aristocracy, revealing it as a relic of the past unable to adjust to a new cultural and social reality. Faulkner includes characters with similar struggles in *The Sound And The Fury*: Jason Compson III and his wife Caroline are unable to let go of the past and adjust to a world where the old ideals of the South have mostly been left behind, with Compson shown to be a cynical alcoholic and Caroline an agitated neurotic fixated on their families' heritages. During the chapter narrated by Benjy, the family discusses Maury's – Caroline's brother's – beating at the hands of their neighbour

¹⁷³ Boyd: *Gothicism*, p. 312-313.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid*, p. 313.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 314.

Mr. Patterson after an affair with his wife is discovered, which illustrates the Compson household's heads' attitudes quite well:

'Maury says he's going to shoot the scoundrel.' Father said. 'I told him he'd better not mention it to Patterson beforehand.' He drank.

'Jason.' Mother said.

'Shoot who, Father.' Quentin said. 'What's Uncle Maury going to shoot him for.'

'Because he couldn't take a little joke.' Father said.

'Jason.' Mother said, 'How can you. You'd sit right there and see Maury shot down in ambush, and laugh.'

'Then Maury'd better stay out of ambush.' Father said.

'Shoot who, Father.' Quentin said, 'Who's Uncle Maury going to shoot.'

'Nobody.' Father said. 'I don't own a pistol.'

Mother began to cry. 'If you begrudge Maury your food, why aren't you man enough to say so to his face. To ridicule him before the children, behind his back.'

'Of course I don't.' Father said, 'I admire Maury. He is invaluable to my own sense of racial superiority. I wouldn't swap Maury for a matched team. And do you know why, Quentin.'

'No, sir.' Quentin said.

'*Et ego in arcadia* I have forgotten the latin for hay.' Father said. 'There, there.' He said, 'I was just joking.' He drank and set the glass down and went and put his hand on Mother's shoulder.

'It's no joke.' Mother said. 'My people are every bit as well born as yours. Just because Maury's health is bad.'

'Of course.' Father said. 'Bad health is the primary reason for all life. Created by disease, within putrefaction, into decay. Versh.'

'Sir.' Versh said behind my chair.

'Take the decanter and fill it.'¹⁷⁶

The patriarch satirizes traditional notions of honor, which dominated the Southern plantation aristocracy he stems from in the past, ridiculing Maury and the situation at large, while his wife takes it as a criticism of her entire bloodline – a recurring theme of the novel in reference to these two figures. Faulkner presents two characters whose opinions and mannerisms are

¹⁷⁶ Faulkner, William: *The Sound and the Fury*. London: Vintage 1995, p. 63-65.

dictated by their understanding of ideals and practices belonging to the past, with one figure reacting to the fall of the culture he grew up with in an embittered satirical tone of moral abandonment and the other clinging to old ideals and values hopelessly. As an example, this points out the Southern Gothic's interest in dissecting all aspects of Southern society, including perceived notions of class structures and social hierarchy, even if it rarely extends its criticism to a larger political system as dystopia tends to do.

Absalom, Absalom! addresses the Southern class struggle more directly: Faulkner implies in his novel that regardless of the democratic ideals the United States was founded on, the South adopted a decidedly less egalitarian approach of social practices. Despite his best efforts to establish himself within the respectable social class of the community he decides to settle in, Thomas Sutpen is consistently treated as an outsider by its members; even after acquiring a large amount of wealth and marrying the daughter of a well-regarded man, he never becomes a part of the upper class and is seen as an infiltrator, as Miss Rosa claims:

“No: not even a gentleman. Marrying Ellen or marrying ten thousand Ellens could not have made him one. Not that he wanted to be one, or even be taken for one. No. That was not necessary, since all he would need would be Ellen's and our father's names on a wedding license (or on any other patent of respectability) that people could look at and read just as he would have wanted our father's (or any other reputable man's) signature in a note of hand because our father knew who his father was in Tennessee and who his grandfather had been in Virginia and our neighbors and the people we lived among knew that we knew and we knew they knew we knew and we knew that they would have believed us about whom and where he came from even if we had lied, just as anyone could have looked at him once and known that he would be lying about who and where and why he came from by the very fact that apparently he had to refuse to say at all. – And the very fact that he had had to choose respectability to hide behind was proof enough (if anyone needed further proof) that what he fled from must have been some opposite of respectability too dark to talk about.”¹⁷⁷

Questions regarding his ancestry and family origin serve to expose the values of historical aristocratic societies, after which the Southern plantation community has fashioned itself. Within the narrative, Sutpen's efforts to truly transcend his class are implied to be

¹⁷⁷ Faulkner: *Absalom, Absalom!*, p. 16.

impossible, despite his elevated financial and social status, thus exposing the American Dream as an illusion when confronted with the traditionalism of the South.

For Williams and Faulkner, the 'Old South' is consequently a society basing its hierarchy on past systems left behind by history and the unethical practice of equating human lives to material value; the pursuit of either maintaining or establishing one's own social prestige is depicted as futile and often the cause of misery.

But some Southern writers also look at their own present to identify class struggle, not just the past of the Southern aristocracy. As the rural South still struggled under the Reconstruction era's failure to modernize its economy and infrastructure, leaving the region especially vulnerable once the Great Depression swept over the entire country, Southern authors didn't have to look far to witness the effects of economic instability firsthand. The images of rural communities in their literary works are almost always marked by extreme poverty, combining them with various narrative devices in order to analyze how the South's social and cultural landscape is shaped by prevailing economic struggle.

Flannery O'Connor does this very effectively in her novel *Wise Blood*. In the rural Southern town the story is set in, poverty is so rampant that even the animals at the local zoo are seen as objects of envy by Enoch Emery, a disturbed teenager working there:

After that he would go to see the animals. They were in a long set of steel cages like Alcatraz Penitentiary in the movies. The cages were electrically heated in the winter and air-conditioned in the summer and there were six men hired to wait on the animals and feed them T-bone steaks. The animals didn't do anything but lie around. Enoch watched them every day, full of awe and hate.¹⁷⁸

Through the satirical device of hyperbole O'Connor comments on the bleakness of the community's condition.

The narrative correlates these circumstances to deteriorating moral standards as well, highlighting how desperate many characters are to ease their material troubles by showing their willingness to do nearly anything to earn money. This is especially true for Hoover Shoats, who preaches under the fake name Onnie Jay Holy and hijacks the protagonist's anti-religious movement, not hesitating to exploit religion for his personal gain:

¹⁷⁸ O'Connor: *Wise Blood*, p. 54-55.

‘Friends,’ the man said, ‘lemme innerduce myself. My name is Onnie Jay Holy and I’m telling it to you so you can check up and see I don’t tell you any lie. I’m a preacher and I don’t mind who knows it but I wouldn’t have you believe nothing you can’t feel in your own hearts. You people coming up on the edge push right on up in here where you can hear good,’ he said. ‘I’m not selling a thing, I’m giving something away!’ A considerable number of people had stopped.

[...]

‘But all the time that I was ready to hang myself or to despair completely, I was sweet inside, like ever’body else, and I only needed something to bring it out. I only needed a little help, friends.

‘Then I met this Prophet here,’ he said, pointing at Haze on the nose of the car. ‘That was two months ago, folks, that I heard how he was out to help me, how he was preaching the Church of Christ Without Christ, the church that was going to get a new jesus to help me bring my sweet nature into the open where ever’body could enjoy it. That was two months ago, friends, and now you wouldn’t know me for the same man. I love ever’one of you people and I want you to listen to him and me and join our church, the Holy Church of Christ Without Christ, the new church with the new jesus, and then you’ll all be helped like me!’

Haze leaned forward. ‘This man is not true,’ he said. ‘I never saw him before tonight. I wasn’t preaching this church two months ago and the name of it ain’t the Holy Church of Christ Without Christ!’

[...]

Haze’s face under the white hat began to take on a look of fierceness. Just as he was about to open his mouth again, Onnie Jay Holy pointed in astonishment to the baby in the blue bonnet who was sprawled limp over the woman’s shoulder. ‘Why yonder is a little babe,’ he said, ‘a little bundle of helpless sweetness. Why, I know you people aren’t going to let that little thing grow up and have all his sweetness pushed inside him when it could be on the outside to win friends and make him loved. That’s why I want ever’one of you people to join the Holy Church of Christ Without Christ. It’ll cost you each a dollar but what is a dollar? A few dimes! Not too much to pay to unlock that little rose of sweetness inside you!’¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 102-105.

As this character is only one of two fake preachers in the short novel, O'Connor deliberately shows a connection between financial gain and amorality to emphasize how the ethical values of a society depend partially on the economic wellbeing of the people.

There are, however, examples of Southern Gothic texts engaging in class criticism in a more structural way and not solely through implications within their narratives. *The Heart Is A Lonely Hunter* uses its characters to express social issues from a possible Marxist direction, creating a sort of meta-discourse, that can be read as referring to conditions outside of the text as well as within it. Again, this begins with the descriptions of the story's environment: A rural town in Georgia consisting mostly of cotton mills providing much of the work for the inhabitants, McCullers summarizes this setting as follows: "These cotton mills were big and flourishing and most of the workers in the town were very poor."¹⁸⁰ The people are described to have a "desperate look of hunger and loneliness",¹⁸¹ unkempt children playing on narrow, often unpaved streets where the smells of food and sewage mingle, living in shacks instead of houses, "rotten and unpainted"¹⁸² and some with no electricity.¹⁸³ These slums are where the cotton mill workers reside with their families, painting a vivid image of a society where hard work affords for barely anything, much less comfort beyond absolute necessity.

The criticism implicated with this depiction turns into fully formed anti-capitalist sentiments through the characters' perspectives. Jake Blount, an alcoholic labor agitator disillusioned with the conditions of the working class, describes a failed strike, and laments the fact that the owners of the mills are millionaires, while the workers themselves live in poverty.¹⁸⁴ In a later scene he even describes an idealized social model, close to what can be called a Marxist Utopia, when asked how things could be improved:

Jake spoke with slow and painful care. 'The work has to start at the bottom. The old traditions smashed and the new ones created. To forge a whole new pattern for the world. To make man a social creature for the first time, living in an orderly and controlled society where he is not forced to be unjust in order to survive.'¹⁸⁵

¹⁸⁰ McCullers, Carson: *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*. Wrocław: Valde Book 2023, p. 4.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 47.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p.139.

Even more interesting is McCullers' inclusion of intersectionality by confronting Jake with the differing experiences and opinions of Doctor Copeland, a Black doctor and activist, who agrees with many of his points but stresses the importance of attaining more freedom and equality for people of colour to strengthen the movement in support of the working class.¹⁸⁶ The novel also indicates how poverty becomes an intergenerational issue, inherited by the young from their parents, when Mick, the young tomboy with dreams of becoming a pianist, is pressured into taking on a job to support her family despite her young age, preventing her not only from pursuing her actual interest, but in effect ending her childhood. She soon realizes that this cycle of hard work just to make ends meet will most likely determine the rest of her life, leaving her feeling like "she had been trapped into something."¹⁸⁷ The author thus comments on many different facets of the class struggle found in the South, voicing these through the characters themselves and inspiring the reader to question their own social and political environment as much as they do between the pages of this book. Here McCullers probably comes closest to the class criticism of dystopian works such as *1984* – but the other examples belonging to the Southern Gothic genre mentioned share the essence of this critical approach as well, even if their form differs from that of the Dystopia. However, social hierarchy is seldom described as the result of class and economic means only in these genres, but by additional, much more primitive factors pertaining to biology and genetics. The body becomes a subject of political and social practices, acting as a setting for ideological discourse – this is explored in both literatures, although through different narrative means, and highlights another branch of social criticism these texts engage in.

The Body and Ideology: Race and Eugenics

Owing to the impact slave narratives and slavery as a historical reality have had on the dystopian and the Southern Gothic genres, they both show a preoccupation with eugenics and race in many of their works, as these were a contributing factor to the scientific justification of chattel slavery. Because of this, the theme of oppression based on perceived

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 233-234.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 250.

genetic differences features in numerous dystopian novels, such as Huxley's *Brave New World* or Zamyatin's *We*.

The first bases the eugenicist ideals and practices of its dystopian society on ideological beliefs held in the past by a portion of the Western scientific community and influential public figures such as Henry Ford – thus warranting the name 'Fordism', the quasi-religion the social order is based on. These beliefs, summarized under the term of eugenics, share certain ideas with the same pseudo-scientific explanations used during slavery to justify the oppressive treatment of Black people, making them comparable to the racism depicted in most Southern Gothic texts.

The second title attempts something similar: Here the rights to bodily autonomy are heavily limited in the name of genetic purity. The state apparatus decides who gets to reproduce and bases this decision on specific conditions the genetic makeup of the potential parents needs to fulfill, like height, chronic illnesses and any form of disability. But this control is exerted even further to dictate specific behavior and personality traits: Towards the end of the novel it is revealed that all citizens of the One State must undergo the so called Great Operation, a neurological procedure rendering the patients devoid of any emotion and individual willpower; this is possibly in reference to the medical practice of lobotomization and highlights how certain ideals are enforced through scientific progress without regard towards ethical concerns, a concept explored in the view on technological advancements, described in an earlier part of this chapter. A newer example would be *The Method* by Juli Zeh, which takes on a female perspective of the subject within a sort of dystopian courtroom drama, thematizing the control a government can exert over the bodies of its subjects.

The idea of criticizing a society's obsession with biological perfection is most often found within the Southern Gothic in the form of depicting racism and its hold on Southern society beyond governing laws. As quoted before, Marshall states in *Critical Insights* that the history of slavery, racial violence and racial inequality make up the basis of the themes addressed in several Southern Gothic texts,¹⁸⁸ with some scholars even suggesting that the Gothic genre itself developed together with its critical function, as a number of Gothic novels offer an outright critique of the concept of slavery by featuring stories of a helpless dependent and an abusive tyrant – a narrative element included in abolitionist texts as well, as mentioned

¹⁸⁸ Marshall: *Defining Southern Gothic*, p. 11.

before.¹⁸⁹ In addition to these Gothic roots, the South itself plays a role in this literature's treatment of racism. Aside from being the main setting of chattel slavery in the United States historically, it also serves as a national 'Other', "becoming a repository of everything from which the nation wants to distance itself"¹⁹⁰ – but the horrors of the past continue to dominate the present and thus the South struggles with a particular awareness of the country's history, taking on the role of the national scapegoat while also having to deal with its own responsibility.¹⁹¹

McCullers' *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* shows effectively how the violence Black people still face decades after the Civil War is rooted in racism and is not only a symptom of a culture deeply intertwined with the history of slavery, but a prevailing systemic issue. She does this through multiple instances where minority communities suffer disproportionately more than non-minorities during various hardships, because of the various disadvantages they face in a system that is inherently unequal. At one point towards the end of the novel for instance, a storm hits the town and reveals how inaccessible important resources are to poverty stricken, predominately Black neighbourhoods, leaving them more vulnerable at times of crisis:

February came. The weather turned milder, then hot. The sun glared down with hard brilliance. Birds sang in the bare trees and children played out of doors barefoot and naked to the waist. The nights were torrid as in midsummer. Then after a few days winter was upon the town again. The mild skies darkened. A chill rain fell and the air turned dank and bitterly cold. In the town the Negroes suffered badly. Supplies of fuel had been exhausted and there was a struggle everywhere for warmth. An epidemic of pneumonia raged through the wet, narrow streets, and for a week Doctor Copeland slept at odd hours, fully clothed. [...]

During most of the day and night he had no time to think. But occasionally he found a chance to rest for a moment at home. He would drink a pot of coffee by the kitchen stove and a deep uneasiness would come in him. Five of his patients had died. And one of these was Augustus Benedict Mady Lewis, the little deaf-mute. He had been asked to speak at the burial service, but as it was his rule not to attend funeral he was unable to accept this invitation. The five patients had not been lost because of any negligence on his part. The blame was in the long

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 11-12.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 12.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

years of want which lay behind. The diets of cornbread and sowbelly and syrup, the crowding of four and five persons to a single room. The death of poverty.¹⁹²

McCullers specifically names the Black community as a victim of such circumstances, instead of a broader critique of poverty in general, because she seeks to hone in on the difficulties people of colour face, which she considers to be the legacy of slavery and racial inequality. In short, Black people don't suffer because they are poor, but they suffer and are poor because they are Black. Thus, the hardships she addresses may appear as issues of class at first, but quickly reveal racism as the underlying root.

McCullers becomes even more explicit in her meaning in a later part of the story, thematizing the physical violence Black people are subjected to at the hands of government officials, when Doctor Copeland's son William and two other boys are arrested by a white guard and taken into custody; what follows is a description of what could be considered state-sanctioned torture:

'There were three of them. Willie and Buster and this other boy. They were friends. Then this here trouble come up.' Portia halted. She wet her finger with her tongue and then moistened her dry lips with her finger. 'It were something to do with the way this here white guard picked on them all the time. They were out on roadwork one day and Buster he sassed back and then the other boy he try to run off in the woods. They taken all three of them. They taken all three of them to the camp and put them in this here ice-cold room.'

[...]

'They put our Willie and them boys in this here ice-cold room. There were a rope hanging down from the ceiling. They taken their shoes off and tied their bare feets to this rope. Willie and them boys lay there with their backs on the floor and their feets in the air. And their feets swelled up and they struggle on the floor and holler out. It were ice-cold in the room and their feets froze. Their feets swelled up and they hollered for three nights and three days. And nobody come.'

[...]

'Then at last they come to get them. They quickly taken Willie and them boys to the sick ward and their legs were all swelled and froze. Gangrene. They sawed off both our Willie's

¹⁹² McCullers: *The Heart*, p. 194.

feets. Buster Johnson lost one foot and the other boy got well. But our Willie – he crippled for life now. Both his feet sawed off.’¹⁹³

Again, the injustice presented in this scene is one of police brutality, but for McCullers this is only the surface, as she clarifies that Black people don’t suffer in this way by chance or because of other factors, but because of racist structures within the system, which is highlighted when Doctor Copeland considers seeking help from official sources, but is unsure where to turn to:

He could think of no white person of power in all the town who was both brave and just. He thought of every lawyer, every judge, every public official with whose name he was familiar – but the thought of these white men was bitter in his heart.¹⁹⁴

McCullers exerts considerable narrative effort to underline racially motivated discrimination as the root of the systemic issues the Black community depicted in her novel is confronted with. Choosing Doctor Copeland, an educated activist of colour, as the narrator of this particular part of the story and having him refer to race as a fundamental part of the systemic failings at hand repeatedly, leaves little to no room for interpretation regarding her critical intent. Like the acts of torture committed by the government of Orwell’s *1984*, human dignity is actively attacked in these scenes of racial injustice in McCullers’ book. Throughout the narrative she wills the reader to understand, that this continuing state of suffering Black citizens are subjected to is not merely a result of issues such as poverty or class, but the product of a long history of racial oppression with slavery at its very root.

Slavery as a supposed ‘thing of the past’ coming back to haunt the present – as Varsam highlights in her essay on slave narratives and Dystopia – is very much a key element of numerous Southern Gothic texts and often aims to expose how Southern society hasn’t fully let go of certain antebellum ideologies. However, owed to the intertextual nature of classic slave narratives, the genre confronts themes of genetic and racial purity in more covert ways as well, letting the narrative and the characters’ fates encompass the majority of the criticism with the aim of communicating certain moral values, instead of pointing out a broader social

¹⁹³ Ibid., p. 196.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 201.

condition as McCullers does – especially William Faulkner adheres to this in some of his novels, while not only focusing on race but on his characters' psychological states as well, following the example of a generation of Southern writers, that tend to equate a decline in mental and physical capabilities with moral decay.¹⁹⁵

In *Absalom, Absalom!* the main antagonist Thomas Sutpen is obsessed with the goal of producing a perfect, white, male heir to establish his very own plantation dynasty. This ideal isn't based on aesthetic appearance or even false ideas of physical prowess, but solely on an abstract concept of genetic purity, since his son Charles Bon – who would legally be the next owner of Sutpen's Hundred – not only passes as a white man visually, but is of sound mind and body, educated and intelligent; yet he doesn't meet Sutpen's expectations due to his heritage, which includes Black relatives. The narrative exposes this preoccupation with 'genetic whiteness' as nonsensical and makes it a contributing factor to Sutpen's downfall, leaving his fantasy of a flourishing bloodline unfulfilled, when he impregnates Milly, the granddaughter of Wash Jones – a squatter living on Sutpen's Hundred – and promptly casts her aside after learning that she bore him a daughter instead of a son:

So that Sunday morning came and the demon up and away before dawn, Judith thinking she knew why since that morning the black stallion which he rode to Virginia and led back had a son born on his wife Penelope, only it was not that foal which the demon had got up early to look at and it was almost a week before they caught, found, the old Negress, the midwife who was squatting beside the quilt pallet that dawn while Jones sat on the porch where the rusty scythe had leaned for two years, so that she could tell how she heard the horse and then the demon entered and stood over the pallet with the riding whip in his hand and looked down at the mother and the child and said, 'Well, Milly, too bad you're not a mare like Penelope. Then I could give you a decent stall in the stable' and turned and went out and the old Negress squatted there and heard them, the voices, he and Jones: 'Stand back. Don't you touch me, Wash' – 'I'm going to tech you, Kernel' and she heard the whip too though not the scythe, no whistling air; no blow, nothing since always that which merely consummates punishment evokes a cry while that which evokes the last silence occurs in silence. And that night they finally found him and fetched him home in a wagon and carried him, quiet and bloody and with his teeth still showing in his parted beard (which was hardly grizzled although his hair was almost white now) in the light of the lanterns and the pine torches, up

¹⁹⁵ Boyd: *Gothicism*, p. 315-316.

*the steps where the tearless and stone-faced daughter held the door open for him too who used to like to drive fast to church and who rode fast there this time, only when it was all over he had never reached the church, since the daughter decided that he should be driven into that same Methodist Church in town where he had married her mother, before returning to the grave in the cedar grove.*¹⁹⁶

This rambling account of the events shows Thomas Sutpen's end as the result of his obsessive need to sire an heir, as Jones murders him due to the insult of his granddaughter, despite the admiration he once held for the man. This undignified end solidifies Sutpen's motivation and actions as a-moral, portraying his wish for the 'perfect' heir, i.e. white, able-bodied and male, as a futile endeavor bordering on madness and ending in a gruesome death; even the language highlights this, referring to Sutpen as a demon and revealing that not even his daughter cried at the news of his fate.

But *Absalom, Absalom!* is not the only Faulkner novel that includes commentary on eugenicist ideals. In *The Sound and the Fury*, the mentally disabled character Benjy is presented in a largely sympathetic way, granting him his own voice as a narrator of the first chapter and urging the reader to identify with his unique perspective. However, due to his condition he is treated more as a burden than a family member, especially by his mother; the following quote shows a scene from his perspective where he burns his hand on accident, disturbing her sleep with his cries of pain, leaving his care to the two Black servants Dilsey and Luster:

I put my hand out to where the fire had been.

'Catch him.' Dilsey said. 'Catch him back.'

My hand jerked back and I put it in my mouth and Dilsey caught me. I could still hear the clock between my voice. Dilsey reached back and hit Luster on the head. My voice was going loud every time.

'Get that soda.' Dilsey said. She took my hand out of my mouth. My voice went louder then and my hand tried to go back to my mouth, but Dilsey held it. My voice went loud. She sprinkled soda on my hand.

'Look in the pantry and tear a piece off of that rag hanging on the nail.' she said.

'Hush, now. You don't want to make your ma sick again, does you. Here, look at the fire.'

¹⁹⁶ Faulkner: *Absalom, Absalom!*, p. 185.

Dilsey make your hand stop hurting in just a minute. Look at the fire.' She opened the fire-door. I looked at the fire, but my hand didn't stop and I didn't stop. My hand was trying to go to my mouth, but Dilsey held it.

She wrapped the cloth around it. Mother said, 'What is it now. Can't I even be sick in peace. Do I have to get up out of bed to come down on him, with two grown negroes to take care of him.'

'He all right now.' Dilsey said. 'He going to quit. He just burnt his hand a little.' 'With two grown negroes, you must bring him into the house, bawling.' Mother said. 'You got him started on purpose, because you know I'm sick.' She came and stood by me. 'Hush.' She said. 'Right this minute. Did you give him his cake.'

'I bought it.' Dilsey said. 'It never come out of Jason's pantry. I fixed him some birthday.'

'Do you want to poison him with that cheap store cake.' Mother said. 'Is that what you are trying to do. Am I never to have one minute's peace.'

'You go on back upstairs and lay down.' Dilsey said. 'It'll quit smarting him in a minute now, and he'll hush. Come on, now.'

'And leave him down here for you all to do something else to.' Mother said. 'How can I lie there, with him bawling down here. Benjamin. Hush this minute.'¹⁹⁷

Clearly Benjy isn't as incapable of comprehending his surroundings as his family believes he is, as he takes in the scene playing out around him in a fairly regular manner, despite obvious signs of differing mental capabilities. However, he is never addressed directly other than to instruct him to be quiet and any concern for his wellbeing is a byproduct of the aim to keep him docile. His mother shows no real preoccupation with her child's condition, only focused on her own rest. Dilsey is the only one remotely interested in Benjy, but instead of thanks she receives criticism and verbal abuse.

This neglect of Benjy's comfort is taken even further: After an incident involving a young girl, that is implied to be a misunderstanding, the narrative alludes to Benjy being forcibly castrated by his family, showing that they would do anything to keep him as compliant as possible, even at the expense of his health and autonomy, instead of trying to understand his actions and feelings; this part also highlights the interconnectedness between perceived physical and psychological flaws and reproduction, which is built upon in some of the

¹⁹⁷ Faulkner: *The Sound and the Fury*, p. 88-90.

previously mentioned dystopian texts, referencing eugenicist beliefs of limiting the process of procreation to individuals deemed 'worthy'. Faulkner clearly invites his audience to question ideals involving genetic and racial purity in both works and states through his narratives, that adhering to such via oppressive and/or violent means is morally apprehensible and can only lead to suffering.

Thematic preoccupations with eugenics and race are found throughout the Southern Gothic genre, indicating a common theme connecting it to dystopias, with authors seeking to question ideologies involving genetic 'purity' narratively. This concept of the body becoming a setting of ideological practices is further represented in the depiction of gender specific oppression, which was already addressed in earlier chapters on Varsam's comparison between Critical Dystopias written by women and slave narratives but offers much more to include in an analysis on the theme of gender within Southern Gothic and dystopian texts.

The (Un)fairer Sex: Gendered Violence and Female Perspectives

To recapitulate an earlier expressed concept, as the socio-political systems and cultural practices criticized in dystopian fiction find their roots most often in actual history, the violence represented in such works includes forms based on gender, with history serving as inspiration for fiction. Slavery as a Concrete Dystopia especially shows examples of gendered violence, which have shaped dystopian narratives – something the genre has in common with the Southern Gothic. Although the critical depiction of oppression based on sex is firmly connected to the previously discussed issues of eugenics via reproductive rights, its complexity still warrants a separate analysis, especially when considering works of the female-led Critical Dystopia, which owes so much to feminist theory. As this has been addressed in Chapter III, the following part serves to both supply earlier points with specific textual references and deeper analysis and to highlight that this narrative importance is not exclusive to Critical Dystopias.

Classical dystopian stories mostly address this subject in a straightforward way. As mentioned before, *We* depicts how the decision to bear children is not made by the women themselves, but by the state apparatus: The character of O-90, the protagonists former lover,

is deemed too short to be permitted motherhood and is subsequently driven to despair, deciding to conceive illegally; this action warrants a death sentence, driving her to flee the dystopian society with her offspring.¹⁹⁸

Although heavily inspired by Zamyatin's novel, *1984* doesn't focus on such a strict restriction of women's bodily autonomy – nevertheless the society of Oceania is obviously based on conservative gender roles rooted in the oppression of one sex, as women are expected to be meek, obedient, and sexually pure until marriage, after which they take on the tasks of mothers and housewives, which is highlighted by the protagonist's love interest Julia, who rebels against such ideals. By making these gender norms and misogynistic practices – which are taken from real life – a part of their dystopian societies' ideologies, Orwell and Zamyatin criticize them openly.

However, the representation of gendered violence takes on more complex forms with the Critical Dystopia, owing in part to the fact that these texts evolved from feminist readings of utopian works in the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁹⁹ The previously discussed method of genre blurring, for example, draws “on feminist criticism of universalist assumptions”,²⁰⁰ which is reflected in the stories themselves. And of course, another major influence are, as stated previously, neo-slave narratives and their inclusion of gendered violence. Examples include *The Handmaid's Tale* with its depiction of the loss of reproductive rights and women's bodily autonomy, especially concerning sexual acts, *Kindred* by Octavia Butler and Zeh's *The Method*.

Owing to its relationship with the literary tradition of the slave narrative, Southern Gothic features gendered violence as it was practiced during chattel slavery and the resulting further treatment of women heavily. Where dystopian narratives take such historical examples and project them into the future – while often basing the oppression less on race –, the Southern Gothic refers to a real past as a national and cultural memory, which has in part been suppressed and banned from the community's collective consciousness, similarly to how the characters' ‘rememories’ emerge in Morrison's *Beloved*. But nevertheless, the focus of many works within the genre is on the ways in which women's bodily autonomy and reproductive

¹⁹⁸ Zamyatin, Yevgeny: We. London: Penguin Books 2020, p. 188-190.

¹⁹⁹ Baccolini/Moylan: Dystopia and Histories, p. 2.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 7.

rights are still attacked even after the Concrete Dystopia of slavery has ended, showing how gendered violence becomes a social norm, just like racial injustice.

Morrison, for example, chooses to focus her examination of slavery and its consequences on the perspective of a Black woman and, more importantly, a mother. The narration circles around Sethe killing her own two year old child before the actual plot of the novel in an attempt to keep it safe from being returned to the plantation they previously escaped from, centering on the theme of inflicting violence out of love through the perspective of motherhood without actually trying to categorize Sethe's actions as right or wrong, and instead highlighting how violent and oppressive systems like slavery force victims to make impossible choices out of desperation. When Paul D confronts her with the murder of her child, Morrison writes her inner monologue as follows:

Sethe knew the circle she was making around the room, him, the subject, would remain one. That she could never close in, pin it down for anybody who had to ask. If they didn't get it right off – she could never explain. Because the truth was simple, not a long-drawn-out record of flowered shifts, tree cages, selfishness, ankle ropes and wells. Simple: she was squatting in the garden and when she saw them coming and recognized schoolteacher's hat, she heard wings. Little hummingbirds stuck their needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nono. Nonono. Simple. She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them.²⁰¹

The author shows no interest in moralizing Sethe's actions, instead relaying them through her own point of view as a former slave, a mother and a Black woman.

As probably one of the most famous examples of gendered violence within the Southern Gothic addressed earlier in Chapter III, *The Color Purple's* female protagonist Celie is almost a parallel to Atwood's main character Offred: She, too, is granted no control over her body as she is forced into sexual acts with a male authority figure. As illustrated with a quote from the novel earlier, the book begins with an underage Celie describing the sexual abuse her adoptive father subjects her to, which results in multiple pregnancies. However, as the

²⁰¹ Morrison: *Beloved*, p. 192.

following letter from the beginning of the novel shows, Celie is ultimately denied motherhood of her own children:

Dear God,

He act like he can't stand me no more. Say I'm evil an always up to no good. He took my other little baby, a boy this time. But I don't think he kilt it. I think he sold it to a man an his wife over Monticello. I got breasts full of milk running down myself. He says Why don't you look decent? Put on something. But what I'm sposed to put on? I don't have nothing.²⁰²

The rest of the story continues on with showing the reader how women from more vulnerable communities are often without a functional support system and therefore left powerless against repeated violence and oppression, as they are financially and socially dependent on the male figures around them. This is even more true for Celie, who was forced to cut off all contact with her sister, leaving her socially stranded and even more reliant on her husband and his environment, illustrated by a conversation between her and Sofia, her stepson Harpo's wife:

I'm gitting tired of Harpo, she say. All he think about since us married is how to make me mind. He don't want a wife, he want a dog.

He your husband, I say. Got to stay with him. Else, what you gon do?
My sister husband caught in the draft, she say. They don't have no children, Odessa love children. He left her on a little farm. May I go stay with them a while. Me and my children.

I think about my sister Nettie. Thought so sharp it go through me like a pain. Somebody to run to. It seem too sweet to bear.²⁰³

Here the community allowing Celie to be treated this way essentially fulfills the same role for her as the dystopian society of Gilead does for Offred, although there is no strictly official system in place as it is in Atwood's novel.

Walker even goes on to suggest that a victim of this unquestioned gendered violence can be manipulated by her circumstances to participate in it, just as the unsympathetic character of

²⁰² Walker: *The Color Purple*, p. 5.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 62-63.

Serena Joy – the Commander’s Wife in charge of the household Offred is a part of – is an example of in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. This is best illustrated when Celie advises her stepson Harpo to beat his new wife Sofia:

I like Sofia, but she don’t act like me at all. If she talking when Harpo and Mr – come in the room, she keep right on. If they ast her where something at, she say she don’t know. Keep talking.

I think bout this when Harpo ast me what he ought to do to her to make her mind. I don’t mention how happy he is now. How three years pass and he still whistle and sing. I think bout how every time I jump when Mr – call me, she look surprise. And like she pity me.

Beat her. I say.²⁰⁴

Such instances where members of a victimized minority act in support of their oppressors are nothing new to dystopian texts either and can be found in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, 1984 and others. This phenomenon seems to have real-life examples rooted in oppressive social hierarchies throughout history; in her essay *Unmasking the Southern Belle & the Black Mammy: The Intertwined and Violent Nature of Southern Antebellum Womanhoods*, Krista Borst analyzes the complicated relationship between white women in charge of households consisting in part of Black female servants during slavery, explaining that this domestic situation was often marked by violence towards the latter, instead of a sense of female solidarity, as white women were more interested in maintaining their privileged racial status than reflecting upon the oppression of their gender:

Instead of being figures who selflessly interceded on the behalf of their female slaves, mistresses as slaveholding women wielded a great amount of power in the plantation household. Instead of focusing on a paternalistic system, where any and all power stems from the master, it is necessary to analyze the complex power dynamics of a plantation in a more nuanced way. Even if mistresses were solely confined to their domestic space, they were charged with running their households, and therefore they had direct control over the domestic slaves. Often, this was not a role of peaceful supervision, but of one fraught with whippings, beatings, and psychological manipulation. Slavery as an institution can only be

²⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 35-36.

enforced through continual displays of power by the planter class, and mistresses played a critical role in upholding slavery as an institution and protecting their privileged position in society.²⁰⁵

Although not covered by Varsam in her exploration of slave narratives and Critical Dystopias authored by women, this aspect appears to be another indication of slavery as a Concrete Dystopia exerting influence over the dystopian and the Southern Gothic genre.

Additionally, a text showing especially poignantly how the gendered violence of slavery directly impacts women's lives even after its abolition in a more general sense is *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston, a literary cornerstone of the Harlem Renaissance. The protagonist Janie is herself a product of this history: Her grandmother Nanny, after being raped by her slave master during pre-Civil War times, gives birth to a daughter of mixed race called Leafy; when the war ends she does her best to ensure a better life for her child, but fails to achieve this as Leafy is assaulted by her schoolteacher, resulting in her conception of Janie. Determined to not let history repeat itself once again, Nanny arranges a marriage between her grandchild and the much older farmer Logan Killicks, hoping for stability and, most of all, safety for the young girl:

‘Lemme wait, Nanny, please, jus’ a lil bit mo’.’

‘Don’t think Ah don’t feel wid you, Janie, ‘cause Ah do. Ah couldn’t love yuh no more if Ah had uh felt yo’ birth pains mahself. Fact uh de matter, Ah loves yuh a whole heap more’n Ah do yo’ mama, de one Ah did birth. But you got to take in consideration you ain’t no everyday chile like most of ‘em. You ain’t got no papa, you might jus’ as well say no mama, for de good she do yuh. You ain’t got nobody but me. And mah head is ole and tilted towards de grave. Neither can you stand alone by yo’self. De thought uh you bein’ kicked around from pillar tuh post is uh hurtin’ thing. Every tear you drop squeezes a cup uh blood outa mah heart. Ah got tuh try and do for you befo’ mah head is cold.’²⁰⁶

Clearly her grandmother is only thinking of what is best for Janie, given their circumstances, and suffers with her in the face of her choicelessness. However, in doing so she inadvertently

²⁰⁵ Borst, Krista: Unmasking the Southern Belle & the Black Mammy. The Intertwined and Violent Nature of Southern Antebellum Womanhoods. In: Proceedings of GREAT Day 2019/3, 2020, p. 21-30, here p. 24.

²⁰⁶ Hurston, Zora Neale: *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. New York: Virago 2020, p. 18.

robs the protagonist of her bodily autonomy, hoping to prevent her from experiencing the same violence she and her daughter were subjected to in an ironic twist, essentially continuing the cycle of oppressive practices, which drives Janie to elope with another man due to her unhappiness, who then turns out to be abusive towards her. Here the narrative reveals how inescapable the violence women face is in the rural South, especially for more vulnerable minorities like poor Black people, and how this is a direct result of the region's history, summarized by Nanny at the beginning of the novel:

‘Come to yo’ Grandma, honey. Set in her lap lak yo’ use tuh. Yo’ Nanny wouldn’t harm a hair uh yo’ head. She don’t want nobody else to do it neither if she kin help it. Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it’s some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don’t know nothin’ but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de [n*gger] man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don’t tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De [n*gger] woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. Ah been prayin’ fuh it tuh be different wid you. Lawd, Lawd, Lawd!’²⁰⁷

Hurston explicitly thematizes the social limitations set upon Black women rooted in slavery still shaping their lives in ways often unseen by anyone other than the victims themselves, despite systemic changes, such as abolition.

Next to Black women’s experiences under and after slavery, Southern Gothic also shows examples of texts addressing white women’s encounters with oppressive gender norms, that remain largely unquestioned by the communities practicing them. Harper Lee’s protagonist Scout, for instance, doesn’t fulfill the expectations her rural Southern society places upon her as a young white girl; she is a tomboy who wants to emulate her older brother Jem and her father in their behaviour and interests. Adults in her life such as her aunt Alexandra try to impose their conservative gender norms on her with the argument, that if she wants to become a ‘respectable’ member of the community, she will have to adhere to the invisible rules set by it; however, when she questions these expectations placed upon her and is reprimanded for not meeting them, the answers given to her are anything but satisfying:

²⁰⁷ Ibid., p.17.

Aunt Alexandra was fanatical on the subject of my attire. I could not possibly hope to be a lady if I wore breeches: when I said I could do nothing in a dress, she said I wasn't supposed to be doing things that required pants. Aunt Alexandra's vision of my deportment involved playing with small stoves, tea sets, and wearing the Add-A-Pearl necklace she gave me when I was born; furthermore, I should be a ray of sunshine in my father's lonely life. I suggested that one could be a ray of sunshine in pants just as well, but Auntie said that one had to behave like a sunbeam, that I was born good but had grown progressively worse every year. She hurt my feelings and set my teeth permanently on edge, but when I asked Atticus about it, he said there were already enough sunbeams in the family and to go on about my business, he didn't mind me much the way I was.²⁰⁸

Scout is clearly confused by her aunt's seemingly irrational expectations of her, referring to them as "fanatical", supported by Lee through the indication that Alexandra equates the ability to portray certain gender-based values to moral purity, insulting her niece in the process. When the young girl seeks out her father's opinion on the matter, he, as the most important interpersonal authority in her life, disagrees with this, cementing Scout's opinion on the matter, which in turn informs the reader's sympathies as well.

The only figures not engaging in these social habits are 'outsiders' or, at the very least, members considered 'peculiar' in the eyes of the town, namely her Black nanny Calpurnia, her widowed father, and her unmarried neighbour Miss Maudie. Scout's experiences under the influence of these differing approaches to her education highlight how expectations of young girls and women perpetuate limiting and even oppressive practices and how deeply they are entrenched in rural Southern culture. By contrasting gender norms used to justify inequality with opposing ideas, Lee encourages the reader to question the ways in which society continues to push women to the sidelines.

Carson McCullers does something similar in *The Heart Is A Lonely Hunter* with the tomboyish character of Mick Kelly, setting her apart from her two sisters, who adhere much more to traditional ideas of femininity, scolding her regularly and contributing to Mick's preference of their eldest brother Bill for company, alienating her in the process:

²⁰⁸ Lee: *Mockingbird*, p. 90.

‘Are you just going to tramp around the room all day? It makes me sick to see you in those silly boy’s clothes. Somebody ought to clamp down on you, Mick Kelly, and make you behave,’ Etta said.

‘Shut up,’ said Mick. ‘I wear shorts because I don’t want to wear your old hand-me-downs. I don’t want to be like either of you and I don’t want to look like either of you. And I won’t. That’s why I wear shorts. I’d rather be a boy any day, and I wish I could move in with Bill.’²⁰⁹

But even if gendered violence and women’s fates in the South isn’t a major theme in all Southern Gothic narratives, it is often still addressed in most, only in less complex and/or detailed ways. In *As I Lay Dying* Faulkner depicts how the seventeen-year-old Dewey Dell is impregnated by a young man unwilling to take responsibility and is later tricked by another into having sex when seeking an abortion.²¹⁰ The sexual violence inflicted upon the female protagonist in the semi-autobiographical *Bastard Out of Carolina* by Dorothy Allison is either excused or overlooked time and time again in favor of her abuser with the justification of maintaining ‘peace’ within the family, suggesting that her suffering is less important than his comfort.

All these examples highlight the Southern Gothic’s willingness to thematize women’s oppression in rural Southern communities with the clear aim to engage with this social issue critically; a trait also found in dystopian texts, especially those belonging to the Critical Dystopia. The traditions these oppressive ideals stem from and their justifications are nearly always religious in nature, foregrounding faith as another key theme addressed in Southern Gothic texts, which often depict its practice cynically as performative and lacking any true spirituality. Dystopian narratives don’t follow this exact pattern, but many works – especially Critical Dystopias – still include the subject either as part of their broader commentary on the justification and maintenance of oppressive political and social systems or as a pillar of utopian hope.

²⁰⁹ McCullers: *The Heart*, p. 31.

²¹⁰ Faulkner: *As I Lay Dying*, p. 142-143.

God is Dead or Disinterested: Faith as Control and the Role of Religion

Religious beliefs and the governing institutions associated with them have shaped political as well as cultural landscapes throughout history – as such they haven't been exempt from criticism and social commentary. Literature has indulged in this for almost as long as organized religion has existed, with the satire being one of the most notable forms, depicting religious practices and ideologies critically through the use of humor. Incidentally, many scholars of modern dystopian studies, such as Moylan, consider it one of the traditions dystopian narratives stem from, pointing out a possible explanation for the genre's interest in including the subject in its critique.²¹¹

Varsam points out in her chapter on the parallels between slave narratives and Dystopia in *Dark Horizons* that the critical tendency with which the genre approaches religion is mirrored in many abolitionist texts, as these seek to expose the hypocrisy of the Southern plantation society basing its ideology on Christian rhetoric, while simultaneously justifying the violence perpetuated by chattel slavery through this belief system; similarly, religious or pseudo-religious rhetoric is often used to legitimize oppressive ideology and policy in dystopian narratives.²¹²

But there are once again notable differences between classical and critical dystopian texts: Most classical dystopias feature religion either as another victim of the regime or only mention its role briefly in comparison to other factors such as class or eugenics; this is possibly due to their authors being inspired mostly by the two major Concrete Dystopias of the time, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, the latter of which banned organized religion outright and the former likely drawing the critical focus towards the use of science in support of harmful ideology. Whatever the specific reasons may be, it is clear that many classical dystopias have a more or less simplistic depiction of religion: *1984* shows governmentally enforced atheism, *We* features a regime with science at its center, rendering religion obsolete and in Ray Bradbury's novel *Fahrenheit 451* a religious text symbolically plays a positive part in the protagonist's character arc, despite writings of the sort holding no different status to other banned books; *Brave New World* differs from the rest in as much as including a

²¹¹ Moylan: *Scraps*, p. xi.

²¹² Varsam: *Concrete Dystopia*, p. 211-213.

pseudo-religious belief system in its depiction of a dystopian society, allowing for a more pronounced comment on the dangers of ideology.

This changes however with the emergence of the Critical Dystopia, where several works highlight religion as a potential tool of oppression. This may partially be due to this newer branch being established predominantly by female authors, who began to concentrate on oppressive gender policies in their narratives, which often hail from religious extremism, such as works like *The Telling* by Ursula K. Le Guin;²¹³ here writers could look at tendencies playing out in real life to inspire their fictional societies. Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* even makes religious extremism the ideological basis for her dystopian regime of Gilead and Butler imagines a future dystopian United States led by Christian fundamentalists, now called Christian America, in her *Parable* series.

The Southern Gothic appears to remain closer in its treatment of this thematic point to the slave narrative, producing texts highly critical of these even before Atwood and others made their depictions more complex in the dystopian genre. As mentioned in an earlier chapter, Walsh theorizes that the South has created a mythology for itself based on a "settled, stable, unchanging region with agrarian values",²¹⁴ mentioning Thomas Jefferson's *Notes On The State Of Virginia* as an example of this; a mythology of which religion is a vital part, integrated into the very conception of Southern cultural identity. This myth, especially concerning the antebellum South, concealed all manner of social, familial, and racial denials and suppressions, which the Southern Gothic genre is intent on exposing.²¹⁵ Here Walsh cites Allan Lloyd-Smith when he summarizes, that Southern Gothic "explores the tensions between a culturally sanctioned progressive optimism and an actual dark legacy"²¹⁶ – a legacy shaped by slavery, which is therefore "racial, political, moral, religious, spatial and even environmental in nature."²¹⁷

O'Connor's *Wise Blood* is notorious for its inclusion of religious themes, with a deeply satirical analysis of spiritualism in a post-war Southern social landscape characterized by

²¹³ Raffaella, Baccolini: "A useful knowledge of the present is rooted in the past". Memory and Historical Reconciliation in Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Telling*. In: Baccolini, Raffaella/Moylan, Tom (ed.): Dark Horizons. Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination. New York: Routledge 2003, p. 212-234, here p. 213.

²¹⁴ Walsh: Dark Legacy, p. 20.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Ibid., p. 21.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

transformation and a collapsed cultural identity.²¹⁸ The narrative's engagement with religion in the rural South can be broken down into two different aspects: How religious practice becomes performative, devoid of actual spiritual substance in a society marked by both cultural and economic decay and the inevitability of faith.

The first one is mainly represented by the characters of Asa Hawks and Hoover Shoats; both can be described as opportunists lying about their religious devotion for their own financial gain. Additionally, O'Connor shows the decline of genuine belief and the exploitation of religion in the general setting of her story: Preachers are described as "too good to believe in anything",²¹⁹ religious symbols are equated to mundane parts of everyday life – for example when a street vendor is described similarly to a preacher²²⁰ or when a church is listed together with a hotel and an antique shop in a brief overview of the town – ²²¹ and when religious belief is outright mentioned, it is only to establish that "people have stopped doing it."²²² One character even remarks offhandedly that "Jesus is a trick on [n*ggers]",²²³ implying that religious ideology and the oppression of Black people in the United States are linked – an idea reflected in abolitionist texts.

The second aspect of religion in the rural South mentioned before, the inevitability of faith, appears as a juxtaposition to the first one and emphasizes how, despite many Southern cultural norms losing their relevance after being interrogated by the larger national community post-Civil War, the role of spiritualism, i.e. religion, cannot be left unfilled. In an act of optimism, O'Connor's novel essentially believes that genuine faith will prevail even in an environment as harsh as the rural South.

Wise Blood's protagonist Hazel Motes can be interpreted as the personification of this sentiment: Despite his best efforts to not only distance himself from religion, but to establish an 'anti-religion' to negate it, he still becomes the head of a religious system. His seemingly inescapable ties to what he swears to denounce can be observed from the beginning of the narrative, be it in his outward appearance, wearing a hat reminiscent of the kind preachers tend to wear, or his obsession with characters pretending to be religious, like Asa Hawks. As Motes actively rebels against religion, while the rest of the townsfolk seem indifferent

²¹⁸ Ibid., p. 30.

²¹⁹ O'Connor: *Wise Blood*, p. 20.

²²⁰ Ibid., p. 24.

²²¹ Ibid., p. 39.

²²² Ibid., p. 154.

²²³ Ibid., p. 51.

towards it, he is effectually the only person in the novel who believes in the power it holds – a circumstance he seems to be somewhat conscious of and perplexed by, for example when meeting a preacher who isn't as intent on converting a 'lost Soul' as Motes thinks he should be.²²⁴ Instead of being truly free from religion and faith, his anti-religion remains within the context of a worldview that puts both at its center, though Motes himself seems to become self-aware of this as the novel progresses:

He said he had only a few days ago believed in blasphemy as the way to salvation, but that you couldn't even believe in that because then you were believing in something to blaspheme.²²⁵

At the end of the story, it becomes clear that Motes cannot escape his roots in faith as a preacher's son and ultimately performs acts of religious self-flagellation, appearing to accept faith as a part of himself. O'Connor's commentary on religion and faith in a postbellum rural Southern landscape are not only of a profound, satirical complexity, but feature elements of both dystopian and utopian ideas in its descriptions of a society void of spiritual meaning while still harboring the potential for it.

The Heart Is A Lonely Hunter communicates its view on religion in the rural South similarly through seemingly inconsequential details pertaining to its setting, for instance when the only religious authority figure, a preacher, is introduced in the same scene as a carnival; when he tries to convince people of the importance of faith he is described as a lunatic, with "bright and crazy" eyes.²²⁶ The living conditions and social circumstances of McCullers' characters have apparently led to an outright loss of faith as she writes that "everybody in the past few years knew there wasn't any real God."²²⁷ This attitude mirrors the ideological collapse of the South after the Civil War, creating a cultural vacuum which has shaped the region permanently. But the author includes an element of potential hopefulness – just as O'Connor does – by implying to the reader that the spiritual and emotional needs met by religion in the past can be fulfilled by other things such as art; in one passage she even

²²⁴ Ibid., p. 99.

²²⁵ Ibid., p. 141.

²²⁶ McCullers: *The Heart*, p. 220.

²²⁷ Ibid., p. 91.

portrays the young girl Mick as having a religious experience after listening to Mozart on the radio:

How did it come? For a minute the opening balanced from one side to the other. Like a walk or march. Like God strutting in the night. The outside of her was suddenly froze and only that first part of the music was hot inside her heart. She could not even hear what sounded after, but she sat there waiting and froze, with her fists tight. After a while the music came again, harder and loud. It didn't have anything to do with God. This was her, Mick Kelly, walking in the daytime and by herself at night. In the hot sun and in the dark with all the plans and feelings. This music was her – the real plain her.²²⁸

McCullers doesn't treat the classical music Mick is hearing as "high art" or something to be intellectualized, but as a spiritual conduit that the character is moved by regardless of her age, education or social background. Instead of all men being equal in the eyes of God, all men are equal through art – as such the author replaces a religious symbol with a cultural one, in this case Mozart.

Of course, there are texts that choose a more pessimistic route when it comes to faith and religion; amongst them being Cormac McCarthy's *Suttree*. The characters' attitudes of indifference towards God are summarized in a conversation the protagonist has with another man:

I aint no infidel. Don't pay no mind to what they say.

No.

I always figured they was a God.

Yes.

I just never did like him.²²⁹

The question McCarthy presents here isn't one of faith but of plain sympathy. The existence of God isn't questioned in an act of blasphemy or philosophical enlightenment, the characters simply do not find this religious figurehead all that useful or even likeable, based on their experiences and surroundings. With the rural South in this worldview as both a place

²²⁸ Ibid., p. 90.

²²⁹ McCarthy: *Suttree*, p. 177.

where religion, especially Christianity, is highly valued, saturating everyday life on multiple levels, and a seemingly desolate wasteland where survival and suffering are taken as the norm, the communities living in this paradoxical condition react to the cognitive dissonance by neither turning away from God fully nor accrediting him with the goodness he is supposed to represent. A sentiment encompassed by McCarthy in five simple lines, highlighting his ability to observe and understand the culture around him.

As religion and faith remain an integral part of the Southern political and social landscape to this day, critical commentary on the subject continues to be included in more contemporary works of the Southern Gothic. Donald Ray Pollock's *The Devil All The Time* published in 2011 is a fitting example, having gained widespread attention after a cinematic adaptation in 2020 and subsequently popularizing the genre for a newer generation.

In the beginning of the novel the protagonist Arvin is traumatized as a child by his father Willard's religious fanaticism as he builds a sort of altar to cure his wife of cancer, dragging his son into the woods to pray for her health:

A couple days later, Willard began picking up animals killed along the road: dogs, cats, raccoons, possums, groundhogs, deer. The corpses that were too stiff and too far gone to bleed out, he hung from the crosses and the tree limbs around the prayer log. The heat and humidity rotted them quickly. The stench made Arvin and him choke back vomit as they knelt and called out for the Savior's mercy. Maggots dripped from the trees and crosses like squirming drops of white fat. The ground around the log stayed muddy with blood. The number of insects swarming around them multiplied every day. Both were covered with bites from the flies and mosquitoes and fleas. Despite it being August, Arvin took to wearing a long-sleeved flannel shirt and a pair of work gloves and a handkerchief over his face. Neither of them bathed anymore. They lived on lunch meat and crackers bought at Maude's store. Willard's eyes grew hard and wild, and it seemed to his son that his matted beard turned gray almost overnight.

"This is what death is like," Willard said somberly one evening as he and Arvin knelt at the putrid, blood-soaked log. "You want such as this for your mother?"

"No, sir," the boy said.

Willard struck the top of the log with his fist. "Then pray, goddamnit!"

Arvin pulled the filthy handkerchief from his face and breathed deeply of the rot. From then on, he quit trying to avoid the mess, the endless prayers, the spoiled blood, the rotten carcasses. But still, his mother kept fading. Everything smelled of death now, even the

hallway leading back to her sickroom. Willard started locking her door, told Arvin not to disturb her. "She needs her rest," he said.²³⁰

Not only does this description convey a disturbing scene reminiscent of a horror novel, but this excess proves to be ineffective as Arvin's mother's condition doesn't improve and ultimately ends in her death. From this point onwards, the protagonist, and through the narrative process of identification the reader, associates religious faith with violence and ignorance for the rest of the story, underlined by a later moment where he leads a police officer by the name of Lee Bodecker to the described 'altar' after his father commits suicide:

Bodecker pinched his nostrils together, tried to breathe through his mouth. 'What the hell is that smell then?'

"That's them up there," Arvin said, pointing into the trees.

Bodecker lifted his flashlight. Animals in various states of decay hung all around them, some in the branches and others from tall wooden crosses. A dead dog with a leather collar around its neck was nailed up high to one of the crosses like some kind of hideous Christ-like figure. The head of a deer lay at the foot of another. Bodecker fumbled with his gun. "Goddamn it, boy, what the hell is this?" he said, turning the light back on Arvin just as a white, squirming maggot dropped onto the boy's shoulder. He brushed it off casually as someone would a leaf or a seed. Bodecker waved his revolver around as he started to back away.

"It's a prayer log," Arvin said, his voice barely a whisper now.

"What? A prayer logs?"

Arvin nodded, staring at his father's body. "But it don't work," he said.²³¹

This attitude paves the way for Arvin's future actions when he is once again confronted with the negatives of religion in a later part. After becoming an orphan he is sent to live with his grandmother Emma and her adopted daughter Lenora, who is just as zealous in her faith as her mother Helen, whom the reader learned earlier was killed by her husband Roy Laferty, a young man travelling with his physically disabled friend, trying to earn money by

²³⁰ Pollock, Donald Ray: *The Devil All the Time*. London: Vintage 2012, p.45.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

preaching sermons and accidentally murdering his young wife after becoming convinced by his God-given powers as a healer, once again connecting faith with delusion and destruction:

Lenora, on the other hand, couldn't seem to get enough of her religion. She carried a Bible with her everywhere she went, even to the outhouse, just like Helen had; and each morning, she got up before everyone else and prayed for an hour on her knees on the splintered wooden floor beside her and Emma's bed.²³²

Despite their differences, Arvin and Lenora become as close as siblings, with him defending her from bullies ridiculing her piety. However, the tentative tranquility is soon disturbed by a new preacher, Preston Teagardin, taking over the local church service, who seduces Lenora through her religious vigour:

“You ain't gonna tell no one, are you?” he said. Already, he wished he'd stayed home and read his psychology book, maybe even attempted cutting the grass with the push mower Albert had sent over after Cynthia stepped on a black snake curled up in front of the outhouse. Unfortunately, he had never been one of those men adept at physical labor. Just thinking about him shoving that mower around and around that rocky yard made him feel a little nauseous.

“No,” she said. “I'd never do that. I promise.”

“That's good. Some people might not understand. And I sincerely believe that a person's relationship with their preacher should be a private thing.”

“Did you mean what you said?” she asked him bashfully.

He struggled to recall which bullshit line he had used on her. “Well, sure I did.” His throat was parched. Maybe he'd drive over to Lewisburg and have a cold beer to celebrate busting open another virgin. “By the time we get done,” he said, “them boys at your school won't be able to take their eyes off you. It just takes some breaking in for some girls, that's all. But I can tell you one of them that just gets prettier as they get older. You should thank the Lord for that. Yep, you got some sweet years ahead of you, Miss Lenora Laferty.”²³³

Pollock employs multiple narrative strategies to shape the audience's opinion on this character: By choosing to focus on the preacher's own perspective, he highlights his

²³² Ibid., p. 106.

²³³ Ibid., p. 180.

amorality through inner thoughts, revealing his lack of guilt or self-consciousness in the face of misusing his position to push an impressionable young girl into sexual intercourse. Furthermore, small details such as the mention of his psychology book and his distaste for manual labor present the character as manipulative and lazy – certainly not a positive image of a Christian leader.

The author underlines Teagardin's heinousness when Lenora confesses her pregnancy as a result of their affair, to which he insinuates her to be the victim of delusional thinking convinced of a false conception, gaslighting her with the help of his psychology book:

Lenora had quit sobbing by then. She wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her dress. "I don't understand what you're talking about," she said. "I'm pregnant with your baby."

He held out his hands, heaved a sigh. "That's part of it, the book says, not understanding. But you think about it. How could I be the daddy? I've never touched you, not once. Look at you. I've got a wife sitting at home that's a hundred times as pretty and she'll do anything I ask, and I do mean anything."

She looked up with a dumbfounded expression on her face. "You're saying you don't remember all the things we did in your car?"

"I'm saying that you must be crazy to come into the Lord's house and talk such trash. You think anyone's gonna believe you over me? I'm a preacher." Jesus, he thought, standing there looking down at this red-nosed, sniveling little hag, why hadn't he just held out and waited until the Reaster girl came around. Pamela had proved to be the finest piece he'd had since the early days with Cynthia.

"But you're the father," Lenora said in a soft, numb voice. "Hasn't been nobody else."

Teagardin looked at his watch again. He had to get rid of this wench fast, or his whole afternoon was going to be ruined. "My advice to you, girl," he said, his voice turning low and hateful, "if you figure some way to get rid of it, that is, if you even are knocked up like you say. It would just be some little bastard with a whore for a mother if you keep it. If nothing else, think of that poor old woman who's raised you, brings you to church here every Sunday. She'll die from the shame of it all. Now you get on out before you cause any more trouble."²³⁴

²³⁴ Ibid., p. 186-187.

Teagardin is shown to be the ultimate villain in this part of the story. His casual assessment of the situation and practiced reactions imply that this is a routine occurrence for him as a sexual predator, basking in former conquests while using Lenora's lack of self-esteem, naiveté and faith to convince her of her isolation and hopelessness in the face of her condition. As a result, she goes home after this ordeal and commits suicide by hanging. But the narrative doesn't leave him unpunished: In a pivotal moment of the book the overprotective, but otherwise mild-mannered Arvin uses his father's gun to kill Teagardin as an act of revenge, fleeing the town and beginning a life as a fugitive thereafter. Pollock's novel exemplifies perfectly how religious institutions and faith are clearly targeted in the genre's critical view of the rural South and although other texts such as McCullers' may be less harsh in their representations, the idea remains the same.

Where Critical Dystopias focus on the use of religious rhetoric as an ideological justification of oppression and injustice, most Southern Gothic works show a society in which religion has lost its spiritual and moral meaning precisely because it was employed as such during slavery, as well as displaying a focus on an individual's psychological state, as is most often associated with the American Gothic. The approaches may differ narratively, but both genres look at the interconnectedness of faith, ideology, and subjugation with critical intent.

But religious rhetoric explored within the narratives is not the only way dystopian and Southern Gothic works engage with the power of speech and storytelling as an important ideological and political tool. In a broader sense, language and history are afforded a special treatment in both dystopian and Southern Gothic texts, pointing out their meaning within the context of social and systemic issues.

The Semantics of Cultural Trauma: Language, History and Memory

Apart from linguistic and stylistic devices used to compose the text itself, language has an additional thematic function in many dystopian narratives. Protagonists are often prohibited from using language and when they do, it is only a means of propaganda. Baccolini and Moylan trace this to the structure of dystopian texts, where the narrative of the hegemonic order and the counter-narrative are largely defined by "the social and anti-social use of

language”.²³⁵ They describe how language plays a key role in the conflicts portrayed in dystopian texts, taking on the role of a weapon for the reigning dystopian power structure, illustrated by authors through the frequent inclusion of a new dialect or foreign slang terms when describing their dystopian societies, which then become the linguistic norm, like Newspeak in *1984* or the conglomeration of English and Russian terms called Nadsat in *A Clockwork Orange*.

However, this also serves the literary device of defamiliarization: The fact that the official language of the dystopian society doesn’t express the characters’ lived experience accurately, but is instead used as a tool for propaganda and manipulation, results in a sense of alienation. Together with the alienation through setting, this works as what Varsam calls “double defamiliarization”²³⁶ within Dystopias.

In this vein the dystopian protagonist’s resistance often begins with a confrontation surrounding language, followed by the reappropriation of it.²³⁷ “Taking control over the means of language, representation, memory and interpellation”²³⁸ is a crucial strategy within the counter-narrative of resistance, because the use of language is usually either limited by the dystopian regime or misused as a tool in support of its ideology; examples for this include *1984*, where Winston Smith begins his rebellion by writing a diary, and Guy Montag’s refusal to proceed with the book burnings in *Fahrenheit 451*.

Although this subject isn’t represented within the narrative context of an official political system described in detail in most Southern Gothic texts – as is the case with other themes addressed in this chapter – it is nonetheless included in the critical commentary of many works on a more social and cultural level.

Similarly to how the use of language is dictated by the dystopian regime, some Southern Gothic authors seem to engage with this concept by alluding to the education system in the rural South, specifically reading and writing. As a means to gain knowledge through language, both of these acts can reveal the ways in which many Southern Gothic texts address how education is either encouraged or discouraged within rural Southern communities in order to maintain the dominant social discourse. Reading and writing in

²³⁵ Baccolini/Moylan: *Dystopia and Histories*, p. 5.

²³⁶ Varsam: *Concrete Dystopia*, p. 215.

²³⁷ Baccolini/Moylan: *Dystopia and Histories*, p. 5.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 5-6.

these works thus fulfill the same function as the use of language as a discursive power does within dystopian narratives.

Scout's experiences as a young female student in *To Kill A Mockingbird* are an interesting example. Once she begins her formal education at the school of the small town she lives in, her new teacher Miss Caroline immediately scolds her for already knowing how to read and write, even though with this she is already much more promising academically than her peers:

Then she went to the backboard and printed the alphabet in enormous square capitals, turned to the class and asked, 'Does anybody know what these are?'

Everybody did; most of the first grade had failed it last year.

I suppose she chose me because she knew my name; as I read the alphabet a faint line appeared between her eyebrows, and after making me read most of my *My First Reader* and the stock-market quotations from *The Mobile Register* aloud, she discovered that I was literate and looked at me with more than faint distaste. Miss Caroline told me to tell my father not to teach me any more, it would interfere with my reading.

'Teach me?' I said in surprise. 'He hasn't taught me anything, Miss Caroline. Atticus ain't got time to teach me anything,' I added, when Miss Caroline smiled and shook her head. 'Why, he's so tired at night he just sits in the living-room and reads.'

'If he didn't teach you, who did?' Miss Caroline asked good-naturedly. 'Somebody did. You weren't born reading *The Mobile Register*.'

'Jem says I was. He read in a book where I was a Bullfinch instead of a Finch. Jem says my name's really Jean Louise Bullfinch, that I got swapped when I was born and I'm really a –'

Miss Caroline apparently thought I was lying. 'Let's not let our imaginations run away with us, dear,' she said. 'Now you tell your father not to teach you any more. It's best to begin reading with a fresh mind. You tell him I'll take over from here and try to undo the damage –'

'Ma'am?'

'Your father does not know how to teach. You can have a seat now.'

I mumbled that I was sorry and retired meditating upon my crime.²³⁹

²³⁹ Lee: *Mockingbird*, p. 18-19.

Instead of recognizing Scout's abilities, Miss Caroline appears to take the fact that it wasn't her who taught the young prodigy as a personal insult, belittling her and her father in a condescending manner. With this scene Lee demonstrates to the reader that within this educational system discipline, hierarchy and conformity are more valued than learning and knowledge. The children aren't expected to engage with the material taught independently, but to sit and listen to the narratives sanctioned by the official curriculum, highlighted by Scout's additional observation during class: "No comment seemed to be expected of us, and the class received these impressionistic revelations in silence."²⁴⁰ This intentional hindering of education prevalent in the rural South appears to be a somewhat common theme of the genre, as it is also addressed in other works, such as O'Connor's *Wise Blood*, in which the protagonist Hazel Motes recounts his brief academic career: "He had gone to a country school where he had learned to read and write but that it was wiser not to".²⁴¹

In *To Kill A Mockingbird* the lack of critical thinking skills resulting from this educational model is represented towards the end of the novel after the trial of Tom Robinson, during a scene in which another teacher, Miss Gates, criticizes the fate of Jewish people in Nazi Germany and compares it to US American democratic values; however, Scout quickly exposes her as a hypocrite to the reader when she asks Jem about the teacher's beliefs:

Then Miss Gates said, 'That's the difference between America and Germany. We are a democracy and Germany a dictatorship. Dictator-ship,' she said. 'Over here we don't believe in persecuting anybody. Persecution comes from people who are prejudiced. Pre-ju-dice,' she enunciated carefully. 'There are no better people in the world than the Jews, and why Hitler doesn't think so is a mystery to me.'

An inquiring soul in the middle of the room said, 'Why don't they like the Jews, you reckon, Miss Gates?'

'I don't know, Henry. They contribute to every society they live in, and most of all, they are a deeply religious people. Hitler's trying to do away with religion, so maybe he doesn't like them for that reason.'

Cecil spoke up. 'Well I don't know for certain,' he said, 'they're supposed to change money or something', but that ain't no cause to persecute 'em. They're white, ain't they?'

²⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 20.

²⁴¹ O'Connor: *Wise Blood*, p. 14.

Miss Gates said, 'When you go to high school, Cecil, you'll learn that the Jews have been persecuted since the beginning of history, even driven out of their own country. It's one of the most terrible stories in history. Time for arithmetic, children.'

[...]

'I wanna ask you something'.

'Shoot.' He put down his book and stretched his legs.

'Miss gates is a nice lady, ain't she?'

'Why sure,' said Jem. 'I liked her when I was in her room.'

'She hates Hitler a lot...'

'What's wrong with that?'

'Well, she went on today about how bad it was him treatin' the Jews like that. Jem, it's not right to persecute anybody, is it? I mean have mean thoughts about anybody, even, is it?'

'Gracious no, Scout. What's eatin' you?'

'Well, coming out of the court-house that night Miss Gates was – she was goin' down the steps in front of us, you musta not seen her – she was talking with Miss Stephanie Crawford. I heard her say it's time somebody taught 'em a lesson, they were gettin' way above themselves, an' the next thing they think they can do is marry us. Jem, how can you hate Hitler so bad an' then turn around and be ugly about folks right at home –?'²⁴²

Miss Gates, an educated individual representing education in the South as a teacher, fails to recognize the similarly cruel and unjust treatment of Black people during slavery in the United States as somewhat of a historical parallel to the treatment of Jewish people – a connection which Scout, a child, makes immediately –, engaging freely in the same kind of prejudice she taught her class to be critical of. What seems like mere irony on Lee's part is in fact a critical commentary on the Southern educational system and the values and intellectual skills it imparts on young impressionable minds, showing how injustice remains unquestioned thanks to willful ignorance.

Besides such statements on the educational system within the context of 'state sanctioned' language as a thematic element, authors such as William Faulkner point out the use of language as a manipulative tool. Although he does so within the social context of a strictly

²⁴² Lee: *Mockingbird*, p. 270-272.

patriarchal family structure, the basic concept is still comparable to the function of propaganda in dystopian narratives.

In *As I Lay Dying* the patriarch Anse uses his authority repeatedly to make decisions that affect the whole family negatively and ultimately lead to its ruin, by gaining the other members' tentative support after manipulating them emotionally through a specific use of language. One example for this is when he refuses any outside help during dire situations, even going so far as risking his children's lives, by stating that he doesn't want to accept charity or owe any debt, a sentiment the rest of the family seems to parrot. In a chapter narrated by the neighbouring farmer Samson, the Bundrens spend the night with him and his wife Rachel, who both disagree with their long journey to bury the dead matriarch Addie, but refuse to stay in their house, opting for the barn instead:

So I told them to drive [the wagon] into the barn, because it was threatening rain again, and that supper was about ready. Only they didn't want to come in.

"I thank you," Bundren says. "We wouldn't discommode you. We got a little something in the basket. We can make out."

"Well," I says, "since you are so particular about your womenfolks, I am too. And when folks stops with us at meal time and wont come to the table, my wife takes it as a insult."

So the girl went on to the kitchen to help Rachel. And then Jewel come to me.

"Sho," I says. "Help yourself outen the loft. Feed him when you bait the mules."

"I rather pay you for him," he says.

"What for?" I says. "I wouldn't begrudge no man a bait for his horse."

"I rather pay you," he says; I thought he said extra.

"Extra for what?" I says. "Wont he eat hay and corn?"

"Extra feed," he says. "I feed him a little extra and I dont want him beholden to no man."

"You cant buy no feed from me, boy," I says. "And if he can eat that loft clean, I'll help you load the barn onto the wagon in the morning."

"He aint never been beholden to no man," he says. "I rather pay you for it."

And if I had my rathers, you wouldn't be here a-tall, I wanted to say. But I just says, "Then it's high time he commenced. You cant buy no feed from me."

When Rachel put supper on, her and the girl went and fixed some beds. But wouldn't any of them come in. "She's been dead long enough to get over that sort of foolishness," I

says. Because I got just as much respect for the dead as ere a man, but you've got to respect the dead themselves, and a woman that's ben dead in a box four days, the best way to respect her is to get her into the ground as quick as you can. But they wouldn't do it.

"It wouldn't be right," Bundren says. "Course, if the boys wants to go to bed, I reckon I can set up with her. I dont begrudge her it."

So when I went back down there they were squatting on the ground around the wagon, all of them. "Let that chap come to the house and get some sleep, anyways," I says. "And you better come too," I says to the girl. I wasn't aiming to interfere with them. And I sholy hadn't done nothing to her that I knowed.

"He's done already asleep," Bundren says. They had done put him to bed in the trough in a empty stall.

"Well, you come one, then," I says to her. But still she never said nothing. They just squatted there. You couldn't hardly see them. "How about you boys?" I says. "You got a full day tomorrow." After a while Cash says,

"I thank you. We can make out."

"We wouldn't be beholden," Bundren says. "I thank you kindly."

So I left them squatting there. I reckon after four days they was used to it.²⁴³

Just as Anse uses his wife's last wish to be buried in the land of her childhood to justify his reckless decisions, he also uses it as an excuse to reject any responsibility for the dangers they are exposed to during their journey, implying that he is only acting according to his late wife Addie's last wish to be buried in a different town out of his love and respect for her, even though he immediately remarries shortly after arriving at their destination. Furthermore, a chapter written in the point of view of Addie before her death heavily implies her to have been verbally manipulated by Anse into a relationship:

That was when I learned that words are no good; that words don't ever fit even what they are trying to say at. [...] He had a word, too. Love, he called it. But I had been used to words for a long time. I knew that that word was like others: just a shape to fill a lack; that when the right time came, you wouldn't need a word for that anymore than for pride or fear.²⁴⁴

²⁴³ Faulkner: *As I Lay Dying*, p. 67-68.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

This emotional manipulation through ‘positive’ language is in its essence comparable to certain narrative themes found in dystopian works such as *Brave New World* as well, where control over the regime’s subjects is exerted via ‘pleasure’, instead of forceful means.

Language can, however, be interpreted as representing community and the potential for change embedded in social unity with regards to some Southern Gothic texts, mirroring Dystopia’s ideas of language as a tool of resistance. However, here language barriers and miscommunication serve to highlight the fundamental disconnectedness within a society of a complex historical background.

The Heart Is A Lonely Hunter comments on this especially poignantly: The protagonist John Singer is a deaf man living alone in a hearing community and most of the communication between him and other characters is one-sided, as they seek him out to share their worries, but aren’t especially interested in him other than as a listener – he inhabits a space both in- and outside of his social circle, where communication is technically taking place, but doesn’t compensate the inherent disconnect between the characters. Their experience of this relationship is summarized as follows:

Singer was always the same to everyone. He sat in a straight chair by the window with his hands stuffed tight into his pockets, and nodded or smiled to show his guests that he understood.

[...]

One by one they would come to Singer’s room to spend the evening with him. The mute was always thoughtful and composed. His many-tinted gentle eyes were grave as a sorcerer’s. Mick Kelly and Jake Blount and Doctor Copeland would come and talk in the silent room – for they felt that the mute would always understand whatever they wanted to say to him. And maybe even more than that.²⁴⁵

Singer is described as a fairly neutral figure from the perspective of his visitors, his room, and subsequently his presence, becoming the perfect place to unburden themselves of the thoughts they can’t share with anyone else; this is expressed even more clearly in an observation by Biff Brannon, one of Singer’s acquaintances: “Owing to the fact he was a mute they were able to give him all the qualities they wanted him to have.”²⁴⁶

²⁴⁵ McCullers: *The Heart*, p. 71-73.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

Singer himself, however, cannot fully reciprocate this sentiment, his inner thoughts often revealing a deep sense of loneliness. The only real friend he has, another deaf man by the name of Spiros Antonapoulos, is moved to a facility for the mentally disabled in the beginning of the novel, leaving the protagonist isolated:

The four people had been coming to his rooms now for more than seven months. They never came together – always alone. And invariably he met them at the door with a cordial smile. The want for Antonapoulos was always with him – just as it had been the first months after his friend had gone – and it was better to be with any person than to be too long alone. [...] At first he had not understood the four people at all. They talked and they talked – and as the months went on they talked more and more. He became so used to their lips that he understood each word they said. And then after a while he knew what each one of them would say before he began, because the meaning was always the same.

His hands were a torment to him. They would not rest. They twitched in his sleep, and sometimes he awoke to find them shaping the words in his dreams before his face. He did not like to look at his hands or to think about them. They were slender and brown and very strong. In the years before he had always tended them with care. In the winter he used oil to prevent chapping, and he kept the cuticles pushed down and his nails always filed to the shape of his fingertips. He had loved to wash and tend his hands. But now he only scrubbed them roughly with a brush two times a day and stuffed them back into his pockets.²⁴⁷

McCullers indicates the character's isolation clearly: Although he enjoys the company of his visitors as a distraction, he doesn't truly connect with them, feeling somewhat alienated through a relationship which appears mostly superficial and one-sided to him. This is underlined narratively when he begins to neglect his hands, which are his personal means of communication.

Ironically, Singer exhibits the same tendencies as his guests when seeking out Antonapoulos at the mental facility. He projects his own desire for connection and friendship onto the other man, despite obvious signs that these feelings aren't understood and reciprocated by him in the same way. Singer even outright ignores the reality of his friend's condition whenever he visits him:

²⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 158-159.

Antonapoulos was not changed at all. When Singer came into his room he ambled placidly to meet his friend. He was even fatter than before, but the dreamy smile on his face was just the same. Singer had some packages in his arms and the big Greek gave them his first attention. His presents were a scarlet dressing-gown, soft bedroom slippers, and two monogrammed nightshirts. Antonapoulos looked beneath all the tissue papers in the boxes very carefully. When he saw that nothing good to eat had been concealed there, he dumped the gifts disdainfully on his bed and did not bother with them any more.

[...]

Antonapoulos kept his dark, oily eyes on his friend and did not move. His hands fumbled languidly with the crotch of his trousers. Singer told him, among other things, about the visitors who had been coming to see him. He told his friend that they helped take his mind away from his lonesomeness. He told Antonapoulos that they were strange people and always talking – but that he liked to have them come. He drew quick sketches of Jake Blount and Mick and Doctor Copeland. Then as soon as he saw that Antonapoulos was not interested Singer crumpled the sketches and forgot about them. [...]

His next visit was the last one, for his two weeks' vacation was almost over. Antonapoulos had forgotten what had happened before. They sat in their same corner of the room. The minutes slipped by quickly. Singers' hands talked desperately and his narrow face was very pale. At last it was time for him to go. He held his friend by the arm and looked into his face in the way that he used to do when they parted each day before work. Antonapoulos stared at him drowsily and did not move. Singer left the room with his hands stuffed hard into his pockets.²⁴⁸

Thanks to the fulfilment of his own desire to communicate on his own terms, i.e. sign language, Singer refuses to acknowledge the obvious one-sidedness of his interactions with Antonapoulos, who barely shows any reactions at all. This is underlined even further in a later part of the novel:

The fact that Antonapoulos could not read did not prevent Singer from writing to him. He had always known that his friend was unable to make out the meaning of words on papers, but as the months went by he began to imagine that perhaps he had been mistaken, that perhaps Antonapoulos only kept his knowledge of letters a secret from everyone. Also, it

²⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 72-73.

was possible there might be a deaf-mute at the asylum who could read his letters and then explain them to his friend. He thought of several justifications for his letter, for he always felt a great need to write to his friend when he was bewildered or sad. Once written, however, these letters were never mailed. He cut out the comic strips from the morning and evening papers and sent them to his friend each Sunday. And every month he mailed a postal money order. But the long letters he wrote to Antonopoulos accumulated in his pockets until he would destroy them.²⁴⁹

Desperate for meaningful human interaction, Singer deludes himself into justifying and idealizing his relationship with Antonopoulos, instead of aiming for closer contact with his visitors, because the language barrier of his deafness and their hearing ability seems like an unbridgeable, cultural gap.

Something similar can be said about the characters of Doctor Copeland and Jake. They both share certain political ideals, but clash repeatedly during discussions, because they contextualize them through different social experiences – Copeland as a Black man and Jake as a white socialist – and are unable to take on the other's perspective. In a scene where they try to come up with ideas on how to combat injustice and implement real social change, this is conceptualized by the two characters ending their discussion in a bitter argument, even though they previously agreed on multiple political and social subjects:

Doctor Copeland coughed and spat into one of the squares of paper which he kept beneath his pillow. 'I have a program. It is a very simple, concentrated plan. I mean to focus on only one objective. In August of this year I plan to lead more than one thousand Negroes in this country on a march. A march to Washington. All of us together in one solid body. If you will look in the cabinet yonder you will see a stack of letters which I have written this week and will deliver personally.' Doctor Copeland slid his nervous hands up and down the sides of the narrow bed. 'You remember what I said to you a short while ago? You will recall that my only advice to you was: Do not attempt to stand alone.'

[...]

Jake rose to his feet and stood stiffly at the foot of the bed. He said flatly: 'No. That's not the right angle at all. I'm dead sure it's not. In the first place, you'd never get out of town. They'd break it up by saying it's a menace to public health – or some such trumped-up reason.'

²⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 163.

They'd arrest you and nothing would come of it. But even if by some miracle you got to Washington it wouldn't do any good. Why, the whole notion is crazy.'

The sharp rattle of phlegm sounded in Doctor Copeland's throat. His voice was harsh. 'As you are so quick to sneer and condemn, what do you have to offer instead?'

'I didn't sneer,' Jake said. 'I only remarked that your plan is crazy. I come here tonight with an idea much better than that. I wanted your son, Willie, and the other two boys to let me push them around in a wagon. They were to tell what happened to them and afterward I was to tell why. In other words, I was to give a talk on the dialectics of capitalism – and show up all of its lies. I would explain so that everyone would understand *why* those boys' legs were cut off. And make everyone who saw them *know*.'

'Pshaw! Double pshaw!' said Doctor Copeland furiously. 'I do not believe you have good sense. If I were a man who felt it worth my while to laugh I would surely laugh at that. Never have I had the opportunity to hear of such nonsense first hand.'

They stared at each other in bitter disappointment and anger. There was the rattle of a wagon in the street outside. Jake swallowed and bit his lips. 'Huh!' he said finally. 'You're the only one who's crazy. You got everything exactly backward. The only way to solve the Negro problem under capitalism is to geld every one of the fifteen million black men in these states.'

'So that is the kind of idea you harbor beneath your ranting about justice.'

'I didn't say it should be done. I only said you couldn't see the forest for the trees.' Jake spoke with slow and painful care. 'The work has to start at the bottom. The old traditions smashed and the new ones created. To forge a whole new pattern for the world. To make man a social creature for the first time, living in an orderly and controlled society where he is not forced to be unjust in order to survive. A social tradition in which –'

Doctor Copeland clapped ironically. 'Very good,' he said. 'But the cotton must be picked before the cloth is made. You and your crackpot do-nothing theories can –'

'Hush! Who cares whether you and your thousand Negroes straggle up to that stinking cesspool of a place called Washington? What difference does it make? What do a few people matter – a few thousand people, black, white, good or bad? When the whole of our society is built on a foundation of black lies.'

'Everything!' Doctor Copeland panted. 'Everything! Everything!'

'Nothing!'

'The soul of the meanest and most evil of us on this earth is worth more in the sight of justice than –'

'Oh, the Hell with it!', Jake said. 'Balls!'

'Blasphemer!' screamed Doctor Copeland. 'Foul blasphemer!'

Jake shook the iron bars of the bed. The vein in his forehead swelled to the point of bursting and his face was dark with rage. ‘Short-sighted bigot!’

‘White –’ Doctor Copeland’s voice failed him. He struggled and no sound would come. At last he was able to bring forth a choked whisper: ‘Fiend.’

The bright yellow morning was at the window. Doctor Copeland’s head fell back on the pillow. His neck twisted at a broken angle, a fleck of bloody foam on his lips. Jake looked at him once before, sobbing with violence, he rushed headlong from the room.²⁵⁰

Once Doctor Copeland and Jake move beyond establishing their similar interest in and view of social activism, they present their different plans for how to translate their theories into practice in a fascinating moment where McCullers appears to ‘predict’ two vital moments of the real-life Civil Rights Movement in her novel, which was first published in 1940: The March on Washington led by Dr. King and the national outrage sparked by the public display of Emmett Till’s mutilated body. However, despite obvious differences in opinion, the argument escalades rapidly almost out of nowhere, ending in a rageful screaming match, which effectively silences the Black party. Off-handed remarks voicing criticism clumsily are taken as personal insults as the two characters’ need to ‘be heard’, i.e. paid attention to, overwhelms them, making a rational exchange of viewpoints with the aim of reaching a compromise impossible; they are ‘speaking different languages’, therefore preventing them from combining their intellectual efforts for the betterment of their respective communities. Using language and communication as narrative key themes, McCullers’ novel is thus an insightful commentary on how perceived differences may lead to loneliness, which in turn can become an inescapable cycle of social isolation – and a community made up of isolated individuals unable to ‘stand together’ cannot focus its collective efforts towards lasting social and political change in the hopes of combatting injustice.

The approach Southern Gothic texts like the ones discussed here take towards the idea of language as a powerful element of social and ideological discourse may differ in practice from the one found in the dystopian genre, but their basic critical stance on it is very much alike.

As an extension of the use of language and the subsequent control of knowledge, history itself takes on a distinct role in both dystopian and Southern Gothic narratives too. In Chapter

²⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 238-240.

6 of *Dark Horizons*, Baccolini focuses on the relationship between Dystopia and history, stating that the former is immediately rooted in the latter, as the genre functions as a warning to readers about the possible outcomes of present tendencies, the argument being that if the dystopian narrative is located in a negatively deformed future of our own world, it appears as a critique of history itself – the history the dystopian writer's society is shaped by in particular.²⁵¹

Quoting a theory by Jean Pfaelzer, Baccolini describes how exactly Dystopia critiques history: Most texts portray a so called “historical collapse”, a sort of “regression” to a previous time”,²⁵² showing the ways in which our present may negatively evolve while also suggesting that history may not be as progressive as it is often understood to be. In this way “dystopias show a profound interest in history and, more precisely, its control”²⁵³ mostly by depicting the knowledge of history and memory as strictly controlled by those in command as a form of oppression, for example through the erasure of memory as a method to fabricate a single, hegemonic discourse. As a consequence they have the potential to become instruments of resistance within the narrative: Baccolini states that in order to gain control of the future and present, i.e. to improve their society's conditions, the protagonist has to gain control over the past first; this also includes a new understanding of the present through the context of its past.²⁵⁴ Orwell sums this concept up in *1984*: “Who controls the past [...] controls the future: who controls the present controls the past.”²⁵⁵ Huxley makes a similar statement when the upper-class citizens in *Brave New World* proclaim that “history is bunk”.²⁵⁶ This is possibly one reason as to why dystopian regimes are often portrayed as having banned things such as art, and cultural practices, since these indicate a history beyond their influence.

As Baccolini points out, the presence of memory and history, especially the recovery of both, “is an important element for the survival of hope”²⁵⁷ in many Critical Dystopias as well. As the authoritarian, hegemonic discourse in these works shapes the narrative surrounding history to the point that even individual memory is affected, personal recollection becomes

²⁵¹ Baccolini: *Memory and Reconciliation*, p. 114.

²⁵² *Ibid.*

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁵ Orwell, George: 1984. London: Penguin Books 2008, p. 37.

²⁵⁶ Huxley, Aldous: *Brave New World*. Stuttgart: Reclam 1992, p. 57.

²⁵⁷ Baccolini: *Memory and Reconciliation*, p. 115.

the first necessary step for collective action;²⁵⁸ Atwood portrays this in *The Handmaid's Tale* when Offred begins recording her memories of the past and everyday life as an act of rebellion and empowerment. These acts do not, however, culminate in a 'happy ending' – the utopian ideal found within Critical Dystopias is maintained by showing knowledge as responsibility, not simply happiness. Where in classical dystopian narratives utopian hope is only available to the reader outside of the text itself, their critical counterparts often feature open endings with it remaining intact for the characters as well, but the condition the protagonists are left with is one of awareness and responsibility, which doesn't leave much room for happiness despite the presence of utopian hope. Instead, they are accompanied by a sense of regret and missed opportunity, ending Critical Dystopian texts on a utopian, but nonetheless emotionally conflicting, note. Baccolini argues that these two concepts aren't contradictory, but mutually beneficial:

It is in the acceptance of one's responsibility and accountability, often worked through memory and the recovery of the past, that we bring the past into a living relationship with the present and may thus begin to lay the foundations for utopian change.²⁵⁹

In the same chapter in which she explains these ideas found in dystopian narratives, she also identifies their roots as the connection between memory and emancipation, and forgetting and loss in Western philosophy. Memory as an act of resistance is thematized by Adorno – amongst others – when he recognizes the liquidation of memory, time and recollection as a defining act of an advancing bourgeois society.²⁶⁰ Marcuse goes further when he argues that in a society where remembrance is perceived as a dangerous and subversive mode of dissociation from the officially sanctioned facts, memory helps break the hegemonic historical discourse, while its erasure leads to the one-dimensionality of the modern world.²⁶¹ Additionally, the association of remembrance with hope, which can be traced to the essays of Walter Benjamin, is considered by Baccolini a key feature of the Critical Dystopia and highlights that a society "incapable of recollection, recognition and remembrance is without

²⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 119.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 130.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 118.

²⁶¹ Ibid.

hope for the future, as it shows no concern for the silenced histories of the oppressed, marginalized and dispossessed”.²⁶²

This latter theory is especially relevant when applying it to the US-American South. Struggling with the responsibility of its own history involving racial violence, the dominant discourse surrounding it often prioritizes forgetting the past for the supposed sake of moving on from it. Official institutions such as public educational facilities rarely engage with the subject of slavery and racism in the complex manner necessary to truly understand its consequences; this is reflected for instance in the push for legislation banning Critical Race Theory from schools, which has gained traction over the past few years.²⁶³

But apart from the systemic consequences of a failure to remember, recollect and recognize, as Benjamin put it, the social issues resulting from this are often unseen and even more difficult to identify. They are a possible factor for the cultural and social divide prevalent in the South, because it is an example of a society in which not all social groups are privy to the same historical knowledge or memory, as it is censored in favor of a controlled narrative. Consequently, different social groups learn of it partially through the context of ideologies passed down from previous generations – thus the beliefs held by the same people who participated in said history may remain largely unchanged years later. Because of this varying historical memory, different communities are often unable to find common ground on which to build a shared identity. The South shows possible signs of this social fragmentation, since the same communities that descended from the victims of slavery and still suffer from systemic racial inequality, share a geographical, political, social and cultural space with communities who are descendants of the perpetrators and partially hold onto this historical past as a better time, which is a belief described by Baccolini to be caused by historical amnesia combined with nostalgia and identified by her as the origin of anti-utopian tendencies.²⁶⁴

The literary landscape is shaped by these circumstances just as much as the political one. The incomplete or even altered recollection of history in the South is most likely partially behind the extensive lists of banned books found in states belonging to the region, which

²⁶² Ibid., p. 118.

²⁶³ Schwartz, Sarah: Map. Where Critical Race Theory Is Under Attack. In: EducationWeek. <https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/map-where-critical-race-theory-is-under-attack/2021/06/2021>, 25.01.2025.

²⁶⁴ Baccolini: Memory and Reconciliation, p. 118.

consist of socially conscious and critical works such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye*²⁶⁵ – both of which confront audiences with the legacy of slavery and are incidentally considered a part of the Southern Gothic genre.

As such, the shaping of collective memory by a dominant discourse described by Baccolini within the context of dystopian texts is present in Southern Gothic narratives as well, although mostly in the way of reflecting the real life tendencies observed by Southern writers in their social and political surroundings; thus the act of reclaiming collective memory in Southern Gothic literature is less a quest for lost or hidden knowledge, as it is in dystopian works, but more of a recovery of the suppressed fragments of a shared history the characters are nonetheless conscious of.

Furthermore, the concept of a 'historical collapse', as Pfaelzer calls it, i.e. the regression of a dystopian society to a previous time, which shows how the present may evolve into a negative future, is used for a similar purpose in the Southern Gothic as well: Despite most stories taking place in a time recognizable as the past of the author's society, many texts treat this chronological setting rather vaguely; known events or other indicators for the specific time are rarely mentioned in Southern Gothic works. As a result the period the characters find themselves in becomes so undefined that it takes on the characteristics of a chronological limbo, where the past exerts so much influence over the present that they seemingly intermingle; moreover, the phenomenon of the past becoming almost indistinguishable from the present within the narrative may even extend beyond the text: Once the conditions criticized by the Southern Gothic author in their work are presented as transcending simple categories such as past, present and future, they are not only identified within their own environment, but the reader's as well, despite their chronological distance. To summarize, instead of the present evolving into a negative future through the control of the past – as is shown in most dystopian works –, a negative past is shown as having influence over the present and ultimately the future, because it is repressed. In this vein, many Southern Gothic narratives are interested in revealing history, its traumas and legacy in the form of collective remembrance, to gain an understanding of the circumstances prevailing in the present and thus allowing for potential change in the future.

²⁶⁵ Watson, Amy: Number of books banned in school classrooms and libraries in the United States from July 1, 2023 to June 30, 2024, by state. In: Statista, 03.12.2024.
<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1310288/school-book-bans-us-by-state/>, 28.01.2025.

One of the most interesting examples of this is Morrison's *Beloved*, in which the ghost of the protagonist Sethe's lost child symbolizes the re-emergence of suppressed trauma, mirrored in the passages of characters regaining suppressed memories of their own tragic pasts. As mentioned before, the term 'rememory' is used throughout the novel and describes the act of 'remembering memories' of past traumas, which differs from simply remembering past events. The text doesn't reveal these in chronological order nor in a way that is narratively fully coherent to the reader, but rather alludes to them through increasingly convoluted mental images and impressionistic descriptions of the characters' emotional states; this stylistic technique allows Morrison to highlight the inability of language to represent trauma²⁶⁶ and the fragmentation of the victim's mind. In *Beloved*, Sethe herself recognizes how unprompted and out of her control memories often are, highlighting that danger lies in recollection:

Unfortunately her brain was devious. She might be hurrying across a field, running practically, to get to the pump quickly and rinse the chamomile sap from her legs. Nothing else would be on her mind. The picture of the men coming to nurse her was as lifeless as the nerves in her back where the skin buckled like a washboard. Nor was there the faintest scent of ink or the cherry gum and oak bark from which it was made. Nothing. Just the breeze cooling her face as she rushed toward water. And then sopping the chamomile away with pump water and rags, her mind fixed on getting every last bit of sap off – on her carelessness in taking a short-cut across the field just to save half a mile, and not noticing how high the weeds had grown until the itching was all the way to her knees. Then something. The splash of water, the sight of her shoes and stockings awry on the path where she had flung them; or Here Boy lapping in the puddle near her feet, and suddenly there was Sweet Home rolling, rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes, although there was not a leaf on that farm that did not make her want to scream, it rolled itself out before her in shameless beauty. It never looked as terrible as it was and it made her wonder if hell was a pretty place too. Fire and brimstone all right, but hidden in lacy groves. Boys hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world. It shamed her – remembering the wonderful soughing trees rather

²⁶⁶ The idea of language being inadequate to represent trauma is prevalent with a number of trauma theorists, such as Cathy Caruth, as well. She goes into detail with regards to this in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*.

than the boys. Try as she might to make it otherwise, the sycamores beat out the children every time and she could forgive her memory for that.²⁶⁷

In the novel the characters are only able to exorcise the ghost and help Sethe's family after re-uniting as a community, because they have confronted themselves with the memories of their trauma, breaking a cycle of regret, shame and isolation. Here the concept of 'rememory' may be more complex than the idea of memory in dystopian texts, but they still serve the same goal of exemplifying the potential of history to evolve into violence and oppression rather than progress, if the knowledge of the past is either lost, changed or repressed.

On another note, history and the collective memory of it could be considered one of Faulkner's main themes in his novel *Absalom, Absalom!*, a family saga told through multiple perspectives serving as a sort of retelling of the Southern plantation aristocracy's history. The fragmented revelation of past events prominent in *Beloved* features here as well, as they are told out of order and by multiple different characters, with accounts often contradicting each other. Here Faulkner illustrates through his writing the disjointed experience of living in a society that represses, censors, and reshapes its own history in favor of a dominant discourse determined by political agendas. Facts about the past are few in the novel, with no two characters agreeing on them fully; just as different communities in the South are unable to connect culturally, because they base their ideas of the present on different accounts of the past, the characters seem to work against each other socially – sometimes on purpose, other times involuntarily – due to their differing perspectives. As a result, they are unable to share a collective memory of the past, leaving no hope for a future of social unity and positive change.

It becomes apparent then, that dystopian and Southern Gothic texts share a profound interest in language, history, and memory and how these play into the different conditions of a society, highlighting again the function of social analysis and criticism, which is inherent in both genres, appearing in similar narrative techniques despite obvious differences in terms of focus, structure, and style.

²⁶⁷ Morrison: *Beloved*, p. 6-7.

CONCLUSION: “IT’S ALL NOW YOU SEE.”

“It’s all now you see. Yesterday won’t be over until tomorrow and tomorrow began ten thousand years ago.”²⁶⁸ Serving as inspiration for the title of this thesis, this quote by William Faulkner summarizes what both the Dystopia and the Southern Gothic are essentially about, namely the present, be it the characters’, the author’s or the reader’s. Precisely by avoiding a direct address of it in their narratives, these texts thematize its most prominent deficits and its near endless potential, positive or negative, highlighting the interconnectedness of past, present and future.

To summarize the findings discussed here, the Dystopia is not only a group of texts that share a similar treatment of a futuristic setting guided by pessimistic speculation, but a genre focused on the complex, often metafictional discourse on politics, culture and social issues, which the works reflect in their narratives on both the structural and the thematic level. The possible origin of this interest in critical commentary, which makes it unique within the larger category of Science Fiction it is often associated with, lies with the slave narrative and its objective to connect fictional storytelling and actual history. This relationship is mirrored when the genetic heritage of both the slave narrative and the Southern Gothic genre as Southern US-American literatures is scrutinized and further investigation reveals, how many commonalities there are between dystopian and Southern Gothic narratives, owing to their status as ‘quotations’ of slave narratives.

To put it briefly, despite certain aesthetic differences, dystopian and Southern Gothic texts prove to be far more connected than it may appear thanks to a number of common practices and conventions. Beginning with the structural similarities, such as basic narrative patterns, the use of techniques like defamiliarization and an interest in genre blurring, both genres show a focus on social commentary and critique which they make a part of their narrative forms themselves, instead of confining it solely to the plot and story. This criticism becomes more specific after analyzing some thematic aspects found in both literatures, for instance the ways in which the texts engage with the subjects of class, race and gender and the roles taken up by religion, technology and language, amongst others. The theory of Dystopia and the Southern Gothic stemming from the tradition of the slave narratives gains credibility thanks to the detailed examination and comparison of the two literatures’ narrative

²⁶⁸ Faulkner, William: *Intruder in the Dust*. London: Vintage 1996, p. 189.

conventions and key themes. Lastly, the significant amount of dystopian and Southern Gothic works addressed in this thesis as examples is testament to the fact that the stated intention of social criticism is in both cases a marker of the entire genre, not only a handful of specific texts.

Once again, be it certain similarities in narrative structures or parallel themes explored with similar intent, the dystopian and Southern Gothic genres share a remarkable number of commonalities despite appearing to be two completely separate literary phenomena devoid of any obvious connection. But once the reader moves past any superficial differences, a deeper analysis reveals great comparative potential, which leads to the realization that these works stem from roughly the same tradition of socially conscious fiction written as a form of critical commentary regarding systemic issues a given community faces. With history and the reactionary forms of texts it gave rise to serving as a catalyst, writers may have taken liberties with certain aspects of the stories they authored like time or setting, but the core of such narratives remains the same: A focused determination to dissect the cultural and political practices a society engages in with the goal to reveal the underlying problems to the reader through the literary form of fiction as a metaphorical exercise.

The close comparison between Dystopia and the Southern Gothic beyond perceived differences shows how productive a re-contextualization and re-interpretation of seemingly unrelated texts, which are often confined to the margins of the classical Western literary canon, truly is. Scholars should be encouraged to re-visit previously analyzed works with a new perspective through the critical lens of other traditions and genres, as this may lead to interesting revelations regarding our understanding of the cultural impact a given literary phenomenon possibly has. Additionally, the link between the dystopian and the Southern Gothic genres as having evolved from the tradition of the slave narrative, and thus being closely related to historical and cultural criticism, suggests that works which have previously not been considered socially conscious may be found to be much more focused on systemic issues found in real life than they seem. Genres and similar categorizations based on aesthetics and form could be re-evaluated and organized into classifications based on function, intent or other factors relating to a deeper interpretation of the texts beyond their surface appearance.

The aim of this thesis is to highlight how the practice of social criticism may take on exceedingly differing shapes within literary fiction and what these may reveal about the ways

in which authors engage with their surroundings. Whereas the Dystopia is already considered a critical type of text in many academic circles, the Southern Gothic has not been considered as such to the same extent and by exhibiting the considerable parallels between the two, the latter will hopefully gain a similar status as a socially critical and culturally conscious literary genre.

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