11th American Lit Poe/Gothicism/House of Usher Reading Guide

Name:\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Jan 12, 2018/Period:\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

There will be an assessment on this story after we finish reading it.

Gothic Characteristics. The word Gothic originated as an architectural style (think Gargoyles)

1. Dark settings
2. Atmosphere of mystery and suspense
3. Depressed characters
4. Omens and terrible visions
5. Supernatural or unexplained events
6. High, overwrought emotion (emotion over reason)
7. Concealed ruins
8. Women in distress
9. Dark landscapes, extreme vegetation
10. Horrific rooms in a house

In Poe:

* Dark, medieval castles
* Decaying, ancient estates
* Insane men
* Beautiful and dead or very ill women
* Murder
* Live burials
* Physical and mental torture
* Retribution from beyond the grave

In “Usher”

* Sense of remoteness and indefiniteness (century and location are never directly mentioned)
* Gloomy dark house/property reflects the minds/bodies of characters
* Eerie and ghostly atmosphere – caverns, vaults, tombs
* Supersensitive hero who cannot function in the normal world (insane?)
* Psychic communication between a living character and a “living” corpse
* Dead come back to life
* Superhuman strength for will to live
* Beautiful and dead or dying woman

Other Elements in FHU: Ironic Doubles, Reversals

Examples of Ironic Doubles

* The house and the “reflection” of the house; it is upside down even!!
* The twins – Roderick and Madeline
* The crack in the house and the fissure or separation between Roderick and Madeline
* The separation between the living and the dead
* Doppelganger Theory – "double walker" - a shadow self that is thought to accompany every person. Traditionally, it is said that only the owner of the doppelganger can see this phantom self, and that it can be a harbinger of death.

Questions:

1. After reading the first three sentences looking for details of Gothic style, describe the words and the feelings they evoke; what mood do these sentences establish?
2. On p. 294, paraphrase the sentence that begins with “It was possible, I reflected…” (9 lines)
3. What are some Gothic details in the painting on p. 295?
4. Discuss the trees and the man in this painting.
5. What do you see in the hollows and contorted shapes of the trees?
6. Where else have you seen this kind of setting?
7. P. 296: Read the bracketed passage; what is being described? How is this related to the term “Gothic”?
8. Bottom p. 297: What is being described? Which three places have been described so far? What are the similarities?
9. How do these places affect the narrator?
10. P. 298: read bracketed passage; how are some of the descriptions of Roderick Usher similar to descriptions of the house? Use specific detail.
11. Paraphrase the meaning of the sentence that begins with “The silken hair…”
12. Bottom of p. 298-Summarize Roderick’s mental state
13. Summarize the condition and appearance of the house. How are Usher’s mental state and the house typical of Gothic Literature?
14. Top of p. 300: Who does the narrator see for the first time? How does he react?
15. Why does he react this way? What is being discussed just before he sees her?
16. How does the narrator describe Madeleine?
17. Top of p. 301: What is the effect created by the description of Usher’s artwork?
18. Read the poem pp 302-303. Which details of the poem reflect the narrator’s sense of Usher’s mental instability?
19. What or who does the Haunted Palace symbolize?

Note: Poe wrote this poem five months before the story. Some believe the poem inspired the short story.

1. Bottom of p. 304: Read “The vault in which we placed…” Paraphrase and explain the main idea of the sentence.
2. Read first bracketed passage p. 305: “And now…”. What caused Usher’s deterioration?
3. Answer “Reading Check” question: What does the narrator notice about Madeleine’s appearance in her coffin?
4. Top of p. 306: Which elements of Gothic Lit are present in the description of the narrator’s sleepless night?
5. Top of 307: What startling coincidence does the narrator experience while he is reading?
6. Is this mysterious noise in fact a coincidence? Why or why not? (Think: Usher told the narrator at the beginning of the story that the mansion had a mysterious connection to the family.)
7. Bottom p 308: Summarize the sentence that begins: “And now, the champion…”
8. Top of 309: What does the narrator mention for the second time about Usher’s movements? What effect does this create?
9. Bottom 309: Which aspects of Gothic Lit are apparent in the description of Madeleine? (“As if in…)
10. Answer Reading Check question.
11. Find the ten Gothic elements in this story; indicate page number, textual evidence and explanation

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1. What is an “usher” and why is the title important?
2. Is Madeline a vampire?
3. What are the symptoms of “acute anxiety”?
4. What are some of the themes in the story?
5. Why isn’t the narrator ever named?