

Compare and contrast the narrative techniques used in three or more of edgar alla...

[Literature](#), [American Literature](#)



Edgar Allan Poe was born in Boston on January 19th 1809. He became a writer unlike many others at that time, writing stores of crime or horror literature. Several people say his disturbing and unusual stories were the result of his own life and situations he had been through, and although he was an American, his writing strongly followed in the examples of European gothic stories. During his life he wrote many of the finest representations of gothic literature, these stories include many essentials that differ them from original stories, such as a melodramatic plot, themes of terror and torture, sinister locations, heightened emotions, and can they also be based on old superstitions or fears.

Another example of gothic literature in the 19th century was “ Dracula” wrote by Bram Stoker (1897), this genre of horror and torment has remained to be popular until the present day, with modern authors such as James Herbert and Stephen King.

“ The Cask of Amontillado” is a short gothic story wrote by Edgar Allan Poe, about the narrator named Montresor, describing how his friend Fortunato has offended him repeatedly in the past, and how he is now planning to seek revenge upon him.

Using a vintage amontillado as bate he guides him down to the catacombs below his house where a space in the wall has been created as a tomb. Locking the padlock, which strapped Fortunato who is now in a drunken state to the catacomb wall, he uncovers a pile of cement and bricks from beneath a mound of bones lying nearby, and row-by-row he begins to bury him alive, taking great amusement and satisfaction out of his crying.

"The Tell Tale Heart" is again another famous piece of gothic literature wrote by Edgar Allan Poe, it shows a defensive man proclaiming that he is not insane, however has a fascination with destroying what he believes to be an "evil eye". The beginning of the story begins with a flashback of when the old man was killed, immediately from this point we become aware that the narrator is actually mad, even though he continuously challenges the fact that this is not true. As the story continues the events are in chronological order as there is build up of suspense, and the mad man exposes that he has to murder the old man because of the threat from his eye, therefore every night he slowly places his head round the bedroom door allowing a tiny sliver of light to shine through upon the old mans sleeping face, searching for the eye which he greatly despised.

However for seven nights the eye was closed, and since the eye was not visible, there was no reason to commit the violence, as it was not the old man he wanted to destroy, but it was instead this "evil eye". On the eighth night he does kill the old man, but is soon terrified by hearing the old mans heart beat grow louder and stronger under the floorboards that he cannot cope with the pounding and madness any longer, so he screamed aloud his confession to the police.

"The Pit and the Pendulum" starts with the unnamed narrator recounting hearing his death sentence from individuals clothed in black robes. Fainting after listening to this news, he awakens later in the darkness as the man finds himself disorientated about where he is. He cautiously explores the room, staggering because his body is so weak, expressing the fear that it

could be a tomb where he has been buried alive. From this point he is subjected to mental and physical torture and great torment of not knowing when he is going to die. Above him hangs a swinging pendulum becoming gradually closer to his body with every swing, eventually near to death, he begins his escape plan, and is rescued by General Lasalle and his French army in an unanticipated conclusion to the story.

The setting in gothic literature is very important factor for the success of the story, for example the settings used in Edgar Allan Poe's short stories set the readers mood, and adds to the theme creating the correct atmosphere for the subject matter. The setting of the gothic literature "The Cask of Amontillado" plays an important role with the development of horror and tension necessary for the reader to feel. The story is ideally set in catacombs under the main character Montresor's house; the walls are covered with human bones, which immediately sets the scene for a gothic story. They are below in his house deep underground, and no one will be able to hear them because of the carnival going on above. In order to maintain that they were alone Montresor had tricked his servants into going to the carnival, "I had told them I should not return until the morning, and had given them explicit orders not to stir from the house.

These orders were sufficient, I well knew, to insure their immediate disappearance, one and all, as soon as my back was turned". The intense description of the setting in this story is very suspenseful and eerie. Edgar Allan Poe describes the men passing through "walls of piled bones, with casks and puncheons intermingling, into the inmost recesses of the

catacombs". The catacombs of death in this story provide an appropriate setting for the story's suspense and inevitable ending. The overall mood of the story is one of impending evil, this mood is significantly helped by the description of the location and phrases that have been purposely chosen by the author such as, " the drops of moisture trickle among the bones" and " its walls had been lined with human remains".

" The Tell Tale Heart" is another story also wrote by Edgar Allan Poe, it is set in a different era as the author describes the character using lanterns and they have no electricity in the house, " I put in a dark lantern". We also know that they are in a remote old house, from midnight to four in the morning. It is dark in the bedroom as the shutters are closed from fear of burglars " his room was as black as pitch with thick darkness (for the shutters were closed fastened, through fear of robbers)". It is not clear but the setting for this story is probably European, as at the ending of the story Edgar Allan Poe describes " officers of the police" that appear knocking on the door; policemen are generally associated with England and Europe.

Another example of a sinister setting in one of Edgar Allan Poe's gothic stories is " The Pit and the Pendulum". The story is set in Spain during the Spanish inquisition at some point in the sixteenth century, and begins in a courtroom where the protagonist is listening to his death sentence by black robed judges. This is where the character first realises his fate, and Edgar Allan Poe uses simple words and phrases to illustrate his foreseeable fate, " I trace these words – and thin even to grotesqueness; thin with the intensity of

their expression of firmness – of immovable resolution – of stern contempt of human torture”.

For the remainder of the story the location is in a cell or prison underground, the narrator is in pitch black “ the blackness of eternal night encompassed me”, he is isolated in the cell, being tormented and under examination by the Spanish army. The setting in this story shows the conditions the character is subjected to, the pit in the middle of the floor was intended for his death, though he tripped and exposed the ditch. Now subject to more torture, he is beneath a swinging pendulum, gradually moving closer towards his body. The floor is covered in rats as Poe portrays them as “ fresh troops, hurriedly, with ravenous eyes”, which again adds to the disturbing setting of this story, which in turn helps the reader understand the situation the character is in.

In all of these gothic stories wrote by Edgar Allan Poe, he has chosen to use a sinister setting, frequently in an isolated place such as the catacombs or a prison cell. As each story changes and develops, so do the surroundings, becoming more dark and threatening.

In these three short stories Edgar Allan Poe uses certain characters to build up and develop the story. The main character in each story is called the protagonist, and the antagonist is the character who usually fights against him. In “ The Cask of Amontillado”, the protagonist is Montresor, as he is the main character and also the narrator, he forms most of the story with the theme of his revenge. During the story Montresor explains what happened the night Fortunato was killed. Montresor is also perceived through the tale

to be very intelligent, since he premeditated the murder so that no one would discover his plans, we can also tell of his intelligence by what he spoke to Fortunato. He asked for assistance in wine tasting, but says if he is busy he will ask Luchesi, this causes Fortunato want to help even more as Montresor is now using reverse psychology on him, “ as you are engaged, I am on my way to see Luchesi. If anyone has a critical turn, it is he. He will tell me”.

Montresor knew that burying him alive would give the best reward in form of revenge, and the greatest satisfaction and fulfilment for him. Since the story is wrote in first person the author does not give a detailed description of Montresor as it is though the author is retelling the story. We are told however his feelings and emotions and the reader is then left form their own opinions on this character through studying their attitudes and actions. For example it is very clear to the reader Montresor’s hate towards Fortunato plus his determination for vengeance. The antagonist in “ The Cask of Amontillado” is Fortunato, as he fights for his life and is the opposition of the protagonist. The audience’s perception of the character has to be again determined from Montresor’s thoughts and feelings. Montresor’s opinion at the start of the story is evil and wicked towards him as he has offended him in the past, although the reader may agree with this at the beginning, near the end we begin to sympathise with Fortunato for being under torture.

Much like the “ Cask of Amontillado”, the story “ The Tell Tale Heart” has both a protagonist and an antagonist. The protagonist in this story is the narrator, we do not know his name but he is a servant in the house for the

old man. From the opening of the story the character is seeking to persuade the audience that he is not insane, because he believes he is exceedingly intellectual for slaughtering the “evil eye”. Later on in the story it comes apparent to the audience that this man is in reality insane, proof of this comes at the end when he believes he can hear the old mans heartbeat, “It was a low, dull, quick sound – much a sound a watch makes when enveloped in cotton”.

From the description in the tale we can understand the narrator’s fear of the eye as he gives a detailed portrayal; he describes it as “one of his eyes resembled that 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 for ever”. Edgar Allan Poe does not give a in depth description of the antagonist, however we do know that he is an “old man” and that he has cataracts on his eyes, this is what is making the narrator think that they are evil. We are left with our own interpretation of what the man is like. We are however given a clue, which is that, we now that he is a pleasant man from the quote “He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult”. Again like the “Cask of Amontillado” the story is wrote in first person and is although the author is retelling the story.

In “The Pit and the Pendulum” there is only one main character, this is the man who has heard his death sentence and is now being tortured in the prison, and he is also the narrator recounting what has happened to him. The only other characters in the story are the Spanish army who are torturing the

man. The protagonist begins the story with a recollection of a previous trial in which he now finds himself in a dungeon room being held captive. Throughout the story the character is faced with many situations for example mental and physical torture also facing death many times until eventually he is saved and released by the French army. Again like “The Cask of Amontillado” and “The Tell Tale Heart”, *The Pit and the Pendulum* is written in first person, and therefore gives the effect of the author retelling the story.

All three of these stories share the same pattern of how the characters are used and represented in the gothic stories. Edgar Allan Poe has firstly chosen to write all of the tales in first person achieving the effect of him retelling the story as if it has actually happened before to him, undertaking this has left the reader to make their own analysis and judgements about the characters, leaving uncertainties about the characters never actually knowing who they are and what they are like.

Themes are very important in creating the right mood for a gothic story; they are used in all three of the short gothic stories by Edgar Allan Poe. It is very common of this genre to have themes of good versus evil, and light versus dark. “The Cask of Amontillado” is a powerful tale of revenge. Montresor, the sinister narrator of this story, pledges revenge upon Fortunato for a past insult. At this time we also see many other themes projected to the reader by using Montresor, for example death, satisfaction and horror. He wanted to be satisfied that he had full revenge upon Fortunato; we know this from the choice of torture which was slow and thorough, watching him suffer. The themes in “The Cask of Amontillado” are also shown using the setting of the

story. When the two characters enter the catacombs, the setting represents the theme of death and horror as the tombs are described with key adjectives as being “lined with human remains” and “the drops of moisture trickle among the bones”.

In “The Tell Tale Heart”, Edgar Allan Poe has used very strong themes of murder, fear and insanity. The main theme in this gothic story is fear and this is mostly presented through the protagonist. The protagonist has been used to show his fear for the eye, which is often described through the way he talks and describes it as evil, “one of his eyes resembled that of a vulture”. Other main themes in this story are insanity and madness, immediately at the beginning of the story the narrator challenges that he isn’t mad “How, then, am I mad?”, nevertheless as the story continues we begin to see more of his mental illness awaiting the end of the story when the protagonist is driven exceedingly mad by the old man’s heartbeat that he confesses his crime.

The themes in this story are also presented through the characters, setting and actions. The theme of fear is shown through actions in the story; the main action taken place is murdering the old man, and the dissection of his body. From this we are able to see that the man feared the eyes so much, that he has to rid himself of the eye forever and take the old man’s life. Fear is also represented through symbolism in the story, the author has made sure that the eye is illuminated in a wicked and fearful way, making sure that the audience understands the protagonist’s fear for the eye, and is also why the author chooses to keep his main focus on the description of the eye.

There are also many themes in “ The Pit and the Pendulum” however the main one being the theme of torture. This is presented through the key character in the story as he is the one being subjected to the suffering. We see his distress throughout the story when he is being put through mental and physical torture. The theme of torment can also be represented through the setting in the tale. The depressing atmosphere of an old, dark damp dungeon in Toledo helps towards the general theme of the story significantly. The writer uses words such as “ damp” and “ cold”, all of these helping to establish the theme, as many of them are associated with evil and horrific situations. After reading this story you are left with a message never to give up, this is clear in the story as the protagonist by no means hands over his life to death even in the situations he is under.

Edgar Allan Poe has used the same techniques for representing the theme in all three of these stories. In each of them he has used the characters, setting, actions and symbolism to illustrate and help the audience recognize the different themes. An additional similarity between these three stories is that they all include a theme of death.

By using a range of narrative techniques in all three of these short gothic stories Edgar Allan Poe has been able to make the reader aware of the circumstances the characters are in, being able to do this also makes the story more realistic and enjoyable for the reader. By using first person in all three of these stories it grabs the reader’s attention pulling them straight into what is happening in the story, making them feel involved.

The language in a story is a very important narrative technique used in most gothic literature, and is carefully selected to construct a successful use of imagery and to build tension; this can also be done with various vocabulary and sentence structure. The “Cask of Amontillado” uses language techniques to build suspense and to generate an imagery of the deep dark catacombs.

There is use of commas which make pauses in the text, building up anticipation and adding to the tension, an example of this is when Edgar Allan Poe is describing the passage to the tombs “We passed through a range of low arches, descended, passed on, and descended again, arriving at a deep crypt, in which the foulness of the air caused our flambeaux rather to glow than flame”. The author also uses the effect of imagery in his stories; this is used to illustrate the setting that the characters are in. An example of this is “Walls had been lined with human remains”, which produces a dim and wicked atmosphere. Phrases such as these are essential for the reader's imagination, it also helps build up the tension amongst the reader as it reminds them of the death that is soon to come later on in the story.

Another story, in which Edgar Allan Poe uses language to build the effect of tension and to make the audience more cautious of the situation in the tale, is “The Tell Tale Heart”. Instantly at the opening, there are short sentences that make the audience slow down with their reading, which in turn builds up the tension in the story “Object there was none. Passion there was none. I loved the old man. He had never wronged me.” Another technique to develop suspense is by using lots of hyphens for long pauses.

These have been used numerous times throughout the “ Tell Tale Heart”, particularly when the author has to increase anxiety of when the character enters the chamber on the eighth night, “ I undid the lantern cautiously - oh, so cautiously - cautiously - I undid it just so much that a single thin ray fell upon the vulture eye”. Imagery has also been used in this story for the description of the eye, the effect this has on the reader makes them wary of the eye as it is described as “ evil” and “ vulture like”. The author has also used imagery when the man enters the bedroom on the eighth night, he describes the room and every action by the character, “ His room was as black as pitch with the thick darkness (for the shutters were close fastened, through fear of robbers), and so I knew that he could not see the opening of the door, and I kept pushing on steadily, steadily”..

The “ Pit and the Pendulum” also has the use of imagery in the language, which is essential for the tale to be appreciated by the reader. The primary focus in the story is describing the setting; this has been done by using many powerful adjectives and adverbs. During the story Edgar Allan Poe has used a list of three commas to slow the text down, for example “ then silence, and stillness, and night were the universe”. Yet again similar to the other stories written by Edgar Allan Poe, the “ Pit and the Pendulum” uses imagery to build up the tension; an example of this is when the character first begins to see the pendulum swinging “ down steadily down it crept”. By repeating the word “ down” it represents the repetitive and continuous swinging of the pendulum from side to side. There is repetition in the “ Pit and the pendulum” to emphasize the point that he is now free from the swinging pendulum, “ For the moment, at least, I was free. Free! - and in the grasp of

Inquisition!” There is also alliteration of “ sidelong, shrinking, and slow – I slid from the embrace of the bandage”.

To identify a gothic story from a normal tale there are certain factors which you recognize that can tell you the story is going to be of a gothic genre. “ The Tell Tale Heart” has telling features so that the reader knows it is a gothic story, the first of these being is that it has both a protagonist and an antagonist, this is the main character and someone who fights against him. It also includes a subconscious fear that the man has of the “ evil eye”, which continues through the story with heightened emotions, lots of terror and suspense. There is a sinister location of an old house isolated at night, and a theme of life versus death. In the “ Cask of Amontillado” much like the “ Tell Tale Heart” there is also both an antagonist and a protagonist, Fortunato and Montresor.

The story is also based on an old superstition of being buried alive, as this is what happens to Fortunato in the catacombs. During the story there is heightened emotions and build up of terror and tension, there is a melodramatic plot and a sinister location of deep underground where no one can hear them in the family tomb. The protagonist in the “ Pit and the Pendulum” is the man who is being tortured, heightened emotions are shown in this story through the terror and fear of death. There is lots of melodrama like in the other two stories as the torture is being dragged out. Once again like in many of Edgar Allan Poe stories the setting is very sinister, as he is in a damp black room containing a pit in the middle, covered in rats. There are themes of good versus evil and life versus death in this story. All these

factors of the gothic genre are used to recognize and understand these stories, based in selective features which they contain.

By looking at the three stories wrote by Edgar Allan Poe, “ The Pit and the Pendulum”, “ The Tell Tale Heart” and the “ Cask of Amontillado”, I can see that there are many similarities between them. The main resemblance is that they have all been wrote in first person, the effect of this is that it draws you into the story and gets the reader involved, I think Edgar Allan Poe has chose to use this on all three of these gothic stories as the reader then has an advantage to understanding what is happening in the tale. Another similarity between all three of these stories is the setting. In a gothic story the setting is usually sinister and dark as this helps to the overall effect the story has on its audience, in each story the location is isolated and usually in a dark room. The use of language is also very similar in these three stories, in each of them there is use of hyphens and short sentences all to build up suspense and tension.