Edgar Allan Poe

textual ideas
falling from the
skies, raining
epiphanies of
the forgotten

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Poe as Celebrity

A figure celebrated in schools even today

• Lived in New England and made a career off his writing.

• Gained a celebrity status in the U. S. and even in Europe.

• Credited with the creation of mystery genre.

• Credited with manipulating the American Gothic genre.

• His life is traditionally seen as haunted, just like his writings.

• Often depicted as mad, opium-addicted, or alcoholic, or all three.

Writing

His work established the concepts of modern short story

• Revolutionized the short story form.

> He is credited with reshaping the short story concept for America.

• One of the first to establish self-destructive characters;

many of his protagonists have a death wish.

• Also one of the first writer's to exploit the notion of a split personality.

• He work develops notions of the **anti-hero** concept.

> A protagonist whose qualities are directly opposite to the traditional hero.

> In some cases not necessarily evil, but victims of circumstance.

> Modern life no longer allows individuals capable of showing true heroism.

• His work is often macabre; collectively shows morbid, psychological tales

Murder Ballads as Possible Influence

• Lyrics from all ballads are the beginnings of poetry; modern verse began as a natural transition from music lyrics in early centuries of English language.

• Ballads were particularly characteristic of British and Irish popular song *and* poetry from the later medieval period until the 19th century.

• American murder ballads are often versions of older Old World ballads.

• Like folk tales and fables, this form of art describes worlds of reality outside of reality. They seem surreal and illogical because they are based on a story known only to the listeners in past centuries.

Murder Ballads-Review

• a sub genre where a song is based on a violent situation

Some modern equivalents:

"The Night the Lights Went Out in Georgia"   "Ballad of Davey Crockett"

"Frankie and Johnny"   "Mack the Knife"

"Bohemian Rhapsody"   "Cocaine Blues"

• Typically these ballads are narratives, presenting a loose plot line which details

  the scene of a murder.

• They can be narrated by either the victim or the criminal, or in some cases

  are recounted by the ghosts of the murdered.

English Murder Ballad

Lucy Wan
Anonymous, 16th Century

Fair Lucy she sits at her father's door,
A-weeping and making moan,
And by there came her brother dear:
'What ails thee, Lucy Wan?'

'I ail, and I ail, dear brother,' she said,
'I'll tell you the reason why;
There is a child between my two sides,
Between you, dear Billy, and I.'

And he has drawn his good broad sword,
That hung down by his knee,
And he has cutted off Lucy Wan's head.
And her fair body in three.

'Oh, I have cutted off my greyhound's head,
And I pray you pardon me.'
'Oh, this is not the blood of our greyhound,
But the blood of our Lucy.'

'Oh, what shall you do when your father comes to know?
My son, pray tell unto me.'
'I shall dress myself in a new suit of blue
And sail to some far country.'

'Oh, what will you do with your houses and your lands?
My son, pray tell unto me?'
'Oh, I shall leave them all to my children so small,
By one, by two, by three.'

'Oh, when shall you turn to your own wife again?
My son, pray tell unto me.'
'When the sun and the moon rise over yonder hill,
And I hope that may never, never be.'

"Lucy Wan." *The Penguin Book of English Folk Songs*.
Ralph Vaughan Williams and A.L. Lloyd, eds. Baltimore, MD:
Penguin Books, 1968. Print.

Gothic Overview

Gothic themes include sub-genres:

- Gothic Romance

- Gothic Horror

- Gothic Horror Romance

- American Gothic genre

- American Southern Gothic

- Female Gothic

- Modern Gothic

For all of these categories, certain requirements must be met:

- melodramatic tones

- sense of heightened drama

- psychological extremes

- use of extreme dominant/submissive personalities

- situations of murder, violence, physical confrontations

Gothic Overview

Gothic Landscapes

Gothic settings are crucial to the development of:

• mood of story

• atmosphere, tone, and plot-lines

• characterizations of key figures

• the protagonist's desires

• the protagonist's psychological condition

This multi-functional image even symbolizes the inevitable decay of:

• society as a whole or of a community's traditions and values

• society's infrastructures and historical progressions

Atmospheric Setting

During the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing alone, on horseback, through a singularly dreary tract of country; and at length found myself, as the shades of the evening drew on, within view of the melancholy House of Usher. I know not how it was; but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit. I say insufferable; for the feeling was unrelieved by any of that half-pleasurable, because poetic, sentiment, with which the mind usually receives even the sternest natural images of the desolate or terrible. I looked upon the scene before me—upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain—upon the bleak walls—upon the vacant eye-like windows—upon a few rank sedges—and upon a few white trunks of decayed trees—with an utter depression of soul which I can compare to no earthly sensation more properly than to the afterdream of the reveler upon opium—the bitter lapse into every-day life—the hideous dropping off of the veil. There was 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. What was it—I paused to think—what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher? It was a mystery all insoluble; nor could I grapple with the shadowy fancies that crowded upon me as I pondered. I was forced to fall back upon the unsatisfactory conclusion that while, beyond doubt, there are combinations of very simple natural objects which have the power of thus affecting us, still the analysis of this power lies among considerations beyond our depth. It was possible, I reflected, that a mere different arrangement of the particulars of the scene, of the details of the picture, would be sufficient to modify, or perhaps to annihilate its capacity for sorrowful impression; and, acting upon this idea, I reined my horse to the precipitous brink of a black and lurid tarn that lay in unruffled luster by the dwelling, and gazed down—but with a shudder even more thrilling than before—upon the remodeled and inverted images of the gray sedge, and the ghastly tree stems, and the vacant and eye-like windows.

Poe, Edgar Allan. "The Fall of the House of Usher." *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*. New York: Vintage Books, 1975. Print.

Gothic Overview

The house in Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" symbolizes:

• the Usher family

• the Usher family's values and philosophies

• Roderick's mental breakdown and swings of emotion

• Roderick's physical weaknesses

• Roderick's possible addictions

• the European ideals of the time

• the European psyche of the time

plus acts as a character onto itself

Gothic Overview

Typical Gothic Characters:

arch villains, tyrants, bandits, pirates, mercenaries

rapists, murderers

maniacs, madwomen, madmen

persecuted maidens

moody, obsessive heros with family curses, family secrets

Romance

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moody, obsessive heros with family curses, family secrets

magicians, sorcerers, witches, warlocks

vampires, werewolves, banshees, mummies

monsters, demons, ghosts

Horror