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Lesson Seven

FOCUS: Genre and Tradition

VOCABULARY WORDS

From “*The Fall of the House of Usher*”:

Collateral, *adj.*

1. Side by side; parallel
2. Descended from the same ancestors, but in a different line

Anomalous, *adj.*

1. Deviating from regular arrangement, usual rule, or general method; abnormal
2. Being or seeming to be inconsistent, contradictory, or improper

Incubus, *n.*

1. An evil spirit or demon thought in medieval times to descend upon and have sexual intercourse with women
2. A nightmare

Casements, *n.*

Window frames that open on hinges along the side

Prolixity, *n.*

Wordiness; long-windedness; use of more words than necessary

To fully understand and enjoy a work, it is sometimes helpful to know its historical background and cultural context, including the category or genre to which it belongs, and the rules or conventions that apply to that category.

“The Fall of the House of Usher” derives from the tradition of the Gothic novel, which is associated with the revival of Gothic (or medieval) architecture in eighteenth-century England, and which is generally said to have begun with Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). Characteristics of the Gothic tradition include a heightened and extravagant style of writing: an atmosphere of brooding, unknown menace or terror; the setting of a decaying medieval castle with long underground passages and mysterious rooms; and the appearance of ghosts and other supernatural phenomena.

?? Discussion Activities

Have your students find Gothic instances in “The Fall of the House of Usher.” List these instances on the board. At a time when “horror movie” usually means sadistic violence and revolting gore, do students find Poe’s use of atmosphere and suggestion effective? Why or why not?

Use the following questions to generate further discussion: Do students find the story successful in creating uneasiness and dread? Does the narrator suggest any reasons for the fall of the House of Usher? If so, what are they? Is the story more effective as the working out of a cause-and-effect process, or as an instance of unknown horror?

Writing Exercise

Works of fantasy—*Harry Potter*, *Star Wars*, and *The Lord of the Rings*—are extremely popular. Ask your students to write a two-page essay on why such books and films are so appealing and what we can gain that isn’t available from more “realistic” works of fiction.

Homework

Ask students to read Handout Two and “The Purloined Letter” (pp. 137–162). Write a brief personal description of each of the story’s characters.