

Internal error

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



'In his writing, Edgar Allan Poe creates a particularly American Gothic sensibility.' Discuss, with reference to 'The Fall of the House of Usher'.

Creating an American Gothic sensibility is an immense undertaking for any author, poet or playwright. One must make sure to include all of the vital ingredients in order to capture and tranfix the reader. A setting of a spine-chilling drafty old House, an immoral act of incest, doubling of characters and events, inconceivable supernatural and inexplicable occurrences and an bone tingling atmosphere of gloom and terror are the must haves for a dish of gruesome gothic. Edgar Allen Poe has been referred to as a ' master of creating atmosphere and detail' (Shanahan, 2012) and when it comes to creating an American Gothic text acute with a Gothic ambience and characteristics, ' The Fall of the House of Usher', can be seen as a faultless example. Poe captures the reader's attention and imprisons them into his stories with his elaborate descriptions and chilling settings. He creates a particular Gothic sensibility by adopting certain American Gothic characteristics in his work. In ' The Fall of the House of the Usher', a definite American Gothic sensibility is achieved by his use of doubling, gothic vocabulary, powerful setting and minute attention to detail. Poe also explores the ' imaginative expression of fears and forbidden desires of Americans in his American Gothic text. American Gothic in the mid nineteenth century gave voice to suppressed groups and untalked about subjects such as incest. (Crow, 2009, 1) In this essay, these elements will be explored and discussed in order to understand how Poe excels in the creation of an exceptional Gothic understanding. Grasping and comprehending the American Gothic injects life into the text and allows the reader to lose

themselves in the words. Poe's use of effective setting captures the reader on a supernatural level. In 'The Fall of the House of the Usher', the signature gothic setting of a Castle is adapted in order to facilitate the American Gothic style. The castle is replaced by a huge Mansion, that has been kept in the Usher family for centuries, the narrator comments on the wood-work which 'has rotted for long years'. (Poe, 2004, 200) This old iconic house is used to create the Gothic sensibility. The title, 'The Fall of the House of Usher', can be referred to the family lineage of the Ushers or the actual house itself. In the text, the residence plays such a huge part in creating atmosphere and it has a huge influence on the visitor to the house, the narrator. The house almost acts as a character in itself. Like the family, it is of "an excessive antiquity" (Poe, 2004, 201), possessing a landscape that is overgrown and ragged which humanizes the building. It could almost be compared to an elderly man, unkept and tattered in his appearance. The inside of the house can be read in a certain way to develop this theory too. Roderick lives in the upstairs of the house which could be seen as the mind, (due to his mentally ill state, another American Gothic feature) and his twin sister is entombed below ground; the body (her situation of being buried alive coming to the fore). As Kerri Pearson discusses in her paper, the narrator feels an air of anxiety as he draws closer to the residence for the first time, 'there hung an atmosphere which had no affinity to the air of heaven...a pestilent and mystic vapour, dull sluggish, faintly discernible and leaden-hued'(Poe, 2004, 201). The building itself has an effect on the visitor, he has to 'shake of a type of dream' that has appears to have taken hold of him and this description allows the reader to believe that the house has encaptured him

within only seconds of him taking in its presence. Pearson also describes how the narrator 'reports a change in himself' as he draws closer. (2009, 134) She discusses how he feels 'unnerved' and 'depressed' and almost regretful of visiting because of the force the house has on him. The narrator has entered a supernatural world when he approaches the house and he knows himself that something unfamiliar and eerie lies ahead. In the beginning paragraphs of the gothic story, we can see how Poe creates the unsurpassable gothic setting. The interior of the house is also vital to creating the American Gothic sensibility. Poe has included many features that reek of Gothic style, 'gothic archway...many dark and intricate passages...somber tapestries...ebon blackness of the floors, phantasmagoric armorial trophies, long, narrow, pointed windows...black oaken floors and profuse, comfortless, antique and tattered furniture'. (2004, 203) The house mirrors the stereotypical view of a gothic building in an American Gothic story perfectly, and like the house itself, as the narrator steps deeper into the building, an 'irredeemable gloom' hangs over him. (Poe, 2004, 200) When describing the house, Poe adopts a style that pays incredible attention to detail but this does not solely apply to the description of the Usher residence. Throughout the whole story, Poe's appreciation of specific features adds to him being able to create an American Gothic sensibility. Taking the description of Roderick Usher, we can see how Poe pays exquisite attention to minute detail in order to grip the reader's attention. His writing is excessive and this is a dominant factor in American Gothic literature. He spends time illustrating and building his character's physique, 'a nose delicate of a Hebrew model... hair of a more than web-like softness and

tenuity... wild gossamer texture, floated rather than fell about his face'. (2004, 203) His descriptions are vivid and creepy adding to the atmosphere of mystery and suspense. However, as we read the descriptions observed by the narrator, another element of gothic literature that has been adopted is revealed. Throughout the story, many things occur that the narrator fails to recognise as something significant. As Douglass H. Thomson describes this story also features 'an unreliable narrator'. (Thomson, 2012) This type of narrator 'does not understand the importance of a particular situation' or he/she makes an incorrect conclusion or assumption about an event that he/she witnesses. (Thomson, 2012) We can see this thread of unreliable narrator throughout Poe's text. The narrator does not seem to realise the importance or significance linked to the story of the "Mad Trist" by Sir Launcelot Canning (as he reads, the events in the story actually begin to happen) and he does not seem to be able to make the connection of the house falling down to the actually family home of the Usher's falling apart. The fact that he does not know much about Roderick Usher after all these years also makes him an unreliable narrator. At the beginning of the text, he mentions how he had been a childhood friend of Roderick and 'that many years had passed' since their last meeting. He may also only describe the things that he could only see through his personal perspective. However, even if the narrator may not be the most ideal storyteller in this instance, he plays a huge role in the plot of the story. In this text, Poe adopts a very Gothic element into the storyline — doubling. The doubling motif in American Gothic literature is also known as Doppelgänger and the narrator in this storyline plays double to a few elements. 'The Fall of the House of Usher' is

closely tied to the poem 'The Haunted Palace' and Scott Peeples discusses this in his essay "Constructiveness". Peeples explores how the text 'is positioned appropriately in the middle to function as a *mise en abyme*, (story within a story) a miniature of the story that contains it.' He goes on to discuss how including this story in the centre of the story is another gothic element that Poe adopts in order to develop the American Gothic sensibility throughout. The mini poem divides the story in two and thus highlights Poe's doubling tactic. A number of doubling strategies can be seen throughout the story, 'The list of paired characters, events, places, and objects that can be regarded as doubles for their more-than-coincidental resemblance testifies to the density of Poe's construction.' (Peeples, 2010) Peeples also makes us aware of the other doubling techniques that Poe uses in this story and the characters that are paired with each other at various sections of the story, the twins Madeline and Roderick, the duo that Roderick and the narrator become, the vault like painting that Roderick owns and the vault where Madeline is buried alive, the double meaning of the title (Family of the Ushers and the actual Residence) "The Haunted Palace" and "The Fall of the House of Usher"; and the story "The Mad Trist" that is being read by the Narrator. Peeples also adds how the thunderstorm can be paired with the tumultuous climax of the story. According to Peeples, Poe has a tendency to repeat words and verbal structures throughout, e. g. 'During the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing alone, on horseback, through a singularly dreary tract of country; and at length found myself, as the shades of the evening drew on, within view of the melancholy

House of Usher.’ Without American Gothic texts like Poe’s, readers would not be able to experience the literature of the nineteenth century that has been described as haunted by an ‘ undead past and fascinated by the strange beauty of sorrow’. (Savoy, 2002, 167) Poe’s style and the elements he carefully utilizes in his text allow the reader to get lost in the piece of fiction and completely indulge in the American Gothic text. He creates an American Gothic sensibility by combining certain ingredients in a meticulous way, as discussed in the above essay. As Scott Peeples says in such a exemplary manner, Poe achieves the spine-tingling effect that can come only when one is not thinking “ this is only a story” but is instead under the spell of, or “ inside, ” the text, succeeding in creating the American Gothic sensibility. (peeples guy) BIBLIOGRAPHY: Cornwell, Neil. ‘ Grottesque.’ Handbook to Gothic Literature. Ed. Marie Mulvey-Roberts. New York: NYU, 1998. 273. Crow, Charles L., History of the Gothic: American Gothic. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009. Pearson, Kerri. “ The Significance of Incest and the Gothic Motif in Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘ The Fall of the House of Usher’”. Analele Critical Meridian- Philology Series 15. 1 (February 2009) : 129-141 Peeples, Scott. ‘ Poe’s “ Constructiveness” and “ The Fall of the House of Usher’’. The Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allen Poe. Ed. Kevin J Hayes. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. 178-190 Poe, Edgar Allan. “ The Fall of the House of Usher. ” The Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe. Ed. G. R. Thomas. New York: Norton, 2004. Savoy, Eric. ‘ The Rise of American Gothic.’ The Cambridge Companion to American Gothic Fiction. Ed. Jerrold E. Hogle. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. 167. Shanahan, Jim. ‘ American Gothic’. St. Patricks College of Education, Drumcondra. October

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