Often mistakenly credited with inventing the literary Gothic, Edgar Allan Poe (1809–49) contributed significantly to the continuance and sophistication of the Gothic tradition. In the majority of his tales, in several poems, and in a novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838), Poe demonstrates important modifications of Gothicism, principally in imparting psychological realism to his characters and credibility to the situations that affect them. What is often forgotten amid the mythologizing that frequently makes Poe's works attractive is that he deliberately turned to the writing of fiction to make money after his initial three books of verse attracted little attention and less remuneration.

Poe's fiction in many surface features follows patterns of the Gothic short story popularized in the pages of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* and other British and American literary periodicals from the 1820s well through the nineteenth century. Moreover, Poe recognized that many Gothic works – from Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) through to Poe's own times (and beyond) – mingled the comic and horrific, and he speedily discerned, and ridiculed, the extravagances inherent in these works. Thus, his own fiction and, possibly, "The Raven" (1845) may seem to be wholly somber, although they may likewise offer multiple interpretations, all equally valid.

Poe's stories first appeared (anonymously) in the *Philadelphia Saturday Courier* in 1832. Of the five tales published that year, four were obvious burlesques of contemporary best-selling authors, though the first to appear, "Metzengerstein" (January 14, 1832), betrays comic and serious elements. In this and other works, Poe's revisions and republications reveal increasingly serious intent and greater technical refinements. In these first years of his fiction writing, Poe also experimented with a book project, "Tales of the Folio Club." Within the framework of a pretentious literary club, the members were caricatures of popular authors, including Poe himself. During monthly evening meetings, accompanied by plenty of food and drink, each member reads a tale of his own creating, which the members then debate in pompous, nonsensical fashion. The weaknesses of the fiction and critical methodology of the time were ultimately thus exposed. In the context of gluttony and drunkenness, the weird settings and the overstrained characterizations, situations, and language would have been entirely comic, but plausible. No publisher would risk the likely financial losses of such a book, wherein the humor was too subtle for average readers, so Poe published the tales individually, and without the Folio Club framework they often seemed ambiguous.

The tale originally entitled "The Visionary," but better known by its final title, "The Assignation," (1934) furnishes a representative text in which Poe's revisions alter any earlier mirth into more probing considerations of life versus art, deftly blending in folkloric elements (see folklore) and romantic intrigue. What may first have read as an engagement with the controversies that encircled the biographies of Lord Byron during the early 1830s is transformed into a tale in which the love affair between Byron and Countess Guiccioli is subsumed by considerations of the psychology in love relationships. Similarly, the related contexts of life and art are linked to folk beliefs about tragedies that befall mortals who fall in love with nonmortal objects that mime life (in this tale, statuary). Thus, what could be read as nothing more than a tawdry story about illicit love transcends such tawdriness by means of Poe's subtle art. The "Visionary" in this tale may be either the narrator, whose perceptions
are constrained within physical planes, or the stranger-hero, whose "vision" shifts from collecting art objects that relate to love (but the loves of classical deities are far more liberated than those in the human society of the early nineteenth century) to a love that itself defies the general conception of extramarital affairs prevalent in the human outlook. As in "Metzengerstein," in which the young, profligate Baron and his great supernatural horse symbolize what might be designated as the human and animal, or rational and non-rational aspects in human behavior, the mortal–statue shifts effected in "The Assignation" lead to tragedy. The difference is that the latter tale presents what is commonly viewed as tragic as a possible transcendence of the illicit lovers to another world (that on the far side of death) that is sympathetic instead of disapproving of their love. The suicide, rather than being horrifying melodrama, is related to the root meaning of the word: "death of the self." The union of the stranger and his inamorata is contextualized within the themes of giving up individuality, which may be destructive to a genuine union, and masculine and feminine equality.

Poe soon comprehended that he could produce tales containing bizarre characters involved in threatening circumstances, in which the human mind itself provided understandable origins for terrors besetting the protagonists. He also realized that he could use long-standing Gothic trappings and characters – for example, the haunted, decayed castle (or its equivalent); gloomy landscapes; characters whose terrors often resulted from fears of death, and, if they survived, strongly affected their subsequent conduct – to represent states of minds under heightening stress. These techniques evince a great advance over what in antecedent Gothic fiction more often seem like implausible characterizations; Poe created Gothic fiction that was eerie, but because of understandable psychological roots. Poe's typical first-person narrative methods enhance the psychological realism, which coalesces well with the hyperbolic language and feelings of the protagonist and, usually, other characters. The brevity in these tales likewise strengthens verisimilitude: extending the length would diminish the impact of the terrors (such length sometimes being a defect in Gothic novels). Another feature in Poe's presumably supernatural writings is his accomplished manipulation of the supernatural to achieve realistic results. That is, a seeming ghost may not be a mere cardboard figure but a character or presence symbolizing aspects of mind or gender.

Consequently, Poe's later tales do not immediately yield the humor evident in earlier works such as "A Tale of Jerusalem," "Bon-Bon," "The Duc de L'Omelette," and "Loss of Breath" (all 1832), though Poe did not altogether eschew the comic impulse in his later works. "Ligeia" (1838), "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839), "William Wilson" (1839), "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841), "The Masque of the Red Death" (1842), "The Raven" (1845), "The System of Dr. Tarr and Professor Fether" (1845), and "The Cask of Amontillado" (1846) are customarily read as wholly grim pieces, though all have comic facets (see comic gothic), and these works are not the sole examples of Poe's later writings that subtly blend humorous and horrifying elements – witness, for example, "The Angel of the Odd" (1844), "The Sphinx" (1846), and "Hop-Frog" (1849). True, we find recurrent motifs of drunkenness and gluttony in "Tarr and Fether," "The Cask of Amontillado" (wherein protagonist and antagonist become intoxicated, though the former, Montresor, does not overtly tell readers about his own mounting intoxication), and "Hop-Frog." In these tales a greater psychological realism emerges than may, or may seem to, in some of the more directly satiric and parodic earlier fiction.

"The Fall of the House of Usher" constitutes a signal representative of the sophistication of Poe's Gothic tales. The unsettled protagonist journeying into intensifying foreboding situations; the haunted, decaying Usher mansion; the mounting suspense relating to the narrator's reaction to the mirror image...
of the old stone mansion as reflected in the adjacent pool (in which he also sees his own reflection, which may resemble that of the house, which in turn looks like and symbolizes a weird human head); the narrator’s brief but unnerving meeting with the family physician; his introduction to Madeline (or, rather, his being made aware, for the first time, of her existence, which disturbs him); his discovery of the decaying state of his former schoolmate, Roderick; the pervasive, foreboding eeriness of the mansion; Roderick’s poem, “The Haunted Palace;” Roderick's painting (of a void that seems so like the Ushers’ own state, which in turn reflects that of the narrator himself); the seeming death and eventual return of Madeline; the collapse of the “house” (physical and emotional), symbolizing the downfall of the three main characters; and finally the narrator’s escape and his compulsion to provide an account of the strange circumstances (which symbolize his own psycho-physical state): all these, and much more, emblematize a character in whom physical makeup and, more importantly, emotional stability are frighteningly imbalanced.

Poe was many years ahead of his time in his comprehension of an individual's embodying masculine and feminine components. If, as is typical in several of Poe's works with important female characters, the feminine is repressed, what eventuates is disaster for the male (often depicted as a survivor of a beloved female’s death), who is responsible for the decline and, usually, the burial of the feminine presence. This circumstance informs "Berenice" (1835), "Morella" (1835), "Ligeia," and "The Fall of the House of Usher." Of course, these deaths and burials are symbolic of the repression of some paramount force in the male’s existence, usually relating to artistic-spiritual and related psycho-sexual makeup. Two additional tales can be grouped with those just cited, "How to Write a Blackwood Article – A Predicament" (1838) and "Eleonora" (1842). The former piece parodies not only the Gothic short story overall but also Poe's own themes and methods (and is the only tale in which the narrator is female). More than passing notice may inhere in Mr. Blackwood's advice to the aspirant fiction writer, Signora Psyche Zenobia: "Hint every thing – assert nothing" (Poe 1968–78, vol. 2: 342). Moreover, for the finest Blackwood tale she should write about the sensations: "Sensations are the great things after all" (340). While on the one hand this remark may seem insignificant, on the other it serves well as a definition of Poe’s own aims in the writing of fiction (and verse). Complaints about Poe overdoing description in his fiction must give way to the fact that Mr. Blackwood's counsel is also a perfect definition of Poe’s symbolic techniques. Just as many of his contemporaries accepted and employed symbolism to enhance their literary art, Poe, too, often wrought such that things or tangibles assume symbolic dimension; for example, the house of Usher itself, wherein gender issues may seem uncertain (note how Madeline, for all her apparent debilitation, proves to be more powerful than her twin) and the narrator goes forth strengthened sufficiently to follow his compulsion to tell a story with great forcefulness. Once he has witnessed the devastating consequences of "burying" the creative presence in one's self – whether that presence is artistic or sexual creativity – he emerges with energized abilities to reflect upon the events he has observed as they relate to himself. That is, Roderick and Madeline represent twin halves in what should be an integrated self. That Roderick inclines more and more toward the artistic – but in doing so imperils the physical, and potentially sexual, elements in his makeup – produces all the horrors that result from such unbalancing or repressing of strong natural forces. Some readers of "Usher" suggest that the downfall of the house, in all senses of that word, is the outcome of Roderick and Madeline’s committing incest, though the text does not seem to bear out that interpretation (see incest). That critique would keep "The Fall of the House of Usher" limited to mere thriller-sensational status, whereas the text itself invites more sophisticated approaches.

That the Poe canon presents a pattern of the author satirizing or parodying his own writings is a factor...
not to be ignored in discussions of "Usher" or many others among his works. In "Usher" itself reside sufficient qualities to align the tale with other works in which Poe seems to create lampoons of Gothic tradition as well as self-parody. Roderick Usher and his situation may be a tilt at the accounts of Roderick, the last of the European Goths, whose downfall was connected with his illicit sexual predation upon the daughter of his greatest ally. Several British Romantics had addressed that legend, as did Poe's American contemporary, William Gilmore Simms, in a number of works. Thus, that Poe turned his attention to the legendry is understandable. Poe's Roderick and Madeline may serve to satirize the persecuted frail maiden and her nemesis, characters long popular in Gothic tradition. Similarly, the cliché of the dilapidated, haunted castle may take a comic fall in Poe's tale. "Usher" may also stand as another of Poe's self-parodies, taking a place alongside "How to Write a Blackwood Article – A Predicament" or the earlier "Loss of Breath," which in part may also burlesque techniques in Robert Montgomery Bird's episodic novel Sheppard Lee (1835), which Poe reviewed, and Eaton S. Barrett's The Heroine (1813), itself a lampoon of Gothic fiction, which had been republished in America during the mid-1830s and was a favorite of and much publicized by Thomas W. White, Poe's employer on the Southern Literary Messenger (1835–7).

This calling of attention to one's own writings is indicative of Poe's self-promotion, and that self-promotion or self-deprecation is not restricted to his fiction. "The System of Dr. Tarr and Professor Fether" may be read as incorporating comedy that harks back to "Usher" in the contrasting human and animal traits of the characters, which are reminiscent of aspects of many earlier stories: Madeline Usher's amazing strength, which enables her to escape from her sealed coffin and a near-sealed room (she may be a vampire figure (see vampire fiction)); the orangutan in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue;" the seemingly ape-like appearances of the escaped keepers of the insane asylum; and the weird, disturbing masked ball scenario in "The Masque of the Red Death." "Tarr and Fether" may also be read as a wholly serious consideration of the fine dividing line separating sanity and madness, a theme reiterated in other works by Poe. Distinguishing serious from humorous intent in Poe's writings often proves difficult. Poe's repeated comment that the death of a beautiful woman constitutes the most poetic of all themes has been taken at face value by many readers; because he also repeatedly devised wordplay on his surname, one may well question the precise nature of "poetic" in his critical vocabulary.

A final specimen of Poe's particularized handling of the Gothic is exemplified in his novel, The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym (1838), which has elicited diverse interpretations that range from reading the novel at face value to seeing it as a deliberate hoax, and from contextualizing it as demonstrating Poe's racism (see race) to offering subtle perspectives on gender issues. Poe was advised to attempt a novel for financial remuneration, but that he followed his own course in Pym makes the novel rich in possibilities. Poe's attitude toward race, specifically toward African American racial matters, is ambiguous (see african american gothic). Pym is clearly a bildungsroman, much like Mark Twain's Adventures of Huckleberry Finn or Dickens' Great Expectations (see dickens, charles). The episodic structure mimes an adolescent male's maturation stages, culminating in his encounter with a mysterious, giant, white shrouded figure (likely symbolic of a female presence) and with Pym's merging with that presence; a natural uneasiness occurs, but Pym's maturation is complete, so the novel ends. Arguments that the novel is incomplete may not be the last word concerning Pym. The scenes of treachery, horrible deaths, and near-deaths; the emphatically masculine presence on the island of Tsalal, with its natives' destruction (which, though, also bring about destruction of many of the destroyers) of the significantly named ship, the Jane Guy; and the overarching aura of mystery and ambiguity throughout the novel are further examples of Poe's manipulation of Gothic sensationalism to serve an exciting
artistic purpose.

In sum, Poe brought to literary Gothicism a sophistication and psychological plausibility that is often absent or left second-rate by authors determined only to produce momentary stimulation for their readership. Poe's own life should not be confused with his more evident accomplishments with the materials usually used for no more than ephemeral bestseller marketability.

SEE ALSO: African American Gothic; Comic Gothic; Dickens, Charles; Folklore; Incest; Race; Vampire Fiction.

REFERENCE


FURTHER READING


BENJAMIN F. FISHER

APA

https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/poe_edgar_allan_1809_1849
Retrieved from https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/poe_edgar_allan_1809_1849
APA

Chicago

Harvard

MLA