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?

Dark, dreary, melancholy

1. On p. 294, paraphrase the sentence that begins with “It was possible, I reflected…” (9 lines)

Narrator thought that if he looked at the outside of the house from a different perspective, it would not look so hideous and creepy. However, he looked at the reflection in the tarn and it looked even worse!

1. What are some Gothic details in the painting on p. 295?

Overgrown landscape, atmosphere of mystery, concealed ruins, dark settings, terrible visions

1. Discuss the trees and the man in this painting.
2. What do you see in the hollows and contorted shapes of the trees?

Faces, eyes, scary

1. Where else have you seen this kind of setting?

Devil and Tom Walker

1. P. 296: Read the bracketed passage; what is being described? How is this related to the term “Gothic”?

Condition of the outside of the house: gothic elements: overgrown vegetation, dark settings, atmosphere of mystery and suspense, dark landscapes, concealed ruins, omens

1. Bottom p. 297: What is being described? Which three places have been described so far? What are the similarities?

The room inside the house; The landscaped, the outside of the house, the room: mystery, suspense, dark, falling apart

1. How do these places affect the narrator?

He is disturbed, scared, tentative

1. P. 298: read bracketed passage; how are some of the descriptions of Roderick Usher similar to descriptions of the house? Use specific detail.

Web-like hair, web-like moss outside windows, ghastly pallor, slightly inhuman, dark, cadaverous

1. Paraphrase the meaning of the sentence that begins with “The silken hair…”

His hair is growing wild and it is unkempt like the outside of the house (moss on eaves, overgrown landscape).

1. Bottom of p. 298-Summarize Roderick’s mental state.

He was energetic, then sad, mood swings, guttural utterances, like opium-induced stupor

1. Summarize the condition and appearance of the house. How are Usher’s mental state and the house typical of Gothic Literature?

Again, omens, depressed characters, mystery, terrible visions and omens, overwrought emotion

1. Top of p. 300: Who does the narrator see for the first time? How does he react?

He sees Madeleine: Astonishment, dread, shock, fear

1. Why does he react this way? What is being discussed just before he sees her?

He just finished listening to Usher say that her death would make him the last of the Usher family. He had never seen her but the feeling overcame him. He did not KNOW why he felt this way.

1. How does the narrator describe Madeleine?

Cataleptic (catatonic), emaciated, gradual wasting away

1. Top of p. 301: What is the effect created by the description of Usher’s artwork?

Dark, awe-inspiring, the work of someone possibly insane, shadowy

1. Read the poem pp 302-303. Which details of the poem reflect the narrator’s sense of Usher’s mental instability?

Thinking he is a king, spirits moving through the house, evil things in robes of sorrow, never morrow shall dawn on him, dim-remembered story of the…entombed, travelers see ghosts inside the windows.

1. What or who does the Haunted Palace symbolize?

Usher and the family and the House

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.

Dark place, no air, like a prison, heavy iron door, no way to get out, used for prisoners, walls secured with copper.

1. Read first bracketed passage p. 305: “And now…”. What caused Usher’s deterioration?

Usher is changing dramatically. It appears that he has lost his mind. It seems that he is hearing noises which he believes is madeleine trying to get out of the coffin, scratch and claw her way out of the dungeon, and push open the iron door – that they buried her alive.

1. Answer “Reading Check” question: What does the narrator notice about Madeleine’s appearance in her coffin?

Strong resemblance to her brother (they are twins), and she has a slight blush on her face and a smile upon her lips.

1. Top of p. 306: Which elements of Gothic Lit are present in the description of the narrator’s sleepless night?

Dark settings, atmosphere of suspense, depressed character, horrific rooms, overwrought emotion, terrible visions and omens.

1. Top of 307: What startling coincidence does the narrator experience while he is reading?

During Ethelred he reads about the clamor of the Lancelot’s mace tearing the dragon apart and then he hears the noises in the house that repeat those sounds (Madeleine trying to get out or the house falling apart).

1. 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.)

It is not a coincidence. the house is eerily connected to the inhabitants and they are falling apart as well, physically and mentally.

1. Bottom p 308: Summarize the sentence that begins: “And now, the champion…”

Lancelot kills the dragon and then finds his silver shield stuck in the wall; when he releases it, it falls to the ground making a loud clanging noise which then sounds like the noise coming from the vault in the Usher house.

1. Top of 309: What does the narrator mention for the second time about Usher’s movements? What effect does this create?

Rocking back and forth. That Usher has lost his mind or is on his way.

1. Bottom 309: Which aspects of Gothic Lit are apparent in the description of Madeleine? (“As if in…)

Women in distress, unexplained events, supernatural, depressed characters, atmosphere of mystery and suspense, omens, terrible visions, overwrought emotions

1. Answer Reading Check question.

The narrator hears cracking, ripping noises, a scream, and a heavy metallic thud.

This should be done on your own:

1. Find the ten Gothic elements in this story; indicate page number, textual evidence and explanation
* Dark settings
* Atmosphere of mystery and suspense
* Depressed characters
* Omens and terrible visions
* Supernatural or unexplained events
* High, overwrought emotion (emotion over reason)
* Concealed ruins
* Women in distress
* Dark landscapes, extreme vegetation
* Horrific rooms in a house