

**Gothic Elements in Edgar Allan Poe’s selected Short Stories**

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**Contents**

**Abstract……………………………………………………………….….................…..**

**Section One: Gothic literature………………………………………………………. 1**

1.1 the rise of the gothic short story ……………………..……………………………. 1

1.2 American Gothic literature ………………............................................................... 2

1.3 Gothic element in literature ……………………………………………………….. 5

**Section Two: Gothic elements Edgar Allan Poe’s short stories…………………… 10**

2.1 Gothic Tradition in Edgar Allan Poe’s short stories………………………………. 10

2.2 the black cat ………………………………………………………………………. 12

2.3 the fall of the house of usher ……………................................................................ 16

**Conclusion……………………………………………………………………..…….. 21**

**List of References…………………………………………………………..………... 22**

**Abstract**

This paper titled "Gothic Element in Edgar Allan Poe’s The Black Cat and The Fall of the House of Usher" aims to dissect the profound influence of Gothic elements in Edgar Allan Poe's renowned short stories. Split into two sections, the paper embarks on a journey to unknot the essence of Gothic literature and its appearance in Poe's works.

Section One of the study traces the historical emergence of Gothic short stories, from their inception to their prominence in American literature. It highlights the unique characteristics of American Gothic literature and its contributions to the genre. Additionally, it explores Gothic elements in literature, setting the stage for analyzing Poe's works. Transitioning to Section Two, the focus shifts to Edgar Allan Poe's short stories, emphasizing the dominant Gothic tradition in his narrative style. Through a close examination of "The Black Cat" and "The Fall of the House of Usher," this section divides the Gothic elements in Poe's storytelling, including themes, characters, and settings. It reveals the haunting ambiance, psychological depth, and macabre imagery in Poe's tales. Overall, the paper aims to provide readers with a nuanced understanding of how Poe employs Gothic elements to suggest uncertainty, terror, and a sense of the weird in his timeless works. Keywords: Gothic literature, Edgar Allan Poe, short stories, American Gothic, analysis.

**Section One:** **Gothic literature**

* 1. **The rise of the gothic short story**

Ghost stories have been a part of human culture for centuries, slowly developing into a separate form by the eighteenth century. Initially, ghosts were often part of elaborate plots, such as the gigantic ghost of Alfonso in Horace Walpole's "The Castle of Otranto." However, they later broke free from these limitations, as seen in Scott's "Wandering Willie's Tale" in 1824, leading to the development of the modern ghost story.

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, ghost stories often shared settings with gothic novels, featuring gloomy country houses and foggy graveyards. However, despite these similarities, ghost stories are essentially different. They focus on supernatural elements, with the dead returning and no room for normal explanations. The aim is to faintly remind fear in readers, rather than relying on obvious horror.

Creating believable characters and settings is central for successful ghost stories. Writers like J. Sheridan Le Fanu, M. R. James, and E. F. Benson excel in this, making their stories relatable and chilling. Despite attempts, it's challenging to sustain the tension of a ghost story in novel form, with short stories remaining the preferred format.

Interestingly, women have made a significant contribution to the genre, despite the unanswered question of why. Writers like Violet Hunt and Elizabeth Jane Howard, among others, have explored the supernatural monarchy with skill. The ghost story raises questions about why they're written and read. One reason could be that they offer a way to confront the worrying concept of death and what lies beyond it, providing an escape from larger, more unpleasant issues (Mulvey-Roberts, 1998)

* 1. **American Gothic literature**

American Gothic fiction has its origins deeply rooted in the larger Gothic literary tradition that first emerged in Britain and Europe. This tradition was characterized by themes of mystery, horror, and the supernatural, often set in weird, atmospheric landscapes. Early American authors such as Charles Brockden Brown and Washington Irving drew inspiration from British and German Gothic literature, adapting its figures and themes to the American context.

One of the most influential figures in American Gothic literature was Edgar Allan Poe, whose chilling and extraordinary tales captured the imagination of readers. Despite his significant contributions, Poe faced challenges in gaining general popularity due to shifting literary tastes in the 1830s and 1840s.

Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville further expanded the American Gothic genre by incorporating themes related to the nation's darker history, such as slavery and racial discrimination. Their exploration of societal issues added depth and complexity to American Gothic literature, reflecting the moral and social tensions of the time.

Southern Gothic literature emerged as a significant subgenre, focusing on the complexities of the American South and its history of racial oppression and trauma. Authors like Toni Morrison explored these themes with profound insight, shedding light on the region's troubled past.

In addition to societal themes, American Gothic literature delved into psychological exploration, as evidenced in the works of Henry James. Female perspectives also became integral to the genre, particularly in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's seminal work, "The Yellow Wallpaper," which explored themes of gender and mental health.

As American society evolved, so too did the Gothic genre. Urbanization and technological advancements influenced the development of urban Gothic literature, with authors like James Purdy, John Hawkes, Thomas Pynchon, and William Gibson exploring themes of alienation, technology, and the modern cityscape.

Overall, American Gothic literature emerged as a distinct literary form, shaped by the nation's unique cultural and political landscape. While indebted to European Gothic traditions, American Gothic offered unique insights into the nation's darker aspects through its exploration of horror, oppression, and psychological depth, making it a rich and enduring literary tradition (Mulvey-Roberts, 1998)

American Gothic literature is a type of writing that explores dark and eerie themes, like fear, violence, and the unknown. But for a long time, scholars mainly focused on European Gothic works, seeing American Gothic as just copies or imitations. Some early American Gothic writers, like Charles Brockden Brown and Nathaniel Hawthorne, were compared to their European counterparts, like Ann Radcliffe and Matthew Lewis. But this comparison often overlooked the unique qualities of American Gothic literature.

In recent years, scholars like Charles Crow have argued that to understand American literature, we need to understand its Gothic side. They say that American Gothic literature reflects the extremes and complexities of American culture, from its colonial beginnings to modern times. However, not everyone has celebrated American Gothic literature. Leslie Fiedler, for example, saw it as a sign of America's dark side, full of sadness and negativity. This view led to what some call "Gothic Guilt," where critics felt ashamed of enjoying or studying Gothic works.

But attitudes have been changing. Scholars like Teresa Goddu and Siân Silyn Roberts see American Gothic literature as a way to explore the nation's history and identity. They argue that these stories reveal deep-seated fears and tensions, like slavery and the treatment of indigenous peoples. Roberts suggests that American Gothic literature isn't just a reflection of society; it's also a way to challenge and question cultural norms. She believes that these stories help shape ideas about individuality and citizenship in America. However, there's a limitation in early American Gothic literature regarding the portrayal of women. While men in these stories were complex and individual, women were often relegated to stereotypical roles. They were expected to fit a certain pattern of behavior, limiting their individuality and agency (Gray,2017)

* 1. **Gothic element in literature**

The setting in Gothic literature often revolves around an old, eerie castle or mansion, or even the ruins of such structures. These buildings may appear abandoned, occupied, or inhabited by entities both human and supernatural. Within these castles or mansions, there are typically hidden features like secret passages, trap doors, and dark staircases, adding to the sense of mystery and danger. Sometimes, these structures are connected to caves, which amplify the atmosphere of fear with their darkness, strange sounds, and the possibility of encountering terrifying creatures like monsters or vampires.

In modern adaptations, this setting is often translated into an old or new house, where unconventional camera angles, close-ups, and manipulation of light and shadow create a feeling of claustrophobia and entrapment. Initially, the house may seem innocuous, but as darkness falls or dramatic events unfold, the atmosphere becomes tense and ominous.

The purpose of such a dark and mysterious setting is to evoke a sense of unease and anticipation, adding to the overall atmosphere of fear and dread. The darkness provides the perfect backdrop for sudden and terrifying appearances, whether they be of people, animals, ghosts, or other monstrous entities. Additionally, in films, the accompanying music enhances the emotional response to the visuals and dialogue, heightening the suspense and fear experienced by the audience.

In Gothic literature, characters often experience unsettling signs or visions that hint at future events. These can take the form of disturbing dreams or strange occurrences that are interpreted as omens. For instance, the toppling of a statue belonging to the lord of the manor might be seen as a sign of his impending death.

In modern fiction, characters may witness something eerie, like a shadowy figure committing a sinister act, and dismiss it as a dream or hallucination. This could be considered an "imitation vision," where reality and perception blur. Authors use these omens and visions to create suspense and anticipation. Sometimes they serve as foreshadowing, hinting at what's to come, while other times they play with reader expectations, leading them down unexpected paths. These elements add depth to the narrative, keeping readers engaged and intrigued as they try to decipher the meaning behind these mysterious occurrences.

In Gothic literature, there's an atmosphere thick with mystery and suspense, where an eerie sense of fear is heightened by the unknown. This feeling is intensified when characters catch glimpses of something fleeting - was it a person darting out the window or just the wind rustling a curtain? Is that creaking floorboard caused by someone's step or just the normal sounds of the night? The plot often revolves around a central mystery, like unknown parentage or a sudden disappearance, adding to the intrigue. People vanish without a trace or turn up dead under mysterious circumstances.

Elements such as these contribute to a sense of unease and anticipation. In modern novels and films, these mysterious events often take the form of murders, with bodies found mutilated or drained of blood, leaving characters questioning what kind of monstrous force could be responsible. As the body count rises, the suspense mounts, leaving readers or viewers on edge, wondering who will be the next victim.

Another setting that lends itself well to this atmosphere is a supposedly deserted island, where characters find themselves stranded after a shipwreck or enigmatic invitation. Cut off from civilization, they face unknown dangers and the possibility of encountering unexpected terrors - perhaps even living dinosaurs. This sense of isolation and uncertainty adds layers of suspense and entrapment to the narrative, keeping audiences hooked as they await each new revelation.

In Gothic literature, supernatural elements often serve as catalysts for the plot, driving characters to confront their deepest fears and desires. Whether it's a haunted castle shrouded in darkness or a cursed artifact with otherworldly powers, these elements create an atmosphere of uncertainty and intrigue, keeping readers on the edge of their seats.

Furthermore, supernatural beings like vampires or werewolves embody primal fears and desires, exploring themes of mortality, identity, and the human condition. They represent forces beyond human control, challenging protagonists to navigate a world where the boundaries between the natural and the supernatural blur.

In essence, the supernatural infuses storytelling with a sense of wonder and possibility, inviting audiences to explore the unknown and question the limits of their understanding. Whether it's used to evoke terror, wonder, or philosophical inquiry, supernatural elements enrich narratives with depth and complexity, leaving a lasting impression on readers and viewers alike.

In Gothic literature, emotions run high, often reaching exaggerated levels. Characters experience intense feelings such as anger, sadness, surprise, and especially, fear. They are frequently overwhelmed by a sense of impending disaster, feeling as if doom is lurking around every corner.

It's common for characters to cry and deliver emotional speeches. They often feel breathless and panicked, with nerves on edge. In Gothic films, screaming is a frequent occurrence, adding to the atmosphere of heightened emotion and tension. Overall, Gothic narratives thrive on intense emotional states, portraying characters who are deeply affected by their surroundings and circumstances. This emotional intensity contributes to the sense of drama and suspense that defines the genre (Harris,2019)

**Section Two: Gothic elements in Edgar Allan Poe’s short stories**

**2.1 Gothic Tradition in Edgar Allan Poe’s short stories**

Edgar Allan Poe is renowned for his adept use of Gothic elements in his short stories, which paved the way for a unique brand of American Gothic fiction. While Poe's works draw inspiration from the European Gothic tradition, they exhibit a distinct sophistication in exploring the complexities of the human spirit. Poe's mastery lies in his ability to elevate Gothic storytelling beyond mere entertainment, transforming it into a vehicle for profound psychological exploration. Benjamin Fisher notes that Poe's genius lies in reshaping Gothic tales into sophisticated psychological fiction, moving beyond mere blood-curdling horror to delve into the depths of human consciousness.

Initially drawn to Gothic storytelling as a means of commercial success, Poe found within it a canvas perfectly suited for his exploration of the darker recesses of the human mind. His stories, such as "The Fall of the House of Usher," and "The Black Cat," exemplify his skillful manipulation of Gothic conventions to create psychologically rich narratives. Unlike his contemporary Nathaniel Hawthorne, who embraced a more restrained approach to Gothic elements, Poe's utilization was less inhibited, allowing him to plumb depths previously unexplored in 19th-century literature. Eric Savoy suggests that Poe's urban background lent a rawness to his Gothic imagery, setting him apart as a writer unafraid to confront the darkest aspects of the human psyche.

Poe's tales are marked by their ambiguity, blurring the lines between reality and illusion, life and death, and conscious and unconscious realms. They often defy easy interpretation, inviting analysis through psychoanalytic, structuralist, and post-structuralist lenses. Central to Poe's Gothic narratives is his exploration of the symbolic power of darkness. While he never directly addressed issues of slavery, his works have been interpreted as profound reflections on the cultural significance of "blackness" in American society. Toni Morrison even hailed Poe as a seminal figure in shaping concepts of African American identity.

Moreover, Poe's treatment of female characters, often associated with death and the tomb, has sparked considerable debate among critics. While some view Poe's portrayal as silencing or suppressing feminine experiences, others argue that his stories subtly critique the androcentric norms of his time, giving voice to the marginalized female perspective. Through his incorporation of Gothic tradition, Poe challenges the binary oppositions inherent in Western society, disrupting the rigid structures of masculine authority. His "uncanny heroines" emerge as agents of the Real, unsettling the Symbolic order and questioning established power dynamics. In essence, Poe's Gothic tales transcend mere genre conventions, serving as profound explorations of the human condition and challenging societal norms with their unsettling ambiguity and psychological depth (Stankovic,2021)

**2.2 the black cat**

"The Black Cat" by Edgar Allan Poe is a prime example of Gothic fiction that delves into the depths of the human spirit through symbolic representations inspired by Gothic tradition. At its core, the story explores the dark aspects of the human mind, often analyzed from ethical, psychological, and sociological perspectives. Central to the narrative is the symbolic potential of the cat, which embodies the protagonist's unconscious desires and fears. Throughout history, cats have fascinated artists due to their mysterious nature, often depicted with dual characteristics of both malevolence and benevolence. In Gothic fiction, cats are frequently associated with mystical and magical attributes, embodying either divine or demonic forces.

Poe's portrayal of the cat, named Pluto, exemplifies this duality. Initially, Pluto is the narrator's beloved pet, symbolizing companionship and affection. However, as the protagonist's psyche unravels, he begins to mistreat the cat, eventually leading to its brutal demise. The appearance of a second cat resembling Pluto serves as a projection of the narrator's guilt and subconscious torment. The cat's role extends beyond mere symbolism; it becomes a catalyst for the protagonist's descent into madness and violence. The narrator's perverse impulses, fueled by alcoholism and mental illness, culminate in the murder of his wife. The cat, both as a physical presence and a psychological manifestation, haunts the narrator, revealing the depths of his depravity. Critics have interpreted the cat as representing various themes, including Freudian concepts of the Uncanny and Kristevan notions of abjection. Additionally, the cat's symbolism extends to broader societal issues, such as white supremacy and the legacy of slavery in America. Some scholars view the cat as an abolitionist allegory, representing the oppressed seeking vengeance against their oppressors.

Through the cat's symbolic potential, Poe challenges traditional notions of good and evil, blurring the lines between human and animal, oppressor and oppressed. The cat's return from the grave symbolizes the resurgence of repressed voices and the reckoning with historical injustices. In essence, "The Black Cat" showcases Poe's mastery of Gothic elements, utilizing symbolism to explore the complexities of the human condition and confront societal taboos. Through the enigmatic figure of the cat, Poe crafts a narrative that resonates with psychological depth and social commentary (Stankovic,2021)

"The Black Cat" is a Gothic tale that delves into the disturbed mind of a man who starts off loving animals but ends up committing terrible acts. The story revolves around the man's favorite pet, a cat named Pluto, and how his mistreatment of the cat leads to a series of tragic events. At the start of the story, the man and his wife share a love for animals and have many pets in their home. But as time passes, the man begins to drink and mistreats both his pets and his wife. Pluto, once his favorite, becomes a victim of his abuse, leading to a shocking act of cruelty where the man hangs the cat.

After the man's house mysteriously catches fire, leaving only a wall with an eerie image of a cat, a new cat with similar markings to Pluto appears. The man's aversion to this new cat grows, leading to further violence and ultimately the death of his wife. Throughout the story, there are elements of the supernatural and madness, typical of Gothic literature. The narrator's descent into madness is portrayed through his erratic behavior and irrational actions, such as mistreating his pets and murdering his wife. The symbolism of the cat is significant in understanding the story's themes. Pluto represents more than just a pet; it symbolizes the man's inner turmoil and descent into darkness. The cat's sudden reappearance after its supposed death adds to the story's mysterious and eerie atmosphere.

Poe's use of language and imagery creates a sense of unease and tension, drawing the reader into the narrator's twisted world. The story's ambiguous ending leaves readers questioning the true nature of the events, adding to its haunting appeal. In conclusion, "The Black Cat" is a classic example of Gothic fiction, exploring themes of madness, guilt, and the supernatural. Poe's masterful storytelling and use of symbolism make it a compelling and chilling read that continues to captivate readers to this day (Lopes, 2017)

In Edgar Allan Poe's story "The Black Cat," there are many scary and weird things happening. The story is about a man who starts off as a nice person but then does some very bad things because of a black cat. Firstly, there's a lot of fear and horror in the story. The man becomes very scared and starts to do terrible things, like hurting animals and even killing his wife. This makes the story really creepy and unsettling. Secondly, there are strange characters in the story, like the black cat itself. At first, it's just a regular pet, but then it becomes really creepy and seems to bring bad luck. Another strange thing is when a second cat appears that looks exactly like the first one, but it's somehow different and scary.

Also, death is a big part of the story, and it's shown in a really gross and disturbing way. The man kills the cat and then his wife, and the way he talks about it is really scary. There's also a fire that destroys everything except the wall where the cat was hanging, which is really weird. Lastly, there are a lot of mysterious things that happen in the story that we can't explain. Like how the image of the hanging cat gets burned into the wall, or how the second cat seems to come back from the dead to haunt the man. Overall, "The Black Cat" is a really scary story that makes you feel uncomfortable and on edge. It shows how fear and darkness can make people do terrible things, and it's definitely not a story for the faint of heart (Endurance, Yahya and Majeed, 2014)

**2.3 the fall of the house of usher**

"The Fall of the House of Usher" by Edgar Allan Poe is a masterpiece of Gothic literature, skillfully weaving together various elements to create a haunting and immersive narrative experience. Central to the story's allure is Poe's adept manipulation of atmosphere, characterization, symbolism, and aesthetic function. Poe's meticulous attention to detail in crafting the atmosphere is evident from the opening lines of the story. He paints a vivid picture of the Usher mansion, with its "vacant, eyelike windows" and "black and lurid tarn," immediately enveloping the reader in a sense of foreboding and unease. Throughout the tale, descriptions of the decaying estate and its surroundings serve to heighten the atmosphere of dread, immersing the reader in a world fraught with despair and impending doom.

Characterization in "The Fall of the House of Usher" is equally compelling, with Poe presenting characters who embody classic Gothic tropes. Roderick Usher, with his "cadaverousness of complexion" and descent into madness, serves as a poignant example. Through Roderick's inner turmoil and psychological unraveling, Poe explores themes of existential dread and the fragility of the human psyche. The narrator, too, undergoes a transformation, grappling with his own fears and uncertainties as he navigates the eerie confines of the Usher mansion. Symbolism permeates the narrative, adding layers of depth and meaning to the story. The Usher family itself serves as a potent symbol of decay and decline, mirroring the crumbling mansion in which they reside. The house, with its labyrinthine passages and gloomy interior, becomes a metaphor for the inner torment of its inhabitants. Throughout the story, Poe employs symbols such as the tarn and canvas to evoke themes of evil, illusion, and impending death, further enriching the narrative with allegorical significance.

At a deeper level, "The Fall of the House of Usher" serves an aesthetic function within the Gothic tradition. Poe's masterful manipulation of horror and suspense creates a sense of sublime beauty that both terrifies and captivates the reader. Through the exploration of darkness and despair, Poe offers readers a cathartic experience—a journey into the depths of the human psyche where inner demons are confronted and fears are laid bare. In this way, the story transcends mere entertainment, inviting readers to confront their own existential anxieties and grapple with the complexities of the human condition. In conclusion, "The Fall of the House of Usher" stands as a testament to Poe's skill as a Gothic writer, weaving together elements of atmosphere, characterization, symbolism, and aesthetic function to create a narrative that continues to resonate with readers today. Through its exploration of darkness and despair, the story invites readers on a journey into the heart of Gothic terror—a journey that is as unsettling as it is mesmerizing (Pang, Wang and Hu, 2015)

"The Fall of the House of Usher" by Edgar Allan Poe is a story that plunges readers into a dark and eerie world. Set in a gloomy and isolated mansion, the tale unfolds with an atmosphere thick with dread and despair. The mansion itself, described as dilapidated and haunting, stands alone in the wilderness, its desolate surroundings mirroring the inner turmoil of its inhabitants. Within this bleak setting reside the peculiar characters of the story, particularly Roderick Usher and his sister, Madeline. Roderick, with his pale face and erratic behavior, embodies a sense of instability and mental anguish. His sister, Madeline, adds to the story's sense of strangeness as she appears to be both alive and dead, her presence haunting the mansion with an otherworldly presence.

As the narrative progresses, Poe delves into the psychological depths of his characters, particularly Roderick's descent into madness. Through Roderick's thoughts and actions, Poe explores themes of fear, despair, and the unraveling of the human mind. The story becomes a haunting exploration of the subconscious, as the characters wrestling with their inner demons amidst the decaying walls of the mansion. Symbolism plays a significant role in the story, with the crumbling mansion and its surroundings serving as metaphors for the deteriorating mental states of the characters. Midnight, a recurring motif in Gothic literature, symbolizes the time when reason gives way to imagination and subconscious fears come to the surface. Themes of isolation and dread permeate the narrative, reflecting the characters' profound loneliness and existential angst. The Usher siblings, trapped within the confines of their decaying home, embody a sense of alienation from the world around them, their fate sealed by the looming specter of madness and death (Zhang, 2022)

In shaping the Gothic genre and his skill in utilizing spatiality to enhance the horror elements in his works. Throughout this analysis, it became evident that spatiality, in conjunction with time, plays a crucial role in defining the Gothic genre and creating an atmosphere of terror in literature. Poe's mastery in utilizing space as a tool for creating horror is demonstrated through his short story "The Fall of the House of Usher." From the very beginning, the house itself serves as a character, evoking feelings of unease and terror in both the narrator and the reader. The description of the house, with its decaying walls, vacant windows, and eerie atmosphere, sets the stage for the unfolding horror.

Moreover, Poe's choice of setting the majority of the story within the confines of the house intensifies the feeling of claustrophobia and isolation, further contributing to the Gothic atmosphere. The house becomes a manifestation of the protagonist's inner turmoil and serves as a reflection of his deteriorating mental state. Furthermore, the gradual collapse of the house mirrors the protagonist's descent into madness, culminating in a climactic and terrifying finale. The fissure in the building, which widens as the story progresses, symbolizes the cracks in the protagonist's mind, leading to the ultimate collapse of both the physical structure and the character's sanity ( do vale and Moura, 2020)

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the Gothic elements in Edgar Allan Poe's short stories, "The Black Cat" and "The Fall of the House of Usher," showcase his mastery of the genre and his ability to evoke fear, suspense, and a sense of the macabre in his readers. Through his use of atmospheric settings, psychological horror, and themes of madness and decay, Poe solidified his place as a pioneer of American Gothic literature. The dark themes explored in these stories continue to captivate audiences, demonstrating the enduring power of Poe's storytelling and his lasting influence on the Gothic tradition in literature.

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