

Similar gothic elements in the work of edgar allan poe and nathaniel hawthorne

[Business](#), [Work](#)



Similar Gothic Elements in the Work of Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel

Hawthorne Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe are considered masters of American gothic fiction. They used similar gothic elements in their writing and used it to build up a sense of impending doom. Even today numerous readers enjoy, study, and discuss the gothic elements both utilized in their work. Gothic writing is a style that is concerned with the dark side of society, an evil that lies within the self.

Poe and Hawthorne contributed stories which contained dark struggles between characters and society with its rules of order of the time. Gothic writing is fantasy meant to entertain despite the fact that it depicts the political and social problems happening at the time. Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allen Poe used their writing to allow them and readers deal with the problems of society, their own lives, and their inner demons. Poe and Hawthorne's works are still being interpreted by generations of readers on many different levels.

Nathaniel Hawthorne was one of the most valiant and significant writers of fiction before the Civil War. He gained fame for publishing, *The Scarlet Letter*, and was praised for his literary style. *The Scarlet Letter*, allowed him to direct attention to issues he valued. Other stories like, "The Birthmark," and "Rappaccini's Daughter," provided a unique view of a how a male dominated society can harm its women. Author Henry James considered him a genius and the most significant writer of his time (Norton Anthology, "Nathaniel Hawthorne" 1272).

Often Hawthorne's jobs pulled him away from his writing but allowed him to support his family. Hawthorne skillfully used gothic elements in his writing to create a clear picture of some approaching death. Though he favored his poetry, Edgar Allan Poe was a master weaver of horror tales who influenced other writers such as T. S. Eliot and William Faulkner (Norton Anthology, "Edgar Allan Poe" 1531). His lifetime of troubles may have shaped his stories of haunting and death.

His reputation as one of the key writers of the macabre in the 18th century is due to selections of poetry and prose such as, "The Raven," "The Purloined Letter," "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Cask of Amontillado." His story, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," is considered to be the first modern detective story. Poe tried to make writing his sole means of work but found that was not possible so he spent time doing different jobs and even joining the military for a time, none of which worked out. He was prone to drinking and had health issues most of his life.

For a time, he was an editor for different publications. However, after the death of his wife, Virginia, Poe's weakness for drinking increased and partly contributed to his death. Hawthorne and Poe used gothic elements in their writing to build up the sense of impending doom. For example, "Some of Edgar Allan Poe's work seems to follow a pattern: the indeterminate urban situations, the nightmare intensities, and above all, the confusions of consciousness as the protagonist's madness destabilizes narrative and setting" (Lloyd-Smith, "Chapter Three" 30).

Poe used these near death situations and a dreamlike feeling in his writing coupled with his morbid sense of humor to reverse the outlook of his readers. He combined in his poetry and prose ways to make his readers quiver unspeakably and tantalize them with psychological complexities. In the selections “ The Fall of the House of Usher,” and “ The Murders at Rue Morgue,” he incorporates gothic elements of fantastic excess which invite and challenge interpretation (Lloyd-Smith, “ Chapter Three” 32).

To illustrate this, “ Nathaniel Hawthorne similarly internalized and domesticated the Gothic to explore its insights into the psychology of everyday life, and its applicability to history” (Lloyd-Smith, “ Chapter Three” 33). His tales are full of magical or fetish objects which are used to show a series of historical and personal meanings (Lloyd-Smith “ Chapter Three” 33). Hawthorne used these elements to create a atmosphere of gothic strangeness that fascinate the reader due to the variety of meanings it contains such as the scarlet letter in his novel, *The Scarlet Letter*, “ or the cryptic veil in “ *The Minister’s Black Veil*. In particular, “ “ *The Fall of the House of Usher*,’ is justly the most famous of all Poe’s gothic horrors. For it is only within the context of this nightmare that one can explain why “ *Usher*,” occupies such an important place in the 19th century development of the Gothic genre. With great attention to economy of expression and unity of effect, this pattern would be revisited by countless other Gothic stylists” (Dougherty 6).

This means that Poe used the fantasy of impending doom in “ *The Fall of the House of Usher*” to change it from being just an upper class dream, to a tale

of horror which brought together some of the political situations in the nineteenth century such as those of race and class. Hawthorne and Poe successfully incorporated gothic elements in their writing which provides greater insight to the meaning and interpretation of their works. Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe utilized specific literary elements to bring their stories to life for their readers.

For instance, Poe uses imagery to transform “ The Fall of the House of Usher,” into a rebellion of inharmonious elements. The house has the same structure as a human head, with windows shaped like eyes, and as it begins to fall into disrepair so to do the humans inhabiting the home, Roderick and Madeline. They are no longer governed by reason and there is a shift to corruption, insanity, and irrational behavior (Bloom 32). This means that the disintegration of the home mirrors the impending death of those living in the home as well.

Ultimately, the home crumbles and is swallowed into the waters of a small lake after Madeline and Roderick die. In addition, Nathaniel Hawthorne prolific use of “ emblems in his writing alerts us that they are allegories and that the stories go beyond the regional, historic, pastoral and gothic boundaries which generate and define them” (Heim & Bloom 49). This means in “ The Birthmark,” the birthmark itself actually symbolizes life as opposed to imperfection because when Aylmer removes it from his wife’s face, he achieves the perfection he is seeking, but at the cost of her life. Alas, it was too true! The fatal Hand gad grappled with the mystery of life, and was the bond by which an angelic spirit kept itself in union with a mortal

frame. As the last crimson tint of the birth-mark—that sole token of human imperfection—faded from her cheek, the parting breath of the now perfect woman passed into the atmosphere, and her soul, lingering a moment, near her husband, took its heavenward flight” (Norton Anthology, “ Nathaniel Hawthorne” 1331).

In addition, the emblem he uses in *The Scarlet Letter*, suggests the reader should seek more meaning regarding what it really was and what it was telling the reader because it was about more than just about forbidden love. In “ Rappaccini’s Daughter, the garden itself became a source of poison despite its incredible beauty because the flowers that made it beautiful could kill anyone who comes close to them. Moreover, “ Hawthorne’s tales are critiques of the nature and efficacy of conflicting values with which moral problems can be met” (Heim & Bloom 53).

This means that because of his Puritan heritage, Hawthorne used his writing to explore the exchange of and the difficulty between situations dealing with desires and imagination. He looked at the moral problems and the limitations where desires and actions connect and struggle. In *The Scarlet Letter*, the circumstance is set for the struggle of forbidden sexual intercourse between Minister Dimmesdale and Hester Prynne. Poe and Hawthorne contributed stories which contained struggles between characters and the society and its rules of order of the time. For example, Hawthorne’s tales are often constructed to suggest that they are narratives veiled by something in the structure of the narrative itself” (Heim & Bloom 68). This means that Hawthorne’s selections describe people who are torn between their own

wishes and the differing demands of society and its rules of right and wrong. They test one's limits and the possibilities of sin and virtue with a great anxiety for righteousness. Hawthorne had an intimate understanding of the elements that make up and set apart the human condition.

To illustrate, for Edgar Allan Poe "reason seems a masquerade, adopted only when convenient as in his analysis of his own poem, "The Raven," that refuses submission to its rule. He claimed the existence of a Higher Reason, accessible by intuition and introspection and Poe's fiction plays around this theme showing how his narrators attempt to contain their irrational experiences, drives, and desires within the rational framework" (Lloyd-Smith, "Chapter Five" 68). Poe believed reason was useful on his terms and the irrational could be controlled to a certain degree.

This is why he is considered the father of the short story. In addition, Poe's prose, "continually confronts the material of the real body; or the corpse. Death is perpetually confronted, but the doorway opens only to the horror of this intransigent 'real'" such as in, "The Tell Tale Heart, which begins with the narrator explaining his reason for committing murder (Lloyd-Smith, "Chapter Five" 69). "He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult. For his gold I had no desire. I think it was his eye! Yes, it was this!

He had the eye of a vulture—a pale blue eye, with a film over it. Whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold; and so by degrees—very gradually—I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye forever" (290 Poe). Also, characters in Poe's stories seem to be awaiting

death and cheat it long enough to be able to convey their last message before meeting some horrifying end. His narrators also began by explaining the reason for their misdeeds or misfortunes to the reader as a preface to the actual story.

Hawthorne and Poe also used their writing to allow them to deal with the problems of society, their own lives, and their inner demons. To illustrate, “The Gothic world Hawthorne created in his fiction—with its gloomy settings, concern with death, and explorations of the demonic—is central to his moral and thematic purposes as it allowed him a broad realm through which he could tell the dark truths about the world as he perceived it” (Lloyd-Smith, “Chapter Five” 71). This means that the gothic elements he used in this writing allowed him to tell about social injustices he felt strongly about.

Some such issues were slavery and the degradation of women in a male dominated society. For example, “Poe's works are associated with death and horror, and he finds a place among the gothic writers. In fact, Poe's use of death as a central motif finds service only in his pursuit of the “effect” which Poe suggests should be the motivation behind the creation and development of any short story” (Pahl 8). The use of death as a central theme in his writing was helpful only if they produced a physical effect on the reader.

Poe felt this gothic element should be the driving force behind any short story that is to be developed and worthy of reading. In addition, “Poe strived to achieve an emotional effect of either melancholy or terror when he chose the unanticipated and undeserved death of young maidens--soul mates

either as wives or sisters--as the subject most likely to inspire this gothic effect" (Pahl 10). Poe often chose to portray women in his works as weak, sickly and almost deserving of some ghastly demise. The characters were usually young and whose roles were that of sisters or wives in the selections.

Finally, Hawthorne and Poe both had a fascination with death and the supernatural, which they included in their writing. These gothic elements coupled with the lessons about life, death, morality, sin and virtue in a male dominated world make their writing major sources of study and discussion even today. Readers can choose to focus on Poe's specific situations set up to produce a reaction or Hawthorne's ability to draw attention to details and setting. Clearly these two gothic fiction writers helped establish the American short story with a dark twist.

Works Cited Bloom, Harold. " Thematic Analysis of " The Haunted Palace". " Bloom's Major Poets: Edgar Allan Poe (Jan. 1999): 32-35. Literary Reference Center. EBSCO. Laredo Community College Library, Laredo, TX. 06 June 2009 <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lfh&AN=16466202&site=ehost-live> Dougherty, Stephen. " Foucault in the House of Usher: Some Historical Permutations in Poe's Gothic. " Papers on Language & Literature 37. 1 (n. d.): 3. Literary Reference Center. EBSCO. Laredo Community College Library, Laredo, TX. 0 June 2009 <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lfh&AN=4316178&site=ehost-live> Hawthorne, Nathaniel. The Norton Anthology of American Literature. Ed. Nina Baym et al. Vol. B. New York, W. W. Norton & Co. , 2007. 1272-1495. Heims, Neil, and Harold Bloom.. " An Introduction to Some

<https://assignbuster.com/similar-gothic-elements-in-the-work-of-edgar-allan-poe-and-nathaniel-hawthorne/>

Elements of Nathaniel Hawthorne's Fiction. " Bloom's BioCritiques: Nathaniel Hawthorne (Jan. 2003): 49-78. Literary Reference Center. EBSCO. Laredo Community College Library, Laredo, TX. 24 June 2009 <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.spx?direct=true&lfh=16305750&ehost-live> Lloyd-Smith, Allan. " Chapter Five: Major Themes in American Gothic. " 65-132. Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd - Books, 2004. Literary Reference Center. EBSCO. Laredo Community College Library, Laredo, TX. 24 June 2009 <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&lfh=23674509&ehost-live> Lloyd-Smith, Allan. " Chapter Three: How to Read American Gothic. " 25-35. Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd -- Books, 2004. Literary Reference Center.

EBSCO. Laredo Community College Library, Laredo, TX. 25 June 2009 <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&lfh=23674507&ehost-live> Pahl, Dennis. Architects of the Abyss The Indeterminate Fictions of Poe, Hawthorne and Melville. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1989. Poe, Edgar A. The Norton Anthology of American Literature. Ed. Nina Baym et al. Vol. B. New York, W. W. Norton & Co. , 2007. 1528-1626. Poe, Edgar A. " The Tell Tale Heart. " The Portable Poe. Ed. Philip Van Doren Stern. New