

Poe's Mechanisms of Terror and Influence on Modern Horror

by Dylan Hulon

Edgar Allan Poe is often referred to as the godfather of horror and Gothic literature and, therefore, has generated extensive scholarly discussions. Some of these discussions focus on the literary techniques, themes, and Poe's mastery of conveying terror to the reader. These conversations analyze the sensory and psychological mechanisms for evoking terror and the influence these techniques have on modern horror. This literature review will outline the central arguments made by several of these scholars discussing Poe's mechanisms of horror and his influence on modern horror, identify noted gaps in the discussion, and suggest potential areas for further exploration.

Several scholars primarily focus on Poe's use of manipulating sensory experiences to convey an overwhelming sense of terror. Caitlin Duffy's article, "Sensory Overload and Poe's Mechanics of Terror," analyzes how Poe is able to create urgency and a sense of unease through what she refers to as "sensory overload" (69). She argues that Poe overwhelms his readers with vivid imagery of the dark atmospheres of his stories and ambiguity in his narratives which disorients his characters and readers alike (70). Staci Conner similarly focuses on ambiguity as a mechanism of Poe's writing, agreeing that this leaves readers in a state of suspense, thereby amplifying the effect of the horror (78). She goes on to say that Poe often uses the element of confinement to place his characters between states of life and death to



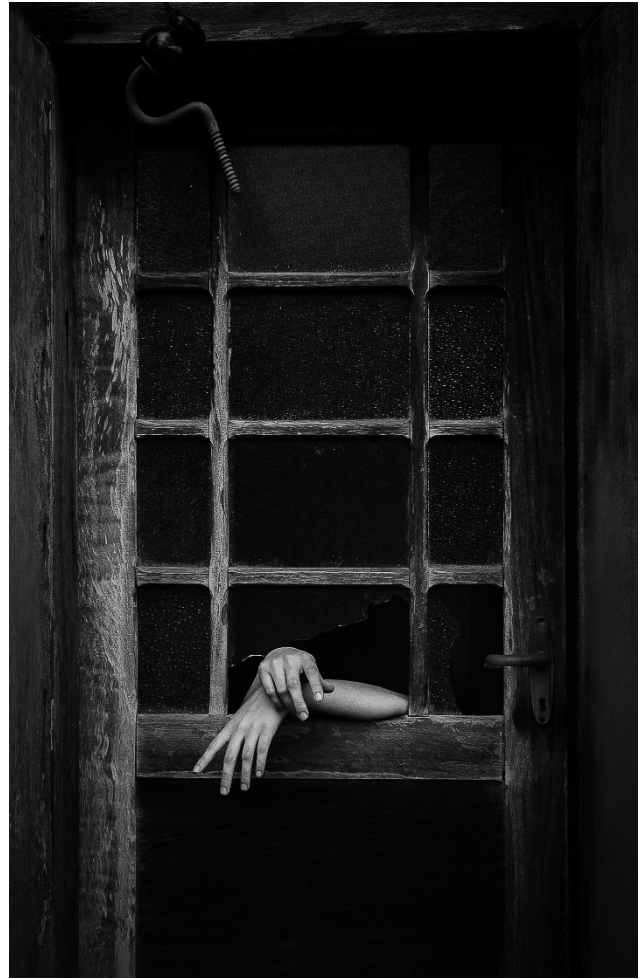
heighten the ambiguity of his narratives which amplifies the effect of terror amongst his readers (Conner 78). For example, in Poe's "Berenice," Conner argues that the fact that Berenice does not die, but rather is entombed alive is what conveys the horror (83). Although both writers agree that Poe derives his horror from manipulating sensory experiences, they each give different examples of the exact mechanism by which this is achieved.

More than just the eerie atmosphere and liminal ambiguity of Poe's stories, some scholars discuss how the subject matter manages to manifest horror. Fred Botting discusses Poe's use of machines and other automata to express his fascination with the mechanical nature of horror, such as in "The Tell-Tale Heart" in which the beating heart is compared to a clock (77). Botting goes on to explain that this comparing and merging of human and machine qualities gives rise to a kind of uncanny horror (79). Meanwhile, Sławomir Studniarz examines the role of the human body in Poe's stories as a subject of horror. Studniarz describes how the dismemberment of the old man in "The Tell-Tale Heart" is in itself horrific, but also the way that the body parts themselves, like the eye and the heart, take on autonomous and symbolic roles in the horror (108). Both articles analyze the subject matter of Poe's stories to determine how he uses certain things as agents of horror. While Botting focuses on the uncanny blending of man and machine, Studniarz highlights the horror presented by the organic nature of humans.

Another topic of discussion among scholars is how Poe's writing has influenced modern horror writers. Analyzing Poe's influence on Stephen King and his popular novel, *The Shining*, Maroš discusses the similar themes shared by Poe and King. He argues that both authors describe isolated, decaying environments as metaphors for the mental degradation and descent into madness of their characters (51). King also uses Poe's techniques of creating a cyclical narrative and using unreliable narrators to construct suspense and terror (Maroš 8). Expanding on this discussion, Torres-Toukourmidis et al. note that Poe's influence also extends to independent films and video games. They describe how Poe's inclusion of supernatural elements is used to evoke terror in film, while video games, like Poe, tend to utilize the depictions of dark, decaying atmospheres (1). Video games leverage the characteristic gothic elements common in many of Poe's works and immerse players in it through the interactive nature of video games, giving players agency in the experience of horror and madness (Torres-Toukourmidis et al. 4). Both of these academic discussions agree that the gothic atmosphere of Poe's writing characterized by isolation, decay, and looming dread live on in modern media.

While the current academic discussion provides valuable insights into Poe's mechanisms of horror and modern transmedia adaptations, there are still several notable gaps in the discussion which could add value to the discussion if explored. One such gap is that of analyzing Poe's horror through a feminist and gender-based

perspective. None of the sources discussed in this paper touched on the gender dynamics or the role of female characters in crafting horror within Poe's stories. A feminist analysis could examine the roles of women in Poe's stories, highlighting how these roles contribute to the conveyance of horror as well as how these roles reflect or challenge gender norms. To go further, this research could also examine how these roles are adapted by modern horror media. Another research gap worth exploring is Poe's influence on other, non-narrative based forms of horror media, such as paintings, sculptures, and digital art. Examining how other forms of art interpret and adapt Poe's themes of death, dark and decaying atmospheres, and the uncanny could deepen the understanding of how these elements convey horror, and aid in the understanding of Poe's influence in modern media.



The academic discussion about Edgar Allan Poe's works of horror shed light on the complexities and effectiveness of his literary techniques. Scholars like Duffy and Conner emphasize Poe's manipulation of sensory experiences and ambiguity to create a sense of terror and dread, while Botting and Studniarz explore Poe's use of the uncanny blend of man and machine as well as the human form as agents of horror. Scholars like Maroš and Torres-Toukoumidis et al. agree that Poe's influence extends far beyond his time. They highlight how his techniques, themes, and dark, gothic atmospheres are adopted by modern authors like Stephen King, as well as by modern films and video games, to instill fear in new audiences. Despite the robust and insightful academic discussions surrounding the horror of Edgar Allan Poe, there remains some gaps which, if explored, could deepen the understanding of Poe's works of horror and their influence today. These gaps include analyzing Poe's works through a feminist and gender-based perspective and examining the adaptation of Poe's methods in non-narrative forms of art. By addressing these gaps, Poe's works and his broader cultural legacy in modern horror could receive new insights and deeper understanding.

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