



Hacettepe University Graduate School of Social Sciences

Department of American Culture and Literature

**THE GREAT DEPRESSION IN TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY
SOUTHERN GOTHIC NOVELS: JOE LANSDALE'S *THE
BOTTOMS*, RON RASH'S *SERENA*, AND JULIA FRANKS' *OVER
THE PLAIN HOUSES***

Furkan YAMAN

Master's Thesis

Ankara, 2023

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KABUL VE ONAY

Furkan Yaman tarafından hazırlanan “The Great Depression in Twenty-first Century Southern Gothic Novels: Joe Lansdale’s *The Bottoms*, Ron Rash’s *Serena*, and Julia Franks’ *Over the Plain Houses*” başlıklı bu çalışma, 29 Kasım 2023 tarihinde yapılan savunma sınavı sonucunda başarılı bulunarak jürimiz tarafından Yüksek Lisans Tezi olarak kabul edilmiştir.

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ETİK BEYAN

Bu alıřmadaki bütn bilgi ve belgeleri akademik kurallar erevesinde elde ettiđimi, grsel, iřitsel ve yazılı tm bilgi ve sonuları bilimsel ahlak kurallarına uygun olarak sunduđumu, kullandıđım verilerde herhangi bir tahrifat yapmadıđımı, yararlandıđım kaynaklara bilimsel normlara uygun olarak atıfta bulunduđumu, tezimin kaynak gsterilen durumlar dıřında zgn olduđunu, Dr. đr. yesi, Zeynep Aya Germen danıřmanlıđında tarafımdan retildiđini ve Hacettepe niversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstits Tez Yazım Ynergesine gre yazıldıđını beyan ederim.

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ÖZET

YAMAN, Furkan. *21. Yüzyıl Güney Gotiği Romanlarında Büyük Buhran: Joe Lansdale'in The Bottoms, Ron Rash'in Serena ve Julia Franks'in Over the Plain Houses Eserleri*, Yüksek Lisans Tezi, Ankara, 2023.

Edebi bir tür olan Güney Gotiği, 20. yüzyılda Güney'in belli başlı toplumsal, ekonomik, ırksal ve cinsiyet rolleri konularındaki sorunları ve şiddet yanlısı sapkın karakterlerin dehşet verici eylemlerini konu alır. 21. yüzyılda Güney Gotiği türünde yazılmış eserler ise türün geleneksel anlatımlarını değişmeceli olarak kullanarak ve tersyüz ederek emekçi sınıfın problemlerini, çevre sömürüsü ve cinsiyete dayalı ayrımcılık gibi günümüz Güney'ine ait çeşitli konuları ele alır ve böylelikle türün geleneksel özellikleriyle günümüz gerçeklerini bağdaştırır. Çağdaş Güney Gotiği türünde yazılan eserlerin en önemli ayırıcı niteliklerinden biri bu eserlerde yoksulluğun ve yoksul Güneylilerin temsil edilme biçimidir. Geleneksel Güney Gotiği türündeki eserler çoğunlukla yoksulluğu canavarlaştırıp, yoksulları eğitimsiz ve zekası kıt insanlar olarak gösterirken, çağdaş Güney Gotiği'nin çoğu yazarı, emekçi sınıfına ait olmaları ya da yoksulluk çekmelerinden dolayı yoksul insanlara ve yoksulluğa karşı daha gerçekçi ve anlayışlı bir tutum takınır. Bu tezde, üç Güneyli yazarın üç romanı, Joe Lansdale'in *The Bottoms* (2000), Ron Rash'in *Serena* (2007) ve Julia Franks'in *Over the Plain Houses* (2016) çağdaş Güney Gotiği türünde yazılan romanlar olarak ele alınmakta ve türün geleneksel özellikleriyle benzerlikleri ve karşıtlıkları incelenmektedir. Söz konusu üç yazarın birleştiği ana nokta Büyük Buhran dönemine dönerek yoksulluk olgusunun altını çizmek ve böylelikle Büyük Buhran'ın yer verilmediği klasik Güney Gotiğin'nden farklı olarak temsil edilmemiş ya da yanlış temsil edilmiş yoksul Güneylilerin deneyimlerini ve öykülerini sahiplenmektir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Güney, Gotik, Büyük, Buhran, Çağdaş, Yoksulluk.

ABSTRACT

YAMAN, Furkan. *The Great Depression in Twenty-first Century Southern Gothic Novels: Joe Lansdale's The Bottoms, Ron Rash's Serena, and Julia Franks' Over the Plain Houses*, Master's Thesis, Ankara, 2023.

As a literary genre, Southern Gothic focuses on the major social, economic, racial and gender role issues of the South in the twentieth century and the horrifying acts of violent and perverted characters. Southern Gothic works written in the twenty-first century, however, present the problems of the contemporary South such as the issues of the working-class, environmental exploitation and gender-based discrimination by making use of and subverting the conventional Southern Gothic tropes, thus blending contemporary issues with the conventional characteristics of the genre. One of the most distinctive qualities of the contemporary Southern Gothic works is the way they represent poverty and the poverty-stricken Southerners. Conventional Southern Gothic works often demonize poverty and depict the poor as uneducated and dim-witted monsters, whereas many authors of contemporary Southern Gothic adapt a more genuine and sympathetic stance towards poverty and impoverished people as they themselves belong to the working-class and/or experienced financial hardships. In this thesis, three works by three Southern authors, *The Bottoms* (2000) by Joe Lansdale, *Serena* (2007) by Ron Rash, and *Over the Plain Houses* (2016) by Julia Franks are discussed as contemporary Southern Gothic novels and are analyzed by comparing and contrasting them with the established conventions of the genre. The common ground on which these three novels meet is returning to the timeframe of the Great Depression to underscore the issue of poverty and thus, unlike the canonical Southern Gothic works in which the Great Depression does not occupy a significant place, to reclaim the experiences and the stories of the poor Southerners who were misrepresented or not represented at all.

Key Words: Southern, Gothic, Great, Depression, Contemporary, Poverty.

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INTRODUCTION

Beginning from the colonial era with the first settlers, southern regions and the life in these regions have been the subjects of many literary texts. While the term “Southern literature” meant any text which was produced by a Southerner and about the South, in time it came to refer to texts which were products of distinct Southern voices. In the course of its nearly half-millennium history, one of the most significant milestones for Southern Literature was the Southern Literary Renaissance in the early twentieth century. Writers and critics of the Renaissance took a critical stance toward the history, society, and political, social, racial, and economic state of the South. The culmination of the efforts to bring the problems of the South to the surface in literature was Southern Gothic.

In particular, starting from the 1920s, Southern Gothic revolted against the “Lost Cause,” the literary trend of the time which was characterized by the white supremacist nostalgia for the Antebellum South. The Lost Cause authors romanticized the slave-master relationship in their works transforming the former African American slave “into the loyal sustainer and mourner of times gone by” (Mackethan 212). As Mackethan indicates, Lost Cause authors tried “to turn a defeated way of life into a substantial legend,” which the authors of Southern Gothic aimed to deconstruct and subvert (209). At its core, Southern Gothic was an attempt to develop a critical stance against the romanticized Old South myths such as the happy and healthy plantation family, contended slaves, Southern belle and gentleman, and fatherly plantation owner, which dominated Southern literature during and after the Reconstruction.

Though it shares some similarities with the European Gothic tradition, as the name suggests, Southern Gothic is the “southernized” version of Gothic. While in Gothic fiction the setting is usually a huge, dark castle with a foreboding host who dabbles in the occult or supernatural, in Southern Gothic the setting is usually a mansion, plantation, or forests, and swamps in which terrible events occur. In Gothic fiction, there are creatures like goblins, vampires, ghouls, and ghosts which haunt the characters and create suspense and horror, whereas in Southern Gothic characters are quite literally haunted by the history of the South. As Thomas Ærvold Bjerre also observes, “the region’s historical realities take

concrete forms in the shape of ghosts or grotesque figures” and torture the characters, reminding them of the horrors of the South as well as the horrors inside their own existence (3).

Southern Gothic works deal with racism, misogyny, sexism, violence, religious and social corruption, immorality, psychological and physical abuse in the South. In Miller’s words, the South, as a setting in Southern Gothic, is “defeated, impoverished, and cut off. It is a place outside the rational light of modern America” (2). It is the mixture of the untamed environment and landscape and unfiltered human beings trapped inside the “scene of the historical trauma of slavery, of the ruined rural economy, of the white colonizer” acting on their instincts and impulses (Miller 2). In the South of Southern Gothic literature, there is sexual perversion, religious oppression, psychological and physical abuse, racism and discrimination. It is an unforgiving and treacherous landscape filled with broken and barren plantations, dark and deep forests and swamps, sexism and misogyny and characters caught up in the horrendous past deeds of the South, of their families, and of themselves.

Southern Gothic characters are usually represented as people torn between their memories of the Old South and the reality of the New South. Some characters refuse to accept the New South and let go of their customs and traditions while some try to welcome the New South and its changes albeit reluctantly. Even though these characters are born in the South and live in the South, they feel displaced. They are tormented and haunted by the sinful past of their region, families and of themselves; nevertheless, they are unable to leave the South behind. As Crow argues, these characters try to “understand or escape the burden of Southern history” (148) which creates a great conflict both on collective and personal levels.

Aside from their collective and personal traumas, Southern Gothic characters are usually depicted with various mental illnesses. Characters with depression, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and crippling anxiety feel isolated and imprisoned both in their own minds and the South’s lifeless landscape. Violence, death, and destruction these characters bring to their lives and the lives of others destroy their

psyches in the process as well. Moreover, many Southern Gothic characters have troubled experiences in terms of sexuality. Body and gender dysmorphia, impotence, perversions, rape, racial and emotional connotations of the sexual act itself further confuse the characters' perception of their own sexuality leading to more frustration with themselves and others.

Although it became more popular during the first half of the twentieth century, the origins of Southern Gothic can be traced back to Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839). Although it does not explicitly take place in the South, the story serves as a crucial example of the genre as it contains many tropes, motifs, and themes which are recurrent in Southern Gothic works. "The Fall of the House of Usher" is built upon the theme of the traumatic burden of the past sins of ancestors pervading the lives of sons and daughters making them physically and psychologically ill. The bleak and grim depictions of the weather and the environment, physical and psychological decay of the house and its host, the narrator's and Roderick Usher's descent into madness, illness, death, and ghostly apparitions make the "The House of Usher" a blueprint for Southern Gothic.

After Reconstruction, Southern Literature is predominated by the plantation tradition and local color authors who glorify the Old South and the Confederacy and romanticize slavery while lamenting about the South's inevitable social, political, and economic change, specifically due to abolition and industrialism. The plantation tradition authors were nostalgic about the times of the Old South "when the manor houses were bright with fresh paint, and filled with cavaliers, and belles in hoop skirts" (Crow 145). They tried to revive a broken and highly delusional dream by using various untrue stereotypes such as the happy slave and morally good master, mammies and uncles telling stories and humbly residing in the plantation together in joyous harmony.

The plantation tradition is one of the pillars of the Lost Cause mythology and Thomas Nelson Page is arguably one of the most important contributors, and to some critics, the inventor of it (Kaplan 244). As Hagood states, most of Page's works "strategically deal with the past, before the Civil War, to soften antebellum sins" (140). His story entitled "No Haid Pawn" (1887) centers on the history of a plantation, the cursed plantation house,

and its cruel host. The story uses many Southern Gothic tropes like a ruined plantation, a dangerous swamp, bleak and grim weather, death, slavery, ghosts, slaves, cruel slave masters and their deeds. As Davison argues, “Pawn” is essentially a story that “exposes the violence and tremendous human costs of” slavery (60). At the end of the story the decaying plantation is burnt by a bolt of lightning, and it is lost to time with its secrets signifying Page’s reluctant acceptance of the fact that the Old South and its ideals are gone.

Before the Southern Literary Renaissance, themes that are related to the Southern Gothic can be found in the works of Grace King, George Washington Cable, Kate Chopin, and Charles Chesnutt. In Chopin’s “Desiree’s Baby” (1893), for example, the ironic heritage of the cruel master Armand topples his world which is wholly established by the ideals of the Old South. Both works center on racial violence and cruelty by those who support supremacist ideals. Therefore, it is possible to argue that the plantation tradition and the myths of the Old South begins to be challenged by various Southern authors in this era.

The challenge reaches its peak during the Southern Literary Renaissance in the 1920s with authors such as William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Tennessee Williams, Carson McCullers, Truman Capote, and Flannery O’Connor whose works are considered the finest and most enduring examples of Southern Gothic. Thematic concerns such as race, slavery, misogyny, moral and religious corruption, differences between the New and Old South, depictions of violence, grotesque and deranged characters, bleak and decaying settings, conflicted Southerners and complex dynamics of their Southern identities have become what many call the stable design for a Southern Gothic work. As Tunc points out, through Southern Gothic, these authors “examine their changing world” and present “the tension between old conventional values and the grotesque realities of the New South” (80).

William Faulkner is the most influential name in Southern Gothic whose novels and short stories, especially *The Sound and the Fury* (1926), *Sanctuary* (1931), *Light in August* (1932), and *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) quite literally defined the genre itself and inspired many authors of the next generations. The fictional setting called Yoknapatawpha County

which he employs in many of his novels is the epitome of the Southern Gothic setting. As Cleanth Brooks writes, in Yoknapatawpha County,

The population was richly diverse: old plantation families, some of them still living on their lands, others having moved into town; the poorer whites, many of them sturdy yeoman farmers, but others landless who worked farms on shares with the owners; still others the 'white trash,' looked down upon by the blacks as well as the other whites. (336)

Yoknapatawpha County represents a mixture of every story Faulkner heard from his parents and grandparents, every experience he had, and every element there is to the life in the South. It is a dark testament to the past, present and future of the South. Aside from the setting, Faulkner's once rich but now decaying plantation families like the Sutpens, the Compsons, and the Snopes, his characters such as Harry Sutpen and Quentin Compson, who represent the conflicted sentiments of a Southerner caught between his family values and the new values and swept inside a turmoil of their own personal and social isolation, have become pillars of the genre.

Despite Faulkner's influence, the Southern Gothic authors who came after him attempted to expand the genre's reach in terms of style and themes. As Crow argues, "[w]riters of Southern Gothic after Faulkner are much less concerned with the fall of the houses of the antebellum aristocrats" (149). Although it is not possible to pinpoint the exact point of turn or break from the Faulknerian Southern Gothic, it can be argued that after Faulkner, Southern Gothic moves towards a different path. While the works of Southern Gothic generally deal with the changing landscape of the South, the historical shackles which bound the characters to irrevocable shame and guilt, and the characters' perversities which coincide with the perversities of the South, the works of the post-Faulkner Southern Gothic delineate characters who feel displaced. Although they reside in the South, they are oblivious to its horrors which they encounter during their ventures into the swamps, forests, and mountains of the region they are from. At the same time, in some works, the protagonists become the sources of horror as they reveal the true face of the South to its inhabitants. The works of this era arguably contain some of the most physically violent and disturbing actions and imagery ever produced by Southern Gothic authors.

A crucial difference between the Faulknerian and post-Faulknerian Southern Gothic is the issue of “the other.” While in traditional Southern Gothic the mantle of other is racialized, in later works it is the rural mountaineer white trash who “[t]hrough inbreeding or genetic accident, . . . declines, reverts, becomes an unspeakable Other” (Crow 152). This other who “rises up in fury against unwary outsiders” (Crow 152) is present in James Dickey’s *Deliverance* (1970) which is one of the most prominent examples of the Post-Faulknerian Southern Gothic. In the novel, a group of friends go on a fishing trip in the North Georgia forests where they are captured and victimized by the mountain men, or as the stereotype suggests, hillbillies with their banjos, overalls and moonshines.

In the late twentieth-century Southern Gothic works, the source of horror is not the past sins of a plantation family, nor do they come from a decaying plantation house. For instance, in *Deliverance*, “the landscape itself becomes a haunted house” (Sivils 92). The Southern region of *Deliverance* is split into two parts and when one inhabitant crosses that line, they realize that they do not belong there. The group of friends gradually continue to descend down the river and deeper into the forest their canoe trip turns into a battle of wills between themselves and the mountain men. The use of wilderness as a place of unspeakable horrors and depravity instead of plantations or mansions makes *Deliverance* “a prime example of Southern Rural Gothic” (Crow 152).

Aside from *Deliverance* and Dickey, Cormac McCarthy is another vanguard of the Post-Faulknerian Southern Gothic with his sexually and physically violent Southern characters residing in the mountains and forests. Lester Ballard, the protagonist, in McCarthy’s *Child of God* (1973) is arguably one of the most prominent examples of the white trash who becomes “the other.” When Lester is thrown out of his house and forced to live in the woods, he gradually becomes more violent and deviant. After being falsely accused of rape and imprisoned, Lester wages a war against the community and starts a string of arson, rape, and murder. Similar to the hillbillies in *Deliverance*, Lester becomes a monster who dwells in the woods and inflicts horrors on clueless and innocent people. In these Southern Gothic texts, being white or a person of color does not determine one’s position in society or in the text for that matter.

As the scope of authors broadened in terms of race, gender, sexual orientation, and social background, the scope of Southern Gothic subjects broadened as well. Especially with the additions of Appalachian Gothic which focuses on the landscape and issues of the Appalachian region, especially those of North Carolina mountains and Grit Lit which is a much more violent sub-genre usually contributed to by authors with working-class backgrounds, the body of Southern Gothic is continuously being expanded by authors who represent the South and its various problematic issues in their works. Since the genre itself is continuously expanding, contemporary Southern Gothic becomes a relevant term to categorize the books of the genre written in the late 1990s and post-2000.

The Southern Gothic of the twenty-first century differs from the former era of Southern Gothic in various ways. Arguably, the biggest difference between the two is the authors' background, race, and gender. As Horn argues, “[f]or far too long, southern literature was considered the exclusive province of wealthy white men, even though women and people of color have been in the South and writing about it for at least as long” (15). In the scope of the twenty-first century, Southern Gothic women and people of color authors are being far more recognized and given space to reflect on their experiences in the South.

Crow suggests that although racism “remains as the master trope of American nightmares, other issues, always present, emerge as from a mist, and clarify: issues of poverty, class conflict, gender identity, child abuse, and addiction, among others” (154). It is worth noticing that the late twentieth and twenty-first century Southern Gothic has been dominated by authors with working-class backgrounds rather than authors with aristocratic or wealthy backgrounds, a trend which, as Vernon argues, “helped to augment the literary canon” of the genre (“Romanticizing” 83-5). As authors from working-class backgrounds increase in number, the issues with which they deal in their works begin to differ from those of Southern authors who had ties with rich plantation families or somewhat lived well-off lives. While common themes such as death, decay, racism, sexual and moral deviance, isolated and corrupted characters, broken Southern settings and the traumatic heritage of the South are still present, the representations of these themes are shaped by the experiences of the author's working-class or middle-class lens,

which is the crucial difference between the 1900s' Southern Gothic and 2000s' Southern Gothic.

Consequently, poverty and its social, psychological, and physical effects have become consistent issues in contemporary Southern Gothic much more than the twentieth-century works. Writing about poverty and the poverty-stricken people of the South also brought a trend of employing the Great Depression in contemporary works. Three works, *The Bottoms* by Joe R. Lansdale, *Serena* by Ron Rash, and *Over the Plain Houses* by Julia Franks use the Great Depression South as the time period and setting to deal with the problems of the twenty-first century South. While writing about the 1930s' South, Joe R. Lansdale, Ron Rash, and Julia Franks focus on various problematic issues of the South which they themselves experience or see others experience on a daily basis. Their works are not non-fictional documentaries about the problems of the South during the Depression but testaments to the South of the twenty-first century and its continuing struggle with racism, white supremacy, poverty, working-class exploitation, destruction and exploitation of nature, misogyny, sexism and abuse reflected through the lens of the Depression.

The Great Depression has been mainly absent from Southern Literature with a few exceptions such as Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road* (1932) and James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941) depicting various fictional and non-fictional scenes from the lives of poor Southerners during the Depression. However, The Depression-fiction, that is, works that are about the Depression written during the Depression by Southerners, are different from the Depression-fiction of the rest of the country. The Depression-based Southern works did not become as popular as nor as influential as, for example, John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* (1939). This was because many elements which were popular in the literature of the time such as "exposes of capitalistic society, sympathetic delineation of the downtrodden, depictions of class struggle" were absent in the Depression-fiction of the South (Rubin 154-5). Rubin also claims that although authors like Erskine Caldwell, James Agee, and Thomas Wolfe wrote on the effects of the Depression, these works do "not develop and sustain a believable consistent artistic

indictment of social justice” (169) as their concerns and worries stem from the issues inside the South rather than the country as a whole.

Despite being one of the most prolific Southern Gothic authors at the time of the Depression, there is no work of William Faulkner that directly deals with the Great Depression. When Faulkner did write about poverty, however, his physical and psychological analysis of poverty was rather tone-deaf. Atkinson concurs as he argues that “Faulkner’s fiction appeared out of touch with what many influential denizens of the literary establishment, energized by leftist activism, considered relevant and worthwhile” (2). The body of Southern literature was fairly dominated by white men and women of rich backgrounds in the twentieth century. Matthew Guinn argues that aristocracy “characterized southern fiction for nearly a hundred years” and southern letters have been dominated by “the lens of the upper classes” (*After* 3). Similarly, Sells maintains that in the canon of Southern Gothic, there existed a “tendency toward minimizing the lives of the rest of the population . . . rendering slaves and the poor little more than scenery” (*Held Together*). If the poor were indeed given a place or a voice in these works, they were not more than stereotypes of gross generalizations.

In light of these remarks, it can be argued that Depression-fiction in Southern literature and consequently in Southern Gothic is not considered as influential nor as popular as it is in the literature of the rest of the country. The pro-proletariat, anti-establishment, anti-wealthy sentiments do not seem to exist in the Depression-era texts of the South as the writers could only take an indifferent stance towards the ill-wind the country and millions of people were going through. Poverty and poor Southerners are not often depicted in the twentieth-century Southern Gothic, and when they are, they are far from being authentic portrayals of the reality of poverty and remain as only comical or grotesque stereotypes.

The Southern Gothic of the later decades saw a steady increase in works that dealt with poverty taking inspiration from direct and genuine experiences because many contemporary Southern authors come from working-class backgrounds. Matthew Guinn also states that contemporary Southern Literature is dominated by “powerful novels written from a poor-white perspective” but “Southern criticism was simply unequipped

to evaluate” these works due to the lack of such examples in Southern Gothic and Southern Literature (“Writing” 571). These authors tend to represent the troubles of the working-class Southerners and the working-class communities and have them in the center. They weave their stories “from personal experience” which “deconstruct[s] such conceptions of southern culture [like] a leisurely, aristocratic, and pastoral civilization” (Guinn *After 3*). Their fiction reflects class consciousness and showcases the exploitative trends of capitalism and bosses in the South and exposes “the brutal poverty at the bottom levels of the culture” (Guinn *After 3*). Unlike many Southern Gothic texts, poverty is not race-determined but a collective trauma and ordeal shared by the Southerners as a whole.

Moreover, the authors of the twenty-first century Southern Gothic oppose the vilified depictions of poverty and the poor as monsters in the canonical Southern Gothic works. In a recent critical survey, Justin Mellette points out the demonized depictions of the poor in Southern Gothic as he states,

The poor whites in Caldwell’s fiction are scarcely considered human, while Faulkner’s Snopeses are compared time and time again to vermin: rats, termites, snakes, and wolves. Thus, while these poor whites could not be said to have been racialized in the same way that blacks were, the language used to describe them still marks them as racial inferiors. (3)

Many twentieth-century Southern Gothic works make use of problematic stereotypes while depicting the Southern poor and poverty. The authors of this era mostly “reify the world of [upper class] as normal and natural, and . . . present the world of the underclass characters . . . as distorted and exotic” (Palmer “Bourgeois” 128) as if the poor were a sub-human species occupying a different physical and moral sphere.

However, in the contemporary Southern Gothic, more and more working-class authors emerge and produce stories about the poor Southerners and how poverty leads to social and moral corruption. These works do not degrade the poor but they are written in a more sympathetic and down-to-earth manner since the authors themselves grew up with stories of the Depression and/or experienced poverty directly or indirectly. Each of these three authors, Lansdale, Rash and Franks, has a specific reason to employ the Great Depression

as the time period of their novels. By his own admission, Joe Lansdale uses the Great Depression because he believes that

[Americans] think times are hard now, and it certainly is for some, but on the whole, not like it was then. Those were tough times and our country was on the brink. It just barely survived. That said, I did enjoy writing about that era because I feel such a kinship to it, having grown up hearing about it all my life. I think it's more interesting to think about and write about than to live it. ("An Interview")

Similarly, Ron Rash decides to develop his narrative against the background of the Great Depression because he wishes to show the reader "that other people have also endured challenges" and "the best way to talk about the present is through the past" ("An Interview"). Through *Serena*, Rash displays a Southern community that manages to stay together as a whole against the conditions of the time, which is something that he would like the current Southern community to do so as well.

Julia Franks says that the reason why she chose the Great Depression as a timeframe is because of the house she and her husband bought prior to writing the book as Franks and her husband discover that the house, which belonged to a woman and her preacher husband, is full of items "and boxes of letters and diaries" (Franks "An Interview"). As the couple lived through the Depression, Franks thought that a woman beset by poverty, limiting community, and a husband would be a perfect example of a Southern woman in search for freedom. ("An Interview"). By employing the Depression-era Texas and North Carolina these authors provide insights into their lives and their regions. To be able to understand the implications of the use of the Great Depression by these three authors it seems necessary to look at the state of the economy and social conditions in two Southern States which the texts take place in—Texas and North Carolina— during the Depression and in the twenty-first century.

Like the rest of the South, Texas in the 1920s and the 30s heavily relied on agriculture and natural resources like oil, lumber and cotton. When the Great Depression started, many Texans initially thought that it was just a phase affecting the North only (Garza 3). They believed that the diverse agricultural and industrial endeavors of the state would

save them from the poverty sweeping the country. According to Ben Procter, Texans had an unrealistic, over-the-top optimistic approach toward the Great Depression as they “prided themselves on their situation, in being the largest state—indeed more spacious in area than any western European nation—and in maintaining the American frontier traits of rugged individualism, of fierce competitiveness, of unblushing patriotism” (“Great Depression”). However, as time passed, the severity of the Depression began to be felt by the Texans as well.

The trusted agricultural output failed and once prideful and self-assured farmers began to ask for help. One of the most important and widespread agricultural products, cotton, lost its value and hardships for the croppers ensued as it “dropped between five and six cents a pound” (Procter). The abundance of oil, despite being seemingly a positive matter for the economy of the state, hurt Texans as the demand did not reach the supply resulting in another price drop (Garza 4). The price drop was so disastrous that politicians had to intervene as the governor of the time issued “martial law in order to halt oil production” (Garza 4). As time passed, the optimistic outlook at the beginning of the Depression was replaced by despair, fear, and general unrest in Texas.

As job opportunities decreased, racial tension further increased in the South. Many unemployed whites started to inflict violence upon employed black people. The number of the lynchings of blacks by white mobs increased from “eight in 1932 to 28 in 1933, 15 in 1934, and 20 in 1935” (“Black Americans 1929-1941”) and the KKK “continued its attack on Blacks, Jews, and Catholics, but added New Deal politicians and labor organizers to its list of enemies” (Long). Black Americans were economically, socially, and politically segregated by racist white Southerners and their persisting wave of violence only waned “as economic conditions improved for whites” (“Black Americans 1929-1941”). Black people who were subjected to racial violence and inequality for centuries were now facing more and more heat from the angry, unemployed white people, or from their white bosses who were yearning for the Antebellum times of free labor under slavery. The nostalgia for those times and the economic benefits it symbolized was longed for at extreme levels as the white violence increased horribly and the Ku Klux Klan resumed their supremacist agendas.

During the first three years of the Depression, nearly half of black Texans were unemployed (“Race”). The ones who were employed were subjected to racism and discrimination by the jobless whites who wanted to get the black workforce out of the workplace and replace them. The defining motto of the state of employment for black people was the sentence: “last hired, first fired,” since during the Depression, black people “were the first to see hours and jobs cut, and they experienced the highest unemployment rate” (Klein). Before the Great Depression, most of black people who did not work as a farmer or a sharecropper worked in jobs which did not require many skills and after the Depression began “those entry-level, low-paying jobs either disappeared or were filled by whites in need of employment” (Klein). Although industrial workers dissented against the rich class and wealthy bosses in the form of multiple unions and organizations, black people were barred from joining these mostly white unions (Sustar). Black people were forced to live in isolated poverty and keep silent about the injustices they faced from all fronts.

Despite the fact that it is the second-most-populated state in the country and has shown economic development and industrial growth in the twenty-first century, Texas still ranks among the poorest states in the United States of America. Although a steady decline existed during the 2010s in the country in general and in the state, Texas always had a higher poverty rate than the country average (“Poverty in Texas”). Almost 4.5 million Texans live in poverty which equals a poverty rate of “16.0%,” meaning that every 1 person out of 7 in Texas is poor (“Poverty in Texas”). In a survey made in 2007, it was found that, when the population ratio was considered, Texas “has the highest poverty rate of any large industrial state” (Dietz). Again in 2007, only four states had higher poverty rates than Texas; however, the total number of poor people of the four states did not even come close to the number of poor people in Texas as the numbers were “3.9 million for Texas compared to 2.13 million for the other four together” (Dietz). Texas also had the highest number of people without any health insurance with almost 25% (Dietz).

An inquiry into the meaning of poverty on a federal level shows how it functions erroneously and becomes irrelevant in the case of Texas. It is estimated that, although they are above the poverty line assessed by the government, some “2.6 million” working-

class Texans are actually quite “below a realistic cost of living” (Collins). Therefore, in Texas, there are millions of cases of hidden poverty, of people who are poor but not considered poor by the government. Many studies were conducted about the issue and it was discovered that “42 percent of Texas households [made] less than the cost of living” (Collins) which shows that nearly half of all Texans struggled economically. While the overall rate of poverty and the number of poor Texans seem bleak, the situation for black Texans is bleaker as compared to the poverty rate of “7.9%” among white people, the rate of poverty among black people in Texas is “18.4%” (“Poverty Rate”). Black people of Texas struggle with poverty more than white people and their struggles are usually unheard and ignored by the white majority or the government branches.

Therefore, it is safe to say that Texas suffers from poverty on a collective level regardless of race though people of color suffer from poverty more. Although the Depression wrecked the economy of Texas and the welfare of Texans in general, it did not become a subject matter for Southern Gothic works produced by Texans. Since Joe Lansdale comes from a working-class family and had relatives who suffered from the Depression poverty, it makes sense for him to include the poor and poverty in his novel *The Bottoms*. Although *The Bottoms* employs the Depression as a time frame, Lansdale references the problems of his time as well.

North Carolina was affected seriously by the Great Depression on many levels. Some banks had to close, others were weakened because of the Depression; farmers could not get credit to buy the necessary goods to cultivate their land (Abrams and Parker). Within four years, the income of agriculture dropped nearly fifty percent; consequently, bankruptcies, low wages and layoffs followed (Abrams and Parker). In the state, out of “5,280 farms”, “3,500” had to shut down in one year (Badger 910). Most of the workers in these farms were sharecroppers and they had no leverage to demand better payments. As the job market was scarce, they had to accept the wages offered by the landlord. Badger also points out the fact that since Southern sharecroppers could not emigrate to other states like the farmers of the Dust Bowl, they “could only bargain by leaving one landlord and working for another” (911).

The effects of the Depression lasted until the beginning of the Second World War, but in the meantime, the FDR administration with the New Deal did help ease the problems in North Carolina. Although Southerners took pride in self-sufficiency and their distance from the federal government, the Depression poverty forced them to change their traditions. The intervention of the government changed “the relationship between individuals and government” (Abrams and Parker). This was because the state government of North Carolina proved ineffective during a time when “[t]he demand for government action grew” but because of “lack of funding and the inability to overcome the complex technical and distribution barriers of extending service to rural inhabitants, the few state efforts at the time made no progress” (Brown 856). Moreover, “North Carolina refused to jeopardize their balanced budgets to spend money on relief” as well (Hanes 244). Due to the lack of help and efficiency from the state government many citizens and North Carolinians alike “looked to the federal government to help” and “meet the challenge” (Brown 856). The federal government of the time became involved in the patterns of agriculture and logging of the local residents and bought lands from the owners to create places of leisure like national parks.

However, the intervention of the federal government did not receive positive responses from every citizen and sometimes put people in economic turmoil as well. As Abrams states:

New Deal agricultural success, however, came with a price. Reduced production meant that fewer tenant farmers and sharecroppers were needed; their ironic displacement by the AAA increased the economic problems of the 1930s. Driven from their land, farmers moved to cities, and there many survived on government relief. African Americans, a large number of sharecroppers, were especially vulnerable to displacement. The benefits for crop controls disproportionately benefited landowners over tenants. (“New Deal”)

In addition, the New Deal and relief programs were criticized by locals and officials alike as they saw these state help as an invasion of their freedom. Anti-New Deal sentiment was more grounded in “the ‘Conservative Manifesto’ of December 1937” which “demanded lower taxes and a balanced federal budget, endorsed states’ rights and private

property rights, and attacked relief programs for fostering permanent dependency” (Burk 207). As Southern states identify themselves with Southern individuality and uniqueness it can be argued that many Southerners were afraid that these programs were actually ploys to change them irreversibly and turn them into appropriate citizens in the eyes of the government.

In the twenty-first century, North Carolina still battles with poverty. In 2019, nearly fourteen percent of North Carolinians, which is more than 1.5 million people, were considered poor compared to the national average income (Harris). Although the region has strong industries such as timber and tobacco and it is “the 12th largest economy in the country,” “1 out of 7 people” in North Carolina lives in poverty (Harris). In addition to the figures of poverty, wealth inequality is another serious issue in the state. In North Carolina, more than half of the total wealth is owned by the top “20 percent,” and the quarter of total income is owned by “top 5 percent” (Harris). The lucrative industries benefit those who belong to the top 20%, while the working class and the middle-class people survive on limited education and job options. Moreover, during the Great Recession of 2008 and 2012, North Carolinians faced a rate of unemployment that was unprecedented.

The Great Recession was further distinguished by unprecedented rates of long-term unemployment, defined as jobless spells lasting 27 weeks or longer. The percentage of North Carolina’s unemployed population who were long-term unemployed reached a high of 49% in 2010, nearly double the rate seen during the worst of the early 1980s. By 2016, the rate of long-term unemployment had declined from its peak, but remained historically high. (Berger-Gross)

Both during the Depression and in the twenty-first century, one of the economic powerhouses of North Carolina is the lumber industry. Logging has been one of the most important backbones and one of the most financially stable industries in North Carolina. Even before the Revolution, in the 17th century, the first colonizers logged the North Carolina forests and brought about a timber market by exporting it to England and other regions (Starnes). Although logging and the exportation of timber stayed somewhat local during the first years of the country, as the railroads increased, timber started to be sold

to other states more efficiently and quickly prior to the Civil War (Starnes). The logging industry provided the country with timber, North Carolinians with jobs, and the state with money for a long time.

Despite being lucrative, logging is considered one of the most dangerous jobs in the United States. Although fatality rates fluctuated over the years, according to the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics, “[i]n 2016, logging had the highest fatality rate of any U.S. occupation, with nearly 136 workplace fatalities per 100,000 full-time equivalent workers” (Kingsley). The Occupational Safety and Health Administration deems logging “the most dangerous occupation in the United States,” since the rate of injury “for loggers is more than 30 times the rate for all U.S. workers” (Mulhollem). Although the logging industry of the twenty-first century is more technologically advanced than that of the twentieth century, there are no definitive and effective safety measures taken yet to ensure the well-being of the loggers. Even though the companies are aware of the dangers surrounding the logging industry, “instead of spending their resources on worker safety, they divert many precious dollars into their legal team so they can fight the legitimate claims of their injured workers” (Bailey, Javins, and Carter LC).

The two novels which take place during the Depression in North Carolina showcase the troubles the Southerners went through in that specific era. In *Serena*, a closely-knit Southern town most of which works in the mountains as loggers, are exploited by the Northern bosses who provide them with little to no security measure and have them live in sub-human conditions. The exploitation at the hands of the Northerner capitalists strengthens the ties of this community but due to poverty, they are forced to continue logging until they eradicate a whole forest. In *Over the Plain Houses*, a little Southern community, led by a deranged preacher, is encouraged to take up arms against the Depression government as the preacher believes that the intervention of the Depression bureaus ruined his life although he is the main culprit behind his own misery.

Taking into consideration the Great Depression and the emergence, development and common characteristics of Southern Gothic, this thesis argues that *The Bottoms*, *Serena*, and *Over the Plain Houses* all of which are written and published in the twenty-first

century and take the Depression era as their time frame are examples of Southern Gothic as they employ many conventional Southern Gothic themes and tropes. As such, they may be said to contribute to a genre that has a history of nearly 250 years. However, it is also true that these Southern Gothic tropes and conventions are either subverted or changed in nature in these novels and there are crucial thematic concerns and depictions of the environment, characters, Southerners and Northerners, and clashes between the values of the South of different eras that separate them from the Southern Gothic of the 1920s, 30s, and the 40s. Therefore, aside from their Southern Gothic status, these novels are examples of Contemporary Southern Gothic. There are obvious differences between these works and the Southern Gothic of the twentieth century as they implicate the fundamental issues and problems of the South of the twenty-first century.

The first chapter of this thesis will focus on *The Bottoms* by Joe R. Lansdale and analyze it as a contemporary Southern Gothic work. Firstly, the chapter will attempt to prove that *The Bottoms* is a contemporary Southern Gothic novel by highlighting the concerns of the author and his characters in relation to the themes and issues of the twenty-first century. Secondly, in order to argue that *The Bottoms* is truly a Southern Gothic example, it will examine the common Southern Gothic themes in the novel. These themes include racism, the clash between the Old South and New South, lynchings, murder, black people described as mammies and uncles, the tragic mulatto character, dangerous swamps and forests.

Unlike the protagonists of Southern Gothic, the main characters of *The Bottoms* are not confused about the Old South and the New South. They are not tormented by the past of the South because they did not own slaves, and secondly, they are sure that the ideals of the Old South, racism and sexism, are morally wrong and should have no place in the South. Moreover, Lansdale neither shows the poor as monsters nor builds their stories and experiences upon stereotypes nor regards poverty as the reason behind any wrong or immoral deed. In the novel poverty does not turn the characters into degenerates, on the contrary, it connects them through collective trauma. The characters try to uphold their morality in the face of the Depression poverty.

The second chapter will analyze *Serena* by Ron Rash, a work which is regarded as Appalachian Gothic set in North Carolina. The chapter will argue that *Serena* is a Southern Gothic novel since it contains various common themes of the genre. The novel deals with the conflict between the agrarian life and modernized life, excessive violence, gruesome deaths and murders, corrupt society and immoral characters. Unlike many Southern Gothic examples, however, the novel does not deal with racial issues, in other words, the Southerners in *Serena* are stripped of the burden of slavery and the traumatic history of the South but they battle poverty due to the Depression and their exploitative Northerner bosses.

In *Serena*, the real conflict is between capitalist Northerner bosses and the exploited Southern working class. The novel represents Southerners as innocent people while the Northern characters are depicted as greedy, immoral, and corrupted. Their exploitation goes hand in hand with the exploitation of the environment which is one of the defining characteristics of the contemporary Southern Gothic. Unlike the South of the twentieth-century Southern Gothic, the South of *Serena* is a place where people are bound by friendship and hard times they are suffering together. The members of the community help one another and do not pose a threat to each other whereas in Southern Gothic works a sense of danger and threat generally looms in the air when Southerners interact with each other.

The third chapter will analyze *Over the Plain Houses* by Julia Franks, in which race and racial issues are not foregrounded as in *Serena*. The novel focuses on the exploitation of women by their narrow-minded, patriarchal communities, friends and families, and obsessed zealots who use gender roles constructed by society as an excuse to oppress and exploit women. Contrary to *Serena*, in *Over the Plain Houses*, the Northerners are shown with more sympathy and compassion while Southerners themselves appear mostly as bigots, misogynists, and cruel people. The novel also comments on Southern evangelicalism and how the corrupted men of cloth destroy people's sense and sensibilities, use and exploit their efforts, commit heinous acts through their self-justified ways. Moreover, there exists an environmental consciousness in the novel which does not exist in the Southern Gothic works of the twentieth century. The association between the

exploitation of women and exploitation of the environment which points out the ecofeminist sentiments of the author is one of the contemporary aspects of *Over the Plain Houses*.

These novels will be studied in the chronological order of their publication dates. They will be analyzed, compared and contrasted to the conventions of the genre. At the same time, their thematic, cultural and historical differences from the works of the Southern Gothic canon will be analyzed. To conclude, this study aims to prove that these three novels are examples of Southern Gothic, representing the contemporary issues of the South through contemporary voices. They depict poverty not as a form of degeneracy or evil but as a fact of life and through morality the characters navigate their way into safety. As these writers are born into a respectively more progressive era, their protagonists represent these values of equality and social justice.

CHAPTER 1: *THE BOTTOMS* AS CONTEMPORARY SOUTHERN GOTHIC

Joe Lansdale is the author of several novels, comic books, short story collections, essays and memoirs. He also wrote screenplays for different comic book adaptations and animated series. His most critically and financially acclaimed novel is the *Hap and Leonard* series which was adapted into a TV series in 2016. He won many prestigious awards for these works including the British Fantasy Award, the American Horror Award and the Edgar Award. Lansdale was born and grew up in East Texas which is the main setting of many of his novels. While he is no stranger to Texas, he is no stranger to the Great Depression either. In an interview with CNN, Lansdale was asked the reason why so many of his works were set during the Depression, to which he replied:

I come from blue collar. I'm very working class. I was a rose field picker, a janitor. I worked in construction. My dad was like 42 when I was born — my mom 38 — so they lived through the Great Depression. I grew up on those stories. My grandmother was born in the 1880's and lived till the 1980's, almost 100 years! She had seen Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. She came to Texas in a covered wagon and saw historical things and Depression-era things in particular have always interested me. (Lansdale “Writer”)

Lansdale’s interest in the Great Depression in Texas comes from the firsthand experiences of the members of his family, which he had heard for many years. In another interview with the Mulholland Books, he mentions the stories he heard of the family’s suffering during the Great Depression saying “I remember hearing stories about people being poor and so desperate. . . . A lot of my relatives had gone through the Great Depression, and it impacted them” (Lansdale “An Interview”). The collective memory of the physical, mental and financial sufferings of his family and ancestors mold into the writings of Joe Lansdale and through real-life experiences both of his family’s and his own, Lansdale brings about stories enriched with a mixture of fictional characters and authentic scenes.

The Bottoms (2000) is Lansdale’s twentieth novel, and it won the Edgar Award in the same year it was published. The main character of the novel is a twelve-year-old boy named Harry who lives in an East Texas town with his family, trying to solve a series of murders. *The Bottoms* starts with a section told by Harry who is now in his eighties living

“in the old folks home” in a “room full of the smell of [his] own decaying body, awaiting a meal” (Lansdale 2). As it can be understood Harry is now a relic from a bygone era. He is the only one remaining from his stories and what transpired decades ago. What he is about to tell is a gruesome and traumatic story from the past, but still, he longs for those times when his family was with him, and he was strong and agile. As a common Southern Gothic theme, he is now decaying. He belongs to a different era and the memories of that time are the only places he can fully inhabit. He is caught between the bitter-sweet memories of the past and the lonely and isolated present.

Harry recounts the story of a series of murders in his town, which started with him and his sister finding the mutilated body of a black female sex worker tied to a tree in the forest near his house. Harry and his sister Thomasina, or Tom, believe that this is the work of the Goat Man, a figure in a popular folk tale “heard throughout the South” (8). As he and his father start to investigate the murders, the number of victims increases and when a white woman is discovered dead, being convinced that the murderer is a local black man, the racist whites lynch him. However, the murders continue, and it is revealed that the murderer is actually a white man and the creature they thought as the Goat Man was an innocent black man living in the forest. During the investigation, Harry gradually begins to find out how racist and supremacist sentiments destroy society, hurt people irreversibly and in the end how futile and meaningless they actually are.

The Bottoms involves many Southern Gothic elements such as dangerous and haunted environments, violence and death, racist and supremacist Southerners, clashes between the values of the Old and New South, mixed-blood characters, and acts of racial violence as lynching. As Wagner states, in *The Bottoms* “Lansdale transports us so fully to his East Texas that it feels like reminiscing about experiences shared,” as “issues of race, oppression, justice, and morality haunt the foreground” (“The Edgar”). *The Bottoms*’ Southern Gothic identity surfaces through Harry’s narration and reflections on the state of his East Texas town, its inhabitants, violence and racial tension while trying to find a deranged killer on the loose preying on the women of the town. However, it is also true that its thematic concerns such as the depictions of poverty and poor Southerners and the

didactic sentiments of the author on the environment and race make *The Bottoms* a contemporary example of Southern Gothic.

1.1. DIFFERENCES WITH CANONICAL SOUTHERN GOTHIC

1.1.1. The Great Depression and Poverty

The Bottoms differs from the canon of Southern Gothic works primarily because it narrates the stories of poverty and the poor Southerners. Contrary to many canonical Southern Gothic works, *The Bottoms* does not take place in an old plantation house or a mansion, but in a semi-urban town with two-storied houses. Like Lansdale himself who does not come from a wealthy family or from a plantation, the protagonist resides in a simple house consisting of simple, ordinary folks. It might be argued that Lansdale prefers to remain true to his own background experiences and presents the story of a family in a simple household instead of following the twentieth-century Gothic authors in this respect. As Palmer also notes, the South of the twentieth-century Southern Gothic “is associated with the antebellum myth of the plantation, with its qualities of wealth and family” (“Southern” 168). However, in *The Bottoms*, Harry and his family belong to the working class who suffer from poverty and, instead of plantations or mansions, they live in a simple house with simple folk. *The Bottoms* is not just a novel about a poor family but one that is beset by the Depression in a violent climate, which separates it from the classical Southern Gothic works.

Another issue that separates *The Bottoms* from Southern Gothic canon is that Lansdale debunks the archetypal depiction of poor Southerners as illiterate and isolated monsters. The common “tendency, in Southern Gothic, [is] to demonize poverty . . . that inspire disgust or anxiety” (Demeester). For instance, The Bundrens in *As I Lay Dying* are more concerned with the cost of cake, flour, sugar, bananas, and their teeth than the dead body of their mother. Dick and Perry in Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* (1966) eventually end up murdering the whole Clutter family for a measly silver dollar. The hillbillies in *Deliverance* turn into sexually deviant monsters due to their poverty and isolation. Similarly, Lester Ballard in Cormac McCarthy’s *Child of God* (1973) becomes an

unhinged necrophiliac murderer after losing his house. Conversely, in *The Bottoms* poverty is not depicted as a morally, socially, mentally and physically corrupting entity but as an unfortunate fact of life that actually binds people together and makes their bond stronger. In other words, poverty does not corrupt the Cranes who keep on maintaining their morality and dignity throughout the Depression.

The Cranes' genuine concern for the environment is another factor that shows the differences between *The Bottoms* and Southern Gothic novels. Due to the Depression poverty, Harry's father has to have two separate jobs, one as a barber and one as the constable of the town but even working in two jobs does not enable him to make ends meet. Harry and his family are bound to the crops they harvest and to the chickens in their hens. Since everyone around him was poor, the twelve-year-old Harry was not aware of the fact that they were among the poor: "I suppose there were some back then had money, but we weren't among them. The Depression was on" (Lansdale 5). Only after he grows up and begins to lead a somewhat prosperous life does he realize that they were not doing well financially back then. Their house "had a leak in the roof, no electricity, a smoky wood stove, a rickety barn, a sleeping porch with a patched screen" (6). Harry later realizes that they had to use every piece of property they own to the fullest in order to survive. However, although they were in dire need of money and food, they did not waste the natural resources around them. Though there is a forest nearby with "hogs, squirrels, rabbits, coons, possums," and "[d]eer roamed the woods too" (6-7) they never hunt the animals in that forest as they respect the environment and its inhabitants. Harry says that unlike others who "get a cheap free shot and feel like they've done serious hunting" (7), they choose to provide themselves with the little amount of money Jacob makes and the crops they cultivate.

The now-old Harry also criticizes the hunters of the new generations "who like to smear their faces with the blood after the kill and take photos, as if this makes them some kind of warrior. You'd think the damn deer were armed and dangerous" (7). A concern for the sanctity of wildlife, as well as a sense of activism, is present in these sentiments, and it can be understood that these are Lansdale's own views on the issue of exploitation of the environment as much as Harry's. The didacticism is also obvious to Lansdale as he writes,

through Harry, that he has “quit talking, and gone to preaching” (7). This constant concern for the environment in the novel set in the Depression era is especially significant because it brings attention to the illegal and torturous ways of hunting, poaching, and burning forests in Texas in the 1990s. Additionally, while using dogs to hunt deer was a common practice before 1990, it was banned by the state of Texas in 1990.

Following the enactment of the regulation, however, many hunters took offense and started burning the woods. It is estimated that in a seven-year span, “arsonists had torched more than 50,000 acres of timberland in southeast Texas” (Draper). The series of burnings were detrimental to the environment and Texans socially and financially: “The smoldering cotton balls had cost the timber companies hundreds of thousands of dollars in lost saplings, the state tens of thousands more to put out the fires—not to mention endangered the lives of the Texas Forest Service’s firefighters” (Draper). Although some of these hunters who burnt down the woods pleaded innocent as they said that they were poor and trying to provide their families with food through hunting, Lansdale reiterates that poverty is not an excuse to destroy landscape or hunt animals to the point of depletion through illegal or violent ways.

One incident which demonstrates the Crane family’s heartfelt attention to the well-being of living beings other than people despite their poverty is when the family dog hurts its back and seems as though it will never be able to walk again. Harry decides to take the dog to his father but when he “moved Toby’s paw around, tried to strengthen his back” the dog cried and barked miserably (9). Since they have “no money to take a dog” (9) to a veterinarian, Jacob tells Harry to take the family gun and shoot the dog. As Harry cannot kill the dog because of his love and compassion for him, Jacob takes the gun and Toby to the barn but he comes back to the house after a few minutes to tell Harry that “I don’t figure he needs killin’” (29) which makes Harry and the whole family rejoice. It remains to be said that although money and food are scarce, they let a dog with a broken back live and continue to provide for him because they consider the dog as family. In other words, the issue is not the financial burdens the dog will bring to the family but love and respect for a beloved family member. Besides portraying the family members as having compassion for the animal, the novel represents the protagonist Southerners as people

with dignity and integrity despite severe poverty unlike many twentieth-century Southern Gothic novels, which is another reason why *The Bottoms* can be considered as a contemporary Southern Gothic novel.

1.1.2. The Old South and the New South

In *The Bottoms*, the clash between the ideals of the Old South and the New South is given through the conflicting views of the townspeople on black people. Harry and his father Jacob represent the egalitarian and non-discriminatory ideals of the New South through their respect and sympathy for the black people of the town. Harry and his father do not approve of the discrimination and inequality black people suffer at the hands of the racist majority. The white citizens of the town, on the other hand, represent the ideals of the Old South that demean black people and advocate segregation on all fronts. Harry and Jacob treat the black people of the town with respect and dignity while the rest of the town verbally and physically abuses and harms them. Harry is beset by the two sides of Southern whiteness; egalitarian and supremacist, and he is forced to take sides while at the same time trying to make sense out of the violence and scrutiny black people and their white friends have to endure.

The townspeople are nostalgic for the times before the Depression and still remember the antebellum era, not having accepted the defeat yet. For instance, the constable of the black part, Red Woodrow, warns Jacob about getting involved with the murder of the black prostitute, saying that “[n]iggers over here don’t want nobody meddlin’ in their business” (92) and that this murder is irrelevant because it is not a white man killing a black man or a black man killing a white man. Since no white person is involved in it, Red says “it ain’t like it matters much to us” (93). Red warns Jacob once again emphasizing that “[t]here’s some things been a certain way for a long time, and they ought to stay that way” (93) making a reference to the times when black people and white people inhabited different spheres and had the relationship of master and property. When Jacob tells him that “I thought the Yankees whupped us . . . Lincoln freed the slave,” Red replies, “[t]he Yankees didn’t whup me” (93). It is apparent that although they adapted the industrial way of life and mostly abandoned the agricultural endeavors, which is one of the main laments of the

Old South fanatics, the white majority is still yearning for racial and social segregation, a crucial practice of the Old South. Therefore, they insist on living as though they are in the antebellum era in terms of racial relations and try to impose it on others as well. Black people are strictly forbidden to enter the white part of the town and to have any kind of relationship with the whites.

The nostalgic white majority tries to maintain the Old South through the practice of segregation. As the whites do not want to acknowledge the social advancement of the blacks, they simply choose to ignore them and have them live in a confined space. Harry's town is segregated, and while the whites live in Marvel Creek, blacks live in "Pearl Creek [which] was an all-colored town" (Lansdale 52). Having its own doctor and constable, Pearl Creek is separated from the white part of the town. It was transformed into an island whose inhabitants are forgotten and are not allowed to interact with the mainland. Pearl Creek is consciously left behind time—in the times of the Old South. While the white part uses cars for transport, the residents of Pearl Creek still use horses and mules (59). The roads to Pearl Creek are "muddy . . . with the wet roads almost bogging" the drivers (57). It is dangerously close to an actual creek from which it takes its name:

Pearl Creek was a real creek, and the name source for the town. The creek was broad in spots and fast running, and the bed of it was rich with white sand and a kind of pearl-colored gravel, hence the name. It was bordered by ancient and magnificent hickory trees and oaks, twisty, droopy willows with wrist-sized roots that worked out of the ground, wound around on the banks, looked like snakes and provided cover for the real thing. (57)

Blacks living in Pearl Creek are not allowed to have the facilities which the white part enjoys. For instance, inhabitants of Pearl Creek do not have direct access to clean water as the water is contaminated because of the lumber mill in the town: "The dust closest to the mill was butternut-colored, the older stuff, black and sludgy with age; it slid into the creek where it heaped up and was washed slowly away by the water" (63). The contaminated water is the product of black residents' exploited labor at the sawmill. Even electricity is a luxury kept from Pearl Creek. As Harry himself observes, "East Texas was always slow to get a thing everyone else had" but even when East Texas finally acquired it, "the colored of East Texas got whatever it was long after the whites, and then usually

an inferior version. Lincoln may have long freed the slaves, but the colored of that time were not far off living as they had lived before the Civil War” (60). The observations of Harry demonstrate the failure of the Reconstruction era, the unfortunate success of Jim Crow laws and how the rules of the Old South still apply to the residents of Pearl Creek.

The segregated people are submerged by the reified racist mindset of the white majority. Significantly, when Harry meets a group of black kids from Pearl Creek, who boast about how they “can shoot a tin can at maybe thirty feet” with something called a “nigger shooter . . . a word for a slingshot made of shoe tongue, tire rubber, and a forked stick,” he is not surprised at all to see that the black kid uses the term “without shame or consideration” as “[t]he name was common” (70) at that time. Racist sentiments are built so deeply in the minds of black people that a device with a such hurtful name is seen as ordinary. Additionally, black people always address white people as “Suh” except for Jacob and Harry who separate themselves from the racist white majority, which reveals the internalization of the racist mindset by black individuals.

The passage to the segregated town over the creek is left in a nearly ruined condition which “rattled beneath car tires, horse hooves, or wagon wheels like it was breaking apart beneath” the passers (58). The residents of Pearl Creek are almost imprisoned in the town which is “all about lumber [and] a sawmill community” (59). Their only worldly interactions are between “the sawmill and the commissary” (59). The black people of Pearl Creek are subjected to “a form of indentured servitude” (59). Moreover, no form of security measure or worker safety regulations is taken by the sawmill as it is “full of working men, many of them with no more than three fingers, some missing hands” (62). The whites wish to keep the blacks in the margins so vehemently that black people are not even allowed to use the same currency as white people. The mill does not pay actual money to the black workers but gives “tokens that could only be cashed at the commissary” inside the town (59). Their worth depends on their labor in the sawmill for which they are compensated with a currency they can use in their own segregated sphere only.

It can be concluded that Pearl Creek is a quasi-slave quarter which was usually located near the plantation house. Almost all blacks live in Pearl Creek, and they are neither allowed to pass to Marvel Creek where the whites live nor use the money the whites use. They do not have electricity, clean water, or any means of modern transportation. Represented as a practice of the Old South fanatics to keep black people in the margins and preserve their ideals of the Old South, segregation is an indicator of the clash between the Old South and The New South in the novel, a common theme of Southern Gothic.

1.1.3. Different Souths Personified

Southern Gothic works are full of characters that represent the Old South and the New South. In William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find," respectively Thomas Sutpen, Blanche Dubois, and the grandmother represent the Old South while Quentin Compson, Stanley Kowalski and the Misfit represent the New South. The personifications of the Old South and the New South are in a constant battle, which is an allegory for the state of the South after the Civil War. In *The Bottoms*, the personifications of the Old South are Red Woodrow, Mr. Nation, and white-part's doctor Dr. Stephenson while the New South's Jacob Crane, and his son Harry. In the novel, Jacob stands for a South of equality and peace, and he is in a constant battle with the representatives of the Old South.

Many canonical Southern Gothic authors were conflicted about the changes the South was experiencing. Therefore, the New South was portrayed as destructive, violent, and toxic so as to show how the changes brought to the South were socially destructive too in nature. For instance, Stanley Kowalski raping Blanche, and Misfit murdering the grandma and her family are perfect examples of the canonical representation of the New South. However, unlike the former representations of the New South, Jacob is not a misogynist, has good relationships with black people, believes that skin color does not make anyone superior or inferior, tries to do his job as the constable, has no violent tendencies and looks out for the weak and innocent while trying to be a good example for his family. He is not conflicted about the Old South and is not sentimental about the South's past at all.

On the contrary, the representations of the Old South are highly racist, violent, and misogynistic. Through them, Lansdale reveals the social defects of the Old South against which the New South fights.

Jacob wants to teach Harry that the racist and white supremacist majority of the town who inflict violence on black people are wrong and their sentiments are dangerous. He hopes that their views will not influence Harry's perspective and way of life. The depictions of the violent and highly problematic racial climate of the 1930s' Texas make *The Bottoms* a significant work in terms of the strictly non-racist and anti-supremacist views the protagonist and his family have. In fact, in the novel, they are the only ones who disagree with the common sentiments. There are hints of social activism and commentary specifically targeting the futility and horrors of racism coming directly from the characters' mouths which seem like didactic statements consciously interwoven into the text by Lansdale. This is a common tendency among the contemporary Southern authors who, in Guinn's words, "interrogate history and culture . . . with a new level of scrutiny and distrust" through their works ("Writing" 573).

Through Jacob and Harry, Lansdale "seeks to undermine the South's received notions of community and tradition" (Guinn "Writing" 573) as he places them right on the opposite side of the racist Southern community. Unlike the patriarchs in *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom Absalom!*—Mr. Compson and Mr. Sutpen—who try to impose their Old South ideals to their children which eventually leads to their downfalls since all "they can offer is physical and emotional abuse combined with a destructive lack of practical knowledge" (Easterbrook 63), Jacob offers new ways of Southern life and portrays a different kind of a Southern patriarch by putting peace and tranquility over toxic authority. In the contemporary scene of Southern Gothic, many authors represent going against the establishment and breaking down the rules of the old society. Therefore, dissent against racial inequality and discrimination is usually present in their works.

Differences between Red's and Jacob's lifestyles, their demeanors, and their views on race and women suggest that they are each other's complete opposites. Jacob and Red have a complex and intertwined relationship with each other. To begin with, neither of

them had a happy childhood. Jacob had a cruel father who constantly beat him and became even more violent after Jacob's mother died. Red's father and mother are irresponsible parents who were engaged in adulterous relationships leaving Red to the care of Miss Maggie who was hired by Red's father. In the course of the novel, it is stated that Red's mother fled from home and married Jacob's father and all of them started living together. Then, Red's mother left them, and Jacob and Red were forced to live with Jacob's hardened and tempered father. From these hard times, they emerged as brothers and they kept on protecting each other against Jacob's father. However, their relationship is broken when Harry's mother, May Lynn, stops dating Red and chooses Jacob to marry. After this incident, Jacob and Red go their separate ways and turn out to be completely different from one another.

While Jacob succeeds in overcoming his traumatic past and becomes a good family man, Red becomes a misogynist after May Lynn's rejection. As Harry's mother tells him, Red "don't like women no more. Won't have anything to do with them" (107). She also adds that she does not mean that Red is homosexual by saying "I don't mean he's funny or anything" (107). She knows for certain that he will not settle down and get married. After the breakup, Red starts seeing women as instruments of pleasure only. In this sense, he can be considered a more unapologetic and violent Stanley Kowalski in Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*. In one of the stage directions in the play, Stanley is described as someone whose "center of life has been pleasure with women, the giving and taking of it . . . with the power and pride of a . . . male" (Williams *Streetcar*) which can be seen in Red Woodrow's life as well. Similar to Stanley, Red Woodrow "is motivated by maintaining a sense of dominance over what and who he sees as his possessions," namely, women (Zayachkowski).

Abandoned by his mother and rejected by the one woman he loved, Red starts hating women and exploiting them for bodily pleasure. He starts tattooing the names of the women with whom he has sexual intercourse and the dates of the sexual activity on his arms, one of which is the name May Lynn and the date of his intercourse with her. Red sees women as conquests and represents the toxic masculinity of the Old South while Jacob represents the morally strong and benevolent patriarch. In addition, Red likes

irritating Jacob by reminding him of his past with May Lynn and when they disagree in the case of the murders, Red says “You tell May Lynn I said howdy” to provoke him. Jacob becomes so infuriated that Harry can see “the arteries stand out in his neck” (94) but Harry walks away without saying anything.

As Red regards sexual intercourse as gaining victory over women, and women as property, he tries to break Jacob’s self-confidence and hurt the married couple’s relationship by saying that he was the one who had intercourse with May Lynn first and therefore he *owns* her. He tries to damage Jacob’s masculinity by referring to his intimate past with Jacob’s wife, but for Jacob what May Lynn and he share is more than bodily pleasure. It is a holy matrimony between two people who love and cherish each other. Jacob feels obligated to be a role model for his family, especially for Harry in such a dangerous and callous climate; therefore, he does not try to pick a fight with Red nor does he get angry with May Lynn for her past but moves on with dignity. Although they both lack maternal figures in their lives, Red becomes bitter and full of hatred for all women whereas Jacob manages to turn it into acceptance and self-growth and becomes a better Southern man.

Red also represents the corrupted systematic racism and how the ideals of the Old South continue to stay relevant in the minds of government officials in the South. He is a symbol of police brutality that has haunted people of color in the United States for generations. Despite being the town constable who is supposed to keep the peace and take care of the citizens he is responsible for, Red Woodrow is highly indifferent to the suffering of the black residents, even supportive of it. While Jacob is extremely aware of the gravity of the murders, Red consciously stays indifferent and distant because the victim is a black woman. When Jacob tries to remind him of his responsibilities as the town constable saying “We’re the law,” Red replies: “Yeah, but a nigger woman gets killed down in the bottoms, that’s one thing. It ain’t like it’s a good nigger” (93). When Jacob pushes Red even further to act like a man of law, Red becomes infuriated and curses Jacob: “Goddamn you, Jacob! It’s known far and wide all over this country you’re a nigger lover, and you ain’t careful you’re gonna bring up another generation of them nigger lovers” (93). Jacob represents newer ideals of equality and nondiscrimination and Red resents

that the Old South is getting obsolete. He is afraid that Jacob's children will become like Jacob as well, and his ideals and the South he knows —the South of discrimination, inequality, and racism— will fade away. Red is trying to preserve a dangerously problematic way of life while Jacob is trying to change it, a symptom of the clash between the Old and the New South.

In order to stop Jacob's efforts, Red goes to see May Lynn and warns her that Jacob should leave the murder case alone. He says "[w]e don't want the niggers stirred up, May Lynn. That's all. They got to know their place, and when Jacob starts treating them with the same concern, the same respect as white folks, then you could have problems" (137). Red strongly opposes the notion of equality between races as he believes that black people do not deserve the same dignity and status in life which he thinks white people are entitled to. Another person who is sentimental about the Old South is Mr. Nation. As it can be understood from his obviously symbolic surname, Nation stands for the ideals of the Old South and through him, Lansdale makes the comment that the American nation itself is holding onto the toxic traditions of the Old South.

It is known by the townspeople that Jacob is the most sympathetic person towards black people. He treats them with the kind of respect that no other white person in the town does or finds them worthy of. Therefore, it vexes Mr. Nation to see that Jacob is interested in the case. Nation tells Harry that his father "was always one to worry about the niggers" and that he "ought to leave it alone, let them niggers keep on killin' each other, then the rest of us won't have 'em to worry with it" (36). It is possible to see the normalization of violence against black people in Nation's reaction to the news of a black woman's death. Moreover, he tells Harry that one less of them is better, and it can be understood that Nation quite literally wants the extinction of black people in his area and maybe in the whole country. As Nation's racist and white supremacist sentiments come forward, Harry finds out that there is an apparent distinction between his father's and Nation's attitudes, which pleases him:

I had never really thought about my father's personal beliefs, but suddenly it occurred to me his were opposite of those of Mr. Nation, and Mr. Nation,

though he liked our barbershop for wasting time, didn't really like my Daddy. The fact he didn't, that Daddy had an opposite point of view to his, made me feel good, and at that moment, measuring the contrast between the two, I think my views and my Daddy's, at least on the race issue, became forever welded. (36)

Through these remarks, the differences between the Old South and the New South become more obvious. As Palmer reiterates, canonical Southern Gothic works are mostly defined by the “narcissism of its protagonists and their antagonistic relationships with the primary social unity, the family” and rejecting the family patriarchs and their values (“Southern” 167). However, in *The Bottoms*, Harry is content and grateful because his father does not hold onto the Old South like Red and Nation do and manages to lead a life with respect and compassion for everyone. Witnessing the way his father interacts with the black townspeople, Harry takes those interactions as his inspiration for his life. Although the whole town constantly uses slurs, demeans and humiliates the black townspeople, Harry does not follow the white supremacist majority as he is taught by his father that “[w]hites and colored ain't neither one better or worse than another. There's just men and women of whatever color, and some of them are worse than others, and some are better” (90). Making his father's teachings his mantra, Harry feels responsible for finding the killer and bringing justice to all those who are murdered. Unlike many southern sons of the genre, he does not reject his father but embraces him and recognizes him as the leading moral force of his life.

Another representative of the Old South is Dr. Stephenson, the doctor of the white part of the town. When Harry's father brings the body of the mutilated victim to Dr. Tinn, Pearl Creek's black doctor, for examination, Dr. Stephenson, the white doctor of the town and his protégé Dr. Taylor also join them. Because the victim is black, Stephenson refuses to examine her saying that “if folks found out he'd had a colored in his office wouldn't nobody use him no more” (51). However, tempted by the brutality of the event, he comes to Pearl Creek secretly. Stephenson is presented as an incompetent and indifferent man as he comes to the examination “loud, and drunk” (72). When the body is brought to the examining table, Stephenson puts down his flask exclaiming that “Now that is one dead darkie” (73) and asks “Ain't it, boy” to the black man who brought it (74). Stephenson's discourse is full of derogatory terms and slurs and while he utters these insults with

impunity, none of the black people in the scene react as they know that they can be hurt and/or killed brutally if they were to respond to Stephenson in any way. The black man only answers, “without looking at Doc Stephenson directly,” “Yas suh, she sho is” (74). Harry realizes the inequality between the segregated groups, and expresses his resentment as follows:

It embarrassed me to see that colored man have to act like that. He was big and strong and could have pulled Doc Stephenson’s head off. But if he had, he would have been swinging from a limb before nightfall, and maybe his entire family, and any other colored who just happened to be in sight when the Klan came riding. Stephenson knew that. White folks knew that. It gave them a lot of room. (74)

White people’s freedom to talk and act freely around black people constantly reinforces the idea that they are not equals and there can be repercussions if there are any attempts for it. When Harry’s father, Jacob, tells Stephenson that he thought he “couldn’t look at the body” (74), Stephenson explains:

Not in town. Wouldn’t a white person within a hundred miles have anything to do with me they knew I was hauling a colored into my place. A decent white woman sure wouldn’t want to be examined in no place like that. No offense, boys, but colored and white need their separation. Even the Bible tells us that. Hell, you boys are happier when you don’t have the worries we do. (74)

Stephenson knows that the majority of the townspeople still cling to the notion that blackness equals dirtiness and lower standards of life; therefore, despite being a doctor who is supposed to help anyone in any way he can, he refuses to treat black patients.

Looking at the mutilated body, Stephenson says that a wild boar may have killed the woman, a ridiculous assumption to which Jacob replies: “Then tied her with barbed wire to a tree?” (75). Stephenson is slightly humiliated by the response because while he is expecting companionship from another white person, he is shunned by him. As his indecent jokes targeting black people receive no appreciation and his inaccurate theories about the body receive no consideration, Stephenson becomes more frustrated. Gradually,

his incompetence comes to surface in the face of Dr. Tinn's capability. When Jacob tells him to go away and sober up, he sees Jacob as a threat to the domination of white people and asks: "You talkin' to me like that in front of these colored boys?" to which Jacob answers: "These men haven't been boys in years. And I'm just talkin' to you, period" (77).

Seething with anger because a white man speaks to him in a manner which he associates with the way one speaks to a black person, Stephenson turns to Dr. Tinn and Jacob, and says "See what you can learn from that boy. I can't believe they even give the title Doctor to a colored. You ain't no doctor to me, nigger. You hear me" before he leaves the building (77). Stephenson is so invested in the ways of the Old South that he cannot believe how black people are able to carry titles other than slaves and how an *inferior* group of people can acquire the same title as him.

By referring to the black men in front of him as boys, Stephenson tries to emasculate them and preserve his own masculinity. It can be understood that the Old South is highly dependent on masculinity and each representative is desperate to prove their own virility and potency as men. While Red sees sex as conquest and tries to increase his self-respect through sexual intercourse, Stephenson tries to render others' masculinity obsolete so that his can stay relevant. However, being challenged by Jacob and Tinn he retreats and leaves the scene immediately. Masculinity is tied to authority and when the masculinity of the Old South is opposed and exposed as such, Stephenson loses the authority his whiteness attains him.

Although both of them are white, Jacob's masculinity is still intact and unthreatened because it is not dependent on his whiteness or on the "slaveholding father's power base and . . . his rule" (Easterbrook 59) of the Old South. Since he is able to transform his sense of masculinity and strip it from the ties of "the whole system of race and class relations in the Old South" (Easterbrook 61), he is able to command respect from others as well as his family and have healthier relationships. Due to his views on women and race Jacob is an enemy of the Old South ideals and their fanatics which is another indicator of the clash between the Old South and the New South.

1.2. SIMILARITIES WITH CANONICAL SOUTHERN GOTHIC

1.2.1. The Gothic Setting/The Gothic Creature

The setting and the environment in Southern Gothic are the places where the horrors and gothic elements spring. *The Bottoms* has similarities with the twentieth-century Southern Gothic setting wise. While *The Bottoms* does not make use of plantations, the gothic setting of the novel is a dark forest and its bottoms as in most Southern Gothic works. Throughout the novel, swamp or swamp-like structures deep in the woods serve to two different purposes and stand for two different spheres both of which are Southern Gothic characteristics. On the one hand, it represents a place of horror and suffering, a dark place where the unspeakable can happen. It is a place which, as Greven argues, “evokes death, a place from which no one returns” (476). On the other hand, it signifies a place of refuge for the marginalized running away from oppression. As Sivils puts it, in many other Southern Gothic works “swamp functions as a temporary refuge from the horrors of slavery” and scrutinization by the white society (87). In other words, it is an uncanny place beyond the territory where the community resides and, in the novel, these two representations of swamp are closely tied to a Gothic creature which is the Goat Man.

In the novel, Harry mentions an old folk tale revolving around the Goat Man, “[h]alf goat, half man [who] steals animals and children” (7). Although Harry has never seen the Goat Man, there are stories of abducted livestock and distant cousins by the Goat Man circulating around the town. This Gothic landscape is separate from the area where the townspeople live and it is almost as if there is a line separating the grotesque from “the normal.” It is said that the Goat Man is not able to cross the limits of the forest into the main road “because Baptist preachers traveled regular there on foot and by car . . . making the road holy” (7-8). As the Goat Man is regarded as an unholy creature banished by the religious men to the confines of the forest, the forest itself turns into a Hell-like place. As Davison also observes, forests and swamps as unholy places are two of the most common tropes of Southern Gothic as they “emblematis[e] the terrifying prospect in the white Southern consciousness of reverting to a state of nature/barbarism” (60). All that is evil

is in the eyes of the society is cast away to the swamp so that the white townsfolk can live an undisturbed life.

Additionally, as the white Southerners refuse to face the sins of slavery and hundreds of years of injustice and discrimination, they transform these horrors into figures of folk tales strolling around dark forests. The forest thus serves as the unconscious of whiteness, containing both the guilt of slavery, and the fear of blackness. In this sense, the swamp has obvious racial undertones as it is depicted as a place where “a subjugated racial Other” resides (Sivils 86). Swamps are associated with the others of the region and that makes them wild, untamed, and unholy places. As Sivils argues, a swamp is a “wild landscape devoid of human settlement” (87). The fact that the Goat Man is segregated from the urban society and the whites symbolizes that he is considered black by the white majority. Harry tells the reader that “[h]igh land was something [the Goat Man] couldn’t tolerate,” “[h]e needed the damp, thick leaf mush beneath his feet” (8). Significantly, the depiction of the Goat Man resembles that of a field slave in the Old South, who toiled endlessly in the farming fields and who was not even allowed to live in a house. Swamps have also been depicted as places where slaves ran off and hid inside, which draws another parallel between the Goat Man and a black man.

Lloyd argues that in Southern Gothic works where there is a certain monster and or a creature that “is ostracized, feared and demonized”, the whole “race is coded . . . as supernatural” (86). The Goat Man is depicted as black as a shadow so much so that even the “[m]oonlight did not change anything” (24). He is a creature of the night which no light can shine on or penetrate into. Harry describes him as something that has “white teeth [and] dark face” (103). Although Harry and his family do not harbor any hatred towards black people, Harry is affected by the collective unconscious of the South. Even though he is not really sure of what to make of the Goat Man’s appearance, he associates him with darkness and having a dark countenance, namely with blackness.

Moreover, as the manner of the death of the victim is revealed,—raped, tortured, murdered, tied to a tree with barbed wires— the common sentiment appoints a black man as the perpetrator since this kind of brutality can only be associated with black people in

the minds of the white people. While examining the body, the white town doctor comes to the conclusion that the torture must be the work of a black man because “there’s things a colored can’t help” and that a black man “would have a pretty good time playin’ with a naked colored gal” (76), which further creates the notion that the Goat Man must be black in Harry’s mind since he thinks that the Goat Man is capable of horrors as these.

The resemblances between the “the other” and a black person are not dismissed by the black community either. Harry listens to Miss Maggie, an ex-slave, talk about what her father called a “Travellin’ Man” who makes a deal with the Devil and starts killing women. When she gives the example of a Travellin’ Man named Dandy, she reiterates that Dandy was a black man who lived in the bottoms. Dandy continues killing women until “he finally gets him a little white girl, mistreats and kills her” because at that point “it ain’t just about niggers killin’ niggers” (49). Once he kills a white woman, and the Klan finds him and lynches him, which, in Miss Maggie’s mind, is “one of the few times the Klan do [them] all a favor” (49). The story about a black man dwelling in the bottoms, drinking, raping and killing women decades ago affects Harry who sees it as the hard proof of the Goat Man’s identity as a black man. As the Goat Man and blacks are associated with one another in the eyes of society, it becomes a given that any violence inflicted upon them is justifiable and a service to the white women of the town.

Towards the end of their investigation, Harry finds out that what he thought was the Goat Man is actually Telly, the mentally challenged son of a black man named Mose whom the townspeople lynch because they believed he was the killer. Telly is intellectually disabled and is abandoned by his mother because “[s]he was embarrassed by that addle-headed boy” (Lansdale 132). Harry realizes that what he feared all along and what he saw as the Goat Man was not a demonic creature but an innocent black man living—quite literally—in the margins of society. Telly hides in the forest and makes the bottoms his home because he is banished by society due to his skin color and his mental state. He is scrutinized by the white society of the town and deemed “not normal.” Telly’s refuge in the swamps ascribes the setting a completely different meaning because the swamp is now perceived as a safe haven, a place of refuge for the marginalized instead of an unholy place where evil lurks.

Davison argues that in Southern Gothic “swamp is an ambivalent, sublime setting associated with brutalized slaves” (59). In Chopin’s “Desiree’s Baby” once Desiree is accused of having mixed blood and is treated as such, she takes her baby and disappears into the bayou never to be found again. It is apparent that the swamp functions as a place where racial and social oppression and discrimination are thwarted. As the scrutinized make their way to the swamp, they strip themselves of scrutinization and make the uncivilized and unpeopled swamp their home.

This is true in Telly’s and his father’s cases. Telly’s father, Mose, being scared of discrimination, and verbal and physical violence against black people and people with mental disabilities, places Telly deep inside the forest and Telly never comes out of that forest except when he tries to warn Harry about the murderer’s whereabouts. Mose, too, lives in the forest and Jacob explains the reason why saying that although Mose was born after the abolition of slavery and had never been a slave, “he ain’t never had nothing but white folks on his butt. That’s why he went off to live in the woods . . . [t]o get away from the white folks” (149). As two scrutinized black men make the swamp their home, the swamp setting becomes, in Sivils’ words, “a place in which an oppressed figure” escapes from “an otherwise inescapable system of oppression” (89). In the final analysis, it can be argued that, as in many other Southern Gothic novels, in *The Bottoms* the swamp is both a place of horror signifying the uncanny, and a place of refuge and a safe haven for the runaway figures.

1.2.2. (Self-) Lynching

One of the most common recurring themes of Southern Gothic and one of the most violent horrors of the Old and New South is lynching. NAACP website describes lynching as “the public killing of an individual who has not received any due process . . . often carried out by lawless mobs . . . used to terrorize and control Black people in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, particularly in the South” (“History”). Lynching often includes torture, castration, setting one on fire and hanging one from a tree. It is a device used by racist and white supremacist groups to enact violence upon black people, when, for instance, blacks fail to show deference to whites or when a black man is accused of having

relation with or raping a white woman with the purpose of keeping them on the line according to their own wishes and expectations. It is a symptom of the white Southern mindset which has not abandoned the Old South “revealing the painful adjustment of the two races to a life of equal rights” (Milica 104). As it is one of the biggest racial issues in the South, lynching has been given a place in the body of Southern Gothic works of the past and the present.

In *The Bottoms*, there are two incidents of lynching both of which take a heavy physical and psychological toll on the residents of Harry’s town and on himself. Although he receives no help, Jacob is pressured by the whites to catch the murderer since they believe that the killer is black, and he would “have liked it better had it been a white woman . . . A nigger prefers a white woman he gets a chance” (126). Nation warns Jacob that if he does not catch the murderer sooner or later, a white woman will be a victim and the town will be swept in turmoil. Due to the pressures from his community and his family, and desperate for some progress, Jacob secretly takes an old black man named Mose into custody although he knows that he is innocent. However, the word gets out and the white public starts to question him. Because he does not reveal the identity of the man, Nation calls him a “[n]igger lover” (127). Jacob withholds the information about the suspect because he fears that “Mose and every colored boy over twelve might end up bein’ lynched” (145). Jacob knows that when one black man is suspected of being guilty, no one, not even the Constable of the town, can guarantee the safety of black citizens.

The townspeople find the identity of the suspect, they apprehend him and take him away. After hearing this, Jacob quickly arrives at the scene with Harry. The white mob gathers together telling him that they want justice, to which Jacob replies: “[t]his is a lynch mob. Justice is a day in court” (199). Jacob also reminds them that he is an official agent of the state whose task is to uphold the law and he is responsible for finding out whether a person is guilty or innocent; however, he is belittled and laughed at because his own sentiments differ from those of the Old South. When Jacob says, “I’m the law here,” Nation replies, “Not today, you ain’t” (199). Nation is yearning for the antebellum era when the division between whites and blacks was even more brutally apparent, which can be understood from his following remarks,

In the old days, we took care of bad niggers prompt like, Nation said. And we figured out somethin' real quick. A nigger hurt a white man or woman, you hung him, he didn't hurt anyone again. You got to take care of a nigger problem quick, or ever nigger around here will be thinkin' he can rape and murder white women at will. (199)

The novel underlines the fact that the remnants of the era Nation are nostalgic about continued to shape the lives of citizens in the South of the 1930s. As Jacob is regarded as an enemy of the Old South, hurting him is regarded as acceptable. For, when Jacob tries to cut the rope Mose is tied with, the white mob starts beating up him and Harry. In other words, not only are they intent upon hanging an innocent black man for hurting a white person but they also hurt an innocent white boy to punish his father. Harry recounts the brutal beatdown and the tragedy that is about to unfold as follows:

He stepped forward then, jerked the rope off Mose. The crowd let out a sound like an animal in pain, then they were all over Daddy, punching and kicking. I tried to fight them, but they hit me too. Next thing I knew I was on the ground and legs were kicking at us, then I heard Mose scream for Daddy. When I looked up they had the rope around the old man's neck and were dragging him along the ground, him clutching at the rope with his hands, his old body making ruts in the muddy grass on the riverbank. (200)

Jacob is attacked by the white mob because of his dissenting voice against the ideologies of the Old South, which gives the white mob the right to enact their own sense of twisted justice whenever they please. Mose, a black man, becomes a victim of this racist hate and violence:

Mose pulled at the rope with his hands, trying to work it free of his throat. He couldn't get his fingers between it and his neck. His feet kicked . . . Mose hung above us, his tongue long and black and thick as a sock stuffed with paper. His eyes bulged out of his head like little green persimmons. Someone had pulled his pants down and cut him. Blood dripped from between Mose's legs, onto the ground. (201)

Mose's lynching is similar to the lynching in Faulkner's short story "Dry September" in which a black man named Will Mayes is wrongly accused by a spinster who suffers from the lack of male attention, of raping her. When the news reaches the white men in a

barbershop, they talk with each other and decide to lynch him before they try to understand what really happened because they will “take a white woman’s word before a nigger’s” (Faulkner “Dry”). When Henry, the barber, tries to plead with others saying that “I know Will Mayes. He’s a good nigger,” they ask him “Do you mean to tell me you are a white man and you’ll stand for it? You better go back North where you came from. The South don’t want your kind here” (“Dry”). In “Dry September” and *The Bottoms*, Henry and Jacob possess other ideals than the white mob’s but they are powerless. Despite the efforts of the two characters in *The Bottoms* and “Dry September,” the white mob lynches the suspected blacks. One crucial difference between the two is that while Henry tries to stop the mob only verbally, Jacob tries to take action but is neutralized through violence.

The powerlessness of the constitution and individuals against an Old South mob is an issue that is addressed in Chesnutt’s *The Colonel’s Dream* as well (1905). As in *The Bottoms*, in *Dream*, the main character, the Colonel, promises a black man safety and protection against a white mob; nonetheless, he cannot stop the white mob from lynching him. In *The Bottoms* when Mose is proven innocent, Jacob tells him that “I’m gonna let you go. We’re gonna take you home” (Lansdale 153). He leaves Mose to his shack and promises him that this will stay a secret and no one will know about it. However, the white mob catches up to him and Mose tells Harry “Missuh Jacob, don’t let them do nothin’. I didn’t do nothin’ to nobody. You said I was gonna be all right” (198). Mose feels deceived and helpless seeing that the white mob thinks he is guilty. Jacob tries to fight the mob, but they knock him down and lynch Mose. After the lynching, Jacob cannot do anything to prosecute or make up a case for the murder of Mose despite the fact that he is a man of law. Similarly, in *Dream*, when the Colonel hears about the lynching he asks, “Can we do anything to punish *this* crime?” (Chesnutt *Dream*).

The difference between the Old and the New South becomes apparent as Jacob and the Colonel see lynching as a crime, as a murder, while the mob sees it as an enactment of justice, something that has to be done “as a form of maintaining order and law in the community” (Milica 104). However, both Jacob and the Colonel are left face to face with the fact that their ideals are not respected, and their moral sentiments are not welcome. In *Dream*, to acquit the mob, the jury returns “a verdict of suicide” and they tell the Colonel

that “it is done. Let it rest. No good can ever come of stirring it up further” (Chesnutt). In *The Bottoms*, the mob goes on with their lives, sickly proud of what they *accomplished* for the honor of white women.

After the shock, Jacob takes Mose’s body and buries him in his own yard. Jacob is devastated because he failed to protect an innocent civilian and a friend from harm. In addition, he cannot protect his son from the mob as they beat Harry which makes Jacob feel further humiliated and powerless. Jacob stops speaking and eating and gives himself to liquor. Harry’s grandmother explains to him that although they “got hit too hard by them folks,” Jacob “got kicked in the soul” (209). This damages Jacob’s psychology deeply because this is a trauma he experienced before. When he was a child like Harry, a black friend of Jacob was lynched as well. He tells the story of a black child named Donald who was wrongfully accused of murdering a white girl whose body was found in the river where he usually fished. One day Jacob sees a white mob and Donald “in a wagon bed, and they had nailed his hands and feet to that bed and they had castrated him” (147). Donald, too, sees Jacob and pleads with him saying, “Mister Jacob. Can’t you help me?” (147). Feeling scared and powerless against the white crowd, Jacob steps back while the mob “set the wagon on fire and finished him” (147). The fact that this tragedy took place on a road called Preacher’s Road symbolizes that the white mob and their white supremacist ideas are encouraged by their religion, which bears a similarity to Stephenson’s view of how the Bible advocates segregation. The white mob bases their hatred on law, the state, and religion. Nailing his hands to the bed is symbolic as Donald becomes a Christ-like figure sacrificed for the sins of the Old South. The white mob thinks that Donald is dirty not only mentally but also physically, as he carries the curse of being black like Cain. Therefore, in the mind of the white mob, burning him is a ritual for cleansing and purifying him of his burden.

Another common racial Southern Gothic trope is the characters with mixed heritages, how learning about their heritage destroys these characters’ whole sense of status and identity and turns the community against them. Armand in “Desiree’s Baby,” Joe Christmas in *Light in August* (1932), and Charles Bon in *Absalom Absalom!* are some of the examples of mixed-blood characters whose lives are toppled due to the secret of their

forebearers. Armand banishes his wife away because he thinks that she is a mulatto, finding out later that the reason why their baby is black is because of his own ancestors. Despite being a cruel plantation owner who looks down on the black race, Armand finds out that he is actually one of them. Since it is a short story, “Desiree’s Baby” does not build upon Armand’s realization, but it is possible to deduce that Armand is psychologically broken because at the end of the story, he loses his wife, his child, and his sense of identity and self-respect. While Armand’s self-realization damages himself, Charles Bon’s mixed blood changes society’s opinion of him. Sutpen’s other son Henry highly admires and respects Charles and although he knows that Charles is his half-brother, Henry is willing to allow him to marry his sister in incestuous matrimony. However, upon finding out that Charles is part black, Henry’s admiration and respect turn into animosity. Charles’ race negates any good quality he possesses and when Henry cannot convince him to leave his sister, he kills Charles.

These “white characters . . . become tragic figures because they find themselves barred from white society and therefore the privileges available to whites. Distraught at their fate as people of color, tragic mulattoes in literature often turned to suicide” (Nittle). In *The Bottoms*, Red Woodrow can be regarded as an example of the tragic mulatto. Despite being a racist and white-supremacist person, Red finds out that both his mother and father are black but because his father was part white, he took that genetic code and was born white. It is revealed to Harry, and later to Red, that Miss Maggie and Mose are his true parents. Participating in Mose’s lynching, reiterating multiple times that blacks and whites are not the same and not equal and that blacks do not deserve the respect and status whites are entitled to, Red Woodrow is utterly devastated after learning that he has mixed blood.

Red’s hatred of women and black people blend together in a violent outburst as he murders his mother, Miss Maggie, by whom he is raised and whom he thought was her wet nurse. Before learning that she was his mother, he constantly visits Miss Maggie and brings her household supplies, to make sure that she is living a fine life. However, once Miss Maggie turns into a mother figure, Red, being a violent and misogynist racist character, changes and becomes hostile. Harry’s grandmother explains that Red “didn’t

care for coloreds. He seen himself as white, and he seen himself as superior, then one day maybe Miss Maggie told him. For whatever reason, she just told him. He couldn't stand the idea, and he killed her" (250). Jacob also concurs as he believes that "Red loved Miss Maggie like a mother, but when he discovered she was his mother, he lost his bearings, his position in life. He was no longer a good white man looking after a poor colored woman, he was colored himself" (322). It is possible to argue that while sex is a way to destroy women and strengthen his masculinity for Red, his sexuality and masculinity crumble into pieces in front of Miss Maggie, the true matriarch who turns into an authoritarian mother figure. He seeks to destroy the very existence of the one woman he is powerless against. By killing Maggie, he subconsciously attempts to kill the black blood in his system.

After killing Maggie, Red Woodrow leaves the town and commits suicide as he cannot live with this *cursed* knowledge about his parentage. Red's self-lynching is highly similar to Joe Christmas' death in *Light in August*. Having lived all his life in limbo, not knowing whether he is completely white or black or mixed, Joe roams the land without trying to establish any connections or relations. As he cannot determine his own identity, he cannot determine what to do with his life. In the case of *The Bottoms*, having believed that blacks are inferior and acted on it, Red is not able to accept the fact that he belongs to that inferior group he has hated all his life. Red's suicide resembles a lynching as his body is found hanging from a cliff with a rope and black tar all over his body. Red "heated the tar, and then, deliberately, plastered the scalding hot stuff to himself, put the rope around his neck, and swung out over the river" (323).

During the autopsy, after cleaning out the tar, it is found out that "[a]cross [his] chest was a new crude tattoo that read, NIGGER" (323). Red's branding of himself as the N-word is also a biblical reference. For generations, slavery institution was based on the story of the Curse of Ham (Lee). Ham is the son of Noah who curses him and all his descendants. Ham is usually depicted as black and as the first ancestor of Africans. This biblical story has been wrongfully interpreted on purpose to justify slavery, and it proves to be one of the most common sentiments of the Old South. As Red finds out that he is black, he

believes that he is cursed and carrying the brand, that is, the black blood, of all the cursed, and kills himself in a manner in which he thinks black people ought to die.

In the final analysis, it can be argued that *The Bottoms* is a Southern Gothic novel as violence and death, the clash between the Old and the New South, tragic mulattos, lynching and self-lynching are present. The novel also makes use of common Southern Gothic settings which are swamps and forests. At the same time, it is a contemporary Southern Gothic example because although the protagonist is poor he does not turn into a degenerate and maintains his dignity and integrity, unlike the poor people in many twentieth-century Southern Gothic works. Moreover, the main characters do not have conflicted views about the Old and the New South at all. They are adamantly certain that the Old South and its practices such as racism, misogyny, and its ideal of white supremacy are morally wrong and should not exist in the New South, which is another characteristic that differentiates *The Bottoms* from the twentieth-century Southern Gothic. There is a sense of activism and didacticism consciously placed inside the novel by Lansdale about the environment and racial issues of the South as he disapproves of the exploitation of natural resources on account of poverty and reiterates the evilness and futility of racism through Jacob.

CHAPTER 2: *SERENA* AS CONTEMPORARY SOUTHERN GOTHIC

Ron Rash, the author of *Serena*, was born in South Carolina in 1953 and later relocated to North Carolina with his family where he spent most of his life and where many of his ancestors had lived since the eighteenth century (“Ron Rash”). Rash is one of the most prominent, critically and commercially acclaimed contemporary Southern authors. He has won many accolades and awards for his novels some of which have been adapted into the big screen (*Serena* in 2014 and *The World Made Straight* in 2015). Apart from being a novelist, Rash is also a prolific poet who published several poetry collections and won multiple awards for them. Rash is often praised for the “memorable voices and . . . unforgettable images” he creates in his works and for his “remarkable skill [,] . . . his dramatic instincts, stoic voice, and deep humanity” (qtd. in “Ron Rash”).

Serena is a Southern Gothic novel as it is characterized by the clash between the Old South and the New South, depictions of intense violence, the use of religious imagery, and representations of corruption in the South. At the same time, it is a contemporary work as it represents working class and environmental exploitation which Ron Rash, an author with a working-class background, presents in a lamenting way. There are no plantations or old, aristocratic Southern families in the novel but poor North Carolinians who live in the mountains of the region isolated from the rest of the country. Moreover, in *Serena*, nearly all the Southern characters are depicted as statues of morality and goodness while all the Northerners are depicted as exploitative and evil. Violence, death, corruption, and perversity typically attributed to Southerners in Southern Gothic become the distinctive qualities of the industrialist Northerners in this novel.

Serena begins in 1929 with the arrival of a Northern couple, Serena and George Pemberton, to a North Carolina town called Waynesville to oversee their lumber business. Upon their arrival, the couple is confronted by a man named Abe Harmon whose daughter, Rachel, George sexually exploited and impregnated before marrying Serena. Harmon challenges George to a knife fight and George kills him in front of Rachel. This marks a turning point for the couple who begins to bribe officials, exploit the environment and the working class, hurt and kill people ruthlessly in order to increase their profits and

have more wealth. Their murderous practices take their toll on George who begins to fear Serena and wants to get closer to Rachel and his illegitimate son, Jacob. When Serena finds out about George's secret love and compassion for Rachel and his son, she poisons and kills him and nearly kills Rachel and Jacob as well. Decades later, Rachel tells Jacob about Serena and how she murdered George, his father. At the end of the novel, Jacob travels to Brazil where Serena moved to after depleting the forests of Waynesville and kills her in her sleep.

2.1. DIFFERENCES WITH CANONICAL SOUTHERN GOTHIC

The most obvious and crucial difference between the twentieth-century Southern Gothic and *Serena* is the issue of race and racism or essentially the lack of it. Racial dichotomy does not exist in the novel as it is set against the background of the white people in the town. Robertson states that "Native Americans do not form part of the Appalachia of the mind, . . . neither do black Americans. The stereotypical mountain man is predominantly imagined to be white, even if less white than his mainstream counterpart" (118). As in contemporary Appalachian Gothic, there are no black characters or voices, slaveholding ancestors, or the sinful history of the South in *Serena*. In the novel, Rash presents a South that is stripped of the guilt and burden of slavery. Southerners are portrayed as innocent, simple folks who try to make ends meet during the hard times caused by the Depression and succumb to evil Northerners as they need money to feed their families. The only guilt of the Southerners is the destruction of the environment of their region but they justify themselves by reminding each other that they are financially broken and are forced to harm the environment so that they do not become unemployed and starve.

2.1.1. Representation of Working-Class Exploitation

Poverty and the exploitation of the working class have been scarcely represented in traditional Southern Gothic works. Arguably, the two most famous working-class Southern Gothic characters, Stanley Kowalski in Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Popeye in William Faulkner's *Sanctuary*, are depicted as socially and sexually violent people but their lives as workers or their struggles at their workplaces are

not reflected, nor are they defined by their identities as wage laborers in these works. As the number of authors from working-class backgrounds increased, the representations of the exploited labor class began to take center stage in contemporary Southern Gothic. In this respect, *Serena* is truly an example of a contemporary southern Gothic novel because it is a testament to the state of the workers of the North Carolina lumber industry and presents the “exploited people” as well as the “scarred landscape” of Appalachia (Walker).

The novel reflects the “struggle between powerless mountaineers and unfeeling” bosses, which is a common characteristic of contemporary Southern Gothic (Peterson 37). The representation of the exploitation of workers by Northern bosses, the treacherous terrain, nonexistent safety measures, sub-human working conditions, the workers’ dilemma between their obligations to their families and to the environment, and the destruction of nature of which they become an instrument are the contemporary aspects of the novel. As Robertson argues, contemporary Gothic by Appalachian authors shows the Southern working class’ “exploitation and expropriation by needy whit(ened) elites” especially by the industrialist Northerners (113).

Timber becomes the highest priority as the actual blood and sweat poured into the process of it are overlooked by the Northerners. Each day the loggers die horrible deaths or suffer crippling injuries rendering them unable to work. As Deel argues, for the Northerners, “[s]afety is not a concern, productivity and profits are” (14). Death and decapitation toll among the workers is so high that it becomes ordinary for the non-loggers to freely jest about it. The camp doctor Cheney makes a joke saying that if they “could gather up all the severed body parts and sew them together, [they would] gain an extra worker every month” (Rash 26). A Northern partner also states that the doctor had “no need for a recovery room” since his patients did not recover at all (32). The very lives of the loggers employed by the Northerners become but a source of indecent jokes. The laborers’ efforts spent cutting the trees during which they lose their limbs and even their lives are mocked and ignored. Although the Northerners see the effort, they actively and consciously belittle it. Serena quickly realizes that the rich “preferred money spent cutting wood, not finery for workers” (340). She understands that other rich landowners with whom she

wants to do business are against spending money for the sake of workers since they see it as money wasted.

When George sees a worker slip on a log, get trapped under it, and drown in the river below, he tells the foreman: “[c]ome into camp tomorrow and we’ll get you a new man,” (Rash 224) without acknowledging the tragedy which has just taken place. He also tells him to “make it clear [the new worker] buys cutter boots with his first week’s pay” (224), which is resistant to slipping. The Northerners dehumanize the workers by not providing them with basic living conditions, making them leave their own houses and live in “stringhouses [that] resembled cheap wooden boxcars” (Rash 15), subtly turning them into lifeless and prospectless carcasses without any sense or sensibility. Even sleeping and eating are for the purpose of keeping worker efficiency at a steady rate as the Northerners do not even supply the workers with electricity. This saves them money as they believe that the loggers will “work harder if they live like Spartans” (17). While the Pembertons pay the workers the lowest amount possible, they also overwork them in nearly 12-hour shifts, as there is no authority to supervise the business-labor relations and practices or punish those at fault. During the breaks, the workers move to and out of the cafeteria for sustenance almost in a robotic way:

The timber crews came in, and for fifteen minutes the men hardly spoke to one another, much less to Rachel and the other kitchen workers. They raised their hands and pointed to empty bowls and platters, their mouths still working as they did so. After fifteen minutes passed, the work bell rang. The men left so quickly their cast-down forks and spoons seemed to retain a slight vibration, like pond water rippling after a splash. (Rash 128)

The conscious belittling of the labor effort takes its toll on the psychology of the workers who feel unappreciated and valueless. As their human value is reduced to zero compared to the product’s value in the eyes of the Northerners, the loggers’ self-value and respect are lost. The loggers almost feel as though they are the members of a suicide cult. Cutting trees in the mountains is a highly dangerous work both for the body and the mind but they cannot and do not stop. The workers damage themselves to be able to hold onto their work by drinking “cups of coffee” carrying “cigarettes and chewing tobacco” and even

using “cocaine to keep going and stay alert” (Rash 24). One of the workers is a doomsday believer frightening other workers:

You can make sport of it, McIntyre said to Ross, but this unnatural weather is a certain sign we’re in the last days. The sun will be darkened and the moon shall not give her light. . . . There will be famines and pestilences coming after that, McIntyre proclaimed. There’ll be nary a plant sprout out of the ground but thorns and you’ll have grasshoppers big as rabbits eating everything else, even the wood on your house, and snakes and scorpions and all such terrible things falling out of the sky. (Rash 63)

The prophecies of the preacher worker are also a window into the psyche of the workers. The representation of this psyche is a common characteristic of “Appalachia’s gothicism [which] offers crucial insights into the region’s socio-economic development” (Robertson 110). Being the victims of exploitation by their bosses and left alone by the Depression government, the workers adopt a bleak and pessimistic outlook on life. In addition, risking their lives for awful wages just to be ignored and underappreciated destroys their hopes for the future. According to the Bible, one connotation of doomsday is that it is the day when every person who ever existed will be judged regardless of their social standing or possessions and will receive punishment or reward according to their deeds in life. In a way, the laborers expect God to bring on a revolution and cast the Northerners in Hell because of their exploitation of the Southern working class. The same worker calls Serena “Jezebel,” the idolater and fornicator wife of the Hebrew king Ahab, and the “Whore of Babylon,” who is the mother of all abominations on Earth in the Bible, whose arrival means the final days of the world (30-1). It is apparent that the Southerners see the rich Northerners as forces of Satanic evil and wait for their doom when they will be punished and stripped of their possessions.

The workers feel a gloomy isolation in the face of the Northerners and the treacherous mountains. Each element in their lives, from the bosses to other workers and to the environment, is an enemy. When the workers move up the snowy mountains, they wear their old “submarine coats, . . . coats from the Great War” (Rash 62). The symbolism is apparent: the mountains are a battlefield, and the loggers fight a battle in a work’s day. The loggers are terrorized by the logs that occasionally get free and impale them, or by

the rattlesnakes whose venom is sure to maim or kill, or by the terrain itself which is so steep that workers start falling down. While these tragedies take place every day, the Northerners remain oblivious to the laborer effort behind the business. Beilfuss emphasizes the fact that because of “high unemployment during the Great Depression, the workers, like the land are quite literally disposable for the Pembertons” (390). Constantly being threatened with their lives the workers claim that “[t]here can’t be a worse . . . job in the world” (Rash 176).

When Serena vehemently refuses to give her land to the government, a local magazine reporter laments: “But think how much you already have profited here, . . . Can’t you give something back to the people of this region?” (Rash 116). As it can be understood from the quotation, the Northern bosses in the novel are not concerned with the state of the Southerners nor do they feel an obligation to help them even though they make profits through their exploited labor. Serena does not oppose the park “because she actually cares about the people removed from their land” but because “the mountain people are just objects for Serena to use in her defense of her” business, wealth, and a way to justify her abusive and exploitative practices in the forests (Schermerhorn 21). One of the partners tells a government park supporter, “When people in this state are grubbing up roots in your parks to keep from starving, they’ll . . . start using those trees of yours for hangings” (166). The working-class members are socially and economically restricted in their lives and can see neither a way of rising above the firm grasp of poverty nor overcoming the crippling anxiety of unemployment during the Depression.

In the novel, it is understood that the Northerners actively keep the poor in a state of lack in order to save money. The only stable entity during the extremely unstable Depression times for the local working class is the Pembertons and their business. Serena and the rich have the money that the working class needs to be able to survive and for that money to flow, all parties need the business to go as smoothly as possible without any Depression-government intervention. When the workers read that a landowner named Townsend sold his land to the officials, one worker gets upset and says that it is “bad news for [his] brother-in-law” and his sister who “got four young ones to feed” (Rash 217). This is one of the contemporary aspects of the novel because contemporary Appalachian Gothic

displays the horrors of the “industrial exploitation of the landscape” and the anxieties of the “displaced peoples” of Appalachia (Solomon 15). The workers fear that the same thing might happen to Serena and her land. If this happens, the rich will still have their wealth and simply move their business elsewhere whereas the workers will receive the most damage. Physical and environmental violence go hand in hand with working-class exploitation as Appalachian Gothic is built upon the history of exploitation in the region. To use Sells’ phrasing, through the representation of working-class exploitation, Rash makes use of “Southern Gothic as a medium for the disenfranchised, oppressed, and dispossessed” (*Held Together*).

2.1.2. Representation of Environmental Exploitation

In the contemporary scene of Southern Gothic produced by Appalachian authors, the true gothic horror is “the aggressive processes of mountain top removal,” “the destruction of the natural habitat” while “capital is cast as villain” (Robertson 109). Michael Beilfuss states that in *Serena*, “[t]he ecological catastrophe [the rich] create is inseparable from the social catastrophes they cause” (390). Sivils also argues that contemporary Southern Gothic authors mold “human oppression with environmental exploitation” (92). Serena regards the nature around her and all its resources as her property which exist only to be exploited and made profit from. Robertson maintains that, as a contemporary Appalachian author, Rash “draws attention to the region’s ongoing battle with companies and politicians who regard [the South] as ripe for plunder, even in today’s more environmentally conscious world” (119). In the same vein, Stephens argues that Serena’s “selfish human-centered worldview creates spiritual and physical death for humankind and the natural environment” (33). Although logging has centuries of history and is one of the biggest economic crutches of the region, what Serena wants is more than logging; it is complete deforestation.

Serena wishes to subdue nature and change the way it works. Beilfuss writes that “Serena will rest at nothing short of complete denudation of the mountains under her control” (387). Since the land is hers, Serena believes that she owns everything on, in, or under it and she “abhors any limits or barriers being put on her . . . design to subdue and destroy”

(Groba 129). She uses excessive force to control nature. She fully knows the hardships of the logging business because of her father and the obstacles the loggers face. While the harshness of the terrain scares the loggers, for Serena it is a circumstance of the business and she tries to ensure that the pace and the effectiveness of the logging stay the same throughout the season. As Deel argues, Serena “believes in efficiency, even at the expense of others” (13). She wants perseverance all around and to not get stuck by those aspects of the business they cannot change.

Justified by her possession of the forests, Serena exploits nature and employs the locals to bring complete deforestation whose dire results begin to appear after Serena makes her money, causing the state and its inhabitants to suffer from the consequences. Both nature and its inhabitants are depicted as victims to Serena who defiles and destroys it with machinery. Serena’s indifference towards the consequences of environmental destruction is pointed out by Alexandria Craft who claims that “Serena, and their business partners are blinded by their present successes, and they are not concerned with looking far enough into the future and admitting the significant ecological impact their clearcutting will have on the Appalachian region in the decades and even centuries to come” (45). In a similar vein, Grace Schermerhorn states “the environmental devastation that Serena joyfully enacts is a direct reflection on . . . the historical implications of industrial destruction in Appalachia” (13). However, Appalachia alone is not sufficient for Serena who wants to expand the reaches of exploitation to other regions outside the United States.

Once the natural resources of North Carolina are depleted, Serena offers to go to Brazil and move their business there as there are only “[v]irgin forests of mahogany and no law but nature’s law” (Rash 29) and no one to answer to. As the Depression government increases its authority over their profits, the industrialist Northerners want to move to less socially and democratically developed regions in order to gain unsupervised and uncontested wealth and power. To Serena, a land with trees is a source of wealth no matter where it is located. As their business and future winnings are threatened by the Depression-government plan to open a park on the lands they own, Serena becomes even more vicious about cutting and harvesting the trees. She is in a race with the government to make the most money in the shortest span of time. When the government agency offers

a meeting, the Pembertons choose the farthest date possible because they are not sure about how the meeting will result. Serena sees this as an opportunity and says that “the more time [they] have to keep logging the better” (110).

In the meeting, Serena and the officials cannot reach an agreement which enables Serena to keep harvesting the trees as she likes. The region is left all alone with “Serena’s boundless ambition to plunder the forests” (Groba 131). Not only the forests of North Carolina but also of other countries which are under no supervision are targets for Serena. She tells other landowners that they should not limit themselves “to just what’s here . . . when there’s so much more to be gained elsewhere” (Rash 234). Serena’s cruel and indifferent attitude towards the trees of the region is intimidating even for the members of her own class.

According to Craft, Serena is a business owner in the time of the Great Depression, who “allowed greed and pride to influence [her] opinions of the environment and its resources” (44). In a friendly night with the other landowners who sold their lands to the government, one of the landowners says that since most of the owners agreed to sell their land, they are now focusing on North Carolina, meaning the Pembertons’ land. Serena does not feel intimidated by this looming threat as she knows that their endeavor is a fast and efficient one and says that they will “have every tree in the tract cut down by then” (Rash 242). When the owner says that although she is right, the government will have the land eventually even if it takes decades Serena responds by saying “Pemberton and I will have logged a whole country by then” (242). Serena’s cruel but also realistic statement puts everybody in awe for a moment as they cannot give her an answer that can match this intense display of greed.

Serena’s ruthless behavior towards the nature of Waynesville, North Carolina, and the local residents’ home in order to earn money will have adverse consequences in the long run. However, Serena does not consider the dangerous results of her actions since she is fully aware that her stay in North Carolina is only momentary. Once she acquires her profit fully, she will leave the state to plunder another forest, which makes her focus on her current profits rather than the ecological consequences of business. The loggers are

so fiercely encouraged to harvest the land that at one point they think that the places they left behind “resembled grave markers in a recently vacated battlefield” (Rash 23). While Serena exploits the forests for profit, the poor loggers have no other option than to be a tool for this exploitation as they are face to face with financial adversities.

As the threat of government approaches, Serena leads the loggers to be more aggressive towards the trees although the loggers are aware of the fact that “logging . . . both gives them a livelihood and destroys their home” (Schermerhorn 9). In this environment, the ultimate battle is between the loggers and the forest. As Beilfuss states “[t]he land on which [the poor] used to hunt, fish, and farm is now the land that they are employed to harvest and denude irrevocably of its fecundity” (389). Towards the end of the Pembertons’ operation on the forests, a crew cuts the last standing tree and they stand face to face with the destruction that had been brought upon the land by Serena’s greediness. The water they drink from the creek which would be otherwise sweetened by the chestnut trees they eradicated for timber now “[t]astes like mud” (Rash 333). As the workers gaze upon the work that destroyed the environment they were born into, they discover more damages and “the environmental consequences of the Pemberton's greed [which] will remain after the Pembertons” (Schermerhorn 23). While the water’s taste changes, the habitat inside it changes as well; it was full of trout once upon a time, but they see no creature that lives in it (334). One worker observes: “Used to be thick with trout too, this here stream. There was many a day you and me took our supper from it. Now you’d not catch a knottyhead” (Rash 334). The workers understand that while they gained some money, they lost an invaluable provider because of Serena’s greed.

As Robertson argues, Appalachia’s “gothic ruins are not merely man-made structures but also the haunting vestiges of humans’ aggressive pursuit of wealth” (109). Through exploitation and deforestation, the environment itself turns into a gothic setting. The workers are awakened to the fact that Serena’s excessive logging of the forests devastates the environment and disrupts the natural order and habitat of the animals and they begin to see “how they are sacrificed and forgotten by the world as created by the Pembertons” (Beilfuss 389). The forests look like “the skinned hide of some huge animal” (Rash 333). They spot a flock of birds circling the forest which almost looks stunned because of not

seeing any trees but a “charred valley” instead and then flying away (334). They realize that they are looking at a barren wasteland without any life in it, whose culprit is Serena’s greed for wealth.

A WWI veteran logger resembles the state of the land to the aftermath of one of the bloodiest battles in the war in France. To him, the landscape looks “[l]ike there’s been so much killed and destroyed it can’t ever be alive again” (Rash 335). They feel that they are looking at “a place where men died and the land died with them” (335). As Beilfuss claims, the poor “are nostalgic, homesick, for the very place they inhabit; they have not left home, but it has left them, or rather they participated in its destruction” (389-90). The severity of this destruction is such that the land looks like a warzone although there were no enemy forces, guns, or bullets, but only industrialist greed. Similar to many contemporary Appalachian authors, through Serena and her partners, Rash presents “the historical wilderness exploitation of Appalachia” (Peterson vii).

Aside from deforesting the entire region for profit, Serena further causes irreversible ecological damage by killing all the rattlesnakes on the mountain. When a worker is bitten by a snake and is rushed to the camp doctor, they realize that the worker is nearly dead even though they arrive on short notice. The doctor says that “his pulse was no more than a felt whisper” (59). The venom of timber rattlesnakes is so powerful and irreversibly deadly that the camp doctor does not even try to save the worker (59). Wilkie, one of the partners, tells Serena that snakes are costing them workers and money as “not just . . . a crew is halted by a bite [but] men get overcautious, so progress is slowed” (59). Serena replies that all of them “should be killed off” (59). Serena sees herself above the natural functioning of the forests since she owns them. She is portrayed as a woman who is so self-absorbed in her own sense of superiority to other beings that she orders the elimination of an entire species just because they interfere with her business.

Serena buys and tames a wild eagle which becomes her biggest weapon for the snakes ensuring the continuity of her business and profits. To tame the eagle, Serena closes herself inside a stall with the eagle and stays there for two full days without eating or sleeping. After two days, the eagle completely gives in and she becomes its master. This

is another sign of Serena's wish to subdue the environment around her. Once fully tamed, Serena teaches the eagle to hunt and kill the rattlesnakes and in one month the eagle kills more than half a dozen rattlesnakes, which Stephens regards as "an attempt to usurp nature's laws as [Serena] is in battle with this natural entity" (30). There is a resemblance between the eagle's arrival at the camp and its destruction of the balance of nature and Serena's arrival in North Carolina. Both of them are outsiders who came from faraway lands and started to harm the locals of the town. Serena's greed and her insurance policy for the snakes cause both social and environmental damages and Serena kills the people and the trees of the region as the eagle kills the rattlesnakes. Rash presents a Gothic environment "[f]rom dead land to dead people" (Robertson 117) due to environmental exploitation and destruction which is a common theme in contemporary Southern Gothic.

2.2. SIMILARITIES WITH CANONICAL SOUTHERN GOTHIC

2.2.1. Death and Violence

Grotesque and gory events such as death, murder, rape, and excessive violence committed by impulsive, evil, or mentally challenged individuals are some of the most distinguishable characteristics of Southern Gothic. As Fisher suggests, Southern Gothic is exemplified by "anxieties, fears, terrors, . . . violence, brutality . . . and death" (145). Bjerre concurs as he argues that the South of Southern Gothic is "an angst-ridden world of violence, sex, terror, and death" (2). In *Serena*, violence and death are abundant and continuous, and have moral, mental, and physical effects on individual and collective levels. However, what differentiates *Serena* from canonical Southern Gothic works is that death, violence, horrible and perverted deeds are not committed by Southerners but by Northerners.

Serena goes against the general tendency in which "gothic Appalachia is defined by bogey-men: hillbillies hiding behind trees with guns and toothless smiles at the ready" (Robertson 109). In *Serena*, while poor and starving Southerners try to preserve their dignity and stay as morally good figures, Northerners who are rich and who wish to become richer hurt and kill people and exploit their way to the top. The Appalachians in

novels such as *Deliverance* and *Child of God* represent North Carolinians and Appalachians as backward, isolated, dim-witted killers and rapists. Contrarily, Rash presents a group of Appalachian people victimized by the seemingly civilized Northerners in their pursuit of wealth.

In *Serena*, the Northerners are depicted as socially, psychologically, and economically manipulative tyrants committing various atrocities towards each other, the local community, and the environment. They are motivated only by their wish for more wealth and are prepared to sacrifice their humanity and those around them. Southern Gothic characters “are often blinded by their own greed or desires” (“What Is”) and, as Sivils argues, Southern Gothic stories are “a dark mixture of . . . dogma and greed” (85). Because of their greed for wealth and power, the Northerners destroy nature and subject local people to abuse, violence, poverty, and horrible deaths. Through *Serena* and her business partners, Ron Rash presents “a reality governed by the structures of greed and ruthless self-interest” (Schroder 425). All types of violence perpetrated by the Northerners are directly connected to each other because Appalachian Gothic is mainly about the total and complete exploitation of Appalachia on all fronts. As Robertson argues, “in Appalachia the terrible forces are far more often economic than spiritual” (118).

From the beginning, the Northerners are portrayed as people devoid of love and compassion. As stated earlier, *Serena* begins with the Pemberton couple’s arrival in North Carolina as nuptials. The events that took place earlier and the nature of their marriage are given through flashbacks. Early in the novel, *Serena* tells George that their encounter leading to their marriage was not “good fortune but [an] inevitability” (Rash 25) and that they married each other because both are “unafraid of challenges” (7). Before accepting George’s proposal, *Serena* has rejected many suitors (25) and as she tells her business partners, the main motive behind their union is to escape from the devastating effects of the Depression and become richer through the forests of North Carolina rather than mutual love: “If we’d wished our wealth spent otherwise we’d have stayed in Boston” (17).

George's social status as a timber company owner and Serena's expertise in the job make them the perfect match to realize Serena's wish for wealth and power. Although the couple seems to be in love with each other, it is also obvious that they see each other as a means to an end. As Brenda Stephens argues, "[t]he affection that Pemberton and Serena have for each other is perverted by their selfishness and greed" (54). Serena turns George into a commodity whose fortune and means of production she plans to use for her benefit and George primarily considers Serena "an unexpected bonus" from his travels, thus materializing and commodifying her in turn (Rash 3). As it can be understood, George's sexual greed and Serena's material greed mix together, and provide the ground for their marriage.

The difference between the Northerners and the Southerners is immediately presented through the first interaction between the two groups. When they get off the train, the Pembertons are greeted by a man named Abe Harmon, Rachel's father. Harmon wants the couple to understand that an injustice was done to his daughter and the guilty ones should make apologies and thus restore her daughter's honor. He expects the Northerners to take responsibility for their injustice but soon he finds out that this is not quite the Northerners' way.

As he finds no other solution, Harmon challenges George to a fight by pulling his knife and inviting George to an old-fashioned duel for he believes that her daughter's honor can be saved only if George agrees to take care of Rachel and their son or dies. However, much older and much drunker than George, as "his voice slurred" while talking and he "smelled [of] moonshine" (7-9), Harmon is beaten and killed by George in the most gruesome way. In the scene which takes place on the steps of the train station, George puts his knife into Harmon's body so deeply that his intestines spill out of his stomach and he dies in front of his daughter:

Harmon's bowie knife fell clattering onto the platform. Like a man attempting to rescind the steps that had led to this outcome, the highlander placed both hands to his stomach and slowly walked backward, then sagged onto the bench. He lifted his hands to assess the damage, and his intestines spilled onto

his lap in loose gray ropes. Harmon studied the inner workings of his body as if for some further verification of his fate. (9-10)

It is made obvious in the novel that the Pembertons inhabit a totally different moral sphere than Harmon and Rachel. After her father dies, Rachel runs up to her father, unable to utter a word: “[t]ears flowed down the young woman’s cheeks, but she made no sound” (10). The mourning woman is *comforted* by Serena who gives her Harmon’s knife by saying that since George defeated Harmon “[b]y all rights it belongs to [George]” but out of courtesy she hands the knife to Rachel so that she can sell it as she “can get a good price for it” and the “money will help when the child is born” (10). Serena also warns Rachel saying “It’s all you’ll ever get from my husband and me” (10). In summary, the Northerners are portrayed as such indifferent, cold and detached individuals that the only remedy and comfort they could offer to compensate for Rachel’s tragedy is money.

Moreover, the murder gives George a sense of power and authority over others. George is glad that his show of violence happens in front of everyone, especially his workers, because “[n]ow they knew he could kill a man, had seen it with their own eyes. They’d respect him” (11). Far from being remorseful for killing a father in front of his daughter, George is content that he had the opportunity to live such an experience and rush as “[a]drenaline surged through him” (10). It is worth noting that he considers this murder as an adventure; a detour from his boring life in the mountains. It also strengthens his masculinity because he believes that killing someone in front of his workers will help him gain more respect and reverence from them. At the end of this scene, George and Serena leave Rachel with her son and her dead father at the station and move on with their lives. Significantly, George’s first full sentence after killing a person is: “Is my [car] here?” (11), which points out the moral callousness of the Northerners.

As these examples demonstrate, Serena and George are the villains of the novel as they are “characters who are monsters in their own right” (Koehler 18). The Northerners see the South as a place where they can freely move and do as they please; a place where there is no law. They hurt and kill people and exploit the environment and the working Southerners without any repercussions. While Southerners try to uphold a set of rules and

traditions, Northerners consider them ancient people. The act of killing becomes a common practice for the Northerners as they try to murder their way to wealth and success.

The cruelty and limitless greed of the Pembertons are not only directed to the Southerners but to their business partners as well. Through these acts of violence towards both groups, it can be understood that the Pembertons do not inflict violence upon the Southerners because they despise them or just for violence's sake. The Pembertons are guided by their ambition to get richer; therefore, anyone whom they see as a threat is to be discarded regardless of their background. The biggest threat to the Northerners' business is the Depression-government which wants to buy the lands and set up a national park, effectively putting an end to the lumber industry in the region. While many landowners accept the government's offer, Serena and her partners are adamantly possessive of their lands and the profits they wish to make off of them.

Although Serena and George try to evade the government's efforts in order to ensure their control over the profits of the land, they believe that their partners do not share the same sentiment. After a meeting with a government official who makes a new offer to buy their land, Serena and George realize that their wealth is in danger because their partner Buchanan wants to sell his land. Fearing that this may endanger their land and their wealth, and encouraged by her greed, Serena begins a murder spree. With the help of her husband and a camp worker named Galloway, she starts her series of murders with Buchanan. As Groba points out, Serena "leads her husband to murder and turns her henchman Galloway into a puppet she can control at will" (128). They take Buchanan into forests to a hunting trip, and while Buchanan aims at a deer, George shoots him in the chest and kills him on the spot (Rash 148). Buchanan's body is unceremoniously brought to the camp and is named a simple hunting accident.

Murder is only one of the violent ways the Pembertons employ to add to their wealth. While Buchanan's newly murdered body is removed from the camp, George confronts Wilkie and threatens him with the same fate if he accepts the government's offer. George says, "It must give you pause to see someone three decades younger die so suddenly,"

and goes on, “it would persuade you to sell your third interest and go back to Boston, live out what time you have left in comfort instead of in these inhospitable mountains” (Rash 150). Dismayed by and at the same time afraid of the cruelty of the Pembertons, Wilkie agrees to sell his shares saying that they are “after all gentlemen, even here in this forsaken landscape” (151). George continues to enjoy the feeling of dominance and authority that enacting violence brings. Killing Buchanan and subtly mentioning his violent deed to Wilkie further increases his desire to dominate others through violence.

For Serena, Buchanan’s murder, a violent outburst of anxiety and greed, is “[a] start and a true beginning” (152) of their journey. Furthermore, The Pembertons enjoy their murderous deed to such an extent that they get sexually stimulated by Buchanan’s blood on George’s clothes which gets smeared on Serena’s body as well. The blood of Buchanan is the concrete proof of their victory and a triumph guaranteeing their status as wealthy people which contradicts the image of the Northerners as more civilized people compared to the Appalachian Southerners. Having the blood of their enemy on their hands and faces also reminds the reader of the rituals conducted by native tribes in ancient times where drinking the blood of the enemy was a sign of superiority and a symbol of victory (Sugg).

Furthermore, sexual intercourse is far from being an act of love, compassion, or even joy. The first of these happens off-screen when George exploits Rachel implying that she can be rich if she were to have sex with George. The second one between George and Serena is fueled by a murder and is done with materialistic intentions, that is, to make an heir. In other words, their unborn child is not a child of love and compassion, but a product or an investment for the future of their business. Therefore, Serena’s wish to have an heir can be regarded as her desire to continue to dominate others directly or indirectly.

Towards the end of her pregnancy, Serena has a miscarriage because of a misdiagnosis by the camp doctor Cheney who prescribes her “a bag of peppermints” (Rash 213) as he mixes the symptoms of Serena’s internal bleeding with simple bloating. Moreover, because of the physical trauma, Serena loses the ability to have children and any chance of having an heir as well. Days later, Cheney is found “in a bathroom stall with his tongue cut out and peppermint in each hand” (217). The murder of Cheney is highly gruesome

and a direct attack on the sanctity of the human body. In Southern Gothic, grotesque bodies or bodies that are made to be grotesque are common. By disfiguring the body, Rash draws a comparison between the disfigurement of Appalachian nature and the human body which is a recurring concept in the bulk of Rash's works. As Walker argues, in Rash's works "it is especially important to look to the space where acts of violence most frequently manifest themselves: on the body. Rash's characters' bodies often exist as sites of violence" (5). As the green space and ecology of Appalachia are destroyed and its sanctity is ruined, so are the bodies that cause it.

It is also possible to deduce that Serena's thirst for revenge does not come from maternal anguish but from an investor's remorse. As Gonzales Groba writes, Serena hoped "to be the origin of a bloodline that would continue her domination of the people and their environment" (131). In other words, because of Cheney, the Pembertons not only lose their heir but also the chance of ever having one, and of controlling the resources of the region for generations to come. Serena cannot cope with the fact that the fruits of her pursuit will be left without a successor; therefore, she has Cheney murdered for damaging her aspirations and ruining her plans. Through these brutal murders, it becomes clearer that Rash presents Serena and George as reprehensible individuals who kill others with impunity in order to realize their financial aspirations. They are "directly connected with moral evil . . . [e]voking disgust as a final result" (Actis 13). Similar to O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find" where the characters are taken outside the frame one by one into the woods and murdered in cold blood by The Misfit's posse, the characters in *Serena* wait to be murdered by the Pembertons with a sense of impending doom.

The Pembertons' life in North Carolina is exemplified by the senseless violence and bloodshed they started. Even their child was conceived at the end of the day of the brutal murder of their partner, Buchanan, whose blood was still on the bodies of the couple. As he was conceived on the night of a murder, the child was already doomed to die because the Pembertons corrupt something pure and innocent with their actions and sentiments. Ron Rash was raised as a Southern Baptist (Vernon "Ron Rash" 25); therefore, it can be argued that here he alludes to the Original Sin, and sins of the father visiting the child through the murder of Buchanan and the death of the child. The child already carries the

burden of sin and brutality and dies before he is absolved from it through christening. The sin stays with the perpetrators, namely the Northerners, with no chance of repentance or forgiveness. In the world of Southern Gothic, there is no forgiveness, no reconciliation and no birth or rebirth. As the Northerners take lives with impunity, in return, a life is taken from them. They cannot or are allowed to create a new life since they destroyed so many before.

However, the death of their child does not stop Serena or create in her a sense of guilt or self-awareness. Instead, she becomes highly jealous of Rachel who gives birth to George's illegitimate son and becomes motivated to kill them. Serena is portrayed as a narcissistic Northerner who cannot stand to see a Southerner having something that she cannot have. She fears that through her son, Rachel will win George's love and they will become a family throwing her away. In order to stop this, she starts searching for Rachel and visits her home with Galloway. She is confronted by an old woman named Widow Jenkins who has been helping Rachel since her father's death. The sheriff of the town gives the news to Rachel: "Adeline Jenkins was murdered last night. I think the folks who killed her thought she could tell them where you and that child were" (264). He asks Rachel why Serena wants to kill her to which she replies: "I think it's because I could give [George] the one thing that she couldn't" (265).

Although Serena is represented as a vicious person without maternal instincts or *womanly* sentiments, losing her baby as well as the chance of ever having one, and seeing Rachel as a mother wake the maternal anguish inside her. This anguish is again destructive for others. Serena tries to take revenge for her dead child on someone whose child is not dead. Furthermore, Serena tries to portray this murder as a gateway to George's love and admiration. She tells George: "We've both killed now . . . What you felt at the depot, I've felt too. We're closer, [George], closer than we've ever been before" (278). Trying to find a place where she and George could come together, Serena chooses the act of murder. Since she cannot give life, Serena prefers to take one and this is again symbolic of the relationship between the Northerners and the South in the novel. As it is proven time and time again, the outsiders only hurt and destroy the Southern landscape and the Southern society.

However, the toll of the violent practices creates disillusionment for George. As the number of violent and grotesque actions committed for the sake of preserving their wealth increases, George's resolve and enthusiasm gradually decrease. For the first time in their relationships, both as a married couple and as business partners, George questions Serena when she wants to kill Harris but, as Beilfuss also observes, he is forced to comply with "the machinations of his wife and her domination of both man and nature" (388). Serena tells George that Harris' murder is a reminder to everyone that even if someone makes them vulnerable, sooner or later "such vulnerabilities are dealt with" (Rash 249).

Although George has no other option but to accept Serena's cruelty, he is disappointed by Serena both in marital and financial accords, which makes him focus on and appreciate the emotional rather than the material value of things and of people. In fact, for the first time in the course of their journey, George finds himself caring about something other than money and starts feeling a fatherly love for Jacob, his illegitimate son. While his love for the greedy and merciless Serena declines, his compassion for harmless and plain Rachel and his innocent infant son grows every day. He gives a job to Rachel in the camp and starts sending them money behind Serena's back. He keeps a picture of his son and a "photograph of himself as a two-year-old . . . so Jacob and [his] photograph lay side by side" (216) which reminds him of his own childhood and probably his lost innocence.

However, George's attempt at salvation prematurely ends when Serena finds out that he has been sending money to Rachel and Jacob. Serena believes that George's affection for Jacob is a sign which shows that George might appoint him as their heir and leave their wealth to him. Threatened by this potential transaction, Serena poisons George by a sandwich she makes for him to eat during his hunting trip with Galloway. Galloway says, "She said to tell you she thought you the one man ever strong and pure enough to be her equaling, but you wanting that child alive showed the otherwise of that" (Rash 363). This reasoning behind George's murder is similar to the reasoning of the Pembertons while killing their partners. They killed Buchanan, Harris, and threatened Wilkie because their desires differed from those of the Pembertons'. When George's desires begin to differ from those of Serena, Serena has him killed as well. The consistent justification of this chain of violence comes to a full circle when one of its perpetrators is murdered due to

the same reasons as well. By killing George, Serena renders herself the sole owner of the forests in the region and becomes the only matriarch through violence and murder. Fueled by her greed and lust for wealth and control, Serena commits or has others commit horrible acts of physical violence which is one of the Southern Gothic characteristics of *Serena*.

2.2.2. The Old South and the New South

In *Serena*, the clash between the Old South and the New South appears in the form of the conflicting sentiments of agrarians and industrialists represented by Rachel and Serena. Milica argues that “[i]n the Southern imagination, the white lady represent[s] a symbol of honor and purity” (107). Through Serena and Rachel, Rash both employs and subverts the conventional depictions of the white lady in the South. While Rachel is forced to fend for herself and her son through her connection to land, forests, plants, and animals after her father is killed by George, Serena wishes to become rich by exploiting nature, hurting and killing others without remorse for her industrialist endeavor. Unlike Rachel, Serena has no connections to the land and the environment, and she sees them as materials to be turned into profit. Serena does not see the beauty or the benefits of nature for the locals, or for herself, while Rachel appreciates the land she was born in with all its inhabitants.

The agrarian South is a recurring image in the body of Rash’s work. Rash is described as an author who “uses the agrarian life in the mountains as a main theme in much of his poetry and fiction” (Israel). Some of his works such as *Raising the Dead* (2002) and *One Foot in Eden* (2003) involve mountaineers who let go of the agrarian way of living to have “stable wages and security in the mills” but ending up finding “hardship and poverty instead” (Israel). As the Depression grows, the community which is already poor starts to feel even more desperate. In *Serena*, although Rachel is poor like the timber workers, she manages to make ends meet for herself and for her son through nature and the land for which she feels grateful, unlike the workers who destroy the land under the command of the Northerners for a wage with which they cannot even fully provide their families while being constantly scrutinized and humiliated by their employers at the same time.

Rash presents a contemporary dilemma of the South when he says “Now I look at the mailboxes and I don’t know any of those names. It’s just changed; that community’s changed. I won’t sentimentalize, but I think something important was lost” (qtd. in Vernon “Ron Rash” 7). Rash does not consider himself an Agrarian author nor does he pledge any allegiance to the Southern Agrarians of the Vanderbilt or their ideals, but it is obvious that he is nostalgic about the sense of community and tradition he believes the South once had. The glaring absence of these Southern communal values pervades Rash’s writings and his characters as he “has witnessed the destruction of many natural landscapes, the spread of generic urban and suburban sprawl, a steady decrease in agrarian traditions, . . . a shift toward industrialization” (Vernon “Ron Rash” 6-7). This grim process is represented in his novels through personifications which, in the case of *Serena*, are Rachel and Serena.

Despite representing opposite values of the South, Rachel and Serena share some similarities. Firstly, they both have a sexual relationship with George Pemberton and both carry his child—at one point at the same time. Secondly, both lose their fathers and their families at a considerably young age. While Rachel’s mother runs away because she could not bear the “way the mountains shut out the sun” which felt like “living in a coal mine” (196) and her father is killed, Serena loses her entire family to the Spanish Plague, with she barely escaping death. Thirdly, both carry on with their lives through the teachings of their fathers. Rachel stays connected to the land and the environment about which she learns much from her father while Serena goes on to become a timber baroness with the knowledge her father, a timber baron, bequeathed to her. While Rachel’s father’s legacy is to use the land gratefully and graciously with her own hands, Serena’s father’s legacy is to exploit the land and deplete the resources for wealth and power with machines and tools.

The differences however start as soon as Rachel and Serena are physically described by Rash in the text. When Serena first appears, she is seen to be wearing “pants and boots instead of a dress and cloche hat, . . . leather chaps, . . . beige oxford shirt and black jodhpurs” (5-6). Serena’s appearance sets her apart from the other women of the town and baffles the business partners who meet her for the first time at the train station. She

seems as though she is ready to work in the forest herself as her attire is not for casual strolls nor for pleasantries but for business. Having heard from George about the harsh environment and weather conditions, Serena prepares herself for her journey on the mountains and she is almost described as a warrior preparing and gearing up for a battle which symbolizes her antagonistic relationship with nature. Serena sees nature and the environment as threats to her and her business; therefore, she prepares herself for them, treating them as enemy forces. In contrast, Rachel's harmonious relationship with nature is presented through her first appearance after her father's death.

While Serena wears boots that cut her contact with the ground beneath her, Rachel walks out of her home with her son in her arms into "the yard, the grass cool and slick [under] her bare feet" (39). Rachel is in full contact with the soil of her homeland, and with her son in her arms, she seems like a part of nature around her. While Serena and George are "richer than a king" (41), and enjoy their train rides and Packard cars, Rachel walks or rides her horse. However, she is forced to sell the horse and cow for money for which she feels sad because "the horse was another lost link to her father" (42). Taking after her father, who "[e]ven when he'd been at his drunkest or angriest, . . . had never mistreated the animal, never kicked or cursed it, never forgotten to give it feed or water" (42), Rachel feels responsible for the animal and is fearful for its fate after selling it.

Making her way through the woods, "Rachel knew in the deeper woods the ginseng leaves would soon begin to show their brightness as well. The prettiest time of year, she'd always believed, prettier than fall or even spring" (42). She feels connected to the environment because she was taught "about crops and plants and animals, how to mend a fence and chink a cabin" (50) by her father so that she could provide for herself just by knowing the land and the environment. This is crucial in understanding the contrast between Serena's and Rachel's views of the environment because Serena sees the environment as an enemy to be defeated while Rachel sees it as a blessing whose beauty is worth celebrating and radiating hope and even happiness. Serena's view of nature causes her to have a bleak and violent life whereas Rachel's affection for nature gives her hope even in the darkest of times.

Moreover, Serena has no compassion or empathy for others and does not feel any comradeship or friendly feelings towards anyone including her husband but Rachel is one with the community. The sense of being a part of the community is like being kin. She also realizes that the Depression is making the conditions of her life even more challenging:

All this trouble because she was living so close to the bone a few pennies mattered, Rachel told herself bitterly. She and her father had had hard times before. When Rachel was seven they'd lost a milk cow that had eaten cherry leaves, and when she was twelve a hail storm had destroyed the corn crop. But even in the leanest times there'd always been a few dollars left in the coffee can stowed on the pantry's top shelf, a cow or horse in the pasture yet to be sold. (82-83)

Rash presents two different approaches to the Depression. While the rich Northerners are content with the desperate situation the Depression has created for the community which they exploit through unfair wages, the Southerners are rendered broken financially. Another difference is that while the rich Northerners kill each other in the pursuit of money, the poverty the Southern community is suffering from makes them stronger and have even stronger bonds with each other. In all representations, Rash refrains from using the stereotypical representations of poor Southerners that can be found in canonical Southern Gothic works.

The Great Depression that has been decimating the already-poor inhabitants of the South does not affect their sense of kinship with their fellow Southerners. For instance, when Rachel goes to pick up the gravestone she ordered for her father, the stone mason asks her if she has hired anyone to haul the stone to her house. Rachel says that she can do it herself with the sack she brought but the stone mason tells her that the "stone weighs more than it looks, near fifty pounds" and "It'll bust right through a sack that thin" (47). However, Rachel insists, saying "I can manage" (47). Feeling sorry for her but at the same time astonished by an orphan and a 17-year-old single mother's will and courage, the stone mason offers to take the gravestone himself to help Rachel who replies "Thank you, . . . That's a considerable kindness" (48). Similarly, when Jacob becomes ill with a fever that does not go away, Rachel walks all the forest by herself during winter and collapses

as soon as she reaches the town doctor. When she comes to, she learns that Jacob's fever has returned to normal and he is going to be fine. However, they have to treat her because her fever will not go down. Rachel refuses to be treated saying "I don't have the money to pay you" to which the doctor replies, "I'm not worried about that" and praises her for completing a harsh journey: "That was almost a mile walk and you sick as him, and barefoot to boot. I don't know how you did it. You must love that child dear as life" (97).

While Serena exploits the Southerners, considers them old-fashioned and as expendable materials, and actively belittles them, even physically and spiritually kills them and their traditions, Rachel feels the warmth and friendship of the community who looks after her as if she is their own. This is one of the major thematic areas where *Serena* differs from many other Southern Gothic novels. Although the clash between the Old and the New South is a cornerstone of canonical Southern Gothic, Rash subverts this clash. Despite the common representation of the working class as having "an animal-like existence on the economic fringes of society" (Dufaure 95), Southern people are portrayed as wholesome, compassionate, helpful people who come together and care for each other and defend their own against outsiders. While in many Southern Gothic examples, "poor white life begins and ends with shame and is marked entirely by negative perceptions" (Sells), in *Serena*, poverty is not the source of corruption or immorality nor is it a reason for humiliation. Rachel is neither scorned nor shunned by the community for committing adultery or for her poor condition nor is she taken advantage of. On the contrary, she is loved, respected and protected. As each member of the community is poor, they stand together against the outsider rich. There are no plantations, plantation owners, or aristocratic Southerners who despise the low-born, and the community becomes a whole, without posing any threat to one another.

The representation of a Southern community which protects and respects each other with every member goes against the tendency to represent the Southerners as threats to one another. In Faulkner's "Wash," for example, Wash, whose granddaughter is abused by Sutpen, the plantation owner, is ridiculed by Sutpen in front of the slaves. Even the slaves do not respect Wash which makes him highly self-conscious of his social standing and position in the plantation. Having had enough of humiliation and exploitation, Wash starts

to consider Sutpen an enemy and kills him with his scythe. Similarly, in Faulkner's *Sanctuary*, the Southern poor are shown as enemies to other Southerners. When the young high-class Temple Drake stumbles upon a bootlegger operation and is abandoned by her friend in an old mansion with the moonshiners who are led by a man named Popeye, she is not taken to her rich family nor is given any sense of direction, but is raped, abducted, and forced by Popeye to live as a sex slave for a long time. In O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find," although the grandmother tries to plea with the Misfit that he is a good man and he would not kill a lady and tries to evoke a sense of community in him, she is shot in the head and killed with the rest of her family. The Southerners in these examples are represented as people having an antagonistic relationship with each other without a sense of community and comradery in a landscape of no safety and security. However, in *Serena*, Rachel considers the land, and namely the South, as "Godly ground" (50).

Despite being beset by poverty, harsh terrain, and exploitative and murderous Northerners, Rachel does not want to leave North Carolina as Widow Jenkins also tells: "if you're born here they're a part of you. No other place will ever feel right" (197). While the industrialist Northerners continuously make plans to move to other regions in search of business opportunities, the Southerners build strong ties with the region and communities to the extent that leaving the land becomes synonymous with leaving one's true self. Regardless of the hardships she faces, Rachel believes in and trusts the South and its people and does not want to sever her ties with her hometown.

While the logger camp and the forests, which the Northerners try to turn into an industrialized area by cutting the trees and building houses and railways, are actually turned into places of suffering where murders and deaths happen, the untamed nature becomes a calming place and a place of refuge for the Southerners. Moreover, for the agrarians, the environment is the only currency. To illustrate, Rachel is aided by Widow Jenkins while raising her son and she feels indebted to her but since she has no money or any materials of financial worth, she goes deep into the forest to gather ginseng. She also starts looking for "bloodroot and cinnamon ferns and other plants her father had taught her [which] signaled places where ginseng grew" (78). She picks up the bloodroot and while she passes through ferns, they make "a whispery sound against her dress," which

seems “to soothe Jacob because his eyes” close (79). Both Rachel and his son Jacob feel serene and calm in nature.

Both Rachel and the Widow value nature and its resources by which they lead their lives and which they use each day for various chores in their homes. After picking up the bloodroot, Rachel takes it to the Widow and says, “I brought you some bloodroot, . . . for keeping Jacob the other day” to which the Widow replies, “That’s sweet of you” (79-80). The Widow is not expecting any money from Rachel for looking after Jacob and she proclaims that she “won’t take no pay for keeping” (81). She is grateful for the carefully dug and picked bloodroot which she needs but is too old to go and pick it up herself. Rachel also plans to sell the ginseng which would bring some money. Although she is desperate for every penny, she refuses to sell the knife which Serena gave her saying “Sell it, it’ll fetch a good price” (83). Rachel thinks to herself that she would never do what Serena “commanded her to do. She’d sell the shoes off her feet before taking the knife out of the box trunk and selling it” (83). Rachel’s reaction against Serena stands for the battle between the Old and the New South.

As Street and Crow argue, contemporary Appalachian authors present “Appalachia as a site of both exploitation and resistance” (4). While the workers and the environment are exploited by the Northerners, Rachel resists the industrialization of the South by holding the knowledge of the land she inherited from her father sacred and refusing to bow down to Serena. Palmer concurs as he states that in Southern Gothic Appalachian people “are supposed to represent a rebellious individuality coupled with bare-bones poverty” (“Southern” 168). Although Rachel is given a tool by a Northerner through which she can make decent money, she does not accept it and remains committed to agricultural life as much as she can. She cultivates and picks plants, extracts honey, picks up eggs, and even sells her family horse and cow to make a living but does not suffer the shame of being given charity. Although George gives her a job at the camp later in the novel, she accepts it only because it comes from George whom she still loves and wants to be the only provider of her child. It must also be understood that while George misled Rachel, he did not rape her; therefore, Rachel believes that through their collective care for their son,

they may become a family together or George can become a more consistent figure in their lives.

The fates of the children are also decisive in the clash between the two Souths. Serena's child dies in the womb and Serena is rendered infertile which symbolizes the stillborn situation of the industrialized South. However, Rachel's son, Jacob, endures poverty, malnourishment, sickness, a life as an illegitimate son and later an orphan, murder attempts and many more and trumps these threats one by one showing the endurance and strength of the agrarian South. The symbolic victory of the Old South becomes even more obvious when Jacob goes to Brazil to find Serena after Rachel tells him what Serena did to the region and its people including George. Jacob gets off the train and makes his way toward Serena and her once-strong henchman Galloway. Galloway is now old and although there was "a time when the man would have heard the slightest sound and awakened, . . . decades around machinery had deafened him" (370), he left the agrarian ways of the South and sided with the industrialists whose machines corrupted him morally, mentally, and physically. Jacob slashes Galloway's throat in his sleep and stabs Serena in the stomach, killing her with the knife Serena gave to Rachel to sell.

Serena is a Southern Gothic novel as it reflects extreme physical violence and death and the clashes between the Old South and the New South. However, it is also an example of contemporary Southern Gothic as it has many aspects and thematic concerns that differentiate it from the twentieth-century Southern Gothic. Unlike many canonical Southern Gothic works, racial issues and people of color are absent in the novel. The Southerners in the text occupy a different sphere where the sin of slavery does not exist and are portrayed as simple, poor, innocent folks trying to earn their daily bread. The gothic evil of the novel is the exploitative and violent Northerner industrialists and bosses who remorselessly kill people, exploit the working class, and destroy nature. The representations of environmental destruction and working-class exploitation are the issues commonly found in post-2000 Appalachian Gothic. In this novel, the clash between the Old South and the New South is strictly tied to the clash between agrarianism and industrialism. It might be suggested that Rash favors the Old South and its agrarian way

of life because at the end of the novel he makes the son of the Old South kill the representatives of the industrial New South.

CHAPTER 3: *OVER THE PLAIN HOUSES* AS CONTEMPORARY SOUTHERN GOTHIC

Julia Franks is one of the recent writers of the twenty-first-century Southern Literature. Her debut novel, *Over the Plain Houses*, was published in 2016. The novel won “the Townsend Prize for Georgia fiction, an NPR best book of 2016, . . . the Thomas Wolfe Memorial Award, . . . the SIBA Southern Book Prize in Literary Fiction, . . . Georgia Author of the Year in Literary Fiction, . . . IPPY Gold Medal in Literary Fiction” (“Julia Franks”). *Over the Plain Houses* takes place in North Carolina during the last years of the Great Depression. The protagonist Irenie lives an isolated life due to his husband Brodis’ religious beliefs. Brodis is a born-again Christian priest and believes that all things, living or inanimate, have been created for men to possess and dominate. Irenie’s life only consists of doing chores around the house and going to church. This monotonous, almost robotic, way of living renders Irenie emotionally and physically incapable as she is not able to voice her resentment in any way. The only escape from her bleak predicament is to go to the woods near her house and spend the night there communicating with nature around her.

Irenie is forced to comply with Brodis’ abuses but her quest for freedom begins when a government agent, Virginia Furman, sent to the town to instruct the farmers’ wives, takes special interest in her. Virginia pays close attention to Irenie because she believes that their son Matthew is a clever student and should be sent to a boarding school so that he can become a man of importance. Moreover, she wants to teach the housewives in the town new ways of efficient cooking in order to save money. Since they are hostile against the Depression government and agents of the Depression program, the women and men of the town stay distant from Virginia but Irenie becomes friends with her. Virginia shows Irenie that an independent way of life is possible. Unlike Irenie, Brodis is wary of the Depression government and its agents because he believes that they are a threat to his Southern identity and his traditions. Helped by Virginia, Irenie starts to break Brodis’ hold, and Brodis begins to believe that she has been possessed by the Devil and has become a witch. Brodis rapes Irenie after which Irenie finds out that she is pregnant. Irenie escapes and aborts the baby because she does not want anything to tie her life to

Brodis'. This makes Brodis very angry and in the aftermath of these events, Brodis becomes even more unhinged. He considers the Depression government agents the cause of his wife's escape and his own downfall. In a violent terrorist act, he blows up the USDA building in the town killing himself in the process.

This chapter focuses on *Over the Plain Houses* as an example of contemporary Southern Gothic literature. *Over the Plain Houses* is a Southern Gothic novel because it demonstrates the clashes between the Old South and the New South personified by Brodis, Irenie and the Depression-government agents. While Irenie accepts the government agents in terms of women's rights and equality and is intent upon following them in order to transform her life, Brodis is stuck in his ways and highly dismissive of the Depression government to the point of violence. Brodis fears that his traditions and his Southern identity are going to be changed irreversibly by the Depression government; therefore, he takes violent measures to ensure that the ideals of the Old South remain intact inside his community and his own house. In addition, Irenie, Brodis, and the Depression government have dissenting views about nature and natural resources. While Irenie tries to preserve nature and protect its inhabitants, Brodis tries to exploit the environment due to his religious beliefs and the Depression government tries to make profits from the environment regarding it as a material to be used.

3.1. DIFFERENCES WITH CANONICAL SOUTHERN GOTHIC

Over the Plain Houses is similar to *Serena* in that it focuses on the Appalachian regions, and it does not have any black characters. Goode argues that "instead of focusing on the relationship of aristocrats, blacks," the Appalachian Gothic "centers upon the mountaineer and his struggles with himself, nature, and the outside world" (29). Similarly, Franks' two protagonists, Irenie and Brodis, struggle with each other, nature, and the outside world in the shape of the Depression government. As there is no black presence, the pseudo-racial tension is between the poor white Southerners and the Northerners. However, contrary to *Serena* and many other Southern Gothic works, the Northerners are not represented as evil, exploitative people or indifferent outsiders who cannot comprehend the inner dynamics of the South or the dilemmas of the Southerners

but as sympathetic people who try to help the Southerners improve socially and financially though in a different way.

Since Brodis rejects this help and Irenie accepts it, their views of the Northerners bring unresolvable conflicts and open chasms between them. In the novel, abuse, violence, decay and death which are traditionally associated with Southern Gothic come from the Southerners themselves, namely, from Brodis. Moreover, *Over the Plain Houses* is a novel full of feminist sentiments which do not quite exist in canonical Southern Gothic. Both Irenie and the environment are exploited by Brodis on account of religion; therefore, it is possible to build associations between the exploitation of nature and the exploitation of women.

Contemporary Southern Gothic has been an outlet for female resistance and as Sells puts it, female authors put aside the “paranoid white gentry of the New South” and “reclaim [Southern Gothic] as a genre for the very people they rendered outcasts” (*Held Together*). Irenie is fully aware that her life is unsatisfactory and that she has to change it somehow, someday. She tries to communicate with Brodis but her emotions and ideas are neither taken seriously nor respected in the household as Brodis always “listened without listening” (Franks 41). Irenie is treated as a machine for such a long time that doing household chores has become almost an automatic, unconscious, and endless routine for her: “Maybe it was a matter of practice. You practiced letting another person make decisions for you long enough and pretty soon that was what you got used to doing” (68). Irenie cannot name the exploitation and oppression she, and by extension, many other women are exposed to: “If they had a name for the hurt she felt, they weren’t telling it in public. Or maybe they didn’t have the energy to ask questions, whenever every bit of effort went to the feeding of mouths. And maybe one day they looked up to find their lives had fled them” (29). She is aware that something in her life and the way that Brodis treats her is wrong but cannot quite name it and as she is not able to name it, she is not able to voice it.

The novel is mainly about the socio-economic change in the South during the Depression, and the people who resist or embrace this change. Brodis is the representative of the Old

South. He is a fundamentalist Christian, a preacher, a farmer, a husband and a father. However, he is foremost a Southerner and he does not want to change the way he and the Southerners have lived for generations. He is suspicious of the FDR administration and the Depression agencies which he considers as enemies to his Southern identity. Seeing his wife, his son, and his congregation siding with the Northerners one by one renders Brodis mentally broken and violent. He and Irenie have opposite views on various grounds such as family and home life, the environment, religion, women's position in society, and government, which gives way to conflicts. While Brodis is content with his life which is isolated from the rest of the world, and which he leads between his church and his house, Irenie wants a way out of this life as well as Brodis' oppression.

3.1.1. Opposite Approaches Towards Nature

One of the contemporary aspects of *Over the Plain Houses*, which can also be seen in *The Bottoms* and *Serena*, is that it reflects an environmental consciousness that champions the value of nature and its resources. As Monteith argues, contemporary Southern authors have been impacted by “in recent decades, new social and critical movements” one of which is “environmentalism” (537). Contrary to the images of swamps, forests, and woods as places of horror and suffering in traditional Southern Gothic novels, the gothic environment is a place of refuge for Irenie whose visits to the forests are her attempts to escape from Brodis' brutality and oppressions. Moreover, the urban environment, the town, and Irenie and Brodis' home turn into a gothic setting for Irenie who feels trapped inside the house in which she experiences injustices and violent psychological, verbal, physical, and sexual abuse.

By contrasting the supposedly safe home environment which is actually the place of horrors, and the supposedly dangerous evil forests which are actually a safe haven for Irenie, Franks subverts and challenges “essentialist notions about Southern community and homeplace” (Monteith 536), a common theme in contemporary Southern Gothic written especially by women authors. The novel presents three different ways of looking at nature: the way of the exploiter, i.e. Brodis, the way of the profiteer, i.e. the Depression government, and the way of the preserver, i.e. Irenie. The three views clash with each

other as Irenie is the only one who sees nature for what it is, who does not think that it is for human beings to use, and who feels connected to it.

Brodus is an exploiter who, after a religious awakening, begins to believe that God gave him a divine right “over every living thing that moveth upon the earth” (Franks 76). He tries to control and take possession of those in his life including his son, his congregation, the environment and his wife. Brodis’ delusions are grounded in and justified by his religion. Though he becomes violent and abusive, he does not find any fault with his actions as he believes that they come “from a place that [is] larger than him and anyone else” (75-6) instructing him to be a shepherd to the lost herd. Through religion, he begins to see every element in his life as material to own and keep under control.

The urge to possess and control in Brodis’ mind is further strengthened by the Depression poverty. As Bronwyn Averett writes, after extreme poverty, “Brodus becomes convinced of his duty to dominate [the] land, its animals, and even his own family” (“*Over the Plain*”). During the fiercest years of the Great Depression, the Lambey family experienced poverty as the rest of the town, which felt like a punishment from God. Brodis believes that Armageddon is approaching and the Depression is a sign of it. He tells Irenie that they are “getting to the evening of time” because God “said it in Revelations” that they will have “earthquakes and fire and famine” and now they are in the stage of the famine in the form of the Depression (Franks 86).

Brodus mixes his urge to possess people, animals, and the land with his religious views. Owning something becomes the foremost leading force in Brodis’ life, and he justifies this purpose on religious grounds. He believes that nature around him with its every component exists to be owned by man and tells his son Matthew that “God made man after his likeness [and] let him have dominion over the fish of the sea, and the fowl of the air” (76). Brodis is convinced that God gave him the right to own “every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth” (76) and he begins to exert this right fully as he suffers from extreme poverty during the Depression. As Laura Relyea argues, “Brodus is a man cut down by circumstance and lashes out, claiming supremacy and using the Bible as his justification” (“The Power”). Relyea further claims that “Brodus knows only domination

and will do anything to maintain it,” and that “[i]n his mind, sovereignty is his inherent right” (“The Power”).

Jeff Calder describes Brodis’ mindset as “religious dementia” as Brodis justifies his violent and perverted acts with his faith. (“Appalachian”). As Julia Franks says, “Brodis has a very Old Testament view” (“An Interview”) which puts forward the doctrine of an eye for an eye. As a fundamentalist, he adopts the cruel and unforgiving parts of his religion and leaves out the parts about compassion and forgiveness. He is hostile towards the animals of the forest which he thinks might damage his crops. He takes the old wolf traps that have not been used for a long time because “[t]here were no more wolves” (47) and turns them into traps for hawks. When Irenie had “shaken her head and said it was too much trap for a bird,” Brodis replies: “No such thing as too much trap . . . Dead is dead” (47). Irenie’s pleas about the environment and wildlife is a characteristic of contemporary Southern Gothic because contemporary authors “embrace environmentalism” and “a strong ecocritical concern over Southern places” in their works (Monteith 544).

The association between the exploitation of nature and the exploitation of women is another contemporary aspect of *Over the Plain Houses* as many Appalachian authors combine “environmentalism with issues of [gender] equality” (Monteith 543). In *Over the Plain Houses*, Irenie tries to preserve the wildlife, but Brodis is adamantly supportive of the idea that animals exist only to serve people and the ones which do not are to be pushed away or killed. One day Irenie hears “a sound like a dead pop, metallic and flat, and she couldn’t lay her mind on the meaning of it” (Franks 52) but soon she finds out that the trap has been activated by an animal. After hearing “the hawk’s scream . . . followed by a spastic beating of wing that flapped” she rushes outside to save the bird but then she realizes that the hawk freed itself and flew away (52). Though injured, the hawk survives and Irenie thinks to herself that the hawk is flying again “beating the skinny air, through the updrafts or down the valley” (53). Feeling upset over how a majestic creature of the sky is forced to stay on the ground by a metallic claw, she goes and disables the other traps. This event which Irenie describes as “a miracle” (53) becomes symbolic of her own condition. It is understood that just like the hawk, Irenie is caught in a trap set

up by Brodis and the Old South. Through the brief captivity and the following emancipation of the hawk, Irenie realizes that if she wants to get free and fly away, she has to manage it herself without any help because *she* has to change first and refuse Brodis' authority and the gender roles that the society expects her to comply with. The hawk also symbolizes the phoenix, the mythical creature which is born again over and over after death. In the same manner, Irenie has to let her former self die so that she can be born again.

While Irenie supports the notion of change, Brodis does not want his ways of dealing with nature to become obsolete; therefore, he instructs Matthew, his son, about "what real school looked like" (70). When he sees that their chicken coop is tarnished by foxes, he takes his son and together they go hunting. Brodis takes Matthew with him because he wants to teach him his own ways so that he will grow up to be like Brodis. He forces Matthew to hold and smell the dynamite and plant it inside the fox's den. Brodis lights the fuse and blows up the den without remorse. He sends Matthew to look at the den. They see that the "base of the cliff was a churn of dirt and bone and meat and fur" and Matthew sees a "paw, then another, blue organs, the lower half of a tiny jaw" (75). Matthew feels so disgusted and guilty for helping his father kill a group of animals violently that he throws up. He does not yell or scream at his father but when Brodis tries to touch his shoulder, Matthew's body reacts violently, it "contracted again, and it was the loudest sound in the world, far more violent than any word he could have said against his father. . . . a bodily rejection that disobeyed" (75).

This event traumatizes Matthew and deeply upsets Irenie but Brodis takes pride in the fact that he ensured the security of his flock. Besides, he cannot understand why Matthew reacted in such a way because he has killed many foxes and deer as God told Brodis to "[r]eplenish the earth, . . . and subdue it" (76). Brodis believes that he kills the animals following the teachings of the Bible but he realizes that Matthew is not a Southerner like him which disappoints him. In other words, Brodis realizes that the Old South and his ways are doomed as his own child disobeys him and rejects his values. When they return home, Brodis tells Irenie that they killed the foxes. Irenie replies: "I know" (77). Irenie's response proves that she feels the damage given to the environment deep in her heart as

if she was the one who was hurt. This connection scares Brodis because Brodis thinks that he “heard the devil” in his wife’s remark (77). The fact that Irenie knew beforehand that the foxes were dead reveals to Brodis that his wife has an unnatural connection with the wild beings around her.

Irenie’s special connection with the environment, animals, and trees sets her apart from Brodis whose view of the environment is quite commodifying and exploitative. Brodis, then, begins to think that Irenie has become a witch. Since Brodis believes that the purpose of the environment is to provide men with their needs, any affection towards it is simply heresy. Irenie’s relations with nature are but devilish signs for Brodis; however, for Irenie, they are attempts to escape from Brodis and his persecutions. Irenie leads an isolated life, which is a common theme in Southern Gothic. However, in the novel, Irenie’s “isolation does not [only] mean a mere physical separation from society” but also “a more acute loneliness . . . of the individual who is spiritually alone” (Barkowsky 3). While she is physically cut off from the world outside her town in North Carolina, she also tries to distance herself from the world of monogamy, heteronormativity, and anthropocentrism. Irenie is also mentally cut off from the others in her life and especially from Brodis whose views on spirituality and religion do not coincide with hers. As she finds no middle ground to connect with Brodis or any other person in her life, Irenie is forced to live a life of isolation which she can only leave behind by escaping to the forest. As Sean Kinch states, “Irenie doesn't visit the mountain shadows to consort with demons. She's escaping a soured marriage during a time when women struggled to find shelter from violence in their own homes” (“Depression-Era”). Machado also concurs with Kinch when she says that Irenie’s “desire to preserve nature is her desire to preserve herself” (“Plain Houses”).

Irenie subverts the centuries-old angel in the house narrative and while Brodis stays at home, sleeping and “dreaming of virtuous dreams” (Franks 20), Irenie goes outside and becomes a part of the wild and untamed nature. Unlike the canonical Southern Gothic works which can be considered “ecophobic,” in which the environment imposes “[e]ffects of loathing, fear, disgust and horror” and nature is “personified as an antagonist or opponent” (Deckard 1), the environment in *Over the Plain Houses* shelters Irenie from

the dangers of the outside world and the gradually urbanizing South. Irenie is “tired of being inside” and at times she ventures inside the dark forest near their house at night, which she considers to be “the only part of her life that belonged to her alone, when she wasn’t obliged to chores nor mothering nor livestock” (Franks 21). For Irenie, “[t]he night air [is] an ally: sharp, alive, alert” and “[t]he world [is] hers, at least for an hour or two” (20). Significantly, when she is raped by Brodis, she finds comfort in the voices of crickets and enters into the cold river outside their house. She starts running up the hill naked and tries to bear the weight of her trauma by aligning herself with nature.

Moreover, Irenie is able to hear the voices of the animals around her in a different way than Brodis. While Brodis can only communicate with nature through physical acts such as cropping and hunting, Irenie hears the words uttered by nature around her. She goes into the woods one night and lets the animals know that she is there as she says, “I’m here” to which a fox suddenly appears, and she hears the voice of the fox inside her mind saying, “*I see you*” (21). The author Julia Franks puts these almost telepathic conversations in italics so that the reader can easily understand that this voice belongs to a being that is not human. Irenie constantly communicates with the nature around her in her mind showing their unity against Brodis’ exploitation.

In another scene, Irenie wants to tell Brodis that she wants Matthew to go to another school but she is afraid to express her opinion. Then, she hears the “preacher birds [which] had returned and taunted [her] without stop” (46). The birds tell her “*whaddya want? Tell him no. Whaddya want?*” (46). The birds encourage her to speak her mind and ask her what she wants, which is a question she has never heard from Brodis or any other person in her life. As Barkowsky argues, in Southern Gothic works, “the spiritually isolated individual cannot communicate or find satisfactory social release” (4). As an isolated individual, Irenie turns to communicating with the environment when human communication fails her and although no words are uttered, she and the nature around her understand and cherish each other. While Irenie seeks and finds refuge in the forest, Brodis fears it and thinks that it is a ground of evil. When he realizes that Irenie has gone to the forest in the middle of the night, he thinks of going into the woods with a shotgun but then he gets scared and turns back to his bed. “On instinct he reached for the Bible at

the bedside table” because the “shotgun and the deer rifle were not the answer” (Franks 66) for the evil inside the forest which, in his mind, has gotten hold of his wife.

As he begins to believe that his wife is a witch because of her ventures into the forest and her special care for animals and the environment, Brodis seeks the help of another man of cloth who has dealt with a witch before. To Brodis, a preacher in the late 1930s, haunted by the Depression and rendered broken physically and psychologically, a woman’s and a wife’s individuality, freedom, or identity register as temptations by Satan. Irenie’s simple wishes to exist and to be free do not translate to Brodis whose human interactions are shaped by his religious views. For Brodis, seeing Irenie talking with the government agent, trying to send their son to a boarding school, wanting to play the piano, sitting at the back during sermons “among the sinners,” and “not among the saved,” (9) going to the forest during night, and refusing sexual intercourse are proofs of her connection with the dark forces. It becomes certain for him that his wife is a witch and *needs* to be saved.

Brodis, by naming Irenie as a witch, renounces her identity as a human being; therefore, he justifies any violent or perverted action he may take on her. The elder preacher tells the story of another witch with whom the community had a quarrel as follows:

She was riled up, was what it was. Course they all are, them that become witches. They got something they got to prove. . . . Otherwise it’s not enough in it for them, not enough motivation, you see. You got to see things from their point of view. What is the thing that’s gonna be so powerful as to make them contract their soul away? Got to be something fair size, like revenge. Or it might could be love. . . . Or pride even. Sometimes a woman just insists on having her way, and she’ll do it at all costs. (Franks 169)

The preacher’s last words especially strike a chord with Brodis as he convinces himself that acting in her own way is a sign showing that the Devil is working its way inside Irenie. He remembers the story of how Satan was banished from Heaven because he refused to obey God and followed his own way.

Accusing Irenie of being a witch, and labeling Virginia Furman as a minion of Satan have various connotations in the context of the novel’s Southern Gothic identity. Donovan-

Condrón argues that the history of Southern Gothic contains a “long association of femininity with fear, excess, and the non-normative” (340). This is obvious in *Over the Plain Houses* as both of the leading female characters are demonized by Brodis. Brodis is certain that Irenie is a witch and has been possessed by the Devil and that Virginia Furman is herself a tool of Satan sent to the town to tempt the good Christians. Both women are suspected of having ties with demonic powers which in turn makes them monstrous characters. Donovan-Condrón argues that Southern Gothic’s “patriarchal social structures have long seen women as—and have caused women to become—abnormal, abject, perverse” (340). Emily in William Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily,” and Miss Rosa and Clytie in *Absalom Absalom!*, whom Donovan-Condrón describes as “gothic belle” can be considered examples of such “abnormal, abject, perverse” women (343). However, the difference between these gothic belles and the women in *Over the Plain Houses* is that the novel embraces these aspects of the women and builds upon them. In other words, as contemporary Southern Gothic authors usually do, Franks subverts the notion of women as monsters.

Due to her connection with nature and animals, Irenie is claimed to be a witch and is raped by her husband. However, even after this traumatic event, Irenie does not stop going to the forest and having a special connection with the environment because this is not something she acquired later in life or something that she can deactivate on demand. The fact that her connection to nature is her innate specialty which Brodis cannot comprehend and which, in return, creates fear and anger on his part, builds a bridge between the representation of environmental exploitation and gender oppression in the South. Irenie is not a witch nor does she communicate with the Devil, but a physically and mentally strong woman, which makes her a witch in Brodis’ perception. She perseveres and survives Brodis’ verbal, physical, and sexual abuses and her connection to the environment helps her navigate her way through her traumas.

The title of the novel also signifies the image of a woman of power and freedom as a witch. The title is taken from a line of “Her Kind” by Anne Sexton who was beset by mental diseases and whose poems reflect her battles with depression, suicidal tendencies, and traumatic experiences. “Her Kind” begins with the lines “I have gone out, a possessed

witch, haunting the black air, braver at night” (qtd. in Franks). Irenie’s ventures into the forest at night are inspired by these lines. Similar to Sexton’s speaker in the poem, Irenie goes outside, not just in physical but in a mental sense as well. Irenie does not only leave her house and husband but also the rules, limits, and oppression Brodis brings into her life. Leaving the house and going outside is a glimpse of freedom taken away from Brodis so that he cannot control or impose his rules on her. The wilderness outside has no rules or rulers, Christianity, or Church, and Brodis cannot convert the forest into a sphere of limitations for Irene; in other words, it means freedom for her.

Another important line in Sexton’s poem is “I have found the warm caves in the woods, filled them with skillets, carvings, shelves, silks, innumerable goods” (qtd. in Franks). Similarly, Irenie collects things and hides them from Brodis as her own possessions. Brodis does not recognize the property rights of others or Irenie because he sees them and Irenie as property. Irenie is conditioned by Brodis to accept him as the owner of every piece of material inside the house. For instance, when their son, Matthew, finds out that Brodis’ jar is full of money, he cannot believe that they have this amount of money yet live a life of extreme hardships. When he asks about the money in the jar, Irenie tells him to leave it there, saying “[i]t’s your father’s” (Franks 136). Likewise, the house they live in “wasn’t their house. Not even their farm . . . It was his. Brodis’s. Everything was his. Even her” (Franks 89). Even though they are a couple, she is made to believe that Brodis is the sole owner of all the living and inanimate beings in their lives including Irenie and her body.

Inside her own world, Irenie reacts against her husband’s abuses, her position in and outside the house, and her economic dependence on Brodis. As stated earlier, when she is raped by Brodis, she finds comfort in the voices of crickets and enters into the cold river outside their house. She starts running up the hill naked and tries to bear the weight of her trauma by aligning herself with nature. As the environment becomes her shelter, she develops a sense of obligation to preserve and protect it. Irenie starts collecting moments and memories like “Matthew’s first teeth rattling around the bottom of a jelly jar, a Cherokee pot, programs from school plays and camp revivals, locks of hair and baby clothes, and whatever was unlikely and surprising that she could call her own”

(Franks 22). She holds “those glass moments close” since they are her only possessions in life and also proofs that she is alive (Franks 22). She consciously keeps Brodis in the dark about her ventures into the forest because moments as those are only hers and not Brodis’.

Another line in “Her Kind” reads “A woman like that is misunderstood” (qtd. in Franks). Brodis fails to understand that the logic or the point behind collecting items from the woods is Irenie’s plea for individuality and freedom. For instance, she finds a fox skeleton in the forest which she cannot “bear to leave” since it looked “so beautiful and sorrowful” (22). The fox is “the first thing she’d taken for herself” and when she brings it home and starts to rearrange it with Matthew, Brodis watches them in shock and disbelief and breaks the moment by asking “about the stew, and was supper on its way or not” (22). He immediately reminds Irenie that she is supposed to work for and serve him instead of playing with bones. Although she highly values the bones and her time with Matthew playing with them, she feels sorry because “the way Brodis looked at it made it silly” and unimportant (22). While Sexton’s poem is a window to Irenie’s own struggle against exploitation, the lines from the Bible are a window to the mindset of the patriarchy based on Christianity.

3.2. SIMILARITIES WITH CANONICAL SOUTHERN GOTHIC

3.2.1. Religious Obsession/Oppression

Men of cloth portrayed as abusive, exploitative, and violent individuals can be considered a Southern Gothic theme. Brodis is a preacher obsessed with the notion that God gave men the right to possess and dominate everything in the world, which causes violent conflicts and disagreements between himself and his wife and the Depression government. As Crow argues, “evangelical Protestantism, with its several variants and cults, provides the background for much Southern Gothic” (151). Brodis’ religious obsession to possess everything around him begins after he experiences bodily trauma and extreme poverty due to the Depression. Before the Depression, Brodis used to be a strong, handsome, hard-working, self-sufficient, self-made American man. After a

logging accident, however, he suffers from a permanent injury which disallows him to continue working as a logger or in any other job requiring strength and muscle. As Brodis loses a part of his body while striving for a wage, he becomes a man without any means to provide for himself. Suffering from a devastating injury, Brodis finds comfort in religion, becomes a born-again Christian, and starts to earn money through preaching. The loss of his bodily faculties prompts Brodis to use his mental faculties to earn his livelihood. Although he continues to sow his own land, he rarely participates in any other strength-requiring jobs and lives a life between his home and his church.

As Carmen Machado writes, “Brodis wasn’t always a man of God, rather, he is a former logger whose transformation after a near-death experience has all the fervency one might expect from a convert” (“Plain Houses”). In his dreams, Brodis relives the same moment but in those dreams “[t]he Holy Spirit didn’t lay on his heart, and Brodis wasn’t overcome by the glow of brotherly love” and there “was no warm glow of light, no Jesus, . . . the secret he discovered wasn’t the Christ” (Franks 83). Although Brodis has had a life-altering experience, he is haunted by the thought of an alternative life in which he would die as a sinner. Brodis believes that he is given a second chance to become a better person. After the near-death experience, Brodis becomes the preacher of the town church and exerts a great influence on the townspeople with his sermons, as he “in the church . . . was his best self” (18). Giving his life to the teachings of the Bible, Brodis undergoes a profound change.

Brodis can be considered a Southern Evangelist who believes in being born again through baptism and tries to spread the Gospel through preaching. Evangelists have had a complex and problematic history in the South. Many evangelists “abandoned their original hostility to slavery and restricted black preachers. Evangelical doctrine increasingly restricted women as well, taking away their right to vote in congregations, limiting their public role and emphasizing family life as a new evangelical ideal” (Wilson). Evangelicals have some distinct features some of which are “conversionism” which is “the belief that lives need to be transformed through a ‘born-again’ experience and a lifelong process of following Jesus,” “biblicism” which is “a high regard for and obedience to the Bible as the ultimate authority,” and “crucicentrism” which is “a stress on the sacrifice of Jesus

Christ on the cross as making possible the redemption of humanity” (“What Is an”). All of these qualities can be observed in Brodis’ life and he uses them to exploit his congregation, his family, and the environment for his needs.

Through religion, Brodis expects Irenie to be a compliant housewife who cleans the house, prepares food, takes care of children, the animals, and the crops, goes to church, and performs sexual intercourse whenever her husband wants. To put it boldly, he wants her to stay in the constructed gender roles deemed appropriate in the Bible and society. For Brodis, the ideals of the Old South are heavily dependent on patriarchy and the unquestionable authority of the male figure of the house. Brodis exploits Irenie and when she wants to lead a life outside of Brodis’ rules, she is vilified and punished. The only authority in Irenie’s life is Brodis and she puts up with his abuses since he made her believe that this is her duty in life as a wife and a woman. Irenie considers these chores as dull and unsatisfying:

She’d come to hate the root cellar. All winter she’d inventoried there, sitting in the dank with the fust and the mold nudging at the door. Cull the apples, unwrap the sweet potatoes, put the potatoes by, set the squash out for cooking before it was too late, But she was the keeper of the house and the yard and the fields. She’d cooked and put up all manner of food. . . . Only the bluest center stayed constant, low between the lamp’s brass thumbs, and on days when she overspent her time there, she found herself staring into its gentian eye. (Franks 20)

Irenie is a woman beset by the responsibilities the society attached to her role as a woman. She is forced to internalize the notion “that men and women occupied different positions in the world” (Franks 101). Her husband, child, and community expect her to be a good, God-fearing and obeying wife and mother. Her identity is split under different titles according to the expectations. She is expected to be a wife or a mother but never herself and is made to believe that a woman is only valuable if she has titles such as those. Her individual identity is lost, or to put it as Franks does, “whatever it was that was her real self had shriveled so small she didn’t know if it lived” (89).

When Brodis angrily scolds Matthew about his view of the Bible, she tries to talk but can only utter one word “Brodis...” before being cut short by the offensive and belittling look on Brodis’ face, by his fierce “stare [that] made her tiny” (Franks 31). She is not allowed to move beyond the limited area that Brodis allocates her even to defend their child. Not having any options, she silently goes back to her work: “Irenie turned back to the sink, slid the scraped dishes into the dishpan without making a sound” (34). The education of Matthew is another crucial subject for Irenie. She wants him to go to a boarding school whereas Brodis thinks that “there’s no point studying history and algebra when there’s no ensuring he’s going to church” (43). This leads to a dispute between the two and Irenie who tries to plea with Brodis is again silenced, because “man hadn’t ought to suffer a woman to teach, nor to take authority over him, but to be in silence” (44).

Aside from her chores, an unwavering, unending silent obedience is expected of Irenie on account of her being a woman. By having her keep her silence, Brodis further reifies her position as a commodity and a woman. Irenie is as important as her use value, her labor, not her emotions and ideas. This is one of the Southern Gothic aspects of the novel as inside the Lambey house nothing is able to grow or be healthy, even human conversation and dialogue. The house is decaying from the inside because of Brodis’ abuses and violent outbursts. The reason why Irenie constantly feels the urge to leave the house is that she wants to feel alive and safe and can only do so in the wilderness which is not corrupted by Brodis.

She is forced to let go of an important part of her identity when she marries Brodis and starts living according to his religious rules. She is conditioned to think of her husband and his rules first before answering any offer made by other parties. For instance, she stops playing the piano as Brodis tells her that “[m]usic from manmade instruments” is “against the church” (113). When she informs Virginia that she will not be playing the piano, or listening to it because of Brodis, when Virginia points out that she listens to Brodis too much, Irenie replies: “He’s my husband, ma’am” (Franks 114). Irenie internalizes the gender roles reinforced by Brodis and believes that since he is her husband, his word must be followed and heeded, even when he is not nearby. Obeying

Brodie is a duty and she lets this obedience mold her life and identity. She is completely owned by Brodie as if she is a material:

But he knew her, knew every part of her, every rise and fold of skin, the hollows above her collarbones, the crease under her small breasts, the curve of her hips full and round like an unshelled peanut, the spread of her buttocks and the soft unmuscled flesh of the inside of her thighs. They were familiar as his own limbs because he had claimed them fifteen years earlier. (85)

Being a fundamentalist, Brodie believes that a wife has to comply with her husband's requests all the time with no objections. He thinks that "A wife was meant to submit herself unto her husband as unto the Lord, for the husband was the head of the wife, even as the Christ was the head of the church" (85). When Irenie refuses Brodie's sexual advances, he forcefully rips apart her clothes and starts quoting verses from the Bible to justify his behavior. To Brodie, Irenie is "a woman [who] refused to come into the fold like Eve, refused to be ruled by Adam" (86). He tells Irenie that just like Adam, he worked with soil, and he toiled hard; however, God gave Adam Eve as "the one consolation he had for his tribulations" (86). For Brodie, Irenie's refusal to have intercourse is her way of denouncing God and everything he believes in and stands for as a preacher and as a man (86). In his mind, Irenie has to comply with Brodie's request because this is the only "part of his living that he didn't have to work for" (86). To Brodie, sexual intercourse between spouses is not a matter of romance or consent. Even suggesting this is an insult, an intervention with the natural process of life as in the case of an animal refusing to comply with its owner.

Right before the rape scene, Brodie becomes infuriated when he realizes that Irenie objects to yield to him. As it is stated in the novel, she "refused ruling. The covenant said that a woman would be ruled by her husband, and Brodie had worked and worked while the one thing that was supposed to be his by right had been denied him. The anger rose in him" (87). Having failed to make her obey his command, Brodie rapes Irenie in his hysteria because as he preached multiple times to his congregation and Irenie, "[t]he wife's body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband" (87). He becomes violent and even though "[s]omewhere he heard her gasp, . . . he didn't stop" (87). Raping

Irenie is his way of putting a marital leash on her, making sure that she can never leave him. Brodis, a hardened believer in the Bible and an enthusiastic preacher does not see any wrong in his horrible deed since he convinces himself that his intentions purely stem from his “husbandly obligations” to Irenie. He wants Irenie to know that “no matter how poorly he behaved, no matter how she construed his actions, he hadn’t meant her harm, that he had, in fact, the deepest anxiety for the safety of her earthly body and the salvation of her eternal soul” (Franks 94).

Brodis is acting hypocritically by convincing himself that he raped Irenie only to save her; however, it is obvious that to be rejected by Irenie threatens Brodis’ masculine authority and the real reason why he feels the need to rape Irenie is the salvation of his broken masculinity. Since he stops having intercourse with other women, he believes that Irenie should be grateful and compensate for his own sexual desires on demand. Using the Bible for his own good while claiming to have people’s interests and salvation in mind is very similar to what Asa Hawks does in *Wise Blood* (1952) by Flannery O’Connor. While Brodis uses the Bible to turn his wife into a machine that only does chores and provides sexual satisfaction, Hawks uses it to collect money. Hawks pretends to be blind and tells everyone that due to his powerful commitment to Jesus and his promise of salvation, he intentionally blinded himself. The protagonist, Haze, tries to uncover the truth and Hawks decides to let his daughter seduce Haze so that he can move on with his lies. To put it boldly, although he is a preacher committed to the teachings of the Bible, he is willing to let his daughter commit adultery which reveals his hypocrisy.

Brodis is also similar to another hypocritical man of cloth, Whitfield, in *As I Lay Dying*. Though a minister, Whitfield has an affair with Addie. When people of the town tell him that Addie is dying, Whitfield decides to confess his sin to the Bundrens, because Addie herself might confess it to her family. After learning that Addie has died Whitfield gives up on confessing his own, feeling saved and clean. In this novel, Faulkner points out the hypocrisy of a man of cloth who committed a great sin according to his beliefs and fearing that his reputation might be tarnished completely, he wanted to confess and appeal to the people’s conscience and mercy in order to save face.

Aside from the hypocrite man of cloth, rape is a common trope in canonical Southern Gothic works. Stanley Kowalski raping Blanche, Popeye raping Temple Drake, hillbillies raping Bobby are some examples of this traumatic experience represented in written form. In addition, rape scenes in these novels and in *Over the Plain Houses* have symbolic meanings. In *Streetcar*, rape symbolizes the death of the Old South and its victimization by the ideals of modernization and industrialization in the New South. After getting raped by Stanley, Blanche's mental health deteriorates, and she is forced to go to an asylum further showing how the ideals and the representatives of the Old South cannot inhabit the New South. In *Sanctuary*, Temple's rape is again symbolic of "the insertion of an unwanted Northern modernity into a world of slow Southern decline" (Arnett). In *Deliverance*, hillbillies raping Bobby is symbolic of the battle between two Southern masculinities and the weakness of modernized and urbanized masculinity in the face of untamed and wild masculinity.

Brodie constantly reminds Irenie that he owns her, body and soul; however, she begins to deconstruct this Biblical hold on her by talking to his parents who are Christians as well. After Brodie's sexual assault, Irenie asks her father, "Does Mama belong to you?" (Franks 102). Seeing that he does not fully understand the question, she follows up: "You know, as a thing that you own for yourself" (102). If the Bible is for the whole Christians in the world, then Irenie supposes that every woman must be their husband's property as the Bible fully and clearly grants this ownership to all men. She looks for a resemblance between herself and her mother, between her relationship with Brodie and her mother's with her father so that she may feel a little less alone, knowing that other women too are subjected to the same predicament. However, her father's answer shocks her and has her panic as it leads to the awareness that the abuses she suffers from are not universal and do not apply to all women: "Well sir, I don't know that your mother would agree to that. I expect she'd tell you I belong to her, just like that speckled cat belongs to her. Except that whenever the cat's work is done, he's allowed to sit in her lap. She don't tolerate me trying that" (102).

Confused by this answer, Irenie tells her father that the Bible considers wives as properties of their husbands and when she asks why her mother does not follow that rule, he tells

her that her “mother must have been somewhere else the day they taught that page of the gospel” (103). This is a very crucial moment for Irenie who realizes that there may be differences in the interpretation of the Bible. Brodis is similar to many Southern Gothic villains who are “religious fanatics, caught in some fierce restlessness and frenzy” and whose main mistake “is the misinterpretation of the Christian faith” (Pilter 17). When Irenie begins to reject Brodis’ Biblical interpretation of looking at the relationship between men and women and finds out that equality exists between the two sexes, she realizes that she does not have to suffer from being treated like a second-class individual by Brodis. This is another feminist and contemporary aspect of the novel. Irenie’s father is a guide for equality in the text. He represents the values of the next and newer generations where gender equality is advocated and practiced. He, as a man and a husband, does not take advantage of the interpretations of the Bible that favor men but creates his own interpretation and comes to the conclusion that men and women are equal. The same verses in the Bible tell Brodis that wives belong to their husbands while for her father there is no inherent difference between a man and a woman and “women were as much like God as [men]. That he’d made both of them to contain some part of himself” (Franks 104).

Her father tells Irenie that he can own a sheep or a pig but they “don’t belong to [him] in the strict sense of the word” (103). However, the difference between a human and an animal is that even though an animal owner cuts its wool, takes its milk, sometimes kills its children and eats, the animal always comes back home as it cannot survive elsewhere (103). Irenie likens her own situation to that of animals as she too wanders off at night to the woods where she feels free and unbound. Knowing that she owns neither property nor money to stand on her own feet, she returns to Brodis as he “put meat on the table” and as “no one could say her husband didn’t provide” (7). However, the phoenix inside Irenie has already “taken wing and flown away” and her father reassures her that she can leave Brodis whenever she wants: “There’s a pack of Raines living in this county, Irenie. Always has been. Don’t forget that. Case it ever gets to the place of want-to versus have-to” (106). He further encourages Irenie to take the reins of her own life and stop being a victim of Brodis’ exploitation.

Traumatized due to Brodis' scrutinization and violence, Irenie finally decides to leave Brodis. She thinks that there can be a "living without Brodis Lambey" and that "[s]he wasn't a chicken nor a sow" (195). Once Irenie realizes that she is not Brodis' property despite what he has been telling her, she rejects his Bible-given dominion over her and deserts her old life for a new one without Brodis. Her assertion of her individuality goes hand in hand with her economic independence. She decides to support herself without relying on any man. She says she is "staying and looking for work," (248) and she is not "picking a boy who would take her to a future life. She [is] picking [her] life" (251).

Ironically, Irenie finds out that she is pregnant after Brodis' sexual assault, which might be interpreted as Brodis' attempt to instill his old values in Irenie who is in search of new values, and a life without rules and traditions without being oppressed by Brodis and the society. The child might also be regarded as Brodis' attempt to hold Irenie within the confines that he drew for her; it is a product of rape and sexual violence and it is the symbolic continuation of the Old South. However, having decided to separate her life from Brodis and his rules, Irenie aborts the baby. The doctor asks her questions about her husband to learn whether he is alive and knows about the abortion to which Irenie answers: "I'm leaving him, sir. . . . Because I am afraid of him" (236). Irenie knows that she is an inhabitant of another world from now on because she realizes that her first two children were "delivered by Aunt Annie, who wasn't even her aunt, and who never called her a thing in the world but Irenie" (237-238). However, during her abortion, the doctor and the nurses always address her as Mrs. Lambey for which she feels respected.

The doctor carefully explains the procedure and even though she does not understand the intricacies of it, Irenie is glad that the doctor is taking the time to talk to her like an equal and an individual which Brodis has never done nor wanted to. When the doctor finishes the operation, Irenie cannot believe the amount of blood that has spilled out of her womb as everything white "looked like . . . dipped in blood" and even "the inside of her [eye]lids were red too" (238). The abortion signifies Irenie's rebirth. By aborting Brodis' baby, she is born again as if she has been baptized. She feels that her own blood bathes her and soothes her like holy water. The abortion is the most crucial step in her defiance against

Brodie because now she becomes free of a remnant of Brodie, which stands for the death of the Old South.

3.2.2. Southerner Against U.S. Government

Another Southern Gothic aspect of the novel is that it presents the clashes between the environmentalist Appalachians and the industrialists who monetize nature. As Robertson argues, contemporary Appalachian authors connect “the concerns of Appalachia with global environmentalism” and position “Appalachia not as uniquely ‘other’, but as a part of a global battle against the ravages of aggressive capitalism” (115). The Depression government tries to treat the environment like property, a lifeless being, while Irenie knows and values the liveliness of the trees and animals around her and her connection to them. Brodie blames the Depression government for how his life has changed and how he began to feel like he lost his Southern identity and control over his family. While Irenie tries to embrace the change no matter how hard it may prove, Brodie actively takes a stance to protect his ideals of the Old South against the social and economic interventions of the Depression government.

While Irenie holds the agrarian values of the Old South sacred, she never intends to harm those who do not. She proves that even though they come from different spheres and creeds people can become friends. Irenie is kind and inclusive and she and Virginia exchange opinions helping each other navigate through their collective issues. However, Brodie is a xenophobe as he quite literally hates people who are not from the South. Although he too is against the industrialization of the Southern landscape, his stance is toxic and molded by hatred toward those who are different from him.

After arriving in the town, Virginia Furman immediately talks with Irenie about Matthew. She tells her that Matthew is an exceptional student, and he would do well in a school with students just like him and through his education, he might have a prosperous life and a good social standing unlike she and her husband. Irenie is very intrigued by this offer because she knows that poverty and lack of education go hand in hand. She believes that if her son is to have a chance at a good life, it will come from his education. Although

pleased by it, Irenie cannot say yes right away because of her husband and the money they would have to spend on Matthew's education. Seeing the hesitation in her face, Virginia tells Irenie that "[t]here are *scholarships*" (Franks 9). Virginia Furman, spending a lot of time with the locals as an agent, knows that every future decision made by these people is determined in the end by how much it costs. Therefore, she quickly eases Irenie's financial anxieties about her son's education. Another reason why Irenie wants Matthew to receive an education in a government school is that she does not want Matthew to become like Brodis. She advocates for Matthew's welfare and hopes that a different Southerner can be made out of Matthew with the help of the Depression government.

However, for Brodis, sending his son to a secular boarding school is an insult to his parenting and Southern identity. He believes that through education, the Depression government will turn his son into a heretic and that Matthew will dismiss the traditions that make them Southerners. When Irenie brings up the issue of Matthew's education and how Virginia finds him very intelligent, Brodis' immediate response is: "We didn't need an outsider come from another state to tell us that" and adds that the only reason a government agent finds Matthew bright is because the government does not expect Southerners to be smart people (27). To Brodis, the only thing that the Depression government wants is to change Southerners, take away their identities, and turn them into appropriate citizens as if being a Southerner is to be frowned upon. He tells Irenie that "[e]very single one of them wants you to change in some way" (27). Irenie believes that Matthew "needs a special education from the government" (42); however, Brodis questions the education the state wants to give to Matthew as he says that "[i]t's fine and good to send a boy for an education, but first you've got to ask yourself is it the education he needs" (43). Brodis wants Matthew to continue with his training of the Bible and fears that if the government were to take him, they would make a heretic out of him and eradicate his Southern identity. Contrary to Irenie's sentiments, Brodis' true fear is that he does not want his son to be different from him. In his mind, his son is the next generation of Southerners and the only way to continue that line is to protect him from Northern sentiments and keep him in the region.

Although the issue of Matthew's education is crucial to understanding Brodis' anger towards the government, the first and the most important intervention of the government into the life of Lambey is through agriculture and the introduction of tobacco and new farming techniques. In the mid-1930s, two USDA agents arrive in the town and instruct farmers on how to cultivate tobacco more efficiently and in financially lucrative ways. Although Brodis is one of the last to give in to their interventions, he stays bitter because of this forceful insertion into his life:

The men had come five years ago, in '34, then commenced holding meetings and visiting farms in both counties. From the get-go they'd been selling the idea of tobacco. And there were people that had switched. Rickerson was the first to get shed of his wheat and rye and cane. Brodis was the last, even though he didn't use the tobacco for himself and had to sell every leaf. After that, the push was for separate pens for the animals. Build more fences and paddocks and leave the crops free in the open, they said. Never mind that the deer and raccoons would get them. (Franks 10)

The reason why Brodis is wary of Depression government agents is because none "of the agents had ever farmed a day in their lives. And you couldn't trust their interest" (10). Brodis realizes that these Northern agents whom he believes have no clues about how farming life operates, take on a pretentious and patronizing attitude implying that the townspeople are failures as citizens and as farmers; therefore, they need to change their ways as instructed.

He witnesses that the New Deal aggravates more than it alleviates and finds the state indifferent to the woes of their town because of "the teams of city boys in shirtsleeves building national parks and kicking people out of their homes and damming up rivers" (23). Tobacco seems so unproductive and lifeless that "[e]ven after three years . . . it seemed impossible that something so invisible would grow" (46). Before the state intervention, Lambey cultivated potato in March, "corn during the growing of the April moon," "squash, cucumbers and mush melon in the May bloom days," "lettuce and rhubarb in May, radishes, peas, and onions in June, beets, cucumbers and melons in July, corn, tomatoes, peppers, and lima beans in August, cabbage, apples and walnuts in

September” (52). However, “in the past three years, it had been all about tobacco” as the Depression government dictated (52).

Brodie believes that the Depression government toppled the world of Southern farmers by suspending a great number of agricultural traditions which they have been practicing for many generations replacing them with a singular type of product and technique. While this partially proved fruitful, it forced the farmers to adopt to grow a single product which has no use for the farmers other than harvesting and selling. This feels like a defeat, a war between the South and the North again lost, to Brodie who has to leave the plants they have been cultivating for years for new ones as deemed suitable by the Northerners. Once tobacco is introduced, all other forms of agriculture and farming have to be deserted in order to maximize the profits of tobacco:

There were no more sheep. Nor were there any more lambs to be born. Years ago, she'd stopped carding and spinning and weaving. Nor was there planting of cane or flax, nor cradling of wheat, nor bundling and stacking, nor mowing of hay. In place of it all, the shaggy mops of tobacco lined the fields, row after leafy-headed row, as if all the growing world had put its energy into this one lurid plant. (95)

Tobacco is like a reverse-Midas touch turning everything into a valueless lump. Even the worms that are plucked from the tobacco cannot be given to the chickens because the chickens become ill, they “[j]ust laid down in the dirt and wouldn't get up” (97).

Since they are instructed to put all their efforts into tobacco, the Lambey's forego other ways of making money or livelihood aside from Brodie's preaching. However, when a hailstorm destroys his fully grown tobacco field before he can cultivate and sell it, Brodie is left without any provision to keep him sustained. He says: “There wasn't any squash, nor broccoli nor melons nor corn enough to last the winter. Wasn't any pumpkin, wasn't any zucchini. They hadn't planted that way in three years, ever since the tobacco. And now there was only this shred of broken leaves” (242). He feels desperate, hopeless and angry at the Depression government which forced him to grow only one particular plant which he could not even eat or use. As that one thing is now destroyed, he believes that he will not be paid and will be left alone by the Depression government.

As his livelihood is gone, the anger bottled up inside Brodis swells as he reminds himself of what the Depression government has done to him. They sent an agent years ago named Roger Furman “who’d never had real work except it was to fill out forms and write his recommendations on a yellow pad or talk” and “every time a man spent a dollar anymore the government took a cut of it. Because the taxes were how they came to afford the paycheck of a man like Roger Furman” (246). In an interview, Julia Franks asks, “what do you do with that anger? . . . [W]hat do you do with this anger and frustration” (“An Interview”). Believing that his life is now over because of the intervention, Brodis decides to take revenge. His confrontation with Virginia at the agency department is not just a trade of barbs between two people but a microcosm of the conflict between Southerners and the Depression government. Brodis believes that he sees through the design when he looks back to the time when the Depression government first sent Roger Furman to talk to the farmers and to convince them to change their ways. After Roger, the Depression government sent Mrs. Furman to convince the wives and the sons of the farmers. According to Brodis, they used kindness as a weapon to convince them. Although Brodis decided to hold his ground, he sees that his congregation could not because the agents asked them to see the prospects for the future: “couldn’t they see there was a better life to be had, forget about Heaven because that didn’t matter a whit, forget about the health of a man’s soul” (246).

Brodis believes that the Depression government agents do not care about the Southerners, or him, or his wife “because it was all about making more money” (246). When Brodis questions Virginia about his wife’s whereabouts, he sees “a group of men [Virginia] and her husband had ruined and told him and all of them lies come straight from the devil” (254). Brodis starts to regard his quest to find his wife and his conflict with the Depression government as a religious crusade. These are the only remnants of his own South and losing them means losing his South. As Sundahl remarks, Brodis “fears the government represented by Virginia Furman, and stakes his older way of life against change. He believes that Mrs. Furman and her husband have ruined his way of life” (“*Over the*”). In his eyes, the South, his holy land, his town and his house are invaded, his possessions are taken, his traditions are attacked, he is left alone and forced to change his ways.

Brodie's distrust of the Depression government as a Southerner is similar to the case of Emily Grierson in "A Rose for Emily" (1930) by William Faulkner. Both Brodie and Emily try to oppose the federal government in order to protect their old ideals and identities. While Emily tries to protect her aristocratic heritage, Brodie tries to protect his Southernness which is molded by his traditions and hard work in the field. While Brodie feels threatened by the Depression government, Emily is dismissive of the new local government which wants her to pay taxes. Both desperately attempt to preserve their ways through disobedience against governmental control and while Brodie eventually succumbs to the Depression government, Emily quite literally holds her ground as she barricades herself in her house into which no one can trespass.

After that the aldermen leave her alone as "she vanquished them, horse and foot, just as she had vanquished their fathers thirty years before" (Faulkner "A Rose"). Faulkner names her disobedience against the local government as vanquishing as if they are forces battling each other. By not succumbing to their rules, Emily defeats her foe, that is the local government and enjoys her victory in isolation. Contrary to Emily, however, Brodie is not able to *vanquish* the Depression government since he plants only what they ordered him to plant as does his congregation, loses Matthew to a government school, and Irenie to Virginia's promises of freedom.

Brodie feels that he failed in his crusade after seeing the defeated men begging for charity, who were just like Brodie before the intervention of the Depression government; they were good, honest, hardworking, and God-fearing people. Brodie tells Virginia how these people were already "living close to the bone" (255) but they could not even grow edible crops because the Depression government forced them to plant and harvest tobacco, "a crop they can't even eat" (255). He also tells her that these men would not be in this dire situation if the Depression government "hadn't guiled them [and] pleaded them to get shed of their stock and clear every last inch of land for the growing of a crop they had no use of" (255). When Virginia Furman finally stands up to question him, Brodie, by the power of the men behind him, resembles her and the government to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor who ordered the crucifixion of Jesus in the Bible (255). By using the Bible as a tool, Brodie demonizes the state and its agents and makes an enemy out of them

while turning his congregation into crusaders, waging war on them whom he believes to be *heretics*. Although it would “not bring Irenie back, nor the tobacco, nor the money” (Franks 261), Brodis goes to the USDA office once again, places dynamites beneath it, and blows up the building, killing the agents, his townsfolk inside the building, and himself in an act of terrorism.

Brodis’ and Virginia’s deaths are symbolic of the clash between the Old South and the New South. Brodis’ death means the death of the Old South. His son in a government school without a theological education, his wife building a life on her own and aborting their baby, losing his farm and his congregation, one by one Brodis loses the important components of his identity, of what makes him a Southerner. Therefore, he is left in a world where no one around him wants to live their lives the same way he does. He realizes that he cannot inhabit the South anymore because it has become a different South than he is accustomed to. Brodis’ and Virginia’s deaths also signify the author’s own sentiments about the environment. Brodis, the exploiter of nature due to teachings of the Bible, and Virginia, the representative of the Depression government which abuses nature and sees it only as a means of money and financial duty for the country, die implying that neither of these views of the environment should exist in the South. The only one that remains alive among the three is Irenie because her role as the preserver and protector of the environment should continue and be continued by the next generations of Southerners.

Once she reads Brodis’ death in the newspaper, Irenie returns to her house from which she previously escaped. Now that Brodis is dead and his corruption and influence are gone, she reclaims the house and the South as her own. She starts to tell her story to a journalist from a local newspaper which is another act of opening herself up to the world after having lived for so long in Brodis’ forced isolation. The animals too rejoice at Brodis’ death as it means freedom from oppression and exploitation. Irenie goes to the woods again but this time with Matthew to teach him her way of approaching and communicating with nature. They encounter a swarm of wolf spiders which Irenie encountered when she was a child and which have been there for two decades waiting for her to return. Irenie understands that the wolf spiders are “watching to see what Irenie and Matthew Lambey [will] do” (271) without Brodis, in the South that Irenie shapes.

Over the Plain Houses is a Southern Gothic work because, first and foremost, it exhibits the clash between the Old South and the New South. However, since it focuses on Appalachia, there is no statement about the issue of race. Unlike *Serena* in which the Northerners are portrayed as exploitative and violent individuals, in *Over the Plain Houses* they are depicted mostly as people willing to lend a helping hand. A common Southern Gothic trope, the hypocrite man of cloth, is present in the novel in the form of Brodis who uses the Bible for his own gains and justifies himself for exploiting the land and abusing Irenie physically and sexually. A contemporary aspect of the novel is the association it builds between environmental exploitation with gender oppression. Irenie's quest for freedom is associated with her wish to protect nature from Brodis. *Over the Plain Houses* can also be considered a feminist Southern Gothic as it is about an oppressed woman's self-emancipation which is common in contemporary Appalachian Gothic written by women authors.

CONCLUSION

Southern Gothic has been an essential sub-genre of Southern Literature since the beginning of the Southern Literary Renaissance in the 1920s. Authors like William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, Tennessee Williams, James Dickey and Cormac McCarthy have produced works which constituted the body of the genre and became blueprints for the following generations of Southern Gothic authors. Southern Gothic is exemplified by its violent and perverted characters representing the horrors of Southern history and its racial, social, and gender issues. Many authors of the genre criticize the problems of the South in their works which are shaped by their individual experiences and recollections. As the range of Southern Gothic authors has broadened in terms of racial, gender, and social diversity, the scope of the genre has broadened as well.

Despite being one of the most important and culturally influential events in the history of the United States, the Great Depression was not often employed by Southern Gothic authors in the 1930s or the following decades. When these authors *did* employ poverty and poor characters, in their work, they almost always used stereotypical and condescending images, representing poor Southerners as dim-witted and uneducated monsters ruled by their impulses and greed. This quasi-tradition of demonizing poverty prevailed in Southern Gothic until the late twentieth century when authors from working-class backgrounds became more and more visible in the landscape of the genre.

The contemporary Southern Gothic authors who belong to working and middle-class families, who do not have any aristocratic lineage, live in mansions or plantations, and have no association with slave-holding have begun to showcase the authentic experiences of poverty-stricken people in the South. In addition to poverty, issues of race, working-class exploitation, environmental exploitation, and discrimination based on sex and religion are also highly visible in the works of contemporary Southern Gothic authors. These authors, while employing the common themes of Southern Gothic like racism, the clash between the Old and the New South, hypocritical man of cloth, and physical and sexual violence such as murder and rape, also blend them with newer thematic concerns that relate to the issues of the modern South. Additionally, these authors frequently

subvert the conventional tropes of canonical Southern Gothic in order to exhibit the unique Southern identity. Joe Lansdale's *The Bottoms*, Ron Rash's *Serena*, and Julia Franks' *Over the Plain Houses* fit into these parameters and it is possible to argue that they are examples of contemporary Southern Gothic having differences and similarities with the canonical Southern Gothic.

In *The Bottoms*, Joe Lansdale tells the story of a teenage boy trying to find a murderer on the loose with his sister and father. The main contemporary aspect of the novel is the identity and background of the protagonist. While the canonical Southern Gothic protagonists come from aristocratic backgrounds and live in mansions, the protagonist Harry is from a simple family, living in a simple house. Unlike the poor in Southern Gothic, however, they are neither corrupted nor greedy people always looking for money and wealth. Though they are poor, they are content with their lives. They have healthy relationships with each other and with the community around them. Another contemporary aspect of *The Bottoms* is the environmental concerns of the author. Through his protagonist, Lansdale criticizes the Texan hunters of the time, who killed animals for sport and destroyed forests. Harry's family respects nature and even though they are poor, they do not resort to violent ways of killing animals or exploiting nature.

Moreover, unlike the canonical protagonists who are torn between the ideals of the New South and the traditions of the Old South, Harry and his family adamantly think that the Antebellum South and its ideals are wrong and need to die out. While the majority of the town is nostalgic about those times and physically and verbally assaults the black locals, Harry's family treats them with respect and embraces the ideals of equality. Harry's father Jacob is not a conventional Southern patriarch who tries to instill the ways of the Old South into his family. Rather, he is a beacon for Harry as he freed himself from the racist, discriminatory mindset of his own father and community long ago. Therefore, in the clash between the Old South and the New South, the protagonist's allegiance clearly lies in the New South.

While *The Bottoms* is a contemporary example, it is a Southern Gothic novel as it employs some of the most common tropes of the genre. One of the aspects of the novel that is

similar to the canonical Southern Gothic is the gothic setting, namely, the swamp. Swamp has been one of the most common locations employed in the canonical Southern Gothic. Both as a place of horrors and a place of refuge, Southern Gothic authors make use of the swamp and incorporate the environment of the South with its historical horrors and tragedies. In *The Bottoms*, the swamp serves as the place where evil lurks and also the place where the outcasts find solace. Another similarity is the act of lynching and the character of the tragic mulatto. A character in the novel named Red, a racist constable, finds out that his parents are black, which destroys his sense of identity. Not being able to bear the news that he is what he hates the most, Red hangs himself and covers himself with tar. Mixing these conventional tropes with contemporary concerns such as the authentic depictions of poverty, environmental abuse, and an idealistic Southern protagonist who rejects the Old South altogether, renders *The Bottoms* a contemporary Southern Gothic novel.

In *Serena*, Ron Rash shows the struggles of the poor, working-class Southerners and their clashes against the greedy Northerner industrialists. One of the most crucial differences between the novel and the canonical Southern Gothic is the absence of black characters. Through this absence, Rash presents the readers with a Southern community exempt from the sin of slaveholding and racism. The racial clash between white and black people is replaced by the clash between the poor, white “trash” Southerners and the rich Northerners. The contemporary aspects of the novel are, first and foremost, the representations of the working class and environmental exploitation. As the novel takes place in North Carolina, the Appalachians, it makes use of the history of the region. Appalachia is famous for its timber industry where thousands of trees are cut every year and hundreds of workers get injured and or die due to the lack of safety measures and without any compensation. Rash uses the era of the Great Depression when Northerners took a special interest in the forests of North Carolina and blends the concerns of the modern South with issues of the South during that time.

The clash between the Southern workers and the Northern bosses is caused by the greed of the Northerners and the ordeal of the Southerners who became much worse financially due to the Depression. The Southerners are forced to work for the insensitive and cruel

Northerners because they have no other way of making money for their families. The workers are also forced to destroy the land they were born into because the cutting of the trees and turning them into timber has the utmost importance for the Northerners. The sanctity of human and natural life does not hold any value for the greedy bosses who kill people standing in their way to immense wealth and decimate the forests of the region ruthlessly. The destruction of the environment will have short and long-term adverse effects on the town and its people but the profits outweigh the environmental concerns for them. By showing the exploitative habits of the timber industry with the common themes of death and destruction, Rash presents a contemporary novel inside a conventional frame.

The novel also has similarities with Southern Gothic in that it displays the clash between the discourses of the Old South and the New South. Though there is no black presence, and therefore no discriminated community in the novel, the South still clings to the traditional agrarian ways of the Old South. Additionally, the contrasting views on the environment and nature represented by Rachel and Serena which become the place where the ideals of the Old South battle with those of the New South. Rachel, who takes pride in knowing the plants and the animals around her, how to pick up plants or which plants to pick up, and which season is the best for cultivation and which is not embodies the agrarian South while Serena personifies the industrialist New South. Rachel treasures the environment and feels connected to it, Serena regards it as a material and looks for ways of destroying it and turning it into property.

Serena was also adapted into a movie in 2014 directed by Susanne Bier. While the novel was a huge success, the movie adaptation did not receive such praise. Many who read the book beforehand criticized the movie because it missed the mark with the representations of the working-class Southerners by stereotyping them. Moreover, this generalization in the movie was against the very essence of the novel which presented the poor Southerners as mostly moral people forced to destroy the environment for a wage. As the movie diverted from this essence, the movie became a run-of-a-mill, betrayal-thriller without the social messages of the novel.

What makes *Over the Plain Houses* an example of contemporary Southern Gothic is that it builds an association between the exploitation of women and exploitation of nature. The novel takes place in North Carolina towards the end of the Depression. The Depression agencies instruct and implement new ways of agriculture forcing the locals to leave their traditional ways of planting and sowing and replace them with the mandated ones which creates hostility between the Southerners and the Depression government. The real issue is the government's and Brodis' views of the environment as a property. Brodis exploits the environment around him, hurts and kills animals, and destroys wildlife senselessly justifying his acts on Biblical grounds.

Brodis believes that both Irenie, his wife, and the environment exist only to serve him. Marriage, sexual intercourse, the relationship between man and woman, man and the environment are solely shaped by the Bible for him. Therefore, he finds it right to abuse his wife and the land. However, as she sees the possibility of a free and independent life, Irenie starts to break Brodis' hold on her. She goes to the untamed nature and communicates with the land and the animals which tell her to be free. She decides to leave Brodis and start a new life, and after Brodis commits suicide, she turns back to her house to reclaim the South. As Brodis dies, his exploitative practices die with him and Irenie decides to lead a life in the South outside the boundaries of gender and environmental exploitation.

In conclusion, the novels studied in this thesis make use of the themes that are often found in canonical Southern Gothic works such as death and destruction, physical and psychological abuse, the clash between the Old and the New South, racial violence, and religious oppression, but they also involve authentic and genuine representations of poverty and poor Southerners, the exploitation of the working-class and the environment, unconflicted Southern protagonists who come from simple backgrounds, and gender exploitation, which make them contemporary Southern Gothic novels. It remains to be said that the novels analyzed in this thesis blend conventional tropes to be found in canonical Southern Gothic with the issues and concerns of the contemporary South and are, therefore, examples of contemporary Southern Gothic.

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