

“Indifference, Bobbie Gentry and Tallahatchie – Gothic Fascination for Decayed, Neglected and Abandoned Spans”

[PLEASE NOTE: If another researcher has proposed this topic, I will defer or offer to co-present....I just think that this subject (early country rock song about the American south, neglect and abandonment as applied to individuals and bridges) deserves a place within the Conference program.

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Abstract

Southern Gothic is a sub-genre of gothic art and literature that usually combines flawed or eccentric characters, decayed or derelict settings, and sinister events stemming from alienation, poverty, violence or stifling social structure. Just as English Gothic authors employed gloomy castles or ruined abbeys as settings for their stories, American authors (and song writers) used dusty small towns, overgrown trailer parks, faded industrial buildings and dilapidated bridges.

Following the American Civil War, southern society adopted a façade of gentility and social mores to hide the bitterness and meanness of the Jim Crow reconstructionist period. Among the themes of Southern Gothic fiction are explorations of passion, despair and degradation, and reflections about an idyllic past, overlaid by social, familial and racial denials of modern-day realism. From a frayed and often dreary landscape, writers and artists try to express the contradictions they see in society, hemmed in with bad memories and worse habits, while holding onto an impossible-to-attain ideal.

Using images from neglected or abandoned bridges – along with an “explication de texte” of Roberta Lee Streeter’s (Bobbie Gentry’s) lyrics from *Ode to Billy Joe* – this paper and presentation will attempt to depict the role of bridges as surrogates for mysterious castles or religious buildings in the quest for atmosphere and sensuality. Gothic alliterations not only give the writer and artist the means to conjure tension and suspense, they help convey melodrama and morbidity as foundations for layered and partially obscured social critique. Gentry’s song had many elements of a Faulknerian novel: indifference, suicide, possibly the child of an interracial couple, a clergyman who knew some secrets or was complicit himself, and an old country bridge instead of a decomposing plantation house. The mood of an abandoned bridge portrays – as De Vore has written about Gothic settings – the deterioration of a world where there was once enormous hope, utility and opportunity for circulation.