

# American gothic fiction



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American Gothic Fiction is a subgenre of Gothic Fiction. Elements specific to American Gothic include: rational vs irrational, puritanism, guilt, Das Unheimliche (strangeness within the familiar as defined by Sigmund Freud), abhumans, ghosts, monsters, and domestic abjection. The roots of these concepts lay in a past riddled with slavery, a fear of racial mixing (miscegenation), hostile Native American relations, their subsequent genocide, and the daunting wilderness present at the American frontier. American Gothic is often devoid of castles and objects which allude to a civilized history.

Differentiating between horror and terror is important in the study of these texts. [edit] Analysis of Major Themes The inability of many Gothic characters to overcome perversity by rational thought is quintessential American Gothic[1]. It is not uncommon for a protagonist to be sucked into the realm of madness because of his or her preference for the irrational. A tendency such as this flies in the face of higher reason and seems to mock transcendentalist thinking as outlined by “ Common Sense (pamphlet)” and The Age of Reason.

Also, one cannot ignore the contemporary Gothic themes of mechanism and automation that rationalism and logic lead to. The dark and nightmarish visions the Puritan culture of condemnation, reinforced by shame and guilt, created a lasting impact on the collective consciousness. Notions of predestination and original sin added to the doom and gloom of traditional Puritan values.

This perspective and its underlying hold on American society ripened the blossoming of stories like “ The Pit and the Pendulum”, “ Young Goodman Brown”, and The Scarlet Letter. The Dungeons and endless corridors that are a hallmark of European Gothic are far removed from American Gothic in which castles are replaced with caves. Lloyd-Smith reinterprets Moby Dick to make this point convincingly[3]. Early settlers were overcome by fear linked to the unexplored territory which surrounded, and in some cases, engulfed them.

Fear of the unknown stemming from environmental factors like darkness and vastness is notable in Charles Brockden Brown’s Edgar Huntly. The emergence of the “ abhuman” in American Gothic Fiction was closely coupled with Darwinism[4]. Ideas of evolution or devolution of a species; new biological knowledge and technological advancement created a fertile environment for many to question their essential humanity. Parallels between humans and every other living thing on the planet were made obvious by the aforementioned.

This is manifest in stories like H. P. Lovecraft’s “ The Outsider” and Nicholson Baker’s “ Subsoil”. Ghosts and monsters are closely related to this theme, they function as the spiritual equivalent of the abhuman and may be evocative of unseen realities, as in The Bostonians. Kristeva theorizes that the expulsion of all things defiling, much like a corpse, is a common coping mechanism for humanity[5].

Gilman’s “ The Yellow Wallpaper” exploits this concept. Furthermore, “ The Yellow Wallpaper” reads like a social commentary on the oppressive

conditions women suffered in their home lives at the turn of the century.

[edit] Early American Gothic Early American Gothic writers were particularly concerned with frontier wilderness anxiety and the lasting effects of a Puritanical society. "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" by Washington Irving is perhaps the most famous example of American Colonial era horror fiction.

As mentioned above Charles Brockden Brown was deeply affected by these circumstances, this is well evidenced by pieces such as *Wieland* (novel).

Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Washington Irving are often grouped together[2]. They present impressive, albeit disturbing, portraits of the human experience by way of horror. Poe accomplished this through the window of a diseased and depressive fascination with the morose, Irving with the keen charm of a masterful storyteller, and Hawthorne with familial bonds to past abominations like the Salem Witch Trials which he addresses in "Custom House".