



Article Info/Makale Bilgisi

✓Received/Geliş: 03.10.2024 ✓Accepted/Kabul: 14.04.2025

DOI: 10.30794/pausbed.1560767

Research Article/Araştırma Makalesi

Işık, O. (2025). "The Representation of Violence in Tom Franklin's *Poachers*", *Pamukkale University Journal of Social Sciences Institute*, issue 69, pp. 281-287.

## THE REPRESENTATION OF VIOLENCE IN TOM FRANKLIN'S *POACHERS*

Onur IŞIK\*

### Abstract

Tom Franklin's novella *Poachers* deals with the themes of violence, poverty, and loneliness, which are the basic elements of Southern Gothic literature. The work is a complex narrative of violence that takes place in the American South and focuses on the darker aspects of human nature. The story of the main characters, Kirxy and the Gates brothers, reveals the physical and psychological effects of violence. Franklin draws the reader into the violent world of the characters by intertwining nature descriptions with violence. Regional elements of Southern culture and social exclusion reinforce the characters' tendency towards violence. In addition, personal reasons such as war traumas are among the reasons for the characters' violence. *Poachers* reveals the human tendency towards evil and deeply examines the individual and social dimensions of violence. The purpose of this article is to exhibit Franklin's representation of violence in *Poachers* and analyze its effects on the characters.

**Keywords:** *Southern Gothic, Violence, Social Exclusion, Trauma, Tom Franklin.*

## TOM FRANKLIN'İN *POACHERS* ADLI ESERİNDE ŞİDDETİN TEMSİLİ

### Öz

Tom Franklin'in *Poachers* adlı novellası, Güney Gotik edebiyatının temel unsurları olan şiddet, yoksulluk ve yalnızlık temalarını ele alır. Eser, Amerika'nın güney bölgesinde geçen ve insan doğasının karanlık yönlerine odaklanan karmaşık bir şiddet anlatısıdır. Baş karakter Kirxy ve Gates kardeşlerin hikayesi, şiddetin fiziksel ve psikolojik etkilerini ortaya koyar. Franklin, doğa betimlemeleriyle şiddeti iç içe geçirerek, okuru karakterlerin şiddet dolu dünyasına çeker. Güney kültürünün bölgesel unsurları ve toplumsal dışlanmışlık, karakterlerin şiddete olan eğilimlerini pekiştirir. Ayrıca, savaş travmaları gibi kişisel sebepler de karakterlerin şiddet uygulamalarının nedenlerinden biridir. *Poachers*, insanın kötülüğe olan yatkınlığını açığa çıkarırken, şiddetin bireysel ve toplumsal boyutlarını derinlemesine inceler. Bu makalenin amacı, Franklin'in *Poachers* eserindeki şiddet temsili sergilemek ve bunun karakterler üzerindeki etkilerini analiz etmektir.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** *Güney Gotiği, Şiddet, Toplumsal Dışlanmışlık, Travma, Tom Franklin.*

\*Asst. Prof. Dr., Tokat Gaziosmanpaşa University, Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Department of Western Languages and Literatures, TOKAT.  
e-mail: drisikonur@gmail.com (<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1294-5282>)

*Poachers*, published in 1999, is a novella that gives the title to Tom Franklin's collection, *Poachers: Stories*, a hard-boiled anthology that combines uncompromising violence and brutality with Southern grotesque imageries. The stories share common themes such as confinement, masculinity, the war between civilized and non-civilized worlds. The novella delves into the dark side of human nature through its potent use of Southern Gothic tropes of violence, poverty, and isolation. The importance of the setting is not to be disregarded in the least, especially as it influences the characters and incidents of the plot. Southern Gothic has a distinct place in American literature because of the way authors implement aspects of regional climate and culture into their narratives. However, probably the most striking part of this novella is its violent tone—expressed in Franklin's unflinchingly brutal scenes—and the consequences these encounters have on the characters. The aim of the present study is to foreground the psychological and physical violence in *Poachers* and critique the reasons why Franklin's complex, demanding novella employs such an aesthetic to tell a story about the human potential for evil.

The story begins with three boys, brothers Neil, Dan, and Kent Gates, who are caught poaching on a game warden's property. A mysterious, hazardous odyssey begins when they murder the warden. The two eldest Gates boys get killed, and the last one becomes blind after an assault by an unknown person. Franklin's narrative approach draws inspiration from the rich history of Southern oral storytelling, and his use of dialect and colloquialisms gives authenticity to his characters' voices, connecting them to a larger cultural context.

In order to examine the premise of *Poachers* in more depth, let us first review the principal characteristics of Southern Gothic literature. This school is distinguished not only by its eerie atmosphere but also by a tendency for exposing deeply rooted historical traumas of the American South. It can be said that the region's unsettling past is the sphere of interest for the Southern Gothic. Themes such as social decay, moral ambiguity, and violence are prominent in this genre. The American South's social and underlying psychological wounds are reflected via grotesque characters and environments. Bjerre notes as follows in the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia*:

Southern Gothic brings to light the extent to which the idyllic vision of the pastoral, agrarian South rests on massive repressions of the region's historical realities: slavery, racism, and patriarchy. Southern Gothic texts also mark a Freudian return of the repressed: the region's historical realities take concrete forms in the shape of ghosts that highlight all that has been unsaid in the official version of southern history. (2017: para.1)

This viewpoint highlights how Southern Gothic transforms historical trauma into spectral or grotesque shapes that confront readers with unsettling realities. The genre is known to foreground the violence and injustices of Southern history, reincarnating and regenerating this repressed past in the forms (or formlessness) of ghostlike characters and phantasmagoric landscapes. *Poachers* makes marvelous use of this aesthetic to portray the deep-seated trauma of the region that encompasses its finely wrought setting. *Poachers* can be seen as a microcosm of life in the South.

The location in question is the Alabama River delta. This area is known for poverty and a badly degraded environment. With the help of Tom Franklin's vivid descriptions, the reader enters an eerie atmosphere that evokes a strong sense of place. The novella focuses on a certain section of the rural, working-class community. All of the characters are in search of a belonging. However, the community does not show them any affection, leaving it to the reader to perhaps feel some degree of empathy. Rich descriptions introduce all the characters, their challenges, flaws and goals.

The Southern Gothic aesthetic is evident in Franklin's richly palpable Alabama River delta setting and in the violence that occurs there. As Burr and Hearn observe, "The wound and wounding in representation is that extra notch of violence that may seem much more violent than the physical attack with fists or head or feet or even weapons (that brings heavy bruising or internal bleeding)" (2008:10). In *Poachers*, the graphic descriptions of mutilation and injury serve to amplify the sense of brutality and horror, leaving a lasting impression on the reader. The visible wounds inflicted upon characters become symbolic of the pervasive violence that permeates the narrative. This situation highlights the destructive consequences of unchecked aggression and the profound impact it has on individuals and communities. Franklin is particularly adept at creating Southern Gothic imagery as it manifests in scenes of violent conduct and the aftermath. At the story's opening, for instance, the lifeless bodies of a fawn and a dog, shot and skinned, set a grotesque tone: "With the skins and heads gone and the dog's tail chopped off, they were difficult to tell apart" (Franklin, 2000:129).

Depictions of violence in *Poachers* are unfiltered and as realistic as Franklin can write them. Undeniably, violence is part of this rural lifestyle in the South, and the novella's atmosphere is built on Franklin's talent for interweaving scenes of violence with descriptions of nature. As the story progresses, violence gradually escalates, leading the characters to a point of no return:

The spotted hound broke free and sprang over the gunnel, slobber strung from its teeth, and the man most surprised by the game warden's shot seemed to be the game warden himself. His face drained of color as the noise echoed off the water and died in the bent black limbs and the cattails that bobbed in the current. The bullet had passed through the front dog's neck and smacked into the bank behind them, missing Dan by inches. The dog collapsed, and there was an instant of silence before the others, now loose, clattered overboard into the water, red-eyed tangled in their leashes, trying to swim. (Franklin, 2000:135)

This description highlights the uncanny timing and brutal nature of violence in *Poachers*. The graphic descriptions of the dog's death and the chaotic events that follow somehow draw the reader into the characters' violent world, creating unpredictability.

In his thesis, Bjerre notices the important role of masculinity and male bonding in scenes when the male characters' imagination wanders: "In several of the stories in *Poachers*, the male characters find escape from the complications of everyday life through acts of daydreaming. These dreams involve male bonding rituals such as hunting and fishing" (2008:270). Bjerre goes on to show that daydreaming is an important structural element in several stories in the collection. For the Gates brothers, the actual sport of fishing and hunting is a way of escaping the civilized world and returning to a lost hunter-gatherer masculine identity. Another scholar, Jackson Mills Smith, draws attention to masculinity as it fits all the routines authentic to the American South: "The subject matter within these stories is pertinent to both the physical and the cultural landscape throughout the region. Activities and concepts such as deer hunting, blue collar jobs, labor and leisure, tradition, storytelling, and notions of masculinity are often brought up throughout the collection" (2020:30-31). Indeed, there is only one female character who has a considerable role in the novella. Esther welcomes the Gates boys whenever they need shelter, food, drinks—and her body. The reader furthermore learns in the beginning of the story that the female members of the family are already dead. The mother of the Gates brothers dies while giving birth to their baby sister, who perishes along with her mother. The graveyard of these two is a sanctuary for the brothers. At different phases of the narrative, Kent, Dan and Neil are found there. After his death, the eldest brother is likewise buried in the family plot.

The narrative becomes even more complicated with the introduction of Frank David, a ghost-like character who symbolizes violent justice. His presence tips the plot into more of a legend than a story. The eerie description of retired game warden Frank David conjures more of a ruthless monster than an ordinary individual. Ironically, despite being an ex-poacher himself, David never shows mercy to poachers. Moreover, he is willing to mete out extrajudicial punishment in his obsessive, lonely tracking. He is motivated to kill just for the sake of killing when he takes charge of "cleansing" the woods. It is important we scrutinize his past when considering this character's propensity for violence:

Nobody knew where he came from, but Kirxy had heard he'd been orphaned as a baby in a fire and found half-starved in the swamp by a Cajun woman. She'd raised him on the slick red clay banks of the Tombigbee River, among lean black poachers and moonshiners. He didn't even know how old he was, people said. And they said he was the best poacher ever, the craftiest, the meanest. That he cut a drunk logger's throat in a juke joint knife fight one night. That he fled south and, underage, joined the marines in Mobile and wound up in Korea, the infantry, where because of his shooting ability and his stealth they made him a sniper. (Franklin, 2000: 149)

His notorious past is central in constructing the legend of Frank David. Throughout the novella he keeps his silence, which is a key characteristic that contributes to his aura as the type of individual right at home in this Southern Gothic scenario.

The Korean War's long-term effect on this character is especially notable, as Frank David's psychosis is almost certainly a post-traumatic stress disorder caused by his combat experiences. The traumatic impact of deployment is a significant factor driving his violent tendencies. As a result of his trauma, he returns as a beast and hunts poachers.

Frank David's survival instinct, honed on the frontlines of Southeast Asia, is a trait that positions him outside of society, similar to how the Gates brothers' efforts to survive in the wilderness with their own skills ultimately marginalize them more than others in their already heavily marginalized environment. Hunting with certain kinds of techniques is illegal in the location where the story takes place. One prohibition is against fishing with electricity or dynamite, which results in "topographic complexity of the substrate to [be] lost, causing coral recruitment to decline and reducing fish habitat and reef function" (McClellan, 2008: 3). The Gates brothers survive in the wilderness as they learnt how to fish and hunt from their late father, albeit utilizing practices forbidden by law. As outlaws, the Gates brothers never cross the line that separates them from the community. This deepens the divide between them and the townspeople. As a member of a stigmatized family, each boy can be seen as a self-educated person who knows how to survive in the wilderness, but this isolation also cultivates a dangerous defiance. Throughout the novella, Neil, Dan and Kent Gates do not exhibit any specific characterizations that distinguish them one from the other. Hence, we can perhaps read them as a composite character. The boys behave as if they belong to a higher unity than their individual being. They do not need anybody else, and their communication with each other is unique as "they [developed] a kind of language of their own, a language of the eyes, of the fingers, of the way a shoulder twitched, a nod of the head" (Franklin, 2000: 143). There is a parallelism between Frank David and the Gates brothers; they are perhaps two sides of the same coin. Frank David's violence is a manifestation of post-war trauma. The Gates brothers, on the other hand, hate society's rules because they are outcasts trapped in an unconventional lifestyle. The extreme behavior patterns of both parties are based on their motivations.

The siblings' uncommon methods of survival are part of the reason they are misfits, but their exclusion is reinforced by an invisible border between them and the rest of the townspeople. Everybody thinks that the Gates brothers do not belong to the town. Nonetheless, there are figures like Kirxy who maintain connections to the misfits. After their father commits suicide, Kirxy shows up and takes care of the boys for a short time. He runs a small shop in a town often visited by the Gates boys. Kirxy assumes a father figure role for the brothers, as can be seen from the quote that follows: "After Boo's suicide, Kirxy had tried to look after the boys, their ages twelve, thirteen and fourteen—just old enough, Boo must've thought, to raise themselves. For a while Kirxy let them stay with him and his wife, who'd never had a child" (Franklin, 2000: 143). However, his relationship with the boys is quite limited. Mostly, the Gates boys do not say any word, and the narrator takes on a greater role to describe these scenes of the pseudo family. Their silence underlines their limitations. They do not need any communication with the rest of the town. This sphere of isolation is designated by an unwritten mutual agreement between the boys and townspeople. Apart from Kirxy and Esther—isolated in another way by virtue of being the novella's only active female character—nobody contacts the brothers.

From the Gates point of view, total isolation is not a disadvantageous position. They commit crimes under cover of darkness and use the woods as a cover. The illegal acts of this family become a threat to the community's shared conservative values. Although other characters are aware of the Gates brothers' delinquency, the conservative townspeople choose to keep clear of the trouble. From the townspeople's perspective, the Gates brothers are a kind of trash: "How did the Gates boys fall into the category of trash animal—wildcats or possums or armadillos, snapping turtles, snakes? Things you could kill any time, run over in your truck and not even look at in your mirror to see dying behind you? Christ" (Franklin, 2000: 168-169). Kirxy's wonder clearly reflects the community's thoughts about the boys. They are seen as nothing more than unnecessary living creatures. This collective mindset gives the townspeople an exaggerated sense of superiority over the brothers. Conversely, the Gates boys keep silent on their side of the rift and mostly shun interaction with their condescending community. They keep living in the woods as "town [isn't] the place for a Gates" (Franklin, 2000: 180). Symbolically, those woods are a prison.

The isolation causes high tension between the community and the boys. It is clearly seen that the boys have not been in a harmony with the community since their childhood. For example, on the first day at school they

got into a fight, "ganging up on a black kid," and were summarily expelled (Franklin, 2000: 143). This is a sign of their lack of adaptation and also an unstoppable will to violence. Writing on the will to violence, Willem Schinkel stresses the perpetrator's social bonds with society and proposes that transgressors lack those bonds (2002: 130). James Dodd explains possible causes of violence as follows: "Violence often comes dressed in the garb of authority, power, right or legitimacy, even when it in effect announces their absence" (2009: 46). In *Poachers*, we may use Dodd's reasoning behind an interpretation that the boys commit violent acts in order to cover the fact that they are indeed otherwise powerless.

The game warden, who is responsible for protecting the environment, is the only one who does not tolerate them: "'You fellows oughta know,' the warden said, pointing his long chin to the rifle at Neil's feet, 'that it's illegal to have those guns loaded on the river. I'm gonna have to check 'em. I'll need to see some licenses, too'" (Franklin, 2000: 134). As they hunt and fish without a license, the game warden has the right to take them into custody. However, the quarrel ends with the warden's death as he is "punished" for disrespecting the invisible barrier that others have erected to distance themselves from the family's illegal, isolated lifestyle (Inge, 2008: 274). It's a turn of events we come to expect in the dangerous encounters that recur in Southern Gothic literature and perhaps can be seen as a logical outcome of the long-term antagonism between the brothers and their neighbors. That is why they see the ambitious game warden as a threat to their existence.

Kirxy stands as a voluntary mediator between society and the boys. As a father figure, he tries to keep them from getting into trouble, and at some point "even made some [stories] up to try to scare them into obeying the law" (Franklin, 2000: 144). When the crisis emerges following the game warden's murder, he coaches the boys to give a false statement: "If I was y'all, I just wouldn't tell him anything. Just say I was at home, that I don't know nothing about any dead game warden. Nothing at all" (Franklin, 2000: 145). It is clear that Kirxy wants to protect the boys, no matter what they have done. At some point, it can also be said that Kirxy runs the shop just to watch their security. However, when all the brothers are dead, it is likewise the death knell for Kirxy's shop because "for the past few years, except for an occasional hunter or logger, he'd been in business for the Gates boys alone" (Franklin, 2000: 179).

In *Poachers*, Franklin considers different aspects of violence, showing how complex its influence can be. Having shown all the ways violence can affect a life, the story goes a step further to shed light on ways to escape that predicament. Franklin deals with violence both physically and psychologically. Psychological violence manifests itself in situations such as the Gates brothers' feeling of exclusion, Frank David's post-traumatic stress disorder, and Kirxy's remorse towards the Gates brothers. Franklin offers various explanations for the causes of violence. The main reason why the Gates brothers resort to violence is their feeling of exclusion. Because they are not accepted by society, they respond violently to any threat. The reasons why Frank David resorts to violence are his feelings of anger and hatred fueled by post-traumatic stress disorder. Franklin also draws attention to the social dimensions of violence in his novella. The Gates brothers' ostracism increases the likelihood that they will resort to violence. Frank David is an ex-outlaw who tries to enforce the law with his own hands. *Poachers* explores the complex relationship between subjective and objective violence. As Žižek notes, "subjective violence is experienced as such against the background of a non-violent zero level. It is seen as a perturbation of the 'normal,' peaceful state of things" (2008:2). The characters' experiences of violence are closely related to the level at which they consider violence to be normal. This confirms Žižek's observation that subjective violence is a disruption of a normal, peaceful situation. For the Gates brothers, violence has become a regular part of everyday life. For them, acts of violence can be as commonplace as a simple hunting trip or a family argument. For them, a "normal" life is lived in a violent environment.

When Kirxy examines the game warden's body and notices dark bruises on his throat, the reality and gravity of violence are revealed: "With the rubber tip of his cane, Kirxy brushed a snail from the man's forehead. He bent and looked into the warden's left eye, which was partly open. He noticed the throat, the dark bruises there" (Franklin, 2000:140). This scene underlines the novel's motif of human nature's dark side. The dead game warden and the bruises on his neck symbolize the consequences of unrestrained aggression. At the same time, the failure of Kirxy to react could arguably point to the normalization of violence and deterioration of social order.



Kirxy's advocacy of the Gates brothers' isolation from society points to the cultural codes of the South and the struggle for existence of these outcast characters: "Them boys don't need a lawyer. They just need to stay in the woods, where they belong. Folks oughta know to let 'em alone by now" (Franklin, 2000: 142). This opinion is embedded with some of the most basic features of Southern Gothic literature: characters who find themselves outside the social order, grotesque elements, and the darkness of their settings. The author's positioning of the Gates boys in the wilderness points to both the social order of Southern culture and how these brothers are marginalized. Although Kirxy's response might be interpreted as a rebellion against the dominant culture, it actually emphasizes the isolation.

The work deals with the conflict between civilization and savagery and the inevitability of violence in the atmosphere of Southern Gothic. The Gates brothers' fear of going to town shows how social order and rules are inadequate in the face of violence: "Kent had never wanted to go to Grove Hill—their father had warned them of the police, of jail. In town your truck needed to have a tag and taillights that worked" (Franklin, 2000: 163). The Gates brothers' fear of going to the city shows how the line between civilization and savagery is blurry. Although the city is seen as a symbol of social order and rules, it is a dangerous and untrustworthy place for the brothers.

The novella can also be counted as an example of the grotesque. On Southern Grotesque, Presley suggests as follows: "The function of distortion in recent Southern grotesque literature is to set forth an interpretation either of the whole man or of what might make him whole" (1972: 44). According to Presley, distortion is an important tool in Southern grotesque literature for understanding human wholeness or the elements that will enable achievement of wholeness. In the context of *Poachers*, this distortion is revealed through the striking display of violence and the human capacity for evil. Elements such as the Gates brothers' ostracism from society, Frank David's post-traumatic stress disorder, and Kirxy's remorse reveal the darker aspects of the human psyche and the destructive effects of social dynamics on individuals. This distortion of reality provides the reader with a broader perspective on the inevitability of violence. The reality revealed by Frank David's post-war trauma and the reasons for the violence committed by the Gates brothers emerge as examples that can help solve the puzzle of being human and the existence of violence as a part of that puzzle.

Disgust is another important theme of *Poachers*. Novak emphasizes that the grotesque element at the core of Gothic literature aims to evoke disgust as follows: "The grotesque of the Gothic is more closely related to what Wieland called 'grotesque in the proper sense,' the end result of which is likely to be disgust rather than laughter" (1979: 58). Novak suggests here that Gothic adopts a disturbing and unsettling aesthetic. While traditionally grotesque is seen as a form of expression that combines both comic and frightening elements, Gothic grotesque, with its dark and disruptive quality, moves away from humor and closer to disgust. The Gothic, therefore, has potential for psychological depth and social criticism. Disgust becomes a physical reaction, a denial and refusal of moral and ethical values. The grotesque in Gothic novels instills genuine discomfort within a reader through fear of things long repressed, social taboos, and the darker sides of human nature. This discomfort can act as a catalyst that leads to thought and questioning. Throughout the novella, various death scenes are presented to the reader in an explicit manner. In this way, Franklin can create a feeling of disgust in the reader. The author's purpose in creating disgust may be to distance the reader as much as possible and try to put her in an objective position.

When Frank David comes to the town unofficially, two brothers die and the last one becomes blind. Nevertheless, the townspeople and especially the sheriff are unwilling to see Frank David as the cause of these casualties. For Kirxy, it becomes an impossible task to persuade the authorities about the danger of Frank David. Ignorance of the sheriff and the rest of the town underlines a critical truth that people want to get rid of the boys as soon as possible. According to them, the Gates brothers are nothing more than a burden to the town and the acts, no matter if legal or illegal, taken against them should be welcomed with pleasure. On the other hand, Frank David's motivation presents similarities with the infamous Nazi commander Eichmann who asserted that he "not only obeyed orders, he also obeyed the law" (Arendt, 2006:135). However, in this case, misreading the laws causes Frank David's transformation into a beast for poachers.

Tom Franklin's imagination has created an uncensored work that reveals the human tendency towards violence and the capacity for evil. This analysis demonstrates how *Poachers* engages with the Southern Gothic tradition's depiction of violence and exposes the dark part of human nature. The author masterfully displays the individual

and social dimensions of this phenomenon by addressing both the visible and invisible aspects of violence. While the work reveals the destructive consequences of violence, it also sheds light on the problem. Franklin examines the physical and psychological dimensions of violence and reveals the effects of different types of violence on the characters. The various explanations he offers regarding the causes of violence highlight different factors, such as the Gates brothers' violent tendencies caused by their feeling of exclusion, Frank David's feelings of anger and hatred triggered by post-traumatic stress disorder, and Kirxy's remorse towards the Gates brothers. In this respect, the work questions the effect of social dynamics on individuals and the importance of breaking the vicious cycle of violence. This study offers a new portrayal of violence in Franklin's *Poachers* by examining not just the bodily trauma caused by violence upon individuals, but also its enormous destruction wrought upon the communal fabric. Franklin's rather particular narrative style ties violent tendencies to environmental, cultural, and psychic factors and, in particular, uses them powerfully to expose the ways in which violence is legitimized and accepted by society. In this context, the current study uses the theoretical framework of the Southern Gothic genre to reinterpret the conflict between the individual and society. This study demonstrates how literature can be used as a tool to understand the role of violence in the social structure and its effects on the individual. Through its graphic depiction of violence, *Poachers* not only explores the dark side of human nature but also criticizes the social structures that remain silent in the face of this brutality.

#### **Disclosure Statements (Beyan ve Açıklamalar)**

1. The author of this article confirm that their work complies with the principles of research and publication ethics (Bu çalışmanın yazarı, araştırma ve yayın etiği ilkelerine uyduklarını kabul etmektedirler).
2. No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author (Yazar tarafından herhangi bir çıkar çatışması beyan edilmemiştir).
3. This article was screened for potential plagiarism using a plagiarism screening program (Bu çalışma, intihal tarama programı kullanılarak intihal taramasından geçirilmiştir).

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