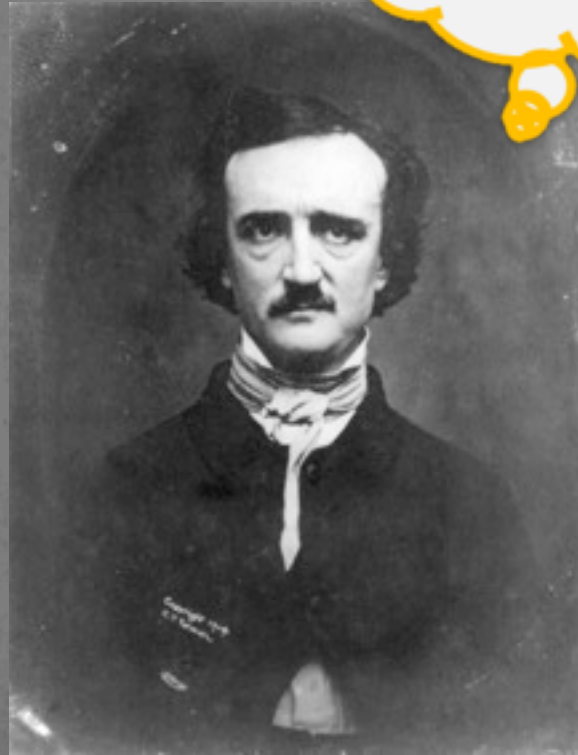


Edgar Allan Poe

In Search of The Human Condition

Poe's "Essential" Thesis: Terror of the soul!

**What would
bring terror to
my readers? Ah I
have it...death!**



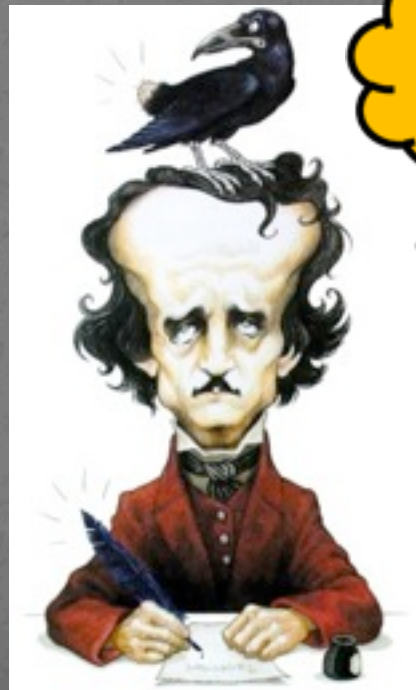
Terror Methods

- Madness
- Violence
- Perverseness
- Disease
- Death
- Decomposition



What's this guy's deal?

- J. Gerald Kennedy notes that Poe, in a broad sense, bears the historical and intellectual crisis that produced the Gothic Novel (896).



Yes, I'm as
crazy as I
look

Gothic Literature

The Important Truth:

- Gothic fiction enacts the radical uncertainty of a new period of revolution where nearly all forms of authority are viewed as constricting systems which should be questioned
- Top 4 Rules To Question and Break:
 - Neo-Classicism
 - Right Reason
 - Religious orthodoxy
 - Aristocracy



Gothic Literature. What is it and where does it come from?

Arts and Literature in crisis!



What's Happening?

- People wanted answers!
- Gothic art and literature wanted to rationalize things such as religion, life, and of course death.
- Some scholars think gothic literature arose from a society in “crisis”. People were afraid of the unknown and searched for a way to address their thoughts and concerns. The popular avenue being literature.



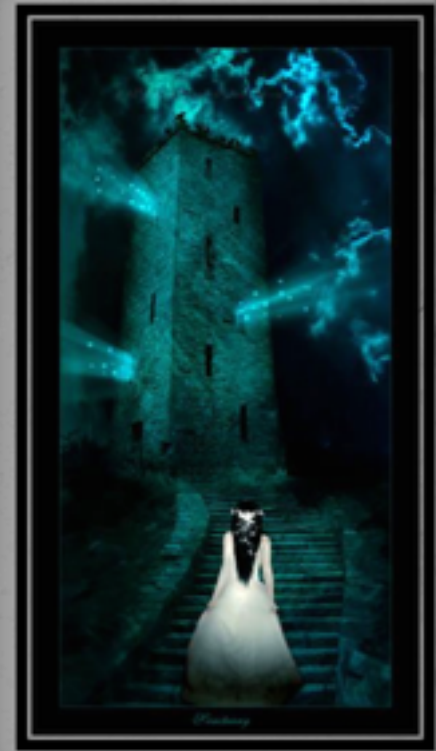
Characteristics of Gothic Literature

- Occult imagery such as ghosts etc.
- Crumbling castles
- Wicked lords
- Collapsing order
- Dark, nightmare landscape
- The hero experiences the “dark side” of Romantic freedom
- Loss of defining social structures



What's the irony of Gothic Lit?

- Through its own illogic Gothic supernaturalism exposed the limits of reason as an explanatory model (897).
- Patricia Meyer Spacks notes that the mind of man is naturally subject to secret terrors and apprehensions. This becomes extremely important to the development of Gothic fiction because supernatural motifs possess a “real and universal” validity (897).



Does the supernatural exist?

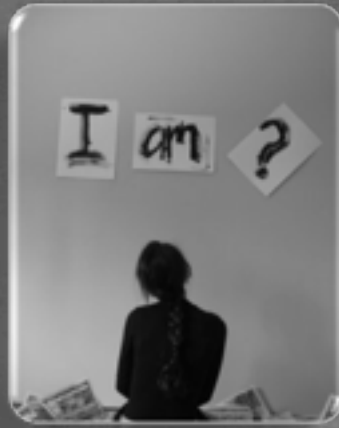
- Gothic writers such as Poe used traditional Christian beliefs in the Devil, curses, and spiritual visitation as a base for their stories.

But this presents a bit of a problem for Gothic fiction writers...

Problems with supernatural imagery

- As a response to death in the face of religious skepticism any sort which in any sense refers to the intervention of the supernatural in human affairs necessarily affirms that the supernatural exists...

This leads to mans most abiding concern...



The Debt That All Men Pay...

Death

The rise of death

- In the eighteenth century a new and powerful consciousness of death emerged
- Gothic poetry brought about a new curiosity about death and dying. This poetry introduced fantasy and dreams about the whole experience and romanticized all aspects of death.

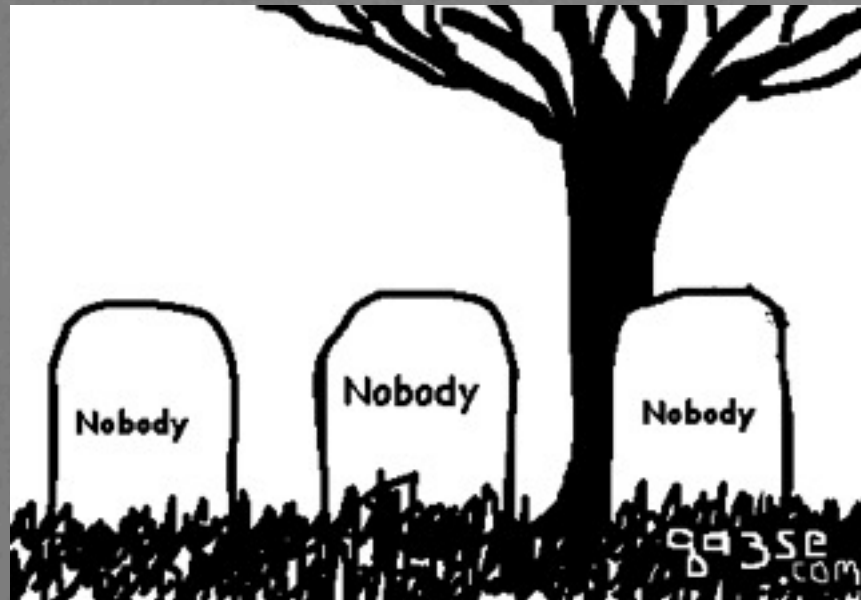


What do scholars have to say
about this?



Philippe Aries suggests:

- Before the end of the seventeenth century humans as history tells us, never really knew fear of death.



Say What?

- Fear of death involves many different responses (psychological, body effects, spiritual etc) so death itself takes on different meanings and “fear” depending on circumstance
- For example, the plague in Medieval Europe certainly made people scared of dying. However it was not the act itself but what lay after that frightened people of death.

3 Contributing factors to the rise of Death Anxiety according to Aries

- The secularization of death and the erosion of belief in the afterlife
- The growth of self consciousness and individualism which ultimately diminished the communal aspects of death making it a more private affair
- Advancement of modern science and medicine which converted the basic corpse into a freakish science experiment and a psychological process

Aries Evidence

- More public cemeteries and the abandonment of services once provided by the church
- Exhuming bodies for scientific purposes
- Appearance of literary and artistic productions concerned with mortality and grief



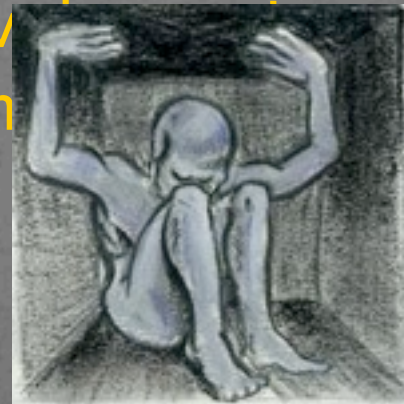
Side note...fear of death was
later replaced by the even more
terrifying possibility...

Being buried alive!

**This fear arose due to the body harvesting made popular by the rise
of medicine during the same period.**

Attitude is everything!

- This new idea and perspective touched almost all aspects of culture. Both Kennedy and later, Freud remind us that the ultimate source of all terror is death itself.
- So the theory goes ...
 - Haunted castles, secret vaults, sub terrain passages, and sealed rooms inv... This is due largely to the fact that each represent or imply a fatal enclosure.



Death the latest trend?

- The eighteenth century had a new outlook on death:
 - Death was now an art form
 - Books like Frankenstein made death and science look morbidly intriguing
- Only one thing was necessary for death to be considered “THE” meeting place; it had to be disinfected and prettified!



But what about Poe?

Gothic fiction evolves

"Who ever REALLY saw
anything but horror in the smile
of the dead?

We so earnestly desire to fancy it sweet—that is the source
of the mistake; if indeed, there ever was a mistake in the
question

~Edgar Allan Poe~

How is Poe different than other writers of Gothic Fiction?

- He refused to soften or idealize death
- Kept the essential element of “horror”
- Explored new and different conceptions of death

Most contemporary scholars do not think Poe had an inappropriate, unhealthy, or laughable obsession with death.

He simply thought outside the box!



The Poe Conspiracy Theory

Personal experience, popular culture, and intellectual history conspired to make death “gigantic” to Poe.

Poe's personal experiences with death

- **Surrounded by death**
 - **Both parents died**
 - **Surrogate mother died**
 - **Foster mother died**
 - **Wife died**



The crisis of authority and understanding in his time contributed to his fear and understanding of death.

The crisis also challenged and in some cases destroyed traditional ways of accepting death and introduced new conceptions.

How did all these changes in
society and his personal life
influence Poe?

The Science and Society Influences of Poe



Science: Death Conceptualized

- Poe incorporates unforgettable imagery pertaining to death such as:
 - Specific body parts such as teeth
 - Word choices like “putrid” and “cadaverous”
 - Decomposition

A good example of science conceptualizing death can be found in works by Poe like *The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar*



Excerpt from “Valdemar”

The eyes rolled themselves slowly open the pupils disappearing upwardly the skin generally assumed a cadaverous hue, resembling not so much parchment as white paper...the upper lip at the same time withered itself away from the teeth which it had previously covered completely while the lower jaw fell open with an audible jerk leaving the mouth widely extended and disclosing in full view the swollen and blackened tongue



So how does society fit in?

- Due to the increase of medical technology and science in Poe's era many sought to understand, control, and conquer death.
- Society became obsessed with finding the "cure" for death.
- Many sought age reversing treatments
- Science looked for "utopias"

More importantly...

- Science went in search of the “great dream” which to many of the era meant:

Extending life beyond its traditional limits and converting death into a manageable discretionary experience



Shock and Horror! Death is inevitable!

Poe understood this because in “Valdemar” he awakes to find that the body does in fact have its limits! And they are NOT pretty! This reaffirms the sovereignty of death.

The society paradox: One scholars opinion

Becker states that over all, “Man is literally split in two! He has awareness of his own splendid uniqueness in that he sticks out of nature with a towering majesty and yet he goes back into the ground a few feet in order blindly and dumbly to rot and disappear forever...”



So what have we learned from J.
Gerald Kennedy's paper on Poe?



The Highlights

- Poe rejected the illusion of “beautiful death” popular in the eighteenth century
- In “Valdemar” he illustrates what death really is about
- Supernaturalism intrudes on reason in Poe’s society which shatters all their illusions of death
- Poe faced the terrifying dilemma of writing about invisible death
- He produced literature that was both menacing and disturbing. It was the most “unprettified” literature of the era.

A final thought from Kennedy:

Some can't take Poe too seriously because to do this is to confront the fearful yet vitalizing truth that our century has done its best to deny(904).

Examples of themes from the assigned reading

The Tell-Tale Heart

Vanity

Poe focuses on age by his choice of the victim. He is basically saying that he had no issues with the guys except that he was old and had a creepy eye. This can be considered a symbol of the ageing process and ultimately the fear of death's approach.

“I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult. For his gold I had no desire. I think it was his eye! Yes it was this! He had the eye of a vulture!” (317)



Twisted Scientific Details

Poe focused on not only the scientific examination of death but also the scientific forensic knowledge necessary to cover up the crime.

“The old man was dead. I removed the bed and examined the corpse... I placed my hand upon the heart and held it there many minutes. There was no pulse...If you still think me mad, you will think no longer when I describe the wise precautions I took...I dismembered the corpse. I cut off the head and arms and legs. No blood-spot whatever...a tub had caught all” (319–320).

Supernaturalism

Poe did not focus significantly on the occult in this story but the implication of a beating heart in a dead body can be considered a supernatural element

“ The ringing became more distinct...I found the ringing was not within my ears...the sound increased– and what could I do? It was a low, dull, quick sound..Oh God what could I do! It grew louder – louder– louder. Villains! I shrieked...I admit the deed! – tear up the planks! – here, here! – it is the beating of his hideous heart!”
(320–321)



Examples of themes from the assigned reading

Ligeia

Supernaturalism and Scenery

This story focuses heavily on the occult with references to:

- Pentagrams
- Ghosts
- Opium induced visions and dreams
- Occult style rituals (séance)
- Other things that make this story Gothic is Poe's use of scenery and descriptions of the characters surroundings. He focuses on the darkness and the night time throughout the story. Here is just one example:

“I met her first in and most frequently in some large, old, decaying city near the Rhine” (159).

Examples from text

- “The room lay in in a high turret of the castellated abbey, was pentagonal in shape and of capacious size...the ceilings of gloomy-looking oak...” (167).
- “ I had become a bounded slave in the trammels of opium and my labors and orders had taken a coloring from my dreams” (166).
- “ In the excitement of my opium dreams...I would call aloud upon her name during the silence of the night” (169).
- “ Here then at least...can I never be mistaken there are the full and the black and the wild eyes of my lost love of the lady, the Lady Ligeia!” (173)

Beauty and Vanity

Poe goes to great length to describe the beauty of his true love but then there is the question of her reality.

Beauty and vanity are clearly important in this story. The narrator refers to his new wife as loathsome and old while Ligeia is beautiful, mysterious, and youthful.

Examples from the text

- “The features of Ligeia were not of a classic regularity– although I perceived that her loveliness was indeed exquisite” (160)
- The fair haired, the blue eyed Lady Rowena Trevanion...[had]cheeks, there were the roses as in her noon of life (172).

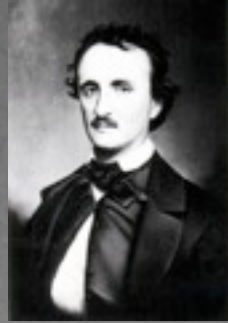
Society and Death

There are references to shrines and veneration in the story which are performed by the man who is grieving for the loss of his loved one. This shows the shift society was undergoing as Kennedy referenced.

“I found the commonest objects of the universe...when Ligeia’s beauty passed into my spirit, there dwelling as in a shrine, I derived from many existences in the material world, a sentiment such I felt always around within me... yet not the more could I define that sentiment or analyze or even steadily it” (162).

So what have we learned from the text?

Poe's literature does reflect the ideals and values of the era. Some consider him perverse and twisted, but Poe gave his readers what they wanted most...



Terror of the soul...thesis accomplished!

Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there,
wondering, fearing, doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal
ever dared to dream before.

~Edgar Allan Poe~

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