

The literary Gothic

English 109 | Fall 2008 | Lieberman

EIGHT features of the Gothic:

1. Gothic focuses on dark emotions: dread, mystery, suspense, terror.
2. Gothic settings are often sketchy or displaced, unfolding in decaying houses, castles, and ruins.
3. These houses are in turn often compartmentalized—with people locked or buried in the attic or cellar—or locked in studies
4. This emphasis on dark emotions and spooky houses often involves a critique of dominant discourses of domesticity.
5. Gothic often deals with the sublime and the supernatural.
6. Often involves themes of twinning or doubling—focusing on uncanny correspondences.
7. Often portrays a protagonist who is struggling with an evil person or force—a force that often represents the repressed emotions of the protagonist.
8. Because of its emphasis on irrationality and its mass popularity, the Gothic is often considered un-academic and has been historically undervalued.

Historical note: the British Gothic peaks in popularity between 1790 and 1830, and was already less fashionable by 1840; the market was oversaturated by cheap 'pulp' Gothic writers - works that would later morph into cheap horror fiction. Thus, by the time Poe gets to this genre in the 1830s and 40s, it is already old and undervalued—associated with popularity rather than genius.

Poe's Gothic ("Usher" & "The Tell-Tale Heart"): Poe's contributed to the Gothic conventions above; he does not merely focus on irrationality but reveals the shift from rationality to irrationality. Use this detail and the above list of literary features to help focus in on Gothic elements to analyze in both stories. His emphasis on psychology and his resistance to the mind/body divide common in earlier Gothic fiction were important innovations within the genre.