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Professor Pittman

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Contemplating the Horrific: How Poe's Gothic Reveals Our Fears

It is very clear to see from Edgar Allen Poe's works of prose that the Gothic explores the dark and uncanny part of the human mind, and the fears Poe had are not very different from our own ("Gothic Creativity" 22).¹ This uncanny side of the mind is strangely fascinated with monstrosity, decay, and violence.² People's fascination with things like violence comes from fear. The exploration of the Gothic reveals contemporary fears of serial killers, death, guns, apocalypse, and the war in Iraq and Syria. The fear of terrorism has resurfaced after the recent bombings in Paris. There are countless popular movies, books, television shows, and video games that explore all of these different fears and elements of the Gothic. For example, the TV show "Jericho" deals with war and apocalypse and the book series *The Hunger Games* focuses largely on death. In her article, "Poe and Gothic Creativity," Maria Lima writes that Gothic works like Poe's and contemporary horror stories produce an awareness of the presence of terror. These works show disturbing, yet fascinating, imagery but nothing as disturbing as contemporary reality ("Gothic Creativity" 28). Botting's statement that "horror appears when fears come a little

¹ Charles L. Crow says that "the essence of the uncanny is a sense of weirdness, created when something that seemed safe and familiar suddenly becomes strange, or something that should have remained hidden is revealed" (*American Gothic* 7). This is my working definition for uncanny throughout my paper.

² I am using the definition for monstrosity Fred Botting, lecturer in English at the University of Wales, provides in his essay as "works that transgressed the codes of reason and morality, presenting excessive and viciously improper scenes and characters" (*Making Monstrous* 163).

too close to home,” agrees (124).³ An exploration of the gothic elements found in Poe’s works reveal fears of past and present, as well as universal fears such as darkness and death. With this in mind, we will be able to understand why we are drawn to the Gothic even though it shows us our fears.

The focus on the Gothic horror in nineteenth-century America shows much about the situations and fears of the time. Diseases were common and deadly, especially during childhood. Crow writes, “Poe’s apparent fascination with disease, death and decay, like most elements of the Gothic, involves only a slight exaggeration of the everyday reality of his time” (*American Gothic* 43). Bodies were prepared for burial in the home, so most people were uncomfortably familiar with death, disease, and dead bodies. Unfortunately, tuberculosis was an especially deadly disease at the time that many were all too familiar with.⁴ Tuberculosis, the cause of Poe’s wife Virginia’s death, slowly drained the life and strength from people. At the turn of the twentieth century TB was the leading cause of death, and more than 80% of the United States’ population were infected before their twenties (“Medical Dictionary”). Since TB was so common, everyone knew someone who had TB. This closeness with death was a gruesome reality that is seen through the Gothic.

Another fear was insanity. People in the nineteenth century and people today are afraid to lose control of their own thoughts and actions. In Poe’s time, people who were considered mad

³ “Bound up with feelings of revulsion, disgust and loathing, horror induces states of shuddering or paralysis, the loss of one’s faculties, particularly consciousness and speech, or a general physical powerlessness and mental confusion” (*Gothic* 124).

⁴ “Tuberculosis (TB) is a potentially fatal contagious disease that can affect almost any part of the body but is mainly an infection of the lungs. It is caused by a bacterial microorganism, the tubercle bacillus or *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*. Although TB can be treated, cured, and can be prevented if persons at risk take certain drugs, scientists have never come close to wiping it out. Few diseases have caused so much distressing illness for centuries and claimed so many lives” (“Medical Dictionary”).

were placed in lunatic asylums, or mental hospitals. These places were known for being dehumanizing and prison-like (“Science Museum”). Early on, the doctors and psychiatrists physically abused and restrained their patients. An alternative to this was moral treatment, where instead of being restrained patients were kept under careful watch by physicians and psychiatrists. However, the successfulness of this technique was exaggerated by the asylums; it did not work as well as expected and reported. When the death of patients increased in 1890, the physicians turned back to methods involving straitjackets, seclusion, and sedative drugs. Public funding poured into the construction of asylums between 1800 and 1900, and were designed to be both majestic and therapeutic (“Science Museum”). This outward beauty of the asylums hid the horrors within, invoking the gothic sublime. Crow writes, “The sublime replaces comfortable beauty with a beauty that mingles awe and even fear” (*American Gothic* 6). These beautiful and scary buildings were perfect material for any Gothic writer.

One of Poe’s most-anthologized short stories, “The Tell-Tale Heart,” includes many elements of horror that illustrate multiple fears. The setting of “The Tell-Tale Heart” is one of these elements. There is not much detail given about the setting except that the old man’s bedroom is “black as pitch with the thick darkness” (Poe 692). This illustrates the universal fear of darkness (*American Gothic* 39). People are afraid of the dark because they cannot see anything and then their minds run wild with panicked thoughts at every noise. The narrator says, “I knew that he had been lying awake ever since the first slight noise, when he had turned in the bed. His fears had been, ever since, growing upon him. He had been trying to fancy them causeless, but could not” (Poe 693). Nearly everyone has experienced this reaction to a strange noise in the dark. As the old man’s fear grows, so does the readers’. This shared fear of the dark

allows readers to be further pulled into the story. They wait in anticipation to find out if the old man will discover the narrator standing in the doorway.

Another prominent fear shown in “The Tell-Tale Heart” is the fear of the other:

I think it was his eye!—yes, it was this! He had the eye of a vulture—a pale blue eye, with a film over it. Whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold; and so, by degrees—very gradually—I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye forever. (691)

This fear of the other leads individuals to the fear of what they may become (*American Gothic* 167). They could become the other that they are afraid of or something far worse: a monster. The narrator becomes afraid of the old man’s disfigurement because it is not normal. However, this is ironic because the narrator’s response to this otherness is far from normal. He plans to rid himself of the eye by killing the old man. It is unnervingly easy to relate to the narrator’s fear of this thing that is not normal. When the narrator says that “it was not the old man who vexed me, but his Evil Eye” (Poe 692), readers can see how something that is different can cause uncomfortable feelings to arise toward someone. How a person responds to these feelings determines if he can become as monstrous as the narrator.

After the narrator kills the old man, he tells the reader the careful precautions he took:

First of all I dismembered the corpse. I cut off the head and the arms and the legs. I then took up three planks from the flooring of the chamber, and deposited all between the scantlings. I then replaced the boards so cleverly, so cunningly, that no human eye—not even *his*—could have detected anything wrong. There was nothing to wash out—no stain of any kind—no blood-spot whatever. I had been too wary for that. A tub had caught it all—ha! ha! (694)

This description of “wise precautions” leaves readers with a very uncomfortable feeling. The narrator’s details of how he dealt with the corpse are very uncanny. Poe creates a sense of weirdness because these horrific actions that should have remained hidden are revealed (*American Gothic* 7). This passage also evokes the grotesque, or the characteristics of monstrosity and strangeness.⁵ Readers feel that the narrator is monstrous and strange because of his thoughts and actions. Also, the narrator constantly contradicts himself. He tells readers throughout the story that he is not mad and insists that his reasoning is rational. As the story progresses, it is quickly and clearly revealed that this narrator is a barking lunatic (*American Gothic* 40).

The realization that the narrator is not in his right mind brings readers’ fear of madness, or insanity to the surface. According to Helen Small, a lecturer in English at Pembroke College, Oxford, “the Gothic plays on its readers’ recognition that the boundary between sanity and insanity is hard to define and harder to defend” (*Love’s Madness* 156). Some people may argue that the boundary between these two states of mind is clear based on actions. However, it is important to keep in mind the Doctrine of Original Sin which states that all humans are flawed and capable of evil. The fear of insanity comes from the idea that an individual may not have the power to choose sanity over madness, and then insanity could cause evil.

“The Fall of the House of Usher” is another one of Poe’s well-known short stories. It is about a narrator who goes to stay with his distant friend, Roderick Usher. From the very beginning, the narrator senses something is off about the House of Usher. He describes his feeling as “an 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” (Poe 654). This

⁵ My working definition for grotesque comes from Crow, who states that grotesque “refers to the strange, distorted or monstrous, usually as applied to human characters” (*American Gothic* 6).

description immediately hooks the reader with a haunted house setting where there are things to be discovered about Roderick and his house. It transports people to a place that has an unreal quality about it. This quality can be further seen when the narrator tries to shake off “what *must* have been a dream” (Poe 655). The story continues with the brief appearance of Roderick’s sister, Madeline. She is very ghost-like and gradually wasting away because of her illness. This is eerily similar to what happened to people with disease during Poe’s time, especially TB. The narrator regards Madeline with “an utter astonishment not unmingled with dread” (Poe 658). The narrator’s reaction to Madeline uncovers the deep fear of disease and what it can do to a person and their family.

After Madeline passes away, Roderick and the narrator take her body to a vault below the house. Then, “having deposited our mournful burden upon tressels within this region of horror, we partially turned aside the yet unscrewed lid of the coffin, and looked upon the face of the tenant” (Poe 662). The interesting thing about this death and burial is it lacks any sense of finality. It foreshadows things to come. The lid of the coffin is not sealed shut. Also, they do not look upon the body or the corpse; they look upon the *tenant*. As Eric Savoy, associate professor of English at the University of Calgary, writes, “Madeline is not completely consigned to the realm of the dead, nor is her historical significance; a mere ‘tenant’ of the coffin, she will return to consciousness” (“The Face of the Tenant” 13). The horrific idea of live burial is further defined in the narrator’s description of the faint blush on Madeline’s face and a “suspiciously lingering smile upon the lip” (Poe 662). These are all things that are not found in death, and bring to light the fear of being dead while living. Botting writes that “premature burial, as in the experience of Gothic labyrinths, confuses life and death” (*Gothic* 127). I think this fear is a very prominent one that every person has experienced at times throughout his life. It involves a person

thinking he is not living life to its full potential, the fear he is only doing things halfway, and that this will lead to a life not amounting to much at all.

The next part of the story incorporates strange coincidences. It is a stormy night, so the narrator reads a book to Roderick to calm him down. The first coincidence occurs when the character in the story rips apart a door. Faintly, the narrator hears this exact sound but shrugs it off and continues with the story. The second coincidence is when the cry of the dragon is echoed in the mansion by a sharp grating sound. Again, the narrator continues the story. The final coincidence occurs when a shield in the story falls and makes a loud ringing sound. When this sound, too, is echoed by something in the mansion, the narrator becomes completely unnerved. Poe's use of these coincidences and repetition of sounds keeps readers' attention and sets them up for the final piece to the puzzle.

This is when Poe brilliantly uses the uncanny. Roderick tells the narrator, "*We have put her living in the tomb*" (Poe 666)! Each sound from the story corresponds with Madeline breaking the coffin, opening the iron door, and struggling out of the vault. Poe further adds to the weirdness of this realization when the narrator actually sees Madeline.

...there *did* stand the lofty and enshrouded figure of the lady Madeline of Usher.

There was blood upon her white robes, and the evidence of some bitter struggle upon every portion of her emaciated frame. (666)

The description of Madeline adds to the idea of a haunted house. She wears white and has 'come back from the dead.' She is the living ghost of the House of Usher, very similar to how people with illnesses or mental problems are the living ghosts of homes and asylums. The end of this story is uncanny because Madeline is hidden deep within the house, but then it is revealed that she had been alive the entire time she was in the vault. The story comes to an end as Madeline

collapses into her brother's arms, and they both fall dead to the floor. The narrator flees while the old house falls apart and sinks into the lake.

A universal fear that comes to light at the end of "The Fall of the House of Usher" is the fear of death. Elisabeth Bronfen, a professor of English at Zurich University, brings up a very interesting idea about death. She writes that death becomes attractive to readers because it seems unreal (*Over Her Dead Body* 40). Bronfen says that it becomes unreal because the characters in the story have been transported to unfamiliar worlds. This unfamiliar world can be seen in the narrator's descriptions of the House of Usher and its dream-like quality. It can also be seen in "The Tell-Tale Heart" because readers inhabit the strange environment of a mad mind.

I think one of the main reasons for people's fascination with the Gothic is that it allows people to confront the fear of death without actually experiencing it for themselves. In both "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Fall of the House of Usher," death is a very prominent aspect, and readers have a front row seat. Bronfen explains this perfectly:

The compromise [the stories] seem to offer is that, although they insist on the need to acknowledge the ubiquitous presence of death in life, our belief in our own immortality is nevertheless also confirmed. We are the survivors of the tale, entertained and educated by virtue of the death inflicted on others. (41)

No one likes to think about their own death. Everyone knows it is unavoidable, but there is a need to somehow obtain a sense of immortality, to survive death. The Gothic lets us do this through the characters in its tales. By examining the different instances of gothic elements in Poe's stories, we can find the fears of Poe's time, the fears of our time, and the fears that stretch across decades. This explains people's continuous fascination with the gothic. Our fears, the ones we are conscious and unconscious of, are woven throughout Poe's tales of horror. When we read

these stories, we are given a way to confront our fears from a safe distance. We are centuries, miles, and an entirely different person away. Yet, somehow, even this can be uncomfortably close.

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