Southern Gothic Literature: A Good Man Is Hard To Find, Good Country People, And A Rose For Emily

Literature consists of a variety of categories. Whether it is a classic historic novel or an uplifting comedy, literature is broad and full of exquisite genres. Southern Gothic literature is a genre whose stories are dark, and it explores profound and dark. “A Good Man is Hard to Find,' “Good Country People,' and “A Rose for Emily” are examples of Southern Gothic literature. In an article written about the elements and what Southern Gothic Literature entails, it states, “Characteristics of Southern Gothic include the presence of irrational, horrific, and transgressive thoughts, desires, and impulses; grotesque characters; dark humor, and an overall angst-ridden sense of alienation. While related to both the English and American Gothic tradition, Southern Gothic is uniquely rooted in the South’s tensions and aberrations” (Bjerre 1). In each of the short stories, one of these characteristics may be more evident to a reader, but there is usually more than one present. Southern Gothic Literature contains many pieces. With its geographical focus, primarily on the South, it tells stories in a setting that is real and easier to identify. “The United States may not have had old castles in which writers could place their Gothic romances, but after the Civil War, the many often ruined or decaying plantations and mansions in the South became uncanny locations for Gothic stories about sins, secrets, and the “haunting history” of the South” (Bjerre 3). These stories have depth, and they often journey into dark and surreal events, but when dissected, some of these pieces such as social issues, grotesque, and isolation can be relatable to the reader. In “A Good Man is Hard to Find,' “Good Country People,' and “A Rose for Emily,' Southern Gothic Literature is portrayed beautifully through characters, settings, and storylines to provide uniquely relevant messages.

Flannery O’Connor is famously known for her works in Southern Gothic Literature. One of her most famous being, “A Good Man is Hard to Find,' which shares the story of how a road trip through the South turns dark and deadly. The characters appear quite disturbed. O’Connor has a way of making the antagonist of the story not much different from the assumed protagonist. “O’Connor’s short story “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” provides important insight into the mysteries of human existence as well as revealing truths that extend beyond what O’Connor perhaps intended' (Mitchell 212). In a subtle, yet clear manner, she provides the right dialogue and situations to reveal certain traits of her characters. For example, the two main characters are the grandmother and the Misfit. The interaction between the two characters is short, yet it is meaningful when trying to comprehend the story. The Misfit is obviously a disturbing character, his name representing his place in society, and his violence, brutality of his words supports his name. On the other hand, the grandmother appears to be a kind elderly countrywoman. The Misfit is aware of the wrong he has committed, and he not only acknowledges it, but he accepts his actions. The grandmother is unaware of her shortcomings. Throughout their conversation, she repeatedly tells him he is a good man, and he must have come from a nice family and would never harm a lady, “You’ve got good blood! I know you wouldn’t shoot a lady! I know you come from nice people. Pray! Jesus, you ought not to shoot a lady. I’ll give you all the money I’ve got!” (O’Connor). She also kept mentioning praying and simply saying things around the line of, 'If you would pray,' the old lady said, 'Jesus would help you'(O’Connor). The grandmother witnesses her family being taken away by criminals to be murdered, yet she can only think of herself and how she is going to manipulate her way out of the situation. The grandmother is brainwashed by her false sense of place in her southern society. She does not

see evil right in front of her. “The story’s journey is a carefully organized argument depicting the extent and the limitations of the transformation of the South into commodified cliché. The story’s final encounter with the Misfit is one in which this argument culminates in a dialectical synthesis of the mean- as in petty- Grandmother, and the mean- as in cruel- Misfit. Together, they find moral good and valuable meaning beyond the world of goods and means” (Link 125). O’Connor has these two opposing characters, representing two different societal issues, overshadow the violence and death in front of them.

In another short story representing the Southern Gothic Literature style, O'Connor explores the grotesque, social issues, and the element of deceit. In the story 'Good Country People,' a girl legally changes her name from Joy to Hulga because she feels her intellectual ability is superior to others, and she does not want a name that represents beauty. In Southern culture, the appearance of a lady is important and above everything else, and unfortunately, Hulga has an artificial leg. In an article about the influence of a Southern woman’s appearance in this genre of literature, Miller writes, “These characters adopt an ugly appearance in order to opt out of the rigid expectations of southern gender roles: that they will conduct themselves in ways amenable to attracting appropriate male attention, marrying, and spending their time primarily as caregivers for their families” (Miller 437). The social rebellion from Hulga is not the only Southern Gothic element in this story. Hulga’s mother meets a Bible salesman, Manley Pointer, and she invites him for dinner after he lies and tells her he has a heart condition. He meets with Hulga one day and, he seduces her. When she kisses Manley, she begins to see and feel another part of life she has not imagined. Hulga believes she is only an intellect, and she is unwilling to connect with others on any other level. She fanaticizes about love she has never felt; however, Manley steels her prosthetic leg and reveals himself as a proud con-artist. This seemingly good Christian man tells Hulga her leg will not be the first of his odd collections, “I've got a lot of interesting things .... One time I got a woman's glass eye this way” (O'Connor 18). Hulga is devastated, 'Her face was almost purple. 'You’re a Christian!' she hissed. 'You’re a fine Christian! You’re just like them all – say one thing and do another. You’re a perfect Christian, you’re...'"(O'Connor 18). This traumatic scene is why O’Connor’s stories exemplify Southern Gothic Literature. “It is in the climax of her stories and novels that the characters—and readers—get a brief glimpse of the mystery O’Connor alludes to, of the possibility of redemption or salvation. But as the stories show, redemption often comes at a terrible price' (Bjerre 10). A Bible salesman who is now exposed as the most grotesque character and an unexpected desire that surfaced then fades with the harshness of Southern Gothic literature is what Flannery O’Connor achieves through her stories and characters.

One of the most qualified stories of Southern Gothic Literature is, “A Rose for Emily” written by William Faulkner. It is well known for its themes of isolation, decay, and the unsettling state of mind of Emily Grierson. When discussing this story, an article on Southern Gothic Literature states, “The story’s themes of necrophilia, sin, and secrecy mark it as obviously Gothic, yet Richard Gray argues that it also 'offers an unerring insight into repression and the revenge of the repressed.' Emily’s actions should be seen as 'a perverse reaction to the pressures of a stiflingly patriarchal society,' ...“ultimately, a measure of the extremity of her condition, the degree of her imprisonment” (Bjerre 7&8). This touches on the first and primary element that Faulkner wants to be witnessed throughout this story, isolation. When Emily’s father dies, her isolation becomes normal to the townspeople. Her isolation causes her disconnection of reality and her troubling mental health to intensify. Emily’s father is very respected in the community, but he is demanding and constantly drives suitors away from Emily, which causes inevitably loneliness for her. When her father dies, she feels desperation for companionship. In her

personal life, 'Emily reproduces the pattern of this social myth by twice keeping at home the bodies of dead loved ones while refusing to acknowledge their deaths--death being the primary consequence of the Fall, which abolished paradise. We are told that she did this with her father, and apparently she did the same with her lover' (Dilworth 253). Along with isolation in this story, an important personification is the decay of the House. The house was beautiful and envied by the town, but it quickly turns to an unpleasant and often smelly mess, “But garages and cotton gins had encroached and obliterated even the august names of that neighborhood; only Miss Emily’s house was left, lifting its stubborn and coquettish decay above the cotton wagons and the gasoline pumps—an eyesore among eyesores (Faulkner). The decay of the house is a personification of Emily. She continues to decay as does the house. Even when her death is described, it is almost as if she is being described as part of the house, “She died in one of the downstairs rooms, in a heavy walnut bed with a curtain, her gray head propped on a pillow yellow and moldy with age and lack of sunlight” (Faulkner). Poison, decay, and death add to the grotesque elements of the ironic ending. Incorporating Southern ideals, social norms, and a town and family who has not 'reconstructed' after the Civil War, Faulkner's Emily represents the dying Southern belle character.

All Southern Gothic Literature have similar themes, characters, and settings that are representative of the social values and norms of the time. Each of the short stories shared are thematically dark, isolated settings, grotesque characters, death or dying, and characters who are different than what his or her appearance portrays. Although the settings and stories are different, each maintains a similarity exhibited through its Southern Gothic culture. Literature is a way of expression, but it is also a means of educating readers about society. “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” “Good Country People,” and “A Rose for Emily” represent Southern Gothic culture through a literary sense.