“God, what frightful, ancient terrors there are on this continent fools call ‘young’!”

America has a Gothic tradition all its own, far removed from the vaulting cathedral arches, crumbling castles and shuttered-turreted manor houses of European Gothic. A rural Gothic; a Gothic of the plains and wheatfields, of the hills and backwoods; a Gothic that concerns itself less with degenerate aristocracy than with equally degenerate plain folks. A gothic immortalised by Grant Wood in his oft-referenced, oft-parodied 1930 painting: AMERICAN GOTHIC. It is evident in the weird, wry fantasies of Charles Finney and the shambling, darkness-dwelling horrors of Howard Phillips Lovecraft, it defines the dark carnival of Ray Bradbury’s smalltown Illinois and casts its shadow over Stephen King’s Castle Rock, Maine. It is evident, too, in the God-cursed, spiritually-hungry backwoods antiheroes of Flannery O’Connor, the florid dialogue, lurid melodramatics, and sudden brutal emotional and physical violence of Tennessee Williams, the ornately-cadenced, psychologically troubled stream of consciousness of William Faulkner, the spiritually isolated freaks and misfits of Carson McCullers, the deadpan grotesquery of Harry Crews, the stark savagery of Cormac McCarthy.

In in some respects, it could be argued, there are two broad traditions of American Gothic. There is a popular tradition, more concerned with the fantastic, the strange, and the supernatural, spawned in the pulps and continued and developed by genre writers, and there is a more literary tradition, particularly in the South, more concerned with the psychological, the sexual, and the spiritual. Of course, sometimes it is difficult to differentiate, because both concern themselves equally with the freakish, the grotesque, the macabre, both focus on extremes of emotion and experience.

And both can trace their origins back to Edgar Allan Poe.

Poe is the father of American Gothic. He was the first to import the European Gothic sensibility into his native country; though with a few exceptions he does not really ground his stories in an American landscape - indeed, he is as likely to set his tales in some fantastic version of Europe, or further afield. But once that sensibility was transplanted to American soil, it soon took hold, and Poe’s influence echoes down the years. It can be seen most directly in authors working in the field of the fantastic. Thus, Charles Finney draws on Poe’s dark, bitter sense of whimsy in his phantasmagorical allegories; the escalating sense of paranoid hysteria that characterises so many of Poe’s better tales finds its apotheosis in Lovecraft’s overwrought existential terrors; both Bradbury and King have paid explicit homage to Poe, Bradbury in his short story “Usher II” in THE ILLUSTRATED MAN, and King in the novella DOLAN’S CADILLAC, which is essentially a reworking of “The Cask of Amontillado”.

But Poe’s indirect influence is everywhere. His focus on extreme, grotesque situations and abnormal states of mind pretty much set the agenda for American Gothic as a whole.

Edgar Allan Poe was born in Boston, and spent some of the early part of his life in the UK, but he lived a large part of his life in Virginia, and died in Baltimore, which means that, from the very start, American Gothic has a strong connection to the South. And it is in the South that the Gothic tradition really flowers and flourishes. This is understandable enough. The South, with its grand, yet decaying antebellum houses, its wealthy plantation-owning families fallen on increasingly hard times yet still striving to mirror the manners of the “Old World” back in Europe, its dark and bloody legacy of slavery, racism and racial guilt, its bitter and humiliating defeat in the Civil War, offers the perfect landscape - both physical and psychological - for feverish and full-blooded Gothic storytelling.

William Faulkner seems to have recognised this from the start. Born in Mississippi, he grew up listening to grand tales of the Old South, Slavery, the Civil War and his war hero Great-Grandfather, and these found their way into his own narratives in various forms. A modernist, heavily influenced by the linguistic and narrative experiments of James Joyce, Faulkner strove to incorporate the language and cadences of the South into stream-of-consciousness psycho-dramas. He would eventually win the Nobel Prize for literature, and did more than any other writer to define the more literary form of Southern Gothic. But as a struggling writer, he would balance his more experimental works with what he saw as more commercial "pot-boilers", such as the lurid and still-shocking SANCTUARY (1931), with its gang of degenerate bootlegger rapists and killers, which served as the template for James Hadley Chase's infamous exploitation novel NO ORCHIDS FOR MISS BLANDISH, and anticipates the mood and tone of much later Southern Gothic fiction, from Flannery O'Connor's short stories to Davis Grubb's THE NIGHT OF THE HUNTER (1953), to the novels of Harry Crews and Cormac McCarthy. But arguably Faulkner's most celebrated piece of Southern Gothic is a short story, "A Rose For Emily" (1930). A droll, subtly-told tale of an old Southern family gone to seed and a crazed, rejected spinster who refuses to let go of the past, it offers a disturbing twist on Dickens' Miss Haversham, and recalls some of the more unsettling gothic narratives of Poe or the Irish author J. Sheridan Le Fanu. Faulkner the restless literary experimenter may well have been paying mischievous homage to his Gothic literary forebears, both American and European, but he was also establishing a new template in terms of style and approach. The story has a wry, folksy, colloquial tone all its own, all the more discomforting for its understatement, and lack of melodramatics, and lingers long afterwards in the mind. You can read it here: http://xroads.virginia.edu/~drbr/wf_rose.html.

The pulp writers, too, seem to have realised very quickly that the South was an ideal location for more Gothic narratives. Four years after Faulkner's chilling short story, Robert E. Howard would write what Stephen King has described as "one of the finest horror stories of [the] century", the unpromisingly titled "Pigeons From Hell". Where the horror in Faulkner's tale is underplayed, Howard is more explicit. This one has the lot: abandoned, rotting antebellum houses, poisonous snakes, marauding wolves, gory murder, voodoo, a grand and cursed old family with an evil history, the horrible legacy of slavery, a grisly, ironic, poetically just revenge. It is a lurid tale, coarse and unsubtle in some respects, certainly lacking the sophistication of Faulkner, but nevertheless equally effective and influential in redefining established European Gothic tropes for an American landscape.

Between them, "A Rose For Emily" and "Pigeons From Hell" perhaps define the parameters, establish the style and mood. American Gothic, be it Southern or otherwise, would ever after take its literary cues from both, balancing literary sophistication against the lurid, the grotesque, and the melodramatic. Historical fact colliding with myth and legend, the fantastic and the supernatural. Real landscapes populated by grotesques with disturbed and monstrous intentions and motivations, by outsiders in need of spiritual or emotional justification and a sense of belonging.

Cormac McCarthy's CHILD OF GOD (1973) fall squarely into this wild-eyed literary tradition. It tells the story of one Lester Ballard, an isolated, increasingly unhinged and dangerous backwoodsman, initially and ironically described as "A child of God, much like yourself, perhaps." Ballard is latest in a long line of alienated, demented seekers after some kind of personal truth or self-created destiny, from the perpetually-defiant Hazel Motes, founder of the Church Without Christ, in Flannery O'Connor's WISE BLOOD (1949), to the psychopathic preacher Harry Powell in Davis Grubb's NIGHT OF THE HUNTER, with a twisted sermon on his lips and "love" and "hate" tattooed on the knuckles of his murderous

hands. But he is by far the most extreme. Supposedly inspired by a real killer who haunted Sevier County Tennessee in the early part of the 20th Century, Ballard's story also calls to mind that of the infamous necrophiliac and serial killer Ed Gein, inspiration for another classic of American Gothic, Robert Bloch's PSYCHO, and a reminder that the grotesqueries of fiction can often seem comparatively tame in comparison with grim reality. Told in terse, objective, impressionistic style, focusing as much on landscape and changing seasons as on Ballard's descent into murderous insanity, refusing to ever spell anything out or state the obvious, it has a dark, grim, deadpan wit that will be familiar to anyone who has seen the recent film version of NO COUNTRY FOR OLD MEN, flashes of shocking violence and understated cruelty, a clear-eyed, unsentimental compassion, and a bleak and merciless vision of human existence.

No wonder James Franco's film version has provoked such discomfort and unease among critics and distributors alike. Defiantly non-mainstream, yet too grim and bloody for the art house circuit, it might have been in danger of falling between the cracks, slinking out, unheralded, straight to DVD and BluRay. But here at Grimm Central, we are partial to a bit of Southern Gothic, the bloodier and bleaker the better. So when the opportunity arose to present the UK premiere of Franco's film, we grabbed it with both hands and ran with it. This will be your only chance to see the film on the big screen, to get steeped in the blood and lose yourselves entirely in those rich, strange, disturbing vistas of backwoods brutality and spiritual and psychosexual torment.

What more incentive could you need than that? Cheap drinks? Well, hell, now, good people, we got that all covered, too. So now you've no excuse at all.