From novel to camera: gothic elements in psycho

Setting is extremely important in Gothic literature: after all, setting really is the foundation of the story and can make or break the atmosphere the author tries to create. The same is true of film, and Psycho's most used setting is arguably the most Gothic element of the movie. The motel is set back from the main road, and multiple characters mention it's hard to find. Norman mentions they don't get much business, and other than his mother, he lives alone. When we first see the hotel, the camera moves slowly towards it, cutting back to Marion who searches the empty property for any signs of life. There's a sense of isolation surrounding the place which is a common theme in Gothic literature, whether in the case of the location or the people, and both are true of Psycho; here as elsewhere, Hitchcock adeptly adapts Gothic conventions and themes from literature to cinema.

The house that Norman and his mother live in is even farther away. As captured by Hitchcock, the outside is dimly lit to the point of appearing black, and it's surrounded by weeds and unkempt landscaping. Mansions, especially ruined and overgrown ones, are very common settings for Gothic tales such as Edgar Allan Poe's " The Fall of the House of Usher" or Bram Stoker's Dracula. The swamp nearby highlights the danger of nature which is less common but can be found in Gothic stories like The Hound of the Baskervilles by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. The interior of the house and the woman it supposedly contains remains a mystery until close to the end of the film. The house and motel are often shown with storm clouds overhead and it's raining more often than not. The weather compounds the dark, foreboding atmosphere of the house and motel. The lighting key contributes to this as well. It's low-key, which causes different areas on set to be

shrouded in shadow. The killer doesn't show up until halfway through the movie, and when they do, they're shrouded in shadow to keep the viewer guessing as to who it is. While he's talking to Marion in the parlor, Norman's face tends to be split with half shadowed and half in light, perhaps to illustrate his dual personalities, while Marion's face remains in full lighting, showing her relative innocence. The two are only shown in the same shot for a brief moment. For the rest of the scene, the camera flashes between them, perhaps to emphasize their differences and how awkward they are around each other.

Norman and Marion also seem to match common character archetypes in Gothic literature. Norman is the sensitive, socially awkward man who is typically the one to commit an act of evil, whether it's in a fit of passion or under some kind of spell. In Norman's case, it's mental illness, another trope often found in Gothic literature. There are countless examples of this trope, such as Egaeus in Poe's " Berenice." Mental illness often causes some kind of strange event, or for the main character to forget things he has done, the latter of which is similar to what happens to Norman. Another trope in Gothic literature is the death or suffering of a beautiful woman, often one the main character is in love with, and it's used in all the examples I've given here. Marion seems to fit this trope quite well. A large part of what makes Gothic literature is the creepy, suspenseful mood or tone. It can be done partly by the use of certain words that describe normal things in a spooky way or by discussing uncomfortable topics. Psycho parallels this with dialogue sprinkled throughout the film. Norman is into taxidermy and has multiple dead birds in his parlor, at least one of which is a bird of prey that looks like a hawk.

Norman is positioned in front of the hawk when talking to Marion, suggesting he and the attacking predator might have something in common.

Not only is taxidermy a morbid hobby, but birds are also a common motif in Gothic literature and often serve as omens. Norman also likens a damp house to a grave. Recall how often it was raining while Marion was alive, causing the majority of the places she went to be like a grave, according to Norman. Additionally, when Sam first meets Lila, the customer in the store is buying insect killer and mentions how she thinks death should be painless. Of course, neither of the deaths in the movie are painless, but simply discussing these kinds of topics helps set a dark mood. The camera also works to create a suspenseful mood and choices in cutting tend to match the structure of a typical story. There are fewer cuts during " expository" scenes and cutting speeds up considerably at points of high tension. The difference is especially noticeable during Marion's death. The editing almost seems to match what's happening on-screen. While Norman is stabbing at Marion, the different shots are sort of stabbing at us. Many of the cuts are actually timed with the stabs, going from Norman to Marion as he brings the knife down. In literature, during a climactic scene, sentences might get shorter or choppy to parallel what's happening in the story. " Berenice" has an example of this at the end of the story. On the other end of the spectrum, the camera creeps along or lingers during suspenseful scenes in Psycho where the audience doesn't yet know what's going on. We don't get to see the inside of the mother's bedroom until the very end of the movie. Normally only a lit-up window is shown, and when, the camera follows him up the stairs slowly but does not enter the room.

It is the hallmark of good Gothic as well as thriller and horror literature to know what to show the reader and what to keep a mystery, and Psycho employs this in its camerawork very well. But why? Why use such tired tropes and recognizable plot elements? For one, the film was adapted from a book which likely used the same Gothic elements, and for another, the movie was still loved and is clearly thought of as important in cinematic history. The way Hitchcock translates writing into visual elements is truly amazing. Authors can say a million words, but there is only so much time that an audience will be willing to spend in a theater. The film seems to pay homage to the literary genre it was adapted from, and transforms it in a masterful way.