

# Edgar Allan Poe and The Gothic

## And a Reading of *The Black Cat*

### Lecture Notes

#### An introduction to the Gothic

The idea that the Gothic is a reaction to the Enlightenment's emphasis on 'reason.'

'In Gothic productions imagination and emotional effects exceed reason. Passion, excitement and sensation transgress social proprieties and moral laws. Ambivalence and uncertainty obscure single meanings. Drawing on the myths, legends and folklore of medieval romances, Gothic conjured up magical worlds and tales of knights, monsters, ghosts and extravagant adventures and terrors. Associated with wildness, Gothic signified an over-abundance of imaginative frenzy, untamed by reason and unrestrained by conventional eighteenth-century demands for simplicity, realism or probability.' (Fred Botting, *Gothic*, 1996. London: Routledge, p. 3).

- The monograph *Gothic* by Fred Botting is important reference for the gothic.
- The gothic genre relates to the darker side of life – fear, terror, disturbances.
- In contrast to enlightenment is the reaction of the Gothic.

#### Key Points on this definition of the Gothic

1. Rejection of rationality or reason: the emphasis is on the imagination and emotion. It has a close association with Romanticism. → Instead of logic and rationality the Gothic looks at imagination and emotions → linked with the movement of Romanticism → the idea that the individual shouldn't have to conform.
  2. There is an emphasis on the moral and social transgression – is it a subversive genre? → the Gothic taps and contrasts this.
  3. It looks back to the past; is a form of escapism – is it a conservative genre? → 18<sup>th</sup> century – medieval folk tales, conservative reaction to new values.
  4. Ambivalent – it is between boundaries, it therefore offers multiple meanings → anything frightening can be defined as gothic, ambivalent, multiple interpretations.
- There is an emphasis on history with a return on past sins.
  - Early examples of European Gothic novels include Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) and Ann Radcliffe, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794)

#### Genre and Nation: What is gothic about America?

- America as a former British colony → contact first established in 16<sup>th</sup> century.