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American Lit. I

Jennifer Pittman

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### A Place for Poe: The Foreign in Two Tales of the Gothic

There are certain words we use so often in life that they begin to lose their meaning—buzzwords, or broad categorical ones, like *millennial*. These words, too, crop up in literature: Here I would like to explore one of these in particular, *Gothic*. We talk often of Gothic literature, Gothic writers, Gothic horror, Gothic post-core triphop—but our definition is so often fuzzy. We know that to be Gothic means to be scary, to be full of the strange and terrifying, but where exactly do we draw the line between Gothic and other forms of horror fiction? Is Stephen King Gothic? Is *A Nightmare on Elm Street*? King probably, *Nightmare* probably not—but are we sure? But there's a much less ambiguous example, too: Edgar Allan Poe, one of the foremost writers of horror of the nineteenth century, who is without the slightest doubt a Gothic writer; in fact, Poe is so inextricably and indelibly wrapped up in our cultural understanding of Gothic fiction that perhaps we might even call him *the* quintessential Gothic writer. Our endeavor here is to understand why that is, and, furthermore, to explore the particular historicity (or *ahistoricity*) of Poe's unique brand of Gothicism—how Poe, by setting his tales “The Cask of Amontillado” and “The Fall of the House of Usher” in foreign, even un-American, locales, deliberately alienates his readers from his characters, in order to conjure a sense of pleasure from their suffering and foibles.

Before we get too carried away, we need to recognize that the Gothic is a “turn to the past ... a type of imitational medievalism” (“The Gothic”). In essence, it's a descendant of the

medieval romance, which, as J.A. Cuddon's *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* notes, involves "elements of fantasy, improbability, extravagance and naivety," adding that we distinguish the Gothic by its use of "the more bizarre and extravagant characteristics of the medieval romance" ("Romance"). Horror, on the other hand, while quite often over-the-top and supernatural, is not *necessarily* so; look to Hitchcock classics like *Rear Window* for examples. Furthermore, the Gothic gets its name from the association of the Middle Ages "with things wild, bloody and barbarous of long ago" ("Gothic novel/fiction"). The Gothic is not a genre of realism, nor naturalism—it's exaggerated, warping characters and events to the point of the grotesque in order to produce a certain effect on the audience.

Effect isn't something we can take lightly when it comes to the Gothic: It's the central tenet of the whole genre, and has been identified as such for decades. For example, Margaret Kane, writing in 1932, observes that "to the romantic mind, the significance of Gothic architecture lay not in its original glory but in the emotions called forth by contemplating its ruins" (149). In other words, the particulars of the Gothic don't really matter—in fact, she notes that Edgar Allan Poe had little to no firsthand experience with Gothic architecture, only familiarizing himself through his brief childhood experiences in England and certain books he read on the subject (149)—only the *effects* of the Gothic architecture upon the audience matter, not the content: like its supergenre horror, Gothic is a genre of *perception*, not of content like sci-fi or fantasy, a fact which allows for us to talk of regional schools like American Gothic (Poe) and Southern Gothic (O'Connor), when Gothic culture had long disappeared by the time Christopher Columbus invented America.

This definition of Gothic literature isn't purely an artifact of the 1930s either, as we see William Veeder say much the same fifty years later in his review of Ringe's *American Gothic*:

*Imagination and Reason in Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (1982), incidentally pointing out that the emphasis on effect has been around since the 17<sup>th</sup>-century:

From the earliest reviews of Radcliffe and Lewis, critics have recognized *how intently gothic fiction assaults its readers. Effect is what this fiction rides and falls by...* Gothic writers either give rational explanations of phenomena or countenance the entry of the supernatural; in America the rational view finds a second mode of expression in satiric work like Irving's, while the more serious fiction is psychologically oriented, like Brown's. (135-136, emphasis mine)

Again, the emphasis is on emotions and effects, not on content-related issues: only through effects can we link such disparate authors as the Ann Radcliff writing of decadent clergymen, Mary Shelley writing of weird science, and Poe writing of anemic aristocrats. Their topics are diverse, but the presentation is not.

A large part of that presentation, as Veeder further points out, is that in Gothic literature authors try to explain away the supernatural elements, either through psychology or rationality—Poe here falls solidly into the so-called serious camp: The resurrection of Madeleine Usher and the sounds heard from her crypt we attribute to the narrator's mental unhinging; and, while in "The Cask of Amontillado" no supernatural events come to pass, the psychological (though perhaps not insanity) undoubtedly motivates Montresor—we see this fact most prominently when he starts screaming at Fortunato while immuring him: "I replied to the yells of him who clamoured. I re-echoed. I aided, I surpassed them in volume and in strength" (719). These are not the words of a cold, calculated killer, but rather an emotionally invested one—to quote an old cliché: *This time, for Montresor, it's personal.* (Remember his family motto, "*Nemo me impune lacessit*" (717)—"No one insults me with impunity.")

Notice again that the specifics of the feud are left unstated: They don't matter, only the effects, the enraged, bloodcurdling screams, do. We don't need to know the history of their feud to feel terror—quite the opposite: We need to feel terror to know (or at least get the gist of) the history of their feud. In this sense, the Gothic focus on effects is the same as what I called Poe's ahistoricity in the introduction—we don't need historical context, we don't need to know the specifics of the Goths or their cathedrals, to understand the effects they have on our psyches. To use the language of philosophy, history is the accidents of the Gothic, and the essence is the terror it strikes within us.

But there is another aspect to Poe's ahistoricity too—not only does history in Poe not matter for the emotional impact of the story, but in some ways, divorcing his stories from historical context gives Poe greater creative freedom regarding the directions he can take his stories: “The Cask of Amontillado” is set at an undisclosed time in Italy during Carnival, a time when society, and hence time, break down; and “The Fall of the House of Usher” takes place in a nameless village somewhere in a countryside. Because we know nothing—or nearly nothing—about the contexts of these tales, we have a very broad horizon of expectations about the content; if they were set in America, especially in the more “civilized” and industrialized American East where Poe resided, we'd have a harder time believing in vampires<sup>1</sup> or immurement, but because they are blurry and far-off, our imaginations have free reign. Think on Stoker's *Dracula*, which takes place in shadowy and wild Romania, full of werewolves and other foul beasts; we don't have to go to great lengths to suspend our disbelief, not near so far as we would if *Dracula* was, say, working in a bar downtown. The more we know about something, the harder it is to get us to commit to gross violations of reality.

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<sup>1</sup> See Lyle H. Kendall, Jr.'s “The Vampire Motif in ‘The Fall of the House of Usher.’”

Don't get me wrong: Poe's stories are in no way devoid of context. That would be impossible. He still has to deal with the historical context and assumptions on his audience's end, of course, and the fact that we know "The Cask of Amontillado" takes place in Italy means Poe pays at least some detail to setting. However, his setting is less important in what it says about the story than what it signals to the audience—Poe has streamlined his context to leave only the bits that are pertinent to his readers. Remember that 1840s America was a very different place than it is today, one where ethnic tensions and nativist sentiment ran high. Poe wrote in a white, Protestant America for a white, Protestant audience dealing with a mounting wave of Catholic immigrants that disrupted the illusion of a homogenous land of liberty, and that, as a result, often held Anti-Catholic beliefs. Kent Bales notes, or puts us in a position to note, for such an audience, placing a story in an explicitly Catholic country during an explicitly Catholic holiday (Carnival is the prelude to Lent) would alter their expectations of the characters significantly:

A Roman Catholic aristocrat takes revenge on his Freemason enemy by walling him into a corner of the family catacombs, thus destroying his life and freedom by masonry. To most readers this is an audacious pun, but to anti-Masonic readers it is poetic justice as well: the remains of Fortunato, the hapless Mason, will lie among the bones of his Roman Catholic enemies, the "great and numerous" Montresors, while the present Montresor lives on. Anti-Masonic readers may be few today, but in the 1840's they too would have been numerous. There were even more Anti-Catholic readers, and many would have hated both in those Know-Nothing Days. (qtd. in Bennett 50)

Poe's original readers would have had great antipathy towards both parties in "The Cask of Amontillado" and would have expected inhuman behavior on their behalves, similar to how

people in more modern times latch on to clickbait about the scapegoat of the week, whether that be liberals, conservatives, or even a dead gorilla—there doesn't have to be fact involved, just biases. In the setting Poe presents, his audience expects terror because of who the characters are, and are more open to the extremity of their acts, perhaps even to the point of satisfaction—here, a heathenish Catholic delivers ironic justice to a Mason, something no self-respecting Anglo Protestant would never ever do (but would enjoy watching being done nevertheless). It's sadopoetic.

Even in giving context, though, Poe is rather stingy with the details: We only learn the absolute bare minimum *we* need to interpret and, presumably, draw pleasure from, the story. We still don't know during which time period the story is set, what city they're in, what drives Montresor to murder Fortunato, the exact relationship between the two “friends,” or any other potentially useful information. All we know is that they're Catholic and that Fortunato is a Mason—but what does this information have to do with the plot? It doesn't. The story would be the same story without any of it; what it does affect is the audience's *perception* of the story; once again, effect is king.

In “The Fall of the House of Usher,” while it does seem that Poe's details are intended to evoke certain feelings in his audience, we don't find such a neat division between audience context and character context: We find out a lot about the characters that will change our perceptions of them, but these details also affect the plot itself: Throughout the story, Poe makes several asides that lead us to believe the story takes place in Britain. The first hint is the name of the story itself, “The Fall of the *House* of Usher,” *house* having certain aristocratic connotations that the word *family* doesn't—it brings to mind family lines like House Habsburg, House Stuart, and other such aristocratic European lineages; nobody says House Washington or House Bush—

it's not the way the United States operates. Of course, he uses the word *house* to toy with its double meaning, but to do so in an American setting would be more jarring and inapt than we would expect of Poe. The names Poe employs in the story, much as *Montresor* and *Fortunato* in "The Cask of Amontillado" give away the setting as Italian, show a particular English bent: We're dealing with Ushers and Rodericks and Madeleines, not Jorges and Henriks. Further, the word *tarn* has a particular British twinge to it, originating as a Northern English regionalism ("Tarn"), although this is a rather less-than-objective measure of the story's Britishness.

And while these names could as well be American, there's more evidence to suggest a British setting, not the least of which is the time Poe spent in England during his childhood (Kane 149). We also learn a veritable mountain of details supporting the Britain hypothesis when the narrator first gives us an account of the Ushers' family history:

The entire family lay in the direct line of descent . . . . It was this deficiency, perhaps, of collateral issue, and the consequent undeviating transmission, from sire to son, of the patrimony with the name, which had, at length, so identified the two as to merge the original title of the estate in the quaint and equivocal appellation of "The House of Usher"—an appellation which seemed to include, in the minds of the peasantry who used it, both the family and the family mansion.

(655)

The direct line of descent bit refers, of course, to inbreeding, a practice historically associated with aristocrats who wanted to keep the lineage pure. Incest isn't unique to aristocrats—consider the stereotypical image of the mutant hillbilly—but the Ushers certainly aren't yokels; they've been living on the same *estate* for centuries. Not plot, not farm, but hefty manor. These facts nudge us towards Britain, as Anglo-American Culture had only existed for two hundred some-



odd years at the point that Poe was writing, and so for the Ushers truly to have lived on the same land for *centuries*, they would have to have been present from the very beginning, and most likely have had strong ties to the British Crown—in which case they would have been dispossessed as Loyalists during the American Revolutionary War and/or would have switched their allegiances to the Patriots at that time, yet remarkably we get no references to the war whatsoever.

The most conclusive evidence of a non-American setting is the narrator's use of the word *peasantry*, given its heavily and overtly classist connotations. We might could get away with something like that in Europe, but America's strong democratic and at times populist tradition—especially after the rise of Jefferson's pseudo-pastoral Democratic Party, which held ascendancy in Poe's native South up until very recent history, albeit with some major changes along the way—pushes us away from using, or accepting, such a loaded word in an American context. Due to this one little word, even if we don't reach a definitive conclusion as to the setting "Usher," we can reasonably reject an American setting.

We might ask at this juncture, why does it matter that the setting is British, or not-American, or wherever? Just as Nativist readers may have derived pleasure from watching the foibles of Catholic and Masonic characters, we might imagine that they would be similarly inclined to view Brits (who had invaded the USA less than thirty years before Poe wrote the story in 1839, little enough time that almost all his readers would have either experienced the war firsthand or be the immediate descendants of those who had) and aristocrats (who represented the antithesis of the American ideal) in an unfavorable light. Or, at the very least, to view aristocratic Brits' moral decay in a favorable light, in a sadistic way. Zachary Z.E. Bennett has expounded on this dynamic in Poe's writings, calling it "the sadomasochistic pleasure

inherent to his style of Gothic. The characters suffer because they desire to be punished, and the reader takes pleasure in the punishment . . . . assum[ing] that the characters are wicked sybarites who deserve to die . . . . tak[ing] pleasure in the knowledge that he or she [the reader] is not the one being punished” (Bennett 49).<sup>2</sup> Thus, when Roderick goes insane, and Madeleine rises from the grave to kill him, and the narrator flees from the scene only to see the house collapse into the earth, we—or at least the original readers—are inwardly pleased, because we’re not the ones whose lives and houses are falling to pieces. The foreignness of the characters heightens our sense of pleasure, perhaps even transforming it into a sense of justice, appealing to a very dark sense of homogeneity within humankind, justifying our pleasure from others’ pains.

The above applies, in a general sense, to “The Cask of Amontillado”: Half of the joy comes from watching scapegoated demographics go at each other’s throats, almost voyeuristically. But there is a sense in which setting is even more important for “Usher,” namely the name. The *House of Usher*: This story is *all* about setting. The narrator implies that it has a life of its own at various points, describing its windows as “eye-like” (654), confusing the home with those who live in it (655), and puzzling over the “atmosphere which had no affinity with the air of heaven” hovering over the manor (655), almost as if it were in its own pocket dimension. The setting is the story. The house is the man. Therefore, what we learn about the setting we can apply to the characters—we see this most obviously in the passage where the storm ravages the House of Usher; not only does it affect Usher’s own deteriorating mental state, it also only becomes present at the moment Usher himself does (664), even though logically the narrator should have been aware of such a great commotion earlier.

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<sup>2</sup> I want to acknowledge that this quote from Bennett actually comes from a section discussing “The Masque of Red Death”; however, the fragment was general enough, and Bennett’s thesis broad enough—theoretically covering the whole of Poe’s Gothic works—that we could easily apply it to “Usher.” If you disagree, meet me in the pit. Bring a pendulum.

From this premise, we can extrapolate the obvious (and previously stated): The setting is British, Roderick is British, everyone is British. In fact, most of what we learn about either the characters or the house seems almost *too* painfully obvious to even try to apply to the other. There is an odd man out, though—incest. There’s no denying the incest motif in this story, and if we are to apply the qualities of the house to the family, we have to ask, *what does an incestuous house look like?* On one level, we could answer, much like the one in the story—crumbling, with “a wild incongruity between its still perfect adaption of parts, and the utterly porous, and evidently decayed condition of the individual stones” (655)—the family is still good country people, but the branches, the stones, are all withering to stormy nothing. But on another level, we have to wonder whether this question makes any sense. My gut answer is no, it doesn’t. There is such a thing as a transferred epithet, but this is the transferred epithet taken to its logical extreme and thrown off the Tower Bridge. We might as well posit an adulterous toaster or a sexy lamp—how is a house supposed to have sex with its own relatives? Does a house even *have* relatives?

So, we assume that that’s a ridiculous question, and now we ask, *does that make the premise as a whole ridiculous?* Let’s turn to what Gary Richard Thompson, who in his book-length study of Poe, defines “Romantic Irony” as “str[iving], in his contrariness, deceptiveness, satire, and even self-mockery, to attain a penetrating view of existence from a subliminally idealistic height of aesthetic perception—but always with an eye on the terrors of an ultimately incomprehensible, disconnected, absurd, or at best probably decaying and possibly malevolent universe” (12). While Thompson does not always apply his premise effectively, the premise itself—the idea that on some level Poe can be at once both mocking and serious—is solid, as we see here in Poe’s use of foreign locales. After all, Poe was part of a wider transatlantic literary

world, with a readership in England and pronounced Germanic influences,<sup>3</sup> and it's hard to believe that he would have harbored any strong xenophobic sentiments. So why do such sentiments appear in his stories then? We might guess that it's because Poe is, on some level, making fun of them—yes, as we have seen in this paper, the sense of foreignness is central to Poe's effects, but something need not be sincere to be effective. As central as place is, it is an illusion, like the Gothic ruins Poe never had the chance to see: crumbling under thunder, bricked into walls, ethereal.

So far we've seen how Poe uses the Gothic, but we still haven't wrapped back around to our starting point: What does this have to do with the Gothic in general, the Gothic outside of Poe? And what makes him the quintessential Goth? Is it his sense of Romantic irony? After all, we don't see such droll equivocation in the stories of his contemporaries such as Nathaniel Hawthorne. No, what makes Poe's work so iconically Gothic is the sense of melodrama underlying his use of irony—his stories aren't so much terrifying as *suspenseful*. We don't get the heebie-jeebies from Poe, not the same way we do watching films like *The Shining* or *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>*, a fact which we can't merely attribute to modern desensitization. He doesn't have to resort to such cheap thrills to enthrall his audience. No, Poe is full of drama, delicious reality-TV drama, which manifests itself, as we have seen, as joyful fear—of pain we hate to love and love yet still.

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<sup>3</sup> See Baym and Levine p. 632, Thompson ch. 1

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