

# The Psychological Connection between Gothic Writers and the Genre

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## Abstract

In this paper, I will demonstrate how the gothic genre facilitated the expression of social and psychological issues through the works of Edgar Allan Poe and Franz Kafka. Both authors endured troubled lives, which influenced their creation of masterpieces that enriched the gothic genre and allowed readers to relate to their own fears, doubts, and pains. Edgar Allan Poe's hardships are evident in works like *"The Raven"* (1845) and *"The Tell-Tale Heart"* (1843). Similarly, Franz Kafka, who also faced significant struggles, produced influential works such as *"The Metamorphosis"* and *"The Hunger Artist,"* inspired by his personal tribulations. This paper will examine the psychological aspects of fear and horror within the gothic genre, focusing on how Poe and Kafka's life experiences influenced their art, demonstrating that their works were deeply connected to their personal lives. Such works by Poe and Kafka are contribution to the gothic style and examining their works adds more dimensions to the gothic style.

## Keywords

Gothic, Genre, Kafka, Poe, Psychological

## 1. Introduction

In 1764, Horace Walpole first coined the term "Gothic" in his novel *The Castle of Otranto*, which he subtitled *"A Gothic Story."* Since then, Gothic literature has grown in popularity. It has evolved into various forms, initially manifesting through texts such as short stories, poems, and novels, and later expanding into films, music, and video games. There is some debate over whether the Gothic genre, like romance or science fiction, constitutes an art form. However, the more pertinent question is its relevance to us. The Gothic genre is undeniably vital as it allows us to confront and face our fears. Horror movies, which have

largely replaced Gothic texts, use fear to create a thrilling experience and bring people together to face these fears. Many works by Stephen King, a renowned Gothic genre writer, have been adapted into films, like *The Shining* (1980) and *Pet Sematary* (1989). The Gothic genre encompasses more than its stereotypical elements of ghosts, castles, and violence; it also includes romance, science fiction, adventure, and comedy. Gothic authors express their deepest and darkest fears through their work, making a Gothic piece a reflection of the creator's dark imagination. While some may view it as a genre that dwells on our fears, dark desires, and troubled pasts, it also offers an escape from the grim realities of our lives, providing a storyline that, though scary, comes with a sense of resolution or explanation for the horrors.

Most stories, regardless of genre, have a beginning, middle, and end, with an essential explanation. The gothic genre simplifies a major problem through an elaborate, chronological plot, encouraging readers to imagine horrors in their minds and experience relief when the end clarifies these horrors' causes. In contrast, horror movies and video games engage viewers and players with visual stimuli, yet they also employ fear-inducing images and resolve the narrative in the final scene. "In horror literature, the unexpected happens-" (Pippin, 1997: p. 210). The feelings of terror are uncomfortable but sought after by readers. Moreover, the fear-inducing effects are not only experienced by the audience but also by the creators. Gothic writers like Edgar Allan Poe and Franz Kafka explored their psychological issues and fears through their works. This research essay will examine Poe's "*The Raven*" and "*The Tell-Tale Heart*" and Kafka's "*The Metamorphosis*" and "*A Hunger Artist*," exploring how these works relate to their psychological trauma. Additionally, I will use secondary sources to support the theory that these works stemmed from their psychological traumas and fears. It is worth mentioning that the reason why this topic was chosen is attributed to the fact that both Poe and Kafka significantly added to this field in literature. Common subjects shared by these writers denote interesting depiction of the dark and mysterious themes. Furthermore, the psychological profundity of both writers' allowed them to explore, with competence, human's inner complexity.

## 2. The Puzzle of Horror

Horror and the gothic genre primarily evoke fear, a potent and often negative emotion that surprises and unsettles people. In today's fast-paced digital world, there's little room to resolve these fears, leading to anxiety, panic attacks, and depression. People's fears vary, including disgust, failure, loneliness, death, and the fear of the unknown, affecting a large portion of the human population. The attraction to horror, despite its negative effects, intrigues many philosophers. This paradox suggests that the feelings of fear and disgust, while uncomfortable, can also be exhilarating due to the adrenaline rush they provoke.

Bantinaki (2012: p. 384) notes that in horror fiction, "Feagin argues that one

can come to enjoy these aspects of the emotional experience and such enjoyment can function to reinforce one's attraction to the kinds of things which generate them". This raises the question of whether these inevitable fears can be confronted and overcome. Horror isn't just about inducing negative feelings; exposing oneself to fear can be thrilling and build confidence in facing discomfort. Viewing fear as merely negative is a narrow perspective. Bantinaki (2012: p. 383) writes, "I argue that fear in response to horror can be experienced as an overall positive emotion, that is, an emotion toward which the subject has a positive stance and thus enjoys experiencing, leaving it open whether the emotional experience is also affectively pleasurable or affectively painful".

Perspective is crucial in handling fear, and experience helps manage the sensations of pity or fright based on similar past experiences. Fear induces alertness and caution, preparing us for potential dangers if we do not cower. It has been essential for human survival, from ancient times when it helped cavemen evade wild animal and outsider attacks to thrill-seeking behaviors. We engage in dangerous and risky actions because they elicit feelings of elation, despite the inherent dangers and fears. For example, a first-time camper might choose to sleep in the woods despite the risks, drawn by the thrill of survival and the chance to share a great story. However, fear can also traumatize and frustrate one's life, as seen in the works of Edgar Allan Poe such as "*The Raven*." In his works, Edgar Allan Poe explored themes of fear, the unknown, and loss, reflecting his own life struggles.

### 3. Compressing Fear into Text

Poe's works have profoundly influenced the gothic genre and inspired numerous adaptations. "Without Poe, the entire horror genre of the comic book might not have developed as it did" (Inge, 2001: p. 8). His stories, such as "*The Raven*," have been reimagined by comic book illustrators, filmmakers, and video game creators, who have brought these narratives to life with visual elements. "*The Raven*" is written from the perspective of a lonely scholar who is startled by a knock on his door late at night. A lonely and anxious scholar is pondering about a book while he is dosing off. Knocking against his bedroom door, the lonely scholar startles. Dismissing it as nothing supernatural, he continues to read and mourn the loss of his wife, Lenore, expressing, "For the rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore—Nameless *here* for evermore" (Poe, 1845: Line 11-12). The narrator, who is a young widower, is consumed by sorrow and unable to move past his wife's death, suggesting that gothic works often stem from the author's psychological trauma. After 11 years of marriage, Edgar lost his wife Virginia at the age of 24 and remained a widower. "For a brief period in Poe's career, ratiocination perhaps offered a distraction from the recurring nightmare of death and disintegration" (Kennedy, 1975: p. 196). His love for her is immense, as depicted in the poem where the narrator questions a raven about the afterlife and whether he will reunite with his wife after death. He fears death and

the unknown, seeking answers from the raven as a means to cope. Poe uses numerous symbols throughout the text to convey this. “The essential meaning of the poem lies in the carefully crafted symbolism of the raven” (117, Unrue, 1995). The poem is packed with symbols that are both direct and elaborate. In composing it, he leveraged the mythology of the raven as a symbol of death, from which the scholar seeks answers about death and the unknown. Poe’s fears are also evident in his other works, such as *“The Tell-Tale Heart.”*

#### 4. Father Issues

*“The Tell-Tale Heart”* is narrated by a paranoid protagonist whose inner thoughts become so overwhelming that readers cannot help but feel the tension escalate. The plot also revolves around a creepy old man with a glass eye, diving straight into their problematic relationship without providing background information. Initially, it’s clear that the old man is seen as the antagonist. However, as the story progresses, the line between hero and villain blurs. The protagonist, driven mad by the old man’s presence, plans to kill him, ending his own fears. The obsessive inner monologue nearly drives readers to question the narrator’s reliability. Initially, I assumed the old man posed a real threat or held some unmentioned authority. Yet, the more I read, the more I questioned what could have led to the planned murder. Murder, being a crime, cannot be justified, suggesting the protagonist saw it as a form of self-defense. In the end, the young man kills the old man and hides his corpse. When police officers arrive, he cannot bear the guilt and confesses to the murder, revealing the body’s location beneath the wooden floor panels. “Precisely because the protagonist mocks the old man’s horror and treats the policemen with hypocritical smiles, he suspects that the policemen are mocking his own horror and treating him with hypocritical smiles as well” (Shen, 2008: p. 336). His impulsive confession to the police revealed his guilt for metaphorically killing the relationship through his irresponsible actions of drinking and wasting his life away. “I did not hate the old man; I even loved him. He had never hurt me” (Poe, 1843: p. 64). There exists a connection between the relationship of the two men and Poe and his father. The paranoid killer protagonist symbolizes Poe, while the frightening and distant old man represents Poe’s father. “Whereas the usual psychological study of Poe treats the fiction as an unconscious manifestation of the author’s problems or as an unconscious confirmation of orthodox Freudian categories, it seems to me that in his best stories Poe has a genuine understanding of unconscious processes and imaginative powers” (Shulman, 1970: p. 245). Poe had a close relationship with his mother, but the opposite with his father. After his mother’s early death, he was left with an unloving and uncaring parent. His father’s remarriage upsets Poe, leading him to isolate himself and express his feelings through poetry and writing. Over time, Poe developed alcoholism. His fragile relationship with his father involved repeated requests for financial assistance, which were initially met. However, increased requests eventually led to quarrels

and his father disowning him. They never reconciled. Similarly, childhood traumas are evident in Franz Kafka's works, such as the short story "*The Metamorphosis*."

## 5. Kafka's Struggles

There are many symbols that link Gregor Samsa's horrific experience to Kafka's own fears in "*The Metamorphosis*." The vermin form symbolizes the dehumanizing and degrading aspects of his work life in modern twentieth-century society. "God!" he thought, "What a job I've chosen". (Kafka, 1915: p. 4) His job consumes him and the vermin he transforms into reflects his misery for working day after day with little to no joy or motivation. "Kafka saw life in early twentieth-century Prague on these elemental and frightening terms, and his ability to translate his experience into fiction is one of the sources of his genius" (Sizemore, 1977: p. 388). Kafka spent his life battling illness and anxiety, struggling with love and feeling too depressed to function outside his job. He initially worked as an unpaid clerk for the local courts, a role that left him depressed and exhausted due to its dullness and his lively mind. Additionally, he lived with his ill-tempered father, Hermann, and longed for a change. In 1907, Kafka took a job at an insurance company in Prague. He endured long hours in his office, a stifling bureaucracy, and did not receive payment overtime. Kafka's life was a monotonous routine of work until he suddenly awoke as an insect. "A second set of Kafkaesque situations explores a slightly different experience, that of being subject to a will not one's own whose source is unknowable or indeterminate" (Bennett, 1991: p. 75). Gregor finds himself unable to predict or control his future, trapped in a situation beyond his understanding. The vermin symbolizes the disconnection between his mind and body. Alienated by his job as a salesman and lacking human connections, Gregor Samsa yearns for a change from his lonely existence, where personal and deep relationships elude him. However, when his wish comes true, it leads to disastrous consequences. Kafka illustrates Gregor's hard work to show that Gregor resembles the insect; he remains unwanted and unloved, and his death ultimately insignificant. "And, indeed, Gregor's body was quite flat and dry; this could be seen more easily now that he was no longer supported on his legs and there was nothing to deceive one's sight". (Kafka, 1915: p. 48). In a cruel sense, Gregor's death was as underwhelming as that of an insect and similarly brought his family a sense of relief. "He appears to grasp that, not just suffering, but the acceptance of his death is his ultimate solution" (Ryan, 1999: p. 148). The tragic story concludes with Gregor's death, after which his family moves on, seemingly better off without him. His demise appears to be a solution to their problems, making them better members of society and enabling them to fit in more than he ever could. Geddes (2015: p. 414), in his article, references Heinz Politzer's argument that pain is insignificant to Kafka. This is attributed to Kafka's masochistic outlook on life, particularly evident in his work where he downplays the significance of physical suffering.

Gregor suffers from the beginning of the story, yet his family does not suffer as much as they should with his death; instead, their lives improve, and they achieve a higher level of self-improvement through his suffering. After his death, they move on to newer and better things. Kafka's works undoubtedly revolve around fear, pain, and suffering, but he explores these negative emotions through outrageous situations, as seen in "*The Hunger Artist*."

## 6. Insatiable Hunger

This story has a clear correlation with Kafka's battle with tuberculosis. "*The Hunger Artist*" describes an artist who fasts in a cage for all to see how long he can go without food or water. "-during his fast the artist would never in any circumstances, not even under forcible compulsion, swallow the smallest morsel of food;" (Kafka, 1922: p. 268). The artist continues to fast, although older audiences doubt his integrity. Even with his depression and isolation, Kafka did not give up on fighting cancer. Kafka's spirituality mirrors that of the artist, who remains resilient after his arts lost popularity. The story ends with the overseer's perspective: the artist is lifeless in the cage and replaced by a lively beast; the beast entertains the crowd who are indifferent to the man who sacrificed himself for his art. Despite being overlooked, Kafka battled personal demons and channeled his trauma into his fictional stories.

## 7. Conclusion

Finally, it is determined that the gothic genre produces works of art expressing the terror we face in our lives. All the negative emotions we feel can be presented in a plotline that either makes sense of the horrors or allows audiences to relate and understand the emotions. Science fiction pairs well with gothic literature, as both reflect aspects of the real world, with science fiction offering a more elaborate and unique way to express gothic stories through metaphors. Iconic and skilled writers like Poe and Kafka were able to transform common fears and psychological trauma into creative stories where the horrors are amplified. Brantlinger (1980: p. 43) concludes his article by explaining how science fiction and gothic literature challenge logic and reason. Poe translates his horrors into his works, and so does Kafka. Different methods and techniques yield the same outcome: horror, fear, and insight into the writers' own demons are transformed into masterpieces. Powell (2008: p. 140) stated that "As a result, the grotesque in Kafka is a subversive aesthetic meant to disturb, shock, and confound its audience". We question the realism in the stories, yet relate to or understand their horrors. Shahar (2016: p. 258) explains, "Without Kafka's experience in these areas of labor and the law, and without his experience in interpreting the writings of the law, one cannot imagine the complexity of his literary creation". The authors' lives are undoubtedly connected to their work. Kafka was able to translate Gregor's feelings because he lived a similar lifestyle. Lastly, Novak (1979) agrees with Tiley on the following statement, "Gothic fiction is a grotesque dis-

tortion of anything resembling ordinary life,” who further advises that “we must acknowledge that they move us nonetheless, that they are deeply disturbing and compelling at the same time” (p. 67). The gothic genre is both uncomfortable and alluring. We choose to engage with it—be it through reading, watching horror movies, or playing horror video games—because we want to confront our fears, just as the writers faced theirs when creating their works inspired by personal traumas.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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