

# Overview of Tales of Mood and Mystery

to be used in support of lessons from Highlights of American Literature and American Patchwork

- The Cask of Amontillado
- An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge
- How the Devil Came Down Division Street
- Pillar of Salt
- Return to Dust

This Level 2 ELLSA lesson can be accessed on the internet at [http://www.rdlthai.com/t2/ellsa\\_ov2mood.html](http://www.rdlthai.com/t2/ellsa_ov2mood.html)

Written by Jeffrey E. Taschner, 1999  
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## Mood

Mood is the feeling an author deliberately creates through the use of language and images, particularly in the treatment of the setting, the place or location of the story. You can think of the mood of a piece as an effect that the author tries to achieve through a consistent and repeated use of similar details in describing the place and time in which the story takes place. Think of the ever-present images of cold and snow slowly freezing the Newcomer in *To Build a Fire* or the rise and fall of the waves which threatened the shipwreck survivors in *The Open Boat* from *American Literary Classics*. Jack London captured the numbing feel of the cold Arctic and Stephen Crane consciously developed a wavelike rhythm in his prose, which captured the up-down and back-and-forth movements of the helpless lifeboat tossing in the sea. There is almost a sense of seasickness, combined with the exhaustion and desperation of the men in the boat.

While those stories developed a hyper-realistic sense of place, O. Henry's stories successfully captured the spirit of the times in which they took place: the Christmas setting in Jim and Della's squalid little apartment for *The Gift of the Magi*, strategically situated during America's Great Depression, and the nightlife in New York City in the early part of the 20th Century from *The Green Door*, as well as the sense of community and collaboration of Greenwich Village as it became the mecca for American artists around that same time in *The Last Leaf*.

In *Tales of Mood and Mystery*, authors such as Edgar Allen Poe and Shirley Jackson make much more dramatic use of their settings: the cavernous catacombs of *The Cask of Amontillado* and the frantic chaos of modern New York City.

## Mystery

The second half of our title for the second section of ELLSA, *Mystery*, refers to a quality of writing that makes the reader uncertain about the outcome of events, and perhaps even uneasy. When the emotional effect of mystery crosses over into a progressive build-up of uneasiness or tension, this effect is more commonly referred to as suspense. Suspense frequently occurs as the reader tries to

anticipate the resolution of a story's central conflict. In choosing the second half of our title, we wanted to be somewhat poetic, but more importantly, we are paying special tribute to the American master of Mood and Mystery, Edgar Allen Poe, whose story, *The Cask of Amontillado*, and other masterpieces appeared in his classic anthology *Tales of Mystery and Imagination*.

## **Genre**

In *Tales of Mood and Mystery*, we move beyond the basic elements of fiction writing and examine more subtle techniques of the writer's craft and particular style. All the pieces chosen are in their original version, as the author intended them. The language has not been simplified, adapted or altered in any manner. In addition to its more authentic and complex language and a deeper exploration of technique and style, and reader orientation.

*Tales of Mood and Mystery* goes beyond *American Literary Classics* in its attempt to develop of framework for classifying these works by genre. We define genre as a distinct literary form, characterized by a particular language, style and tradition.

The pieces in *Tales of Mood and Mystery* represent specific genres, (and sub-genres) of literature and we shall attempt to classify each piece, as well as define the genre to which it belongs.

### **Selections from Highlights of American Literature**

- Edgar Allan Poe, *The Cask of Amontillado*  
(genre: gothic)
- Ambrose Bierce, *The Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge*  
(genre: horror)
- George Bamber, *Return to Dust*  
(genre: science fiction)

### **Selections from American Patchwork**

- Shirley Jackson, *Pillar of Salt*  
(genre: terror)
- Nelson Algren, *How The Devil Came Down Division Street*  
(genre: ghost story)

## **Definitions**

### **Gothic Literature**

Gothic literature is characterized by gloomy settings such as castles and old, dark houses, in which mysterious and sometimes violent or supernatural occurrences take place. Originally, the term Gothic was confined to a specific genre of mostly 18th and 19th Century British literature. Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's, *Frankenstein* and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* are perhaps the most famous examples of this tradition, although the works of Ann Radcliffe and Emily Bronte figure prominently as well. We might consider this tradition to be Gothic with a capital G.

Many of the stories of Edgar Allen Poe contain gothic elements, such as the crumbling manor in *The Fall of the House of Usher* or the gloomy catacombs in *The Cask of Amontillado*. Critics, therefore, often include such works as these, as well as some of the works of other prominent American authors such as Henry James and Ambrose Bierce.

Frederick Frank, Professor of English at Allegheny University, believes that the tradition of gothic literature, as practiced in America, "rapidly diverged from the European model just as our country had broken away from England". Frank states that the American gothic reflects a "unity of mood and theme". He traces the emergence of a distinct tradition of American gothic from the work of the late-Eighteenth Century author, Charles Brockden Brown, to more contemporary authors such as H.P. Lovecraft, Shirley Jackson, Joyce Carol Oates, all the way to Stephen King. He even argues that *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville, considered by many critics to be the greatest American novel ever written, is an example of American gothic.

David Punter, British author and lecturer in the School of English and American Studies at the University of East Anglia, likewise treats both British and American gothic traditions separately, but attempts to bridge them through common themes of social alienation and psychological fear and repression. He represents one of a growing number of academics and serious literary critics who refuse to dismiss this body of literature as mere escapism. Although, he recognizes distinct American and British traditions, Punter is also one of the leaders of a growing trend of analysts who choose to group much of the literature of horror and mystery on both sides of the Atlantic under the single genre heading of Gothic Literature.

## References

Punter, D. (1980) *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day*. Longman: Hong Kong.

Frank, F. S. (1990) *Through the Pale Door: A Guide to and through the American Gothic*. Frank, Greenwood Press: Westport, Conn.

## On-line resource

An outstanding site featuring links to e-text versions of gothic stories and novels can be found at Jack G. Voller's *The Literary Gothic*. <http://www.siue.edu/~jvoller/gothic.html>

## Horror and the top 40 horror books of all time

Horror is a genre of literature which is often characterized by supernatural creatures and fantastic occurrences, as well as by violence and death.

Here are the top 40 horror books of all time, as chosen by the Horror Writers Association, <http://www.horror.org> (featuring the Stoker Awards annual competition for best horror writing).

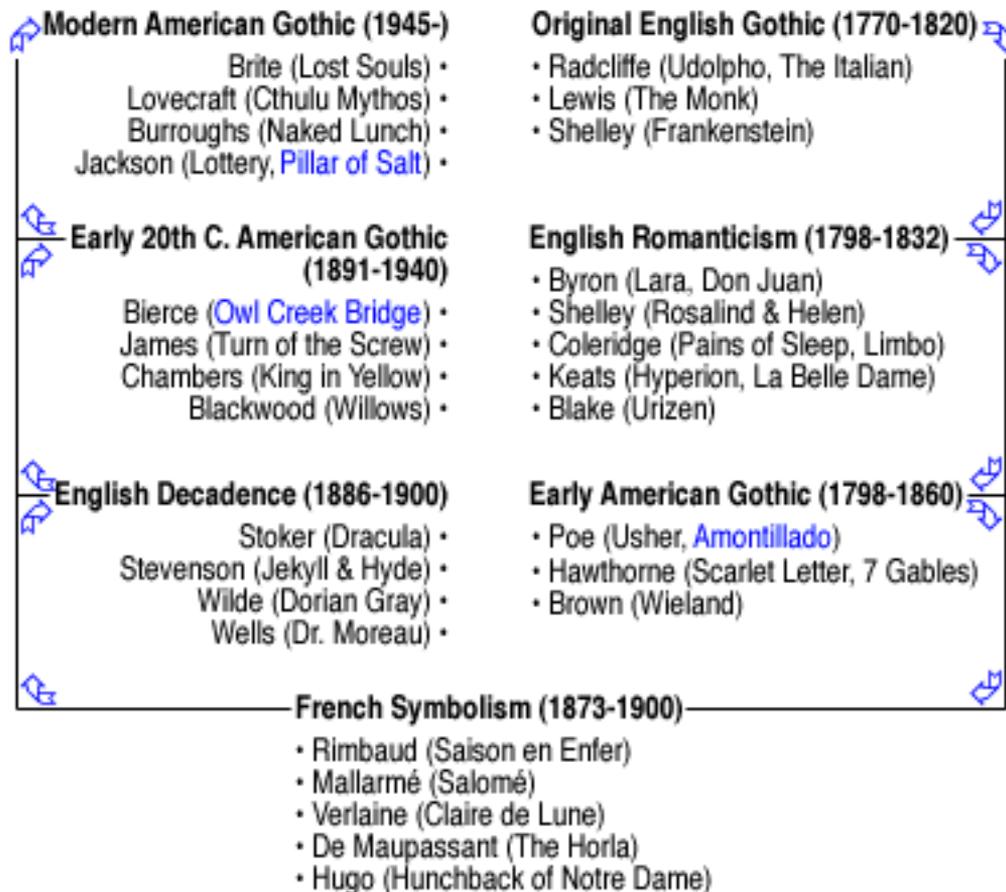
Note: This list is alphabetical by surname; no ranking is implied. (Note the predominance of American authors here, not to mention the inclusion of Thai author, S.P. Somtow.)

1. Best Ghost Stories of Algernon Blackwood
2. The Exorcist by William Peter Blatty
3. Something Wicked This Way Comes by Ray Bradbury
4. Lost Souls by Poppy Z. Brite
5. The Hungry Moon by Ramsey Campbell
6. The Between by Tananarive Due
7. Darklands by Dennis Etchison
8. Raven by Charles L. Grant
9. Dead in the Water by Nancy Holder
10. The Haunting of Hill House by Shirley Jackson
11. The Lottery and Other Stories by Shirley Jackson
12. Turn of the Screw by Henry James
13. The Ghost Stories of M.R. James
14. Dr. Adder by K.W. Jeter
15. The Metamorphosis and Other Stories by Franz Kafka
16. Pet Semetary by Stephen King
17. The Shining by Stephen King
18. The Stand by Stephen King
19. Skin by Kathe Koja
20. Dark Dance by Tanith Lee
21. Conjure Wife by Fritz Leiber
22. Rosemary's Baby by Ira Levin
23. Songs of a Dead Dreamer by Thomas Ligotti
24. Lovers Living, Lovers Dead by Richard Lortz
25. The Dunwich Horror and Others by H.P. Lovecraft
26. At the Mountains of Madness by H.P. Lovecraft
27. The Hill of Dreams by Arthur Machen
28. Tales of Horror and the Supernatural by Arthur Machen
29. Sineater by Elizabeth Massie
30. I Am Legend by Richard Matheson
31. Relic by Douglas Preston and Lincoln Childs
32. Frankenstein by Mary Shelley
33. Book of the Dead edited by John Skipp and Craig Spector
34. Ghoul by Michael Slade
35. Vampire Junction by S.P. Somtow
36. The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde by Robert Louis Stevenson
37. Dracula by Bram Stoker
38. Some of Your Blood by Theodore Sturgeon
39. Phantom by Thomas Tessier
40. Sacrifice by Andrew Vachs

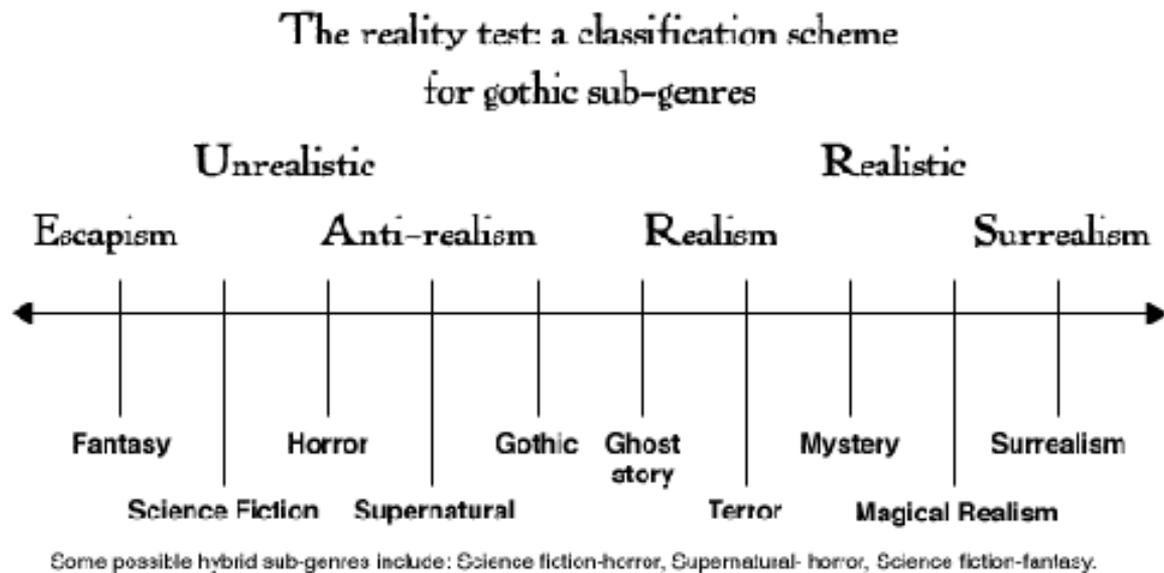
**Compiled by Thomas Deja and Nicholas Kauffman**

## Influences

### Gothic literature: a cycle of influences



## Classifications



### Fantasy

**Characteristics:** other worlds, other realities, modern medieval (sword & sorcery)

#### Sampling of authors and works:

- J.R.R. Tolkien (The Hobbit, The Lord of the Rings)
- Peake (Gormanghast)
- Ursula LeGuin (The Last Unicorn)

### Science Fiction

**Characteristics:** futurism, technology, scientific speculation, aliens, space travel

#### Sampling of authors and works:

- Arthur C. Clarke (2001)
- Isaac Asimov (Foundation)
- Ray Bradbury (Fahrenheit 451)
- James Herbert (Dune)

### Horror

**Characteristics:** death, violence, possibly war, creatures/monsters (vampires, werewolves, zombies, gill-men, mummies, disfigurements).

#### Sampling of authors and works:

- Ambrose Bierce (...Owl Creek Bridge)

- Bram Stoker (Dracula)
- Poppy Z. Brite (Lost Souls)

## **Supernatural**

**Characteristics:** witchcraft, demons, black magic, paranormal occurrences (ESP, telekinesis, etc.).

### **Sampling of authors and works:**

- Nathaniel Hawthorne (Dr. Heidegger's Experiment)
- H.P. Lovecraft (The Cthulu Mythos)
- Blatty (The Exorcist)

## **Gothic**

**Characteristics:** gloomy setting (castles, old houses, caves, catacombs, monasteries, convents), stock characters (suspicious servants, sinful clergy, sickly characters), mysterious events

### **Sampling of authors and works:**

- Edgar Allan Poe (Amontillado, Usher)
- Radcliffe (Udolpho)
- Lewis (The Monk)

## **The Ghost Story**

**Characteristics:** spirits of the dead, hauntings

### **Sampling of authors and works:**

- Henry James (Turn of the Screw)
- William Shakespeare (Hamlet)
- Charles Dickens (Christmas Carol)

## **Terror**

**Characteristics:** heightened suspense, psychological illness, stalking, pursuit, paranoia, focus on fear rather than death, thrills.

### **Sampling of authors and works:**

- DeMaupassant (The Horla)
- Shirley Jackson (Pillar of Salt)

## **Mystery**

**Characteristics:** crime, detectives, criminal society, police investigation.

### **Sampling of authors and works:**

- Edgar Allan Poe (The Gold Bug)
- Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (Sherlock Holmes stories)
- Agatha Christie (Ten Little Indians)

## **Magical Realism**

**Characteristics:** miraculous or magical occurrences that happen in realistic, everyday settings.

### **Sampling of authors and works:**

- Gabriel Garcia Marquez (100 Years of Solitude)
- Cecile Pinéda (The Love Queen of the Amazon)
- Angela Carter (Nights at the Circus, Wise Children)

## **Surrealism**

**Characteristics:** inexplicable happenings, coincidence, hallucinations, narrative experimentation.

### **Sampling of authors and works:**

- William. Burroughs (Naked Lunch)
- Jean Genet (Lady of the Flowers)
- Breton (Nadja)