

# Horror from the Soul—Gothic Style in Allan Poe’s Horror Fictions

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## Abstract

Edgar Allan Poe made tremendous contribution to horror fiction. Poe’s inheritance of gothic fiction and American literature tradition combined with his living experience forms the background of his horror fictions. He inherited the tradition of the gothic fictions and made innovations on it, so as to penetrate to Sub consciousness. Poe’s horror fictions became the origin of Southern fictions, to a certain degree. In his works, he revealed people’s horror towards super nature, nothingness, death, evil and disintegration of personality. He tried to demonstrate that horror originates from our soul. By means of symbol, suspense, first person narrator, exaggeration of atmosphere and anti-closure, Poe tried his best to construct an intact uniform, mysterious and shaking effect. Poe’s fictions feed readers aesthetic enjoyment. In the portrait of evil and horror, he achieves the sublimation and purification of man’s inner world.

**Keyword:** Allan Poe, horror, American literature

## 1. Ways of Expressing Terror

There is no other passion than fear that can effectively deprive people from actions and thoughts. In Poe’s works, we have profound comprehension that all the terrifying souls were fully immersed in the atmosphere of the Gothic horror Poe had depicted for them. The danger does not really exist, but Poe turned them into reality with his imagination and formidable narrative ability, and updated the frightening degree, so people could not but feels scared. Valery said that Poe was the person who created the world, and the only writer who didn’t have any defects. He never made mistakes. He was not guided by the instincts, but his way of explaining things. He created forms from nothingness.

In the world view of Allan Poe, he treated original unity as phenomena of universe. This principle, reflected in his creation, aims to achieve perfection in art. All the Symbolism and suspense in his works left enough space to the readers, which made it possible for them to experience the magic of terror. The first person narrator made the story more real and close to the readers. The readers can see the characters’ naked soul in which they may see themselves. The continuously high lightening of atmosphere, anti-closure, the readers are experiencing the invisible fear. Through all these means, Poe tried his best to construct an intact and uniform, mysterious and shaking effect.

## 2. The First Person Narrator

All Poe’s novels are told in first person. But all the American writers before him chose the third person perspective when they wrote. Poe had his own purpose in choosing the first person view. The first person narrator told the readers the chilling stories either they saw or they experienced themselves, which objectively presented and narrated his own opinion and the readers can see the vivid behavior and the direct effect. Also, the readers can imagine themselves in a plot Poe set where they could experience the feelings of craziness and terror which only the narrator could experience. And another advantage of the first person narrators’ technique is that we can see the inner world and the state of mind of the narrators themselves.

In Poe’s novel, the first person narrator used an experience-recreating technique to describe his experience, which made the readers become the mainstay of the story, is one important narrative technique which runs through the whole process. He seemed to look or think, however, “I” disappeared in the rhetorical structure. The readers realized that what they face maybe their own subjective impression. The early Thriller Writers impact people by directly describing the horrible experience, yet Poe used this indirect method as a way by which emotions would easily be aroused; the key difference of this method is that the readers treat the reactions of the

narrator as his own.

*The Fall of the House of Usher* is considered by the public as the best horror fiction. The leading character, Roderick Usher, is a typical character Poe created in the novel. In the process of narrating, on the one hand, Poe paid great attention to every fine change in Usher's psychotic brain; on the other hand, he placed a friend beside Usher in order to observe him, and then the man came back and told the terrible process of how Usher died.

In *The Fall of the House of Usher*, the narrator started the story with memories. The gloomy and decadent environment the narrator described set the tone for the readers' imagination. A series of hints and signs fired the imaginations of the readers. Gradually, we get involved in the observation and thought toward this family and the house which was in the eyes of the narrator and allowed him to bring us into a real and fantasy world.

The first person narrator's perspective helped to profoundly analyzing the characters' inner world. The author did not tell you why the characters in his story committed crimes, nor did he want to re-educate his criminals. Instead, Poe depicted an overstated process of commission of crime and the psychological change of the characters in the process. He depicted the process so delicate and incisive that the readers are truly in their parts before they know it. The heroes in *The Tell Tale Heart* and *The Black Cat* were both murderers, however, Poe by using the first person, openly and directly told the criminal's psychology. Consciously or unconsciously, he showed the psychology activities of the characters to the readers. He let the inner voice of the heroes be heard. Reading this kind of stories is just like directly facing the characters' soul, listening to his last words, which affect us and move us to sympathy.

In *The Tell Tale Heart*, "I" was an oversensitive mania and killed an innocent old man without any other motivation, just because "I" disliked and even could not bear the old man's vulture-like eye. We can read it in the story: It took me 8 days to observe the old man and I killed him eventually and dismembered the corpse and hid it under the floor. In order to exaggerate the mysterious and horrible psychology activities of the madman in the process of commission of crime, Poe described many times in the novel "the eye of a vulture—a pale blue eye, with a film over it" and "the beating of the old man's heart".

The terrible vulture eye and the louder and louder heartbeat were only the patient owns feelings. The police officer didn't hear the heartbeat (Exactly speaking, there was no such sound at all!). The criminal just got an illusion of the heartbeat after he committed the crime because of terror or his guilty conscience. The heartbeat just tortured me and I could bear it no more,

*"Villains" I shrieked, "Dissemble no more! I admit the deed!—tear up the planks!—here, here!—it is the beating of his hideous heart!"* (Note 1)

The author gave a vivid description to the whole process of commission of crime, including criminal motive, murder and confession by analyzing the madman's abnormal psychology. Furthermore, it was conveyed in the form of psychological feelings and constructed the horrible atmosphere for the readers, so it achieved the author's predicted effects.

In these stories, the narrator himself properly participated in telling the readers his own experience in the novels, which definitely aroused the people's attention to every intension to the main theme. The narrator in the novels became Poe's messenger whose mission is a media connecting common and noble, sufferings and stimulation, plain and poetic and articles and readers. These stories recorded the narrators and the imaginative readers' entering the frightening world in their hearts through the power of words.

Poe's works are full of suspense and passion. Terror always came in an unguarded moment and the readers experienced an exaggerate excitement because of the terror. In order to achieve this effect, and make the story seem real, Poe used the first person narrator in most of his works, which made the readers go down into the deepest part of the heroes and read his mind, so the terrible scene in the story could be reconstructed and the effect of terror of the soul could be achieved. Poe made the readers directly face his own feelings through the narrator. The narrator's hesitation, suspense and terror were totally accepted by the readers. The first person narrator went down into his own inner world and influenced the narrative object by his own ideas and feelings, which made the story, seem very real and vivid. Compared with the calm and objective third person narrator, it can cover or decrease the work's imaginary plots, which will easily arouse the readers' sense of reality and fully show the people the charm of the language in Poe's works.

### **3. Heightening of the Atmosphere**

#### *3.1 Symbolism*

Symbolism is an invaluable literary tool that is widely used in western modern literature. It is different from the

common metaphor or simile. Simile only has the function of indirect modification. The vehicle is not necessarily associated with the thing itself. However, in symbolism, the image overweighs the literal meaning. It should reflect the essence of the thing itself and has a broader meaning. The author could not express everything in short stories and poetry, so the technique of symbolism is widely used to enlarge the capacity of the message and tell the readers to read between the lines. This became the distinctive artistic feature of Poe's works and reached a higher artistic level. Poe had a great influence on the formation of French Symbolism. He was considered as the pioneer of Symbolism Literature.

*The Fall of the House of Usher* is a work full of symbolism. For example, taking the House of Usher and Usher and his sister as symbols, the thing itself made people feel terrified. The House of Usher which was located in a poor interactive environment was an isolated and daunting house. It was in a great state of disrepair, and gave people the impression of lifelessness. The House of Usher also had a weird feature, that is, the house and its surroundings seemed to get well along with each other. The reflection of the bleak walls, the buildings, and hundreds of years' of weird Usher family, all of which made House of Usher lingua franca of the three. That is, the house, the people and the environment. Usher and his sister got an incurable disease (In a certain sense, they got it because of the genetic factor from the Usher family). Formed the sharp contrast what with the healthy and energetic young people is their isolated and weird life in the old house. Compared with the normal people, they didn't have the due common customs and openness; Usher had a lot of decaying thoughts and weird behaviors, which was out of tune with the positive atmosphere. Would not such environment, such house, and such proprietor make you feel depressed and restless?!

From this we can see that the symbolic body has a definite internal link with the thing itself. Although this kind of link will be various according to different times, cultures, customs, environment, regions, countries and nationalities, the readers can feel it.

### 3.2 Repetition

The famous American contemporary critic, J. H. Miller, once pointed out in his book *Fiction and Repetition* which was published in 1982, all patterns of repetition in narrative repeat one form or another of the contradictory intertwining of the two kinds of repetition along the narrative line. Theoretically, Poe noticed what repetition meant to artistic work. In *The Poetic Principle*, Poe showed clearly that repeat mode was the source of pleasure, the power to move hearts. In Poe's literary creation, the technique of repetition was everywhere. The emotions which derived from it moved the people to tears and the terrible effect which came from it made people's hair stand on end.

In *The Fall of the House of Usher*, Poe carefully selected the gothic scene of horror through which showed us the feelings of dreary, decadence, loneliness. The specific description of setting created a gloomy atmosphere, which helped to convey the theme of the story. In order to strengthen the effect of the description of the environment, Poe used the technique of repetition, which greatly enhanced people's feelings. In the first five paragraphs of the story, Poe was committed to the heightening of the atmosphere of gothic novels. Therefore, the repeated words, such as, dull, dark, gloom, casted an ominous shadow on the story.

*"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. I know not how it was—but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit... There was iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart—an unredeemed dreariness of thought which no goading of the imagination could torture into aught of the sublime..."* (Note 2)

Through the repeated application of the words: dull, dark, gloom, Poe gave us a vivid description of the background—gloomy and terrible. Meanwhile, it captured the readers' heart. The dark weather, the gloomy storyteller, the dead Usher house, the gaunt house owner, all of these filled the readers with much terror immediately.

### 4. Suspense

Poe's works are full of suspense. But what suspense is here? Alfred Hitchcock once gave a definition to suspense. If you wanted to present such a scene: A group of people seated on the table, playing cards. Suddenly, there was an explosion. After that, the only scene you could shoot was the stiff expressions of the people on the spot. On the other hand, although you wanted to present the same scene, yet before playing cards, someone placed a time bomb under the table. Then, you gave the readers suspense. And that would definitely and tightly touch the hearts of the audience. We also know that an audience experience suspense when they expect something bad to

happen and have (or believe they have) a superior perspective on events in the drama's hierarchy of knowledge, yet they are powerless to intervene to prevent it from happening. In broader definitions of suspense, this emotion arises when someone is aware of his lack of knowledge about the development of a meaningful event; thus, suspense is a combination of anticipation and uncertainty dealing with the obscurity of the future. In terms of narrative expectations, it may be contrasted with mystery or curiosity and surprise.

There exists two different kinds of suspense when making stories; the first one is known suspense. Take the classical science fiction *Alien* for example. The narrator carried on the details by the omniscient angle of view. So the readers also became omniscient. However, the characters in the story were isolated. They knocked against one another between the plots the author built and the plots the readers knew clearly. Based on the known background, the unique characters reacted differently and the characters' fate became a kind of suspension. The readers are drawn to the story. It attracted the readers to research the characters' affection world. "What happened next?" "How his fate would be?" This is our thinking mode when we come into contact with this kind of suspense.

The second one is the unknown suspense. This is the style of Poe's novels. When we read his novels, we are deeply involved in a series of closely connected unknown events he created. It is the curiosity we showed toward the unknown things that we are attracted. In such a labyrinth the author had designed, both the reader and the narrator are in the same situation—half an understanding. The reader experienced these mysterious events through the narrator's feelings. "What's that?" was the common question to the reader when facing this kind of suspense. To the readers, the more they reason according to common sense, the more confused they get. Poe was particularly good at this. The vision-like suspense in his works is impressive. Unlike other writers, Poe never gave the readers a definite answer to his suspense. Most of the time, he didn't give us the answer, which gave his works a lot of space for explanation; so ideas on the understanding of Poe's works vary from person to person, which also made his works mysterious. And reading Poe's works is a great pleasure to most of the readers. Poe liked to design in his novels.

The sense of mystery of Poe's work is only one of its most important factors; what really counts is the connotation of the novel. Poe's works has its psychological foundation. The readers and the people who have a normal life have an intense curiosity about those hardly intelligible and weird things. This curiosity comes from a timid, proper, and disciplined man who wants to pry into the inner heart of those who are wicked and violent. Poe had a unique narrative technique and well-designed novel effect. Poe created a tense atmosphere in his works, which made the readers feel they will be forever in the suspense of the stories. Poe's novels are based on crimes and some terrible events, describing murders and death, which is the influence of Gothic novels. On the other hand, the sharp conflicts made the novels more entertaining and readable. In such novels, interior monologue which is a kind of silent, psychological language is mostly-used.

### **5. The Reason for Poe's Unique Charm**

The unique charm of Allan Poe's horror fictions attracted many readers attention, home and abroad. However, Poe's life was miserable. His creation gained recognition by his countrymen only after his death. Only those who lived in the 20th century could understand his talent. He was doomed to live a lonely and miserable life all his lifetime. His creation reflected his unique life experience, which laid a strong foundation to the unique style of his work. Allan Poe was widely read and had a high literary accomplishment. The gothic tradition and the American literature tradition had a great influence on Allan Poe.

We can find the gothic element everywhere in his horror fictions. The influence of original sin and born degenerate in Puritanism can also be found in his novels. We can say, it is Allan Poe's life experience and literary accomplishment that made him choose horror as his literature creation content. After discussing the reason why Poe depicted horror for the readers, we will further discuss what kind of terror Poe brought to us. After reading Poe's novels, we always feel a kind of unnamable terror coming from the bottom of our hearts. What are we afraid of on earth? We never get the appropriate answer from the previous research. For this part, I will start with Poe's world view and seek the characters' soul, which was in a horrible state, in Allan Poe's works. Horror is an instinct and one of the strong feelings of human beings. When we read Poe's novels, we can feel the readers' instinct fear toward supernatural in his *Ms Found in a Bottle*; terror toward death in his *The Premature Burial*; terror toward the evil in human instinct in his *Black Cat*. Among all the terrors, nothingness is the most terrible one. People can fear the tangible things, the crimes in the real life. However, this is not worth mentioning compared with the terror of nothingness. We can feel this inherent and inexplicable terror.

But, how could Poe present the real terror through the virtual text? Poe once said that a good novelist never imposed his own thoughts which had been processed on the story plot, instead, he planned carefully beforehand,

formulating some unique and distinctive effect, making out some plots and connecting all the plots, all of which help to fulfill an effect he had been crafting all the time. By further studying Poe's works, we find out that there were lots of implications, symbolism and unspoken mystery; with the development of the plot, we were brought in the suspense system Poe had designed for us; in order to enhance the readers' experience, Poe adapted the first person narrator manner; in order to strengthen its aesthetic effects, Poe constructed the integral atmosphere, stimulating the readers' senses from different angles. Most of Poe's horror novels had an end, telling us that the good should overcome evil. But some novels were anti-closure. For example, in *Ligeia*, when it came to the Raise Dead, the story just stopped. Was this the hero's illusion or the real truth? Did Ligeia come back again? Poe didn't mention that in the novel, which left the terror in our heart which was hard to let go.

What have we achieved from Poe's horror fiction? Terror brings us pain. But why are so many people still mad about him? Because we found beauty in terror and we experienced its aesthetic pleasure. In this sense, terror is beautiful and cheerful. Poe's horror fiction gives people appreciation of beauty. And he has made unique contributions to the literary history.

Poe himself pointed out in the preface of *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*: if you find that terror was always the theme in most of my works, I insisted that the terror was not Germanic, but from the heart and I interpreted the terror from its reasonable source and drove it to its reasonable result. Poe's imagination had great influence on the readers' heart. And the so-called terror was actually the cooperation between the author and the readers.

Allan Poe was not the first writer who wrote horror fiction in American literary history. However, he was the first writer who wrote fine arts. His creations were eventually traveled across the time and distance of space and have a broad and far-reaching impact.

## 6. Conclusion

The American writer Edgar Allan Poe is a genius in the world literary history. He was considered as "the symbol American artist who couldn't fit in the ignorant world around"; his works were "the literature of the 20th century". Poe lived in the golden era of America, but he was not inspired by the picturesque landscape and of the frontier life of the country as the Romantic writer of the same time did; he was pessimistic about the so-called American Dream. On the contrary, he indulged himself in the theme of dream, death, evil and revealed isolation and separation between human and the surrounding world and the terror toward the harsh realities through the adoption of the gothic terror, represented all the nightmares modern westerners have in the 20th century.

Kierkegaard said in his book, *The Concept of Anxiety*, in this absurd world, it was fear that kept human from falling forever, so fear was another means of saving. "One must train himself in the most dreadful possibility." "We must anticipate our fate through fear and welcome any dreadful experience of our own. Fear melts everything in this limited world and reveals fantasy." Poe told us with his pen that the terrible events were the exterior expression of characters' scared psychology. The characters' scared psychology was the interior expression of the terrible events. Poe tried his best to experience the terror. He expressed terror in his fantasy and expressed the real world, the real human nature in terror; anticipating human's self-rescue and world-saving.

Poe's cousin Allan Tart thought, Poe's works were much close to Victorian emotions type: a world lack of God's power, an imaginary world lost Christian virtue. Compared with naturalistic novels that appeared 50 years later, Poe's works played a very important role in arousing people. Poe created a nightmare for all human beings in which there were no religious belief to comfort the soul. Absolutely, Poe had an eye to death dance which symbolized the inevitable of death; his stories were some of the most frightening and strange ever written; it was written in a tone of mournful, desolate style; but it was a mirror of Poe's own miserable life and consistent with the purpose of his creation. Poe's gothic short stories which researched the morbid psychology, described strange behavior, in the eyes of French symbolic poets and modern westerners, had a deep significance like the foretold prediction. Lawrence highly praised the psychological depth of Poe's works. He pointed that Poe well described the modern people, especially the process of psychotic breakdowns of the neurotic modern people. He also pointed out the mixture of love and hate in Poe's novels and its abnormal indulgence. Eliot also affirmed his achievements in combining the morbid mind with the nightmarish symbolism perfectly.

The fascination of Poe's terror has a far and deep influence. Stephen Edwin King, the American novelist, one of the most widely-read writers, who enjoys the highest fame, who was called the Modern Master of Horror by New York Times and King of the Novel of Terror by the Youth Generation, thought highly of Allan Poe, saying that Poe was the real master of horror, whom was hard to match by the juniors. He also said that many of his own works were inspired by that of Poe's. Nowadays, many people are studying the influence of Poe's works on the horror artistic.

Poe attempts to step into people's soul, which undoubtedly surpassed his contemporaries, and even the people that would follow. Besides, Poe started his arctic pursuit with the research of the beauty of terror, which showed an outstanding purport. Down the ages, excavating the beauty of the tragedy or the comedy has become the goal of most of the artists in the artistic creations, including Aeschylus, Ovid, Milton, Shakespeare, Cervantes, etc. However, Poe devoted himself in "interpreting the terror of the soul", which needed the artistic courage and guts in those time when few people set foot in that field. What is worth praising, Allan Poe not only followed his heart, but also succeeded, which left us plentiful heritage, proving to people that the terror in heart is complicated as well as beautiful, which can shake our soul.

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### Notes

- Note 1. *The Tell Tale Heart*. Edgar Allan Poe, Published: 1843, p. 7
- Note 2. *The Fall of the House of Usher*, Edgar Allen Poe, p. 2

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