Tampereen yliopisto

Rio Karjalainen

’AM I MAKING YOU FEEL SICK?’

Ethel Cain’s *Preacher’s Daughter* and the Southern Gothic

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Tämän tutkielman tavoitteena oli osoittaa, että laulaja-lauluntekijä Ethel Cainin albumi *Preacher’s Daughter* (2022) on etelän gotiikkaa edustava teos. Tutkielman ensimmäisessä vaiheessa selvitettiin goottilaisen kirjallisuuden juuria, sekä tutkittiin tyylisuunnalle tyypillisiä teemoja ja aiheita. Näihin kuuluu kuoleman pelko, aaveet, kummittelevat nummet sekä vanhat kartanot. Seuraavaksi tutkielmassa tarkasteltiin etelän gotiikkaa genren temaattisen ja kulttuurisen kontekstin pohjalta, jonka jälkeen se rinnastettiin laajempaan goottilaisen kirjallisuuden kirjalliseen kaanoniin, sekä aiempien kirjailijoiden teoksiin. Siinä tutkittiin esimerkiksi Cormac McCarthyn, Flannery O’Connorin ja Toni Morrisonin vaikutusta etelän gotiikan genreen. Tämän jälkeen tutkielmassa analysoitiin lainauksia kahdeksasta eri kappaleesta *Preacher’s Daughter* -albumilla, tutkien niitä uskonnon, perheen, menneisyyden trauman, groteskin sekä makaaberin tematiikan näkökulmasta. Analysoidut kappaleet olivat “American Teenager”, “Sun Bleached Flies”, “Thoroughfare”, “Family Tree (Intro)”, “Ptolemaea”, “Hard Times”, “Gibson Girl” ja “Strangers”.

Analyysin tulokset osoittivat, että systemaattinen etelän gotiikan teemojen käyttö albumin lyriikoissa sekä narratiivissa vahvisti teoksen olevan osa etelän gotiikan genreä.

Avainsanat: gotiikka, etelän gotiikka, uskonto, trauma, groteski, makaaberi

ABSTRACT

Rio Karjalainen: ’Am I Making You Feel Sick?’: Ethel Cain’s *Preacher’s Daughter* and the Southern Gothic
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The aim of this thesis was to demonstrate the ways in which singer-songwriter Ethel Cain’s 2022 album *Preacher’s Daughter* is a Southern Gothic work. The first step of the methodology was the exploration of the roots of the Gothic literary genre, with discussions of prevalent themes and motifs within its tradition. These include the fear of death, ghostly apparitions, haunting vistas of sparse moors and old manors. Next, this thesis explored the cultural and thematic context of the Southern Gothic genre, relating those to the wider Gothic canon and to the works of prior authors. The influences of writers like Cormac McCarthy, Flannery O’Connor and Toni Morrison were discussed. Finally, analysis of selected quotes from eight songs on *Preacher’s Daughter* was conducted, where they were discussed through the lenses of religion, family, past trauma, the grotesque and the macabre. The songs analyzed were “American Teenager”, “Sun Bleached Flies”, “Thoroughfare”, “Family Tree (Intro)”, “Ptolemaea”, “Hard Times”, “Gibson Girl”, and “Strangers”.

The investigation revealed the systemic utilization of Southern Gothic themes and motifs within the narrative and lyricism of the album, cementing the work as belonging to the Southern Gothic genre.

Key words: Gothic, Southern Gothic, religion, trauma, grotesque, macabre

TEKOÄLYN KÄYTTÖ OPINNÄYTTEESSÄ

Opinnäytteessäni on käytetty tekoälysovelluksia:

☒ Ei
☐ Kyllä

Ilmoitukseni mukaan olen käyttänyt opinnäytteessäni tutkielmaprosessin aikana seuraavia tekoälysovelluksia:

Tekoälysovellusten nimet ja versiot: [Listaa tähän kaikki tekoälysovellukset ja niiden versiot, joita olet käyttänyt tutkielmaprosessin aikana.]

Käyttötarkoitus: [Kuvaa tähän yksityiskohtaisesti, mihin tarkoitukseen ja miten tekoälyä on sovellettu opinnäytteeseen tutkielmaprosessin aikana.]

Osiot, joissa tekoälyä on käytetty: [Luettele tähän kaikki opinnäytteen vaiheet ja osiot, joissa tekoälyä on tutkielmaprosessin aikana käytetty.]

Olen tietoinen siitä, että olen täysin vastuussa koko opinnäytteeni sisällöstä, mukaan lukien osat, joissa on hyödynnetty tekoälyä, ja hyväksyn vastuun mahdollisista eettisten ohjeiden rikkomuksista.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Singer-songwriter Ethel Cain's debut album *Preacher's Daughter* (2022) chronicles the story of a young girl named Ethel who lives in the American South. Throughout the events of the narrative, she runs away from home and becomes embroiled in tumultuous relationships, before eventually succumbing to a gruesome fate when she is murdered and cannibalized by a lover.

The aim of this research is to prove that *Preacher's Daughter* is a Southern Gothic work of fiction, and the theoretical basis for this research lies in classical understandings of Southern Gothic as a literary genre. Southern Gothic commonly deals with themes of poverty, religion, past trauma as well as the grotesque and the macabre. What sets it apart from traditional Gothic literature is its strong connection to the American South – both in terms of the physical setting as well as the cultural context of the work. As a concept album, *Preacher's Daughter* presents the listener with an overarching story that envelops the entirety of the work, as well as themes and motifs that are present throughout the album's length. Because of this, it lends itself well to thematic analysis and the whole album is thus potentially relevant to the aims of the thesis.

This thesis will commence with the exploration of Gothic themes within *Preacher's Daughter.* The goal will be to then draw parallels to contemporary Southern culture within the work itself – this will be done to demonstrate how *Preacher's Daughter* is part of Gothic literature whilst also providing a way to specifically analyze the album as a distinctly Southern Gothic work of fiction. Another method utilized in this research will be the comparison of themes present in *Preacher's Daughter* to classic Southern Gothic authors' works (such as William Faulkner and Cormac McCarthy). This will allow for a discussion of the continuum of the prevailing styles withing the genre, thus allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the wider canon of Southern Gothic works.

One thing to note is that there is a difference between analyzing a work through a Southern Gothic lens and setting out to prove that a work is Southern Gothic. The former involves applying generally agreed-upon themes and motifs found within Southern Gothic fiction to the album and seeing how they might change the way in which we view and interpret the narrative and work as a whole, whereas the latter involves the specific intention to prove that the album is explicitly a work of Southern Gothic fiction and that those elements are an integral and purposeful part of the work. Therefore, the objective of this research is not only to explore how the album

could be interpreted as a Southern Gothic work because of its themes and motifs, but also to outline the specific ways in which the album is purposefully drawing from Southern Gothic tradition and employing Southern Gothic elements in its text, and why those elements matter.

This thesis will contribute positively to academia by filling a niche that is largely unexplored; because *Preacher's Daughter* is a very new album, there does not exist a large corpus of academic texts discussing it. This thesis can offer a new perspective into the wider discussion of the Southern Gothic genre, as well as provide an insight into how it manifests in contemporary works of popular culture, especially in modern pop music.

2. THEORETICAL APPROACH TO THE SOUTHERN GOTHIC

When examining the theory that forms the basis of this thesis, an apt place to begin is at historical understandings of Gothic literature and Southern Gothicism. Discussing the beginnings of Gothic literature in the 1800s through the lens of contemporary scholars as well as writers of the time is imperative when the aim is to gain an understanding of relevant manifestations of the genre in literature and art. In addition to this, identifying the key themes and motifs present aids in constructing a coherent analysis of the nature of Southern Gothic as a subgenre of classic Gothicism. Finally, by discussing the ways in which contemporary Southern Gothic works share integral elements with hallmark works of the past, we can create a tangible connection to classic Gothic canon whilst simultaneously legitimizing new, more contemporary works, such as *Preacher's Daughter*.

2.1 Defining the Gothic and Southern Gothic

To understand Southern Gothic, we must first be able to define the genre from which it stems: *Gothic.* Throughout modern history there have been various interpretations of what the term entails, with many scholars and writers being unable to agree on one overarching definition. For decades, Gothic has been used to describe a myriad of varying aesthetics across different contexts and mediums (Brown et al 1). The genre is commonly believed to have begun with Horace Walpole's 1764 novel, *The Castle of Otranto*, in which many elements that would come to be viewed as hallmarks of the genre were made popular. A haunting tone borne from common woes of the time, such as distressed women, the threat of supernatural forces, ruined ancestral buildings and imposing physical structures, proved to be a durable cultural marker particularly because of how transferable those elements were to other mediums (2). Gothicism as a literary genre is very adaptable, and its longevity is often seen as a testament to that. Similarly, the pervasive nature of societal fears and the manner in which they change throughout the decades, can also be seen within Gothic literature and the themes that are integral to pervasive narratives (for example, stories of heroes grappling with fear and dread on their quest to come to terms with mortality), both in terms of time as well as region. This can be observed in works like Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, which deals with the fear of the other, as well as common traditions in 19th century British Gothic canon where anti-Catholicism and anti-Semitism were common, or American Gothic

tradition, in which fears of religious zealots, homosexuals, and Black people were often discussed within literature (3). As a genre, Gothic is thus characterized by narratives that discuss not only societal fears, but personal ones as well. It concerns itself primarily with the forces that trouble people, the mechanisms of life that unsettle and bring fear into our minds. Gothic literature has us confront the forbidden, the disgusting, the frightening within the societies we inhabit and the lives we lead (5). The past never remains in the past, and bursts through into the present shaking the foundations of the 'contemporary with the supposedly outdated' (Killeen 28).

Southern Gothic is a distinctly regional form of Gothic, hailing from the American South. Sometimes considered an offshoot of the American Gothic tradition, the genre is strongly interwoven with Southern history. As a region, the South has historically been considered America's "other", viewed by outsiders as a backward, impoverished land with a legacy of trauma and lingering violence. This in turn informs the cultural output of the region, as seen in Southern Gothic and its preoccupation with the macabre, the grotesque and one's haunting past (Redding 79). Interestingly, the wider American cultural tradition's insistence to other the South, its people and its history, has been viewed as an unwillingness by the nation to come to terms with its collective past and the horrors and violence it has inflicted upon the groups it has oppressed. Washing one's hands of the legacy of slavery, for example, is much easier when that legacy is assigned to a particular region only. Imposing guilt onto the South serves to effectively alienate it in the face of shared responsibility for atrocities the entire country was complicit in (80). This cultural isolation has since morphed into a part of Southern Gothic tradition, feeding it with narratives of desolation and abandonment, both personal and communal. While classical Gothic literature is concerned with the dark, haunting and the supernatural, Southern Gothic often strips those elements down to a distinctly human level, opting to draw fear not from vampires, ghosts and werewolves, but from the deplorable nature of humanity itself. People are rendered grotesque by their obsessions and passion, by the things they yearn for and the things they cannot let go. In Southern Gothic tradition, being human is the greatest horror of all (Bailey 269). The genre is preoccupied with understanding the nature of being human, the impact that trauma and the past have on the present, the manner in which family, blood, community and religion shape the ways in which people grow up. It asks the question: what is home? What compels one to speak of it? Thus, Southern Gothic is defined as a literary genre by narratives that delve into human nature and the aspects of it that terrify us (272).

2.2 Key Themes

As discussed in part 2.1, Southern Gothic is a subgenre of Gothic literature that discusses many of the same motifs. With a distinct regional identity, however, comes the burden of unique worries from which the genre's tradition pulls its themes. The U.S Census Bureau marks the American South, where *Preacher's Daughter* takes place, as a region in the southeastern United States that is bordered to the north by the Northeastern and Midwestern regions, and to the west by the Mountain and Pacific Western regions. Within the South itself lie 17 states: Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia and West Virginia. The South is a region that has historically been the stage for political, societal, religious and financial strife. From the Trans-Atlantic Slave trade and Confederate defeat during the American Civil war, to the stark decline of the coal mining industry that left Appalachia destitute in the 20th century, the region has seen its share of difficulties. Expectedly, these issues have also found their way into Southern literature, particularly into that belonging to Southern Gothic tradition.

The imprint of America's past with religious Puritanism is etched deep into the foundation of many denominations of the Christian faith. While the Gulf coast has historically been mostly Catholic since settlers founded towns and cities there, especially the city of New Orleans in Louisiana, many communities further inland are Southern Baptist and Southern Methodist (Ayers 181). The South is seen as a region that developed a distinct spiritual identity as a result of both the Antebellum era with its brutal treatment of enslaved people, as well as the horrors of the American Civil War and its aftermath. Subsequently, the Southern people considered themselves strong for rising out of the ashes of the 19th century and its perils, and rebuilding a region torn to shreds by war and discord (Wilson 1). Since then, most Protestant churches in the South have grown to coexist within the same communities, with many churchgoers visiting more than one church on a regular basis (Ayers 185). With religion being such a large part of the foundation onto which community is built in the South, individuals who stray away from the institution are often ostracized by most of their community. The subsequent isolation is one of the things that is dealt with in Southern Gothic works in regard to religion. Feverish devotion to a higher power at the expense of oneself, one's desires and sometimes one's body or life, serves to demonstrate how obsession and unchecked zealousness morph into forces of destruction. Additionally, narratives about the suffocating nature of religion and its rules as obstacles to a fulfilling life are also

commonplace. Individuals may be trapped in the vice grip of religion against their will, unable to shed the doctrine they have been taught since they were children. With this, come haunting reminders of hellfire, fate and eternal damnation that loom menacingly over the people's lives (Lloyd-Smith 70). Religion can be something that saves, but to many it is a birthright of burden. Characters in Southern Gothic works often grapple with religious trauma and a growing distrust of the church, whilst simultaneously leaning on faith and religious teachings to overcome strife in their lives. A double-edged sword of terror, with religion there is much to gain, and much to lose.

The Gothic in the South holds history in an important position. One of the central and recurring themes of the genre is the haunting of the past. Oftentimes characters in Southern Gothic works grapple with past trauma, either in the form of abuse and anguished memories, specters that haunt the protagonist and the narrative. Intertwined with this is often the notion of the lasting significance of an old and familiar place, as well as the weight of familial heritage (Kaus 84). Oftentimes Southern culture is concerned with how the contemporary world is colored by the world of the past, and how it is disturbed by its continued, spectral presence. In that sense, the traditional narratives of ghostly hauntings that are littered throughout classical Gothic works, are mirrored in Southern Gothic through the haunting of the past. The traumas of history linger in the Southern collective consciousness, emerging as distinctive quirks in regional culture and life (Redding 81). Embedded in the notion of the past is the idea of place and belonging. The places people occupy, both geographical and social, determine the manner in which they experience the echoes of the past. If we think of the history of slavery, for example, we can see that for a plantation owner and an enslaved individual, the sight of crop fields means very different things: to the former, it represents profit and wealth, to the latter it is hard work and exploitation. Similarly, to a white observer a plantation house restored from the Antebellum South is just a grand old building attached to some land, but for a Black observer it is a site of generational pain and torture (Inscoe 6).

The exploration of the grotesque is perhaps the theme most often accredited to Southern Gothic. In literary tradition, the *grotesque* is 'incongruous or inappropriate to a shocking degree' as well as consisting of 'comically distorted figures, creatures, or images' (Edwards and Graulund 15). Visceral and poignant in nature, the term brings to mind imagery of misshapen fleshy amalgamations of David Cronenberg's films, where people and animals morph into disgusting, visually disturbing creatures before the watcher's eyes. In the Southern Gothic

tradition, however, the grotesque refers not only to monsters, but to incongruous and abnormal situations, feelings objects and places (Bailey 270). It often includes notions of perversion, sexual deviance, freakishness and extremity, imbuing the narrative with feelings of distress, panic and helplessness (Redding 82). Interestingly, the notion of "revolting femininity" is also included under the umbrella of the grotesque. Not because being a woman is inherently bad, but because being a woman in the wrong way is frowned upon. Performing femininity in a manner not approved by the rigid framework of the patriarchy is grotesque, especially during times in the past when a woman's place in the world was even more policed than today. A woman who is tall is not simply big, but a hulking "giantess" like in Carson McCuller's 1943 novel *The Ballad of the Sad Café*. Lacking traditionally feminine features, a woman transforms from a person into a freakish monster in the eyes of the beholder and is thus pushed from the acceptable to the grotesque (Whatling 91).

2.3 Southern Gothic Perspectives in Literature

One of the most prolific writers in the Southern Gothic genre, Cormac McCarthy is known for his gripping, horror-drenched and heavily allegorical style within his novels, along with commentary rooted in the region's history and pervasive social ills. These include issues such as slavery, racism, poverty, and industrialization (Frye 41). A heavy emphasis on the "southern grotesque" is a prominent aspect of McCarthy's writing as well. The depiction of brutal acts of violence, sexual deviance and exaggerated physical deformities for objects and people alike serves to highlight the bleak atmosphere and sullen tone present in Southern Gothic works. Similarly, another prominent Southern Gothic author Flannery O'Connor incorporated the grotesque into her writings, often depicting horribly detailed, frightening accounts of violence in her writing, from self-mutilation to brutal murder (Redding 82).

In addition to classic authors like McCarthy, Faulkner and O'Connor, it is also important to consider when it comes to Southern Gothic literary canon, the emergence of narratives written from perspectives that have been historically underrepresented. These include texts written by women, Black and Indigenous writers, and writers of color. Thematically, authors like Toni Morrison, Louise Erdrich and Maxine Hong Kingston explore many of the genre's staple issues whilst providing a fresh perspective to Southern Gothic. For example, Morrison brings her own contribution to the Southern experience in her 1987 work *Beloved*, as told by Black Southerners during the era of slavery. True to form, the novel tells the story of a house in which

former slaves reside, but that is haunted by the ghost of a Black child who died there (Crow 146). As a Southern Gothic work, *Beloved* is able to expertly articulate the cultural anxiety that existed in the immediate aftermath of slavery, boring into and challenging the South's history with racial violence and bringing the region to its figurative knees in front of its sordid past. Through the novel, Morrison is able to demonstrate Southern Gothic's evergreen relevance when it comes to contemporary critical debates (Walsh 23).

3. ANALYSIS OF SOUTHERN GOTHIC ELEMENTS IN *PREACHER'S DAUGHTER*

Returning to the crux of this thesis, we must focus on analyzing what specific elements in *Preacher's Daughter* are fixtures of Southern Gothic fiction. In addition to this, we will draw parallels to other works within the Southern Gothic literary canon. Upon reviewing all the evidence, we can then uncover the ways in which *Preacher's Daughter* is a distinctly Southern Gothic work.

3.1 The Story

Preacher's Daughter is set in 1990s Alabama, and follows a girl named Ethel Cain, who is our protagonist. Throughout the events of the narrative, which spans the entire length of the 1 hour 15-minute album, the listener is told the story of Ethel as she endures childhood abuse, runs away from home, and subsequently becomes entangled with two men who alter the course of her life each in their own way. Towards the end of the story, she is murdered by her second boyfriend, Isaiah, who deposits her body in a freezer and cannibalizes her. In the final two songs of the album, "Sun Bleached Flies" and "Strangers", Ethel speaks to the listener from the afterlife, lamenting her brutal demise and accepting death as her body is being devoured.

The Southern Gothic themes present in *Preacher's Daughter* are evident in the manner in which the album deals with themes of religion, trauma, the grotesque, highlighting each as Ethel recounts her experiences growing up in the South. In "American Teenager" and "Thoroughfare" she yearns for independence, love and meaning, but struggles to find her fill in religion and family. Ethel feels shackled by her history and the ways in which she is still tethered to her family and their ways even after leaving. In addition, tracks like "Gibson Girl" and "Hard Times" explore themes of sexuality, intertwined with circumstances of abuse and coercion, easing the story into a bleaker atmosphere. The tension culminates in "Ptolemaea" where the macabre and grotesque come into play as Ethel meets her grisly end at the hands of her boyfriend, dying violently.

3.2 Religion

The community Ethel Cain is raised in is heavily steeped in Southern Baptist tradition. Ethel grows up as the daughter of a preacher and attends service regularly. Despite being an active member of her congregation, as Ethel grows older, she begins to lose faith in religion, God and the institution she has been raised to hold dear since she was born. In the third track on *Preacher's Daughter,* "American Teenager", Ethel speaks about her struggles with faith:

> A life full of whiskey but I always deliver
>
> Jesus, if you're listening, let me handle my liquor
>
> And Jesus, if You're there
>
> Why do I feel alone in this room with You? (verse 2)

Ethel is asking if there is anyone out there who can hear her anguished request for help, and if they can, why does she feel alone. Therein lies the familiar theme of alienation upon failing to believe wholeheartedly and conform to the congregation's expectations. Even though Ethel is struggling with her connection to the divine, she goes through the motions of church life, "delivering" despite her substance abuse issues and subsequent inebriation during service. Interestingly, this drawing of parallels between intoxication and religion is not unheard of in Southern Gothic tradition. Flannery O'Connor likens drinking to a form of Gothic possession in her novel *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960), where surrendering to the vice of alcohol coincides with a metaphorical fall from grace, serving to separate the individual from the divine (Banco 63). Although initially viewed in a negative light, eventually the consumption of liquor brings the character of Mason Tawater to the "White Logic" of alcohol, a kind of 'spiritual malaise' and feeling of worthlessness brought on by the intoxicative properties of alcohol, which then allows him to receive divine revelation unlike any other. Relating this to Ethel's condition, she, too, is seeking connection with the divine while under the influence of alcohol, however improper it may be, indeed experiencing a slow metaphorical severing between herself and God.

In "Sun Bleached Flies", the twelfth track on the album, Ethel talks about missing church and the feeling it used to bring her:

What I wouldn't give to be in Church this Sunday

Listening to the choir, so heartfelt, all singing

God loves you, but not enough to save you

So, baby girl, good luck taking care of yourself (verse 2)

Again, she brings up the feelings of isolation that were present in the past as well. She laments her relationship to the divine, musing that God will not offer salvation even if one believes. There is an air of hopelessness and coming tragedy looming in lines three and four of the quote, especially if one imagines the church choir singing these lines to Ethel during service. It begs the question: is this Ethel's community telling her she does not belong? Are they saying she has no one but herself to rely on in life? Certainly not the congregation. Certainly not God. In a way, the prophecy has already come true, as at this point in the story of *Preacher's Daughter,* Ethel is already dead and is reminiscing about her time at home. God did indeed not save her. She did in fact have to take care of herself, and unfortunately, she did not make it very long, failing to prosper on her own.

In the American South, religion has long been a source of unity and hegemony for people who have otherwise been divided for centuries (Wilson 239). Ostracization from one's religious community, either by force or by one's own actions, often results in an individual being rejected by their entire community, including family and friends. In Southern Gothic tradition, alienation from the divine is akin to alienation from the self, casting an individual adrift and without anything to lean on during times of strife. Zealous commitment to God and faith, even at the expense of one's own health and even life is encouraged, rendering a person's human needs as second place. For Ethel, this means her aforementioned desire for independence, love and freedom do not matter as much as her devotion to religion. This, too, is in keeping with traditional themes of Southern Gothic, as vehement, obsessive preoccupations are commonplace within the prevalent narratives of the genre. The Christian religion (and organized religion in general) is a movement rife with opportunity for the kind of feverish, overzealous devotion whose intensity fits perfectly in Southern Gothic stories (Bailey 271).

3.3 Family, Past Trauma and History

Throughout *Preacher's Daughter*, the themes of family, history and past trauma are strongly interlinked. Family to Ethel is both something she is desperate to run away from, as we see her accomplish in "Thoroughfare", as well as being something she cannot shed. Much like the past and one's history, family is something Ethel cannot leave behind no matter how hard she tries. In the song, she sings:

> Jesus can always reject his father
>
> But he cannot escape his mother's blood
>
> He'll scream and try to wash it off of his fingers
>
> But he'll never escape what he's made up of (verse 1)

The notion of family runs parallel to religious imagery as Ethel explains how God's son can reject his father but not his mother. Not only does it highlight the somewhat morbid nature of family dynamics in their rigidity, but it also comments on the frightening experience of being human. In Biblical canon Jesus is born of his human mother, the Virgin Mary, but his father is divine. For all his celestial legacy, he is still human, and to be human is to be flesh and blood. To be flesh and blood is to be weak.

Interestingly, the idea of being human and being made up of such earthly constructs as muscle and sinew evokes another kind of non-celestial weakness: vulnerability. God is ever present, omniscient and all-powerful. Humans are not. God is abstract. Humans are material. The Southern Gothic notion of forgoing monsters of myth, such as vampires, werewolves and eldritch beasts, in favor of drawing horror and dread from everyday experiences rings true here as well. In *Preacher's Daughter,* the Gothic horror comes from being human. It comes from being small and brittle, and too weak to shed the ghosts of the past. This motif is introduced in "Family Tree (Intro)" when Ethel says:

> The fates already fucked me sideways
>
> Swinging by my neck from the family tree (chorus)

Ethel evokes the imagery of the traditional notion of a family tree, which in turn brings to mind the lineage she comes from, as well as a literal tree from which she hangs by a noose. This metaphor illustrates her inability to escape her family's legacy and the fact that she feels resigned to the unavoidable fate of ending up like those who came before her. Her path has been decided for her, and she has no agency in deciding the course of her life. Additionally, employing violent imagery in saying she is "swinging by [her] neck from the family tree" helps to cement the Gothic atmosphere "Family Tree (Intro)" aims to build straight from the beginning of the album. If we consider the act of being hanged in a more physical sense, having a suffocating noose tied around the neck, the poignancy of Ethel's sentiments about feeling stifled by her family become even more apparent. She is doomed by the legacy of pain and trouble that has been thrust upon her, destined to a life of misery far before she was even born. The same theme of inherited trauma resurfaces again in "Ptolemaea":

> Blessed be the Daughters of Cain, bound to suffering eternal through the sins of their fathers committed long before their conception (outro)

The Daughters of Cain, the children of Ethel's family, inherit the sins of their parents and their grandparents' past, and are forced to suffer because of them in the lives they lead in the present. This is in accordance with the old Puritan notion of the Original Sin, an idea which is present in Southern Gothic interpretations of religion and its role in life and one's personhood, and which argues that humans are inherently sinful on account of the Sin they committed in the eternal paradise of Eden, and that the world is already 'fallen', with only a select few being able to find true salvation in God again, thus securing their place in the Heavenly Kingdom once more (Lloyd-Smith 73).

Along with sins of the past, Ethel is also dealing with transgressions her family has committed in this life. In the song "Hard Times" Ethel sings about her tumultuous youth, where she faced childhood sexual abuse at the hands of her father:

> In the corner
>
> On my birthday
>
> You watched me

Dancing right there in the grass

I was too young

To notice

That some types of love could be bad (verse 2)

Ethel recounts her memories of being young, lamenting that because of her youth, she was not able to discern that the way her father was looking at her was untoward. In her musings, there is also an ever-present gloom hanging over occasions that would otherwise be considered joyous. A child's birthday party contrasted with the nefarious edge of lustful thoughts about one's daughter is abhorrent enough on its own, but the true extent of the tragedy is revisited when Ethel explains how what transpired between her and her father still haunts her in the present:

I'm tired of you, still tied to me

(Bleeding whenever you want)

Too tired to move, too tired to leave (outro)

Southern Gothic literature is often preoccupied with ideas of familial violence as sexual abuse, with those elements being tied to a deep sense of both individual and communal tragedy (Bailey, 271). Coupled with the fact that Ethel describes her inability to let go, both literally and metaphorically, of the abuse she experienced, "Hard Times" is an elegy to an unburdened youth, and a farewell to innocence. As Bailey (271) writes, the Southern Gothic genre deals with personal trauma, and the overwhelming need to both understand and explain it. This often preoccupies itself with narratives precisely like that of *Preacher's Daughter,* where characters recount their trauma to the reader (or listener, in this case), embarking on a journey of life and survival, the culmination of which is often violent catharsis.

3.4 The Grotesque, The Macabre and Sexual Deviance

Preacher's Daughter is a work that does not shy away from mature, grisly themes. As a Southern Gothic album, it is not surprising that the story contains references to subjects commonly thought

of as obscene. The album's foray into the grotesque and the macabre is some of the most poignant material it has to offer that is in keeping with Southern Gothic tradition.

In the eighth track of *Preacher's Daughter,* "Gibson Girl", Ethel sings about being introduced to nightlife by Isaiah, starting to dance at strip clubs for money:

> Black leather and dark glasses
>
> Pouring another while I shake my ass
>
> He's cold-blooded so it takes more time to bleed
>
> Obsession with the money, addicted to the drugs
>
> Says he's in love with my body, that's why he's fucking it up (pre-chorus)

The traditionally puritan notions about human sexuality, purity, and chastity that Ethel's conservative and religious community holds dear are contrasted with an edge of rebellion in Ethel's current line of work. In doing sex work, she is seemingly rejecting the archaic notions of Christian purity that were instilled in her and her peers growing up. Failing to perform femininity in a traditional way, however, a way that is chaste and modest, renders her transformation near grotesque within the confines of a Southern Gothic narrative (Whatling 94). There is melancholy in the moment, too, as we learn that this (rather abrupt) change in her ambitions is largely being fueled by Ethel's boyfriend, not herself. An imbalance of power rears its head, and the question of possible coercion and abuse is brought into the fold. Adjacent to the Southern Gothic themes of challenging religious tradition and ponderings of human sexuality, perversion and deviancy as they relate to instances of mistreatment or abuse, there are also echoes of Female Gothic in the song. Predominantly found in British literature written by women, Female Gothic typically identifies a female Gothic heroine (in this case, Ethel Cain), who throughout the events of the narrative, faces confinement of some kind, perhaps within tradition, family or community, and violation, both physical and emotional (Bailey 273). This is also true for William Faulkner's works, where his Gothic female characters endure circumstances that often involve abuse, confinement and restriction of autonomy and the self (Donaldson 567). We see these Southern Gothic elements in Ethel's story as well, especially in "Gibson Girl", where she is tethered to her boyfriend and is subject to his will.

Isaiah mistreats her, abusing her physically and emotionally while insisting he is doing it out of love for her.

In the next track on *Preacher's Daughter,* "Ptolemaea", Ethel dives headfirst into the macabre:

I am no good nor evil, simply I am, and I have come to take what is mine

I was there in the dark when you spilled your first blood

I am here now as you run from me still

Run then, child

You can't hide from me forever (outro)

Here, Ethel is dying, and Death (capitalized for personification) is speaking to her. It tells her that although her wish is to evade it, death cannot be escaped. We see the influence of storytelling, that is, narratives dealing with death and people's relationship with death, their fear of it, and its inescapability. The notion that Death has been watching Ethel her whole life, waiting to claim her once her time finally comes, is in keeping with macabre themes, especially that of death's gruesome inevitability. In Southern Gothic tradition, discussions of death are often accompanied with ghostly apparitions and haunted figures, especially of those who have been wronged during life (Kaus 85). Usually, these are people who have been subjected to abuse, exploitation and gross mistreatment. The same is true for Ethel, as she dies violently at the hands of someone who has taken advantage of her, after a lifetime of enduring abuse and mistreatment from her father and members of her community. After those ordeals, Ethel becomes a ghost, a specter in her own story, as she moves on from one life to the next.

"Strangers" is the final track of *Preacher's Daughter* and serves as the definitive ending to Ethel Cain's story. In it, she is speaking to the listener from the afterlife while her body lies frozen in her boyfriend's basement, awaiting his devouring of her:

In your basement, I grow cold

Thinking back to what I was always told

"Don't talk to strangers or you might fall in love"

Freezer bride, your sweet divine

You devour like smoked bovine hide

How funny, I never considered myself tough (verse 1)

The grotesque as seen in Gothic literary tradition is often paired with violent, abhorrent imagery that disgusts, revolts and nauseates. In his 2006 novel *The Road,* Cormac McCarthy presents the reader with a human pantry full of cowering, hiding people, intended to be eaten. The act of cannibalism between humans blurs the boundaries of what is considered moral, just and correct, as well as inviting the question of how much, or rather what kind of violence makes us nonhuman (Liénard-Yeterian 149). It is as much a question of abject violence as it is of the uncanny (150). In addition to that, perhaps more than anything else, it is shocking. Most humans consume animal meat in varying quantities throughout their lives, and it is socially acceptable to butcher, prepare and eat bovine shuck, for example. A human eating another human, however, is near baffling as an act. The mere idea of cannibalism is stomach-turning to most people. Murdering another person is already considered horrible, because it means a life has been taken, but eating them afterwards is even worse. It means stripping a human of their personhood and reducing them to cattle, a mere commodity to be consumed and not a person with dignity.

Some narratives, such as Bones and All (2022), portray cannibalism as the ultimate act of love, showing a character devouring another's flesh because they are so entwined, so devoted that there is nothing else left to do but consume them. This is not the case in *Preacher's Daughter,* however. Isaiah does not eat Ethel because he loves her, he does it to own her. This is an important distinction to make, as the nefarious overtones of Ethel's cannibalizing are integral to understanding the tone her story inhabits in the final moments of her life, and beyond. Isaiah's desecration of her body is a final bid to exert control over her. Even in death, she cannot attain the love she wants.

4. CONCLUSION

Ethel Cain's *Preacher's Daughter* is a distinctly Southern Gothic work of fiction, not only in its themes and motifs, but in its overall tone and presentation. From discussing the role of religion, family, personal history and past trauma in the overall narrative, to paying homage to staples in the genre, the album weaves apropos imagery into its haunting narrative in a manner that is not so dissimilar to its predecessors, such as the works of authors like Flannery O'Connor, William Faulkner and Cormac McCarthy.

The Southern Gothic themes present in *Preacher's Daughter* are evident in the manner in which the album deals with themes of religion, trauma, the grotesque, highlighting each as Ethel recounts her experiences growing up in the South. In "American Teenager" and "Thoroughfare" she yearns for independence, love and meaning, but struggles to find her fill in religion and family. Ethel feels shackled by her history and the ways in which she is still tethered to her family and their ways even after leaving. In addition, tracks like "Gibson Girl" and "Hard Times" explore themes of sexuality, intertwined with circumstances of abuse and coercion, easing the story into a bleaker atmosphere. The tension culminates in "Ptolemaea" where the macabre and grotesque come into play as Ethel meets her grisly end at the hands of her boyfriend, dying violently. Ethel is doomed by the sins of her forefathers before she is even born and barely gets to reclaim any sense of personal freedom before she is sucked into the orbit of another abuser who takes advantage of her, ultimately leading her to her death, and the brutal desecration of her remains.

A tragic story in every sense of the word, *Preacher's Daughter* embodies the hallmarks of the Southern Gothic genre, weaving classic Gothic elements of fear and dread with distinctly Southern Gothic influences, blending zealous religion and fear of God, small conservative communities, and one's desire for freedom and connection, with a sinister, looming threat of calamity. Despite being the protagonist of *Preacher's Daughter,* Ethel Cain is not some larger-than-life heroine of classical epics. She is a girl who has human wants, fears, and hopes, and that is precisely why the album succeeds as a work of Southern Gothic fiction. Ultimately, the genre comes down to deeply personal and human narratives, and what is Ethel by the end of the album, but a girl calling out to Mama, saying "I love you."

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