

The Gothic Elements in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven"

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المخلص

القوطية فن في الدراسات الأدبية والثقافية، وهي عبارة عن جنس أدبي أو أسلوب، استعاراته الكنيية تشمل بقايا آثار القرون الوسطى وأحداثها الخارقة للطبيعة فضلاً عن أبطالها الشيطانيين. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تقديم عناصر القوطية في قصيدة ايدغار الآن بو "الغراب". تتألف الدراسة من خمسة مباحث: الأول يمثل المقدمة التي تُعنى بتعريف القوطية وتتبع أصلها. بينما يعالج المبحث الثاني الاستخدام الأدبي للقوطية الذي ظهر في عام (1764) عندما قام هوراسب وليول بطبع روايته (قلعة اوترانتو) التي أصبحت نموذجاً للرواية القوطية احتذى به الروائيون فيما بعد. ويتناول المبحث الثالث أسلوب القوطية المميز عند بو الذي يخاطب الإنسان من الناحية النفسية. كما ويناقش المبحث أبطال بو الخياليين الغامضين المعتمدين وعالمه المريع. ويعرض المبحث الرابع تعريفاً قصيراً لقصيدة بو "الغراب" كما ويعطي فكرة عامة عن القصيدة. ويمثل المبحث الخامس والأخير جوهر هذه الدراسة الذي يعرض عناصر القوطية في "الغراب".

Abstract

In literary and cultural studies, the gothic is a genre or mode whose dark imagery often includes medieval ruins, supernatural occurrences, and demonic protagonists. To show Poe's use of the gothic elements in his poem "The Raven" is the aim of the present study. The study falls into five sections.

The first section forms the introduction that deals with the definition of the gothic term and alludes to its origin. While the second section treats the literary use of the gothic style which came into being in (1764) when Horace Walpole published his novel *The Castle of Otranto* which became a sample of the gothic novel that was followed later by other novelists. The third section tackles Poe's distinguished gothic style, which addresses man psychologically. His imaginative, mysterious mad heroes and his nightmare world are also discussed. The fourth section offers a short definition of Poe's "The Raven" and gives a general idea about the poem. The core of the study is represented by the last section, which displays the gothic elements in "The Raven".

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1. Introduction

Gothic appeared as a style of art in Europe during the last part of the Middle Ages, (twelfth to sixteenth centuries). The gothic style of that period was expressed in "architecture, sculpture, panel painting, illuminated manuscripts, stained glass, jewellery and textiles"⁽¹⁾.

The term gothic came from the "Goths" a "northern Germanic barbarian pagan tribes which invaded former territories of the Christian Roman Empire century A.D"⁽²⁾. The Goths who were very interested in Christianity that affected their architectural and artistic works first used the gothic style. They created a distinctive style of grotesque, horror and exaggeration. The gothic style, which differed from the "subtle" and "controlled" Roman style, was simple and displayed general ideas particularly religious matters⁽³⁾.

The main concern of the gothic style was to express the catholic faith through dealing with the presence of God. However, pagan doctrine in nature and "elemental spirits whose power was to prevent evil"⁽⁴⁾, still occupied the gothic style. These ideas and symbols were particularly incarnated in the architecture of cathedrals⁽⁵⁾. Hence, in gothic style, pagan appeared to support the idea of Christianity, which by itself a contrasting matter that explores the essence of this style.

The gothic style of the artists before the fifteenth century was away from personal feelings or self – expression. After that, the pictorial art of the artist became a reflection of his own imagination, which was distinguished by its horrible nature. The gothic paintings presented violence through surreal, fearful images in order to provide the sense of horror⁽⁶⁾. It deserves mentioning, that the term gothic never used during that period which was called by the Renaissance "The Dark Ages". During the Enlightenment the gothic style was ignored for it dealt with brutality and superstitions. At any rate, the term gothic came into being in the mid-to-late eighteenth century when medieval period became a great inspiration of many literary works⁽⁷⁾.

2- The literary use of the Gothic style

The term gothic came to be applied to the literary genre precisely because the genre dealt with such emotional extremes and very dark themes, and because it found its most natural settings in the buildings of this style-haunted castles, mansions, and monasteries often remote and ruined⁽⁸⁾.

Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) introduced the brooding characteristics of the gothic fiction in England. This novel established the main features of the gothic novel thus; it became a proto-type followed by other novelists. The gothic novel was

fascinated by the horrible, the grotesque and the supernatural. Night and sunless environment is the best atmosphere for the gothic action.

The atmosphere of mystery and suspense may be found in old castles, forests and mountains. These fearful, haunted places suit the gothic heroes and heroines who live alone in complete fear and alienation, obliged to be decisive to find solutions to their own problems. The origins of these protagonists are mysterious for they are either orphans or foundlings. They could also be demonic⁽⁹⁾.

Gothic themes emphasize the persistence of the past and history's grip on the present, and take place against a backdrop where few characters are innocent, and most of them are damned. Gothic narratives often stress embodiment, with all its attendant possibilities for sensation, as well as the fear of decay. "The themes of the literary gothic have been translated into other media such as the theatre and had a notable revival in twentieth century gothic horror films such as the classic universal horro films of the 1930"⁽¹⁰⁾.

Gothic genre also influenced the American writings⁽¹¹⁾ and the most prominent writer was Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) whose gothic style expanded to include his poems.

3. Poe and the gothic Style

Poe is known primarily for his mastery of the gothic genre. He is a professional artist in horrors. Poe is influenced by the gothic novels of the eighteenth century and he develops the use of the gothic element. He presents vague, mysterious and complicated stories, which address man psychologically. In "The philosophy of composition", Poe mentions that his works are "conscious exploration of morbid psychology"⁽¹²⁾.

Poe's work has a unique style that defines him immediately to the reader. The settings of his stories are dark, gloomy and horrific. The events of stories like, "The Tell-Tale Heart", "Hop-Frog", "The Cask of Amontillado", and "Ligeia", occur at night. The element of darkness is important in Poe's stories because it stands for evil that increases the reader's feeling of suspense. The places of these stories are of a gothic nature. "The Fall of the House of Usher", for example, the house stands on the edge of a tarn. Its appearance is like the dull day in which the events happen. It is a view of melancholy and dismay that suits the "horrifying mood of Poe's stories"⁽¹³⁾.

The action in Poe's gothic fiction is strange and grotesque that enhances the sense of discomfort and horror. The horrifying action may lead the characters in Poe's stories to be mad. Thus, the element of madness adds mystery and strangeness to his literary works⁽¹⁴⁾.

Poe's nightmare world is not only a "method of explaining the mystery of the universe"⁽¹⁵⁾; it is also psychologically employed to portray "the minds awareness of itself"⁽¹⁶⁾. In short, Poe's short stories

and poems reflect a state of man's inner world. Horror is inside and outside man; Poe successfully marries the two to give birth to a horrible world of mystery and destruction. This is obvious in his symbols. In *The Fall of the House of Usher*, for instance, the crack in the Usher mansion suggests a fundamental split in the twin's (Roderick and Madeline) personality and anticipates the final ruin of both mansion and family.

At any rate, there is inevitable relationship between death and horror, in other words, death is the main source of horror. Death is the truth whose essence is out of man's reach; it is the unknown, which means the fearful matter. Thus, death is adopted to be the subject of horror in gothic literary works. Poe also uses death as a gothic tool. This can be touched in "*The Raven*"; Lenore's death causes the horror in which the hero lives, as it will be explained later.

4. The Raven (1845)

Edgar Allan Poe "The Raven" is a dark reflection on lost love, death, and loss of hope. The poem examines the emotions of a young man who has lost his lover to death and who tries unsuccessfully to distract himself from his sadness through books. Books, however, prove to be of little help, as his night becomes a nightmare and a single visitor, the raven, shatters his solitude.

5. The Gothic Elements in "The Raven"

"The Raven" can be considered a gothic poem because it has the elements that distinguish it as such. The following gothic factors will present the gothic identity of the poem.

5.1 Setting

The poem opens with a description of scared and dull setting: once upon a midnight dreary ..." (L.1) which spells gloom and fear over the reader. The most suitable time for fearful events is midnight and when that midnight belongs to "the bleak December" (L.7) the horrific touch increases. Both "midnight" and "December" symbolize an end of something, they may symbolize Lenore's or the narrator's end because Lenore's death means the end of their love and of his happy life.

The room in which the lover lives is portrayed in terms of horror and depression:

In addition, the silken, sad uncertain rustling of each purple curtain. Thrilled me-filled me with fantastic terrors never felt before (LL. 13-14)

The movement and sound of the curtains fill the lover with terror, the simple furniture then becomes a source of horror. The tapping on his door at midnight also creates a fearful sense. Hence, horror is outside and inside the room. Eventually, the whole atmosphere is ready now to receive the sudden black visitor, the raven, which lands on a Greek eyeless statue in the lover's room. "[The Raven] perched upon a bust of pallas just above my chamber door".

(L.41). This statue may refer to the lover himself for, in his "philosophy of composition", Poe states that "the bust of Pallas being chosen, ..., as most in keeping with the scholarship of the lover".⁽¹⁷⁾

Hence, in a way or another, the statue can be seen as an emblem of the student who is accordingly cannot see or feel because of his grief. At any rate, there is a strong relationship between the time, the place, the furniture, and the lover. The main connection between them is fear; there is a frightened lover at a fearful time in a horrific house. The events happen in a room in a "home by Horror haunted". (L.96) and instead of the ruined sections that can be found in a castle in a gothic story, one can touch the ruined soul and thoughts of the student.

The dark thoughts of the student and the gloomy and dark setting may focus the light on the darkness of the poem.

5.2 Darkness and Silence

Darkness is an inevitable element used to support the gothic style. It is a symbol of vagueness, which is the main characteristic of Poe's writings. Darkness means the unknown that fears everybody. Hence, "The Raven"s hero must be afraid when he opens the door and sees "Darkness there and nothing more" (L.24). He contemplates the darkness, wonders, and the power of darkness makes him dream about "... dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before" (L.26). "Peering", "wondering", "fearing", "doubting", and "dreaming" all these matters

occur at the same time and they are normal reactions to the sense of horror.

Silence is another important fearful factor employed in Poe's "The Raven". Here, silence seems part of darkness. Darkness in the poem is dumb which may suggest the student's disability to discover the truth, for there is no token, "But the silence was unbroken, and the stillness gave no token" (L.27). Darkness carries no clue to explore the mystery of knock, and the lover hears only the echo of his word Lenore, "And the only word there spoken was the whispered word, Lenore!" (L.28). the word he hears is so weak it is just a whisper that leads to more vagueness. In fact, the silent darkness increases the young man's internal conflict, "... all my soul within me burning"(L.31).

The image of darkness goes further to represent death. In other words, the act of horror is portrayed as that of death, after death man's home is darkness and silence is the language of graves. The hero's mistress is dead, when he opens the door (after hearing the tapping) he expects her soul, he tries to explore her world but he faces darkness and silence with soul full of fear. It seems seeking the truth leads to hell, and to self-burning which is a grotesque matter and on element of the gothic style.

5.3 Loneliness

The loneliness of the student by itself is a gothic factor. After Lenore's death, he lives alone among his books reading the "curious

volumes of forgotten lore" (L.2). It seems that the word "forgotten" gives the reader a sense of alienation and oldness; it is a deserted lore, which could be haunted by old spirits. Thus, the word may carry a ghostly flavour and a touch of loneliness. The dark chamber in which the lover is placed is used to show his emptiness and loneliness, now that he is without his lost Lenore.

Poe's protagonist is disappointed; his hopes to live happily with his beloved have flown. He even expects the departure of the Raven for he used to live alone without friends.

*Till I scarcely more than muttered other friends have flown
before on the morrow he [the Raven] will leave me, as my hopes have
flown before (LL.58-59)*

The bereaved lover's state of loneliness and depression leads to his obsession with the idea of meeting his mistress' soul, however, when the Raven appears he cannot believe that the moment is real. For him it seems very odd. Although he doubts the situation, he gives up and loses hold on himself and on reality. Hence, the lover believes that.

*The Raven, sitting lonely on the placid bust spoke only that one
word [nevermore], as if his soul in that one word he did outpour.
(LL.54-55)*

The fowl's word "nevermore" reflects the situation of the lover: he will not see Lenore, he will not live happy, and he will live alone until the end of his life. Such state of endless loneliness and

depression leads to the man's insanity, which all contribute to the gothic aura of the poem.

It deserves mentioning that such state of isolation is just a reflection of Poe's feeling. The tragedies in Poe's life are shown in *The Raven*, and can be predominately seen through the comparison between the loss of his wife, and the student's loss of Lenore. The apparent tone in *The Raven* represents a very painful condition of mind, an intellect sensitive to madness and the abyss of melancholy brought upon by the death of a beloved lady. The student asks if he will see his mistress in the afterlife. After Virginia's death, Poe tried to relieve his grief by drinking. A parallelism is formed in *The Raven* between the condescending actions of the Raven towards the student and the taunting of alcohol towards Poe. The Raven declares that the student will never see his lost love again when uttering, "Forget this lost Lenore" (L.83). Alcohol taunts Poe into ceaseless depression and causes him to have a life – long problem with alcoholism, which eventually ended his life.⁽¹⁸⁾ Poe's sorrowful life seems to have been the fuel for his dark and gothic writings. In short, the poet's horrible loneliness is employed to enhance the gothic element.

5.4 The Mystery

The atmosphere of mystery and suspense is a vital gothic element in Poe's *The Raven*. Throughout the poem, there is a feeling of fear enhanced by the unknown. The lover is roused from his sleepy state by a tapping on the door, which begins to terrify him because he

is longing for Lenore, but finds nothing instead or rather the Raven. This scene then contains the typical gothic elements of mystery, ghosts, and supernatural.⁽¹⁹⁾

To conclude, *The Raven* is pervaded by mystery; as the sudden appearance of the Raven, the speech of the black bird "Nevermore", and the mystery of death itself and life after death. In fact, the whole poem is a mystery and the solution for the mystery forms, to some extent, another mystery particularly when the lover asks "Is there – is there balm in Gilead?" (L.97)

What is there beyond death? Is there any further release from anguish? Can he meet Lenore (his balm) there? The Raven answers "Nevermore". The hero aims to find a solution to the mystery of death, but the vague answer leads him to nowhere, which again enhances the mystery of the poem.

5.5 The Unreliable Narrator

The narrator's point of view toward the raven is characterized by its changeability. At the beginning of the poem, the narrator of *The Raven* shows his fear because of the knock of the unknown visitor. When he opens the window and the Raven flies in, he feels happy "then this ebony bird beguiling my sad fancy into smiling" (L.43). He also shows his respect for the fowl by calling him "lordly". (L.47)⁽²⁰⁾. The Raven appears to be a source of hope and consolation. The narrator thinks the bird is a "prophet" (L.85) sent by God "thy God hath... sent thee" (L.81) to tell him something about his lost Lenore.

He longs for reunion in heaven with "a sainted maiden whom the angels name Lenore" (L.94). The narrator begs the Raven to tell him something pleasant about his beloved, he seeks comfort but the Raven gives no comfortable answer. Then his emotions toward the bird change and he describes it as "thing of evil"(L.91) and as "devil" (L.91) and defines his "fiery eyes" (L.74) as those of "a demon" (L.105). The narrator also calls the Raven as "...grim, ungainly, ghastly, gaunt and ominous bird" (L.76) and as a "beast" (L.52). All these fearful and hateful features are given to the fowl because, according to the narrator, it is a dreaded emblem of death. Hence, the Raven fails to be a symbol of hope and consolation; however, it becomes an explorer of reality.

The narrator seeks the truth; he wants to know what is meant by the word "nevermore"? "... What this ominous bird... Meant in croaking 'nevermore'" (LL.71-72). For the unstable narrator, the Raven is still the object of hope, the hope of knowing something about Lenore, knowing something beyond the barriers of ignorance. Although he suspects the raven as a prophet or a devil, yet he begs the Raven to tell him the truth about man's end.

Besides the narrator's uncertainty of the identity of the Raven, he is also uncertain of man's state after death. In addition to that, the narrator believes that the recovery of his bleeding heart is associated with the departure of the Raven "Take thy beak from out my heart" (L.101), but the Raven "Quoth... 'Nevermore'" (L.102). According to

the narrator, the Raven will never leave him, which is incredible matter that asserts his insanity. Eventually, the trinity of insanity, uncertainty and changeability presents the young man as unreliable narrator, which is another gothic element that strengthens the gothic show of the poem.

5.6 Other Basic Gothic Elements

In addition to the previous gothic factors, four characteristics allow a work to be labeled as "gothic". The first is that there are a victim and torture, here the victim is the speaker and the Raven is obviously torturing him in that he will not respond with anything other than "nevermore", seemingly driving him crazy.

The second characteristic is that the torturer is either evil or has supernatural powers; this is also true in the poem since the Raven can speak (supernatural merit) and the speaker refers to it many times as being evil or demon – like. Third, the work must have some type of setting that the victim cannot escape. Here, it would seem that the speaker could easily walk out of the room but since he thinks that the Raven has some information for him about his lost love, he feels like he must stay and is, in essence, trapped⁽²¹⁾.

The poem is also full of gothic vocabularies⁽²²⁾ such as terror, scare, wondering, fearing, whispered, mystery, beast, ghastly, unseen, ghost, enchanted, horror, haunted, demon. The employment of such words in the poem is necessary to suit its gothic nature. Besides,

breathlessness and panic are common in this gothic poem. Finally, Poe's *The Raven* is a prime example of gothic poetry at its finest.

Notes

- 1- Kathy Prendergast: "Introduction to the Gothic Tradition", [www.Document], URL, <http://A: bbb. htm>, 2006, page 1 of 3.
- 2- Prendergast, page 1 of 3.
- 3- Prendergast, page 1 of 3.
- 4- Prendergast, page 1 of 3.
- 5- Prendergast, page 1 of 3.
- 6- Prendergast, page 1 of 3.
- 7- Prendergast, page 2 of 3.
- 8- Gothic Fiction, [www. Document], URL, <http:// en. Wikipedia. Htm>, 2006, P.2 of 7.
- 9- Prendergast, page 2 of 3.
- 10- Gothic fiction, page 4 of 7.
- 11- Gothic fiction, page 4 of 7.
- 12- Poe – Philosophy of composition. [www. Document], URL, <http://en. Wikipedia. mht>, 2007.
- 13- Darkness prevails: common characteristics of Edgar Allan Poe's "Gothic fiction", <http:// www.associatedcontent.com/ article>. Page 1 of 2.
- 14- Darkness prevails: common characteristics of Edgar Allan Poe's "Gothic fiction" page 2 of 2.

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- 17- Poe – Philosophy of composition, 2007.
- 18- "Criticism: The Raven", [www. Document], URL, [http:// www. Book rags. co](http://www.Bookrags.co), 2007.
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- 20- "Analysis of Poe's The Raven", [www. Document], URL, [http://litencyc, com](http://litencyc.com), 2006.
- 21- Analysis of Poe's "The Raven", 2006.
- 22- "The characteristics of the gothic Novel", [www. Document], URL, [http://en. Wikisource.org](http://en.Wikisource.org), 2006, page 1 of 3.

Conclusion

The gothic elements pervade Poe's "The Raven" from the beginning until the end. The setting is portrayed in a gothic way; the bereaved lover's gloomy room and his haunted house are fearfully described at midnight during the cold December. This setting prepares the reader to receive another important gothic factor i.e. darkness and silence. After opening the door, the lover cannot see but darkness and cannot hear but weak whisper and then silence, which suggests vagueness and grotesque.

The young man's feeling of loneliness, after his mistress' death, is another gothic characteristic in "The Raven" which appears to be a reflection of subjective experience. Mystery is a pervasive gothic element in the poem. It is represented by the mysterious appearance of the raven and its mysterious and tiresome word 'nevermore', besides the mystery of life after death, which lead to the unknown, and strangeness. These gothic elements of mystery, ghosts and supernatural form the subject of "The Raven" i.e. the mind's loss of any hold on reality. These factors contribute to create insane hero and unreliable narrator, which is another gothic aspect in the poem. Finally, the poem is a report by imagination in gothic terms.

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