

American artist in the sense that he shifted

[Business](#), [Career](#)



American Gothic is a genre that emphasizes the social pressures of the era in which it thrived such as “ economic exploitation, racial and gender discrimination, and religious intolerance.” The genre went so far as to exploit the fears of the general public and dramatize the events that people experienced or witnessed. Authors such as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe are two of the most prominent American Gothic writers recognized today. However, their approach the genre differed through narration techniques and subjects of exploitation. Nathaniel Hawthorne is well recognized for his “ emphasis of the essaylike aspects of his prose... and the intrusion of his narrative persona upon the events of the story.” The narrator often expressed the fear and paranoia of the American people in a high stakes context.

Hawthorne made his narrator self-conscious and aware of the social context surrounding his predicament. He focused on the art of storytelling with a projection of his own thoughts evident through the narration. Edgar Allan Poe criticized this Hawthorne persona in a review of Mosses from an Old Manse where he remarks “ he is self impelled to touch everything.” Poe includes this criticism as his own writing reflects a more naive narrator that does not necessarily embody the author’s opinions but rather exploits the public’s apprehensions. Poe deliberately dramatized historical events that echoed the oppressive aspects of modern society. He played upon religion’s domination on the subconscious and explored the idea of “ Catholic guilt”. Poe was a revolutionary artist in the sense that he shifted the focus of the American Gothic genre.

He rerouted the usual emphasis of “ external threats” to “ the irrationality of the human mind.” The power of the human subconscious was a point of focus for Poe and he used his writing to explore the human psyche. To understand the shift that Poe developed, one must look to the prior conventions of the American Gothic genre. The genre invites multiple readings and interpretations of the work created, but the intended symbolism can also be quite specific. The tendency of the genre is to dramatize past events in American history and “ the resistance of Americans hearing them.” Many of the stories written, such as Hawthorne’s Alice Doan’s Appeal, focus on the external threat of political implications rather than a tormented subconscious. American Gothic has been described as “ the dark side of Enlightenment free-thinking.” The typical Gothic genre explored grotesque taboos of society including incest, demonism, and murder.

American Gothic continued to use such dark elements, but the genre used the latter atrocities to embody the public’s silent fears. The emerging anxieties of the working class bled into the work of authors like Poe.

However, the shift that Poe created emerged from a Freudian approach rather than an evolution of previous literary ideals. Poe articulated the deepest fears of the American psyche through the exploration of psychoanalytic theory.

According to this theory “ if satisfaction of an instinct threatens the existence of the organism (as perceived by the ego), a process of repression occurs.” The concept was recycled by Poe and applied to the domination of religion in the modern era. The fear of repealing order lead to the notion that chaos will

reign. That notion consequently lead to the repression of a new foundation. The original order of society was built upon the morals of the church, and the subconscious fears of chaos allowed for the church to dominate modern society. Poe applied the idea of the subconscious dictating people's actions to that of his short stories. One of Poe's more historically engaged short stories, *The Pit and the Pendulum*, is the strongest embodiment of the Freudian theory.

Poe's story is a dramatization of the Spanish Inquisition torturing and murdering those that were not of the Roman Catholic faith in the 1480s. Thomas Dick wrote of the event, " the great number of instruments of torture which cause a lingering death excited horror even in the minds of soldiers." Poe confines the reader in a literal and figurative sense as he surrounds the narrator with iron walls to symbolize the constraints of the mind.

The narrator can never escape the torture as the temporal and the immaterial are plagued by the presence of visions and a swinging pendulum. The Pit is emphasized by the narrator continuously as it comes to represent the pit of Hell. The narrator voices the fear of the reader that their own sins should bring them to such a place. Poe is careful to never explain the past faults that lead the man into the pit so that the reader subconsciously puts him or herself into the position of the narrator.

Poe describes the torturous pit as such" the pit, whose horrors had been destined for so bold a recusant as myself, the pit, typical of hell, and regarded by rumour as the Ultima Thule of all their punishments" The idea of

pit plays into the internal fear of eternal damnation ingrained in the public's subconscious via the repeated doctrines of the church. Poe even directly alludes to the Book of Revelations through candlelight. Playing further into the idea of modern religious indoctrination Poe reverses the figure of Jesus Christ. In The Book of Revelations Jesus is illuminated by candles, " and in the midst of the seven candlesticks one like unto the Son of man, clothed with a garment down to the foot." The presence of candles in The Pit and Pendulum becomes sinister as the narrator remarks, " And then my vision fell upon the seven tall candles upon the table...

I saw the lips of the black-robed judges." Poe used The Book of Revelations to compare the judges to Jesus and " pervert the imagery in the name of horror." Poe knew the indoctrination of the church altered the subconscious of the readers and used that to his advantage.

The historical context for the story provided a very real reference for which the audience could relate back. Dramatizing the crimes of the Spanish Inquisition deliberately attacked the fear of the political institution of the church further. Part of the structure of the Catholic church was rooted in the massacre of thousands of non-believers. Poe knew of the historical context and managed to not only remind the reader of past indiscretions, but also dig into the fear of damnation.

The reader can not escape the temporal and immaterial of the story much like the narrator cannot escape his fictional imprisonment. Poe continues his investigation of the human psyche through the motif of the pendulum. The one universal concept that plagues every reader is that of inevitable death.

Poe obsessively wrote about death throughout his career. The Pit and the Pendulum is the ultimate amalgam of his obsession and people's greatest fear. The pendulum is described as the weapon of time by Poe, "in lieu of a scythe (Time) held what at a casual glance I supposed to be the pictured image of a huge pendulum..

. its sweep was brief, and of course slow." The image of Time is equated to the grim reaper by implying that it usually carries a scythe. The swinging of the pendulum also implies the daunting passage of time and the fear of what occurs when the clock stops. The presence of the pendulum in the pit has been said to be "an allegory of the most basic human situation and dilemma." The basic fear of death and the need to understand what follows the last tick of the clock haunts all men. Religion was a feasible and indoctrinated answer to what occurred after death. The public then relied on the church for answers.

However, the fear of damnation then plagued the mind. The subconscious associated the political system of the church with that of order and answers, but the presence of the pit remained. Thus a deep rooted fear of a life with the church and a life without the church dwelled. Edgar Allan Poe knew of the internal strife and targeted it. The choice to dramatize such a traumatic event in history was to accentuate the fears that still resided in modern society. His work continued to revive past predicaments that echoed modern social issues. Poe's shift towards the invasion of the subconscious best suited the use of historical context. He knew that inciting fear into the public was best rendered with attacking rooted and residing conflicts.

Religion was an especially taboo topic as the church dominated many aspects of modern life. The reader was reminded of the Spanish Inquisition's crimes in the name of Catholicism as it disrupted the purity of the church's foundation. Poe incited the fear of death with the pendulum, vilified the church via the Spanish Inquisition, and consequently threatened the structure the church provided. American Gothic was then lead to be defined by new terms as Edgar Allan Poe continued to use the subconscious to arouse fear rather than rely on exploiting external threats to alarm the reader.