

Gothic special effects: shock endings in the fiction essay sample

[Literature](#), [Fiction](#)



Observed through modern eyes, the “ shock” endings so prevalent in Gothic fiction of the nineteenth century are likely deprived of a bit of their former gusto and visceral impact. Not only have modern minds grown very well accustomed to the device of “ shock” endings in fiction, as well as in other forms of media: films, television, music, and even, to some extent, contemporary visual arts such as abstract-expressionist sculpture and painting, many of which utilize shock and surprise as part of their overall aesthetic impact (Frascina and Harris).

However, to nineteenth century audiences, the device of the “ shock” ending in Gothic fiction was not only perceived as inventive and new, but also in many cases as scandalous or worthy of much popular attention and debate. In this light, the use of the “ shock” ending in Gothic fiction may be regarded almost as a popular trend or, in fact, as a “ special effect” used by Gothic writers, who, in addition to winning over or scandalizing audiences with this technique, also found innovative ways of putting the technique into the service of theme and self-expression (Thomson, Voller, and Frank). These traits of popular self-expression are well-evident in the Gothic fiction of Stephenson, Poe, and Bierce.

In many cases, the “ shock” ending, as integrated into an allegorical work, provided a deep psychological catharsis for both the author and reader. This is evidenced by the enduring, iconic stature of particular Gothic characters, themes, and settings, notably: Poe’ “ The Fall of the House of Usher,” Bierce’s “ An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge,” and Stephenson’s “ The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde” (Thomson, Voller, and Frank.).

“ The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde” was published by Stephenson late in his life and career, after he had already established a popular idiom and when he was in need of both emotional and financial stability. In a letter to W. H. Low written on December 26, 1885, Stephenson writes of his new novella, saying: “ I have another thing coming out, which I did not put in the way of the Scribners, I can scarce tell how; but I was sick and penniless and rather back on the world, and mismanaged it. I trust they will forgive me.” (Colvin 443)

Though financial considerations no doubt played a part in the composition of “ The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr, Hyde,” the primary thematic impulse of the work is psychological, a confrontation with self-alienation and fear: “ Here emerges a sense of change that defies the very idea of subjective continuity; a kind of auto-alienation is implied by which the self is turned into another, a disguised other, the strangest other of all” (Mills 1).

The Gothic form of the work allowed Stephenson to probe issues hitherto unarticulated to Victorian audiences in fiction, “ The complexity of such a description, which characterizes subjectivity as a masquerade in which the self is an all-but-unrecognizable stranger, a figure of auto-dissimulation, might be read as preparing the way for the manifold subjectivity and self-estrangement with which the reader of Jekyll and Hyde would be confronted” (Mills 1).

That the themes of dissemination and personal disintegration would be challenging enough for Stephenson’s audience is a given; as is the fact that,

in order to tell a well-wrought tale, the novellas ending must ring with as much sensationalism as its rising action and themes. So, it is by use of a “ shock” ending that Stephenson completes not only his task of entertaining an audience and fulfilling their expectations, but bringing wholeness to his allegorical inquiry into the dualism of the human psyche. The “ shock” ending here is not only that such disassociative schisms can bring ruin to the individual, but also, forwarding the idea of the novel or novella as a mode of confessional expression, which in turn, brought about an almost meta-fictional resonance.

Edgar Allen Poe’s “ The Fall of the House of Usher” presents an allegory which integrates similar themes of personal psychic disintegration and fragmentation. Like Stephenson, Poe aspired to craft fiction that would entertain popular audiences, and Poe, like Stephenson, faced grievous psychological, physical, and personal issues at the time of the composition of his Gothic novella (Hoffman).

The use of a “ shock” ending in “ The Fall of the House of Usher” follows Poe’s typically logical and typically thorough theoretical preparation. In “ The Philosophy of Composition” Poe revealed a self-aware method of composition, at least at a technical level. His use of the “ shock” ending in some ways probably partakes of the type of technical delight that movie director Alfred Hitchcock took in thrilling audiences. In this regard, Poe probably glowed, knowing that his use of sudden twists, reversals, or revelations in fiction produced a palatable (and most interestingly: neurological) impact on readers (Spoto).

Poe's invention of the detective story in such works as "The Gold Bug" and "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" displayed yet another use of the "shock" ending, this variation in crime fiction, which was a novel form at the time and one which proved very successful for Poe. These facts speak to the popular (what we might call commercial) application of the "shock" ending in fiction. In Poe's works, the "shock" ending and the building of suspense add not only to reader engagement, but psychological ambience, lending a sense of urgency and profound drama to the allegorical events, which are largely psychological, rather than political or aesthetic, in their ultimate expression (Hoffman).

The Gothic form found potent political expression via Ambrose Bierce, whose wry, anti-romantic idiom challenged the notions of transcendence or even of spiritual exaltation so valued by Victorian writers and critics.

Does anyone quite forget his or her first reading of "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge"? At the time I was a seventh-grade Civil War aficionado, a proud owner of a square foot of the Gettysburg Battlefield—a fund-raising promotion I couldn't quite fathom. I felt that I owned that square foot of history and became an ardent believer in the heroic romance of that great conflict. But then came this "stunning blow upon the back of the neck" (58) of Peyton Farquhar, just as his miraculous escape from the hangman's noose and his dream of returning from the war to his beautiful wife look within inches of fulfillment. Why would anyone play this dark joke upon the reader? (Thomson, Voller, and Frank 61).

Bierce is revealed as “ a detonator of both romantic illusion and realist sobriety whose tightly woven tales helped purge the Gothic of some of its excesses and sentimentality” (“ The Ambrose Bierce Mystery,” American Mercury 18 September 1929, 124). (Thomson, Voller, and Frank 61).

The famous ending of “ An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” stands as a microcosm of Bierce’s anti-romantic or unflinchingly realist vision of human existence: “ Details of Farquhar’s death by hanging persistently intersect with much of the description of his apparent journey, a journey that is actually a distortion of the sensation of hanging and not merely a disengaged reverie of his escape from it.” (Stoicheff 41)

In “ The Damned Thing, ” another Bierce story, a coroner’s jury is convened to “ establish the mysterious cause of death of someone mauled by a terrible “ thing” that lurks around his house. The jury returns a verdict of death by mountain lion, but this commonplace cause scarcely does justice to the issues raised. What in fact was out there?” (Salomon 75).

Bierce’s “ well-grounded” Gothicism employed the “ shock” ending as a play of reality against manifold illusions; rather than searching for psychic integration as Stephenson in “ The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde” or for the lamentation of psychic disunity, as Poe did in “ The Fall of the House of Usher,” Bierce employs the elements of gothic narrative, including the use of “ shock” endings to engage readers with the facts of reality. That these facts are often grim and gruesome provides enough horror in Bierce’s

work, such that the reader is “shocked” to realize the world they inhabit is a dangerous, cruel, and often unjust place.

In conclusion, the “shock” ending technique employed by Gothic writer such as Stephenson, Poe, and Bierce can be regarded as a “special effect” of nineteenth century popular writers. This technique was useful not only as an element of allegorical sotires and novels, but as a mode for confessionalism, political commentary and criticism, satire, and psychological catharsis.

Though each of the writers studied in the above discussion used the device of ‘shock’ endings for the similar ambition of entertaining and thrilling audiences, each of these writers also found an idiom for unique expression via the use of “shock” endings. This techniquew, along with iconic charcters, storylines, and themes have helped Gothic ficiotn of the nineteenth century attain a perenial popularity with readers.

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