The Southern Gothic movement in literature brings the atmosphere and sensibilities of the gothic, a genre originating in late 18th century England to the American South. Southern Gothic is a sub-genre of the Gothic Writing style, unique to American literature. Like its parent genre, it relies on supernatural, ironic or unusual events to guide the plot. Unlike its predecessor, it uses these tools not for the sake of suspense, but to explore social issues and reveal the cultural inequities of the South. As early Gothic writers used the genre in part to criticize what they saw as the moral blindness of the medieval era, so Southern Gothic writers deal with their own past through Gothic tropes. The Southern Gothic is unusual as a genre in that it is significantly limited to a certain geographic space.

Southern Gothic literature builds on the traditions of the larger Gothic genre, typically including supernatural elements, mental disease and the grotesque. Much Southern Gothic literature, however, eschews the supernatural and deals instead with disturbed personalities. Southern Gothic is known for its damaged and delusional characters, such as the heroines of Tennessee Williams’s plays. Southern Gothic is a sub-genre of the Gothic writing style unique to American literature. Like its parent genre, it relies on supernatural, ironic or unusual events to guide the plot. The Southern Gothic author usually avoids perpetuating the antebellum stereotypes the dominant culture would prefer to see, such as the contented slave, the demure Southern belle, the chivalrous gentleman and the righteous Christian preacher. Instead the writer takes classic Gothic archetypes, such as the damsel in distress or the heroic knight, and portrays them in a modern and realistic manner, transforming them into a spiteful, reclusive spinster or a white-suited, fan-brandishing lawyer with ulterior motives. One of the most notable features of the Southern Gothic is the grotesque, a stock character who possesses some cringe-inducing qualities, typically bigotry and self-righteousness, but enough good traits that the reader finds himself empathizing in spite of himself. The grotesque may also be a character rejected by society because of his/her unusual looks, behavior, intelligence or unsubstantiated rumors about the character, perpetuated by gossip. Deeply flawed characters, while often disturbing to read about, provide the author with greater narrative range and more opportunities to highlight the unpleasant aspects of Southern culture without resorting to open moralizing.

Southern Gothic literature often deals with the plight of those who are ostracized or oppressed by traditional Southern culture – blacks, women and gays, for example. Harper Lee’s To Kill A Mockingbird deals with a clearly innocent black man who is convicted of rape and murdered simply because of his race. It also uses the grotesque, through the freakish Boo Radley, a much gossiped about recluse, who lives in an old haunted house. Tennessee Williams’s A Streetcar Named Desire reinvents the Southern belle as a pretentious mentally unstable woman, and his Cat on a Hot Tin Roof portrays the favorite son of a Southern dynasty as a repressed homosexual whose alcoholism threatens his marriage. William Faulkner’s frequently anthologized “A Rose for Emily” brings the recurrent Gothic motif of unrequited love leading to madness to a Southern town. Other notable writers in the Southern Gothic tradition include Flannery O’Connor, Carson McCullers, Eudora Welty, Erskine Caldwell and Truman Capote. Tennessee Williams described Southern Gothic as a style that captured “an intuition of an underlying dreadfulness in modern experience.”

Information for this handout is provided by onpedia and wisegeek.