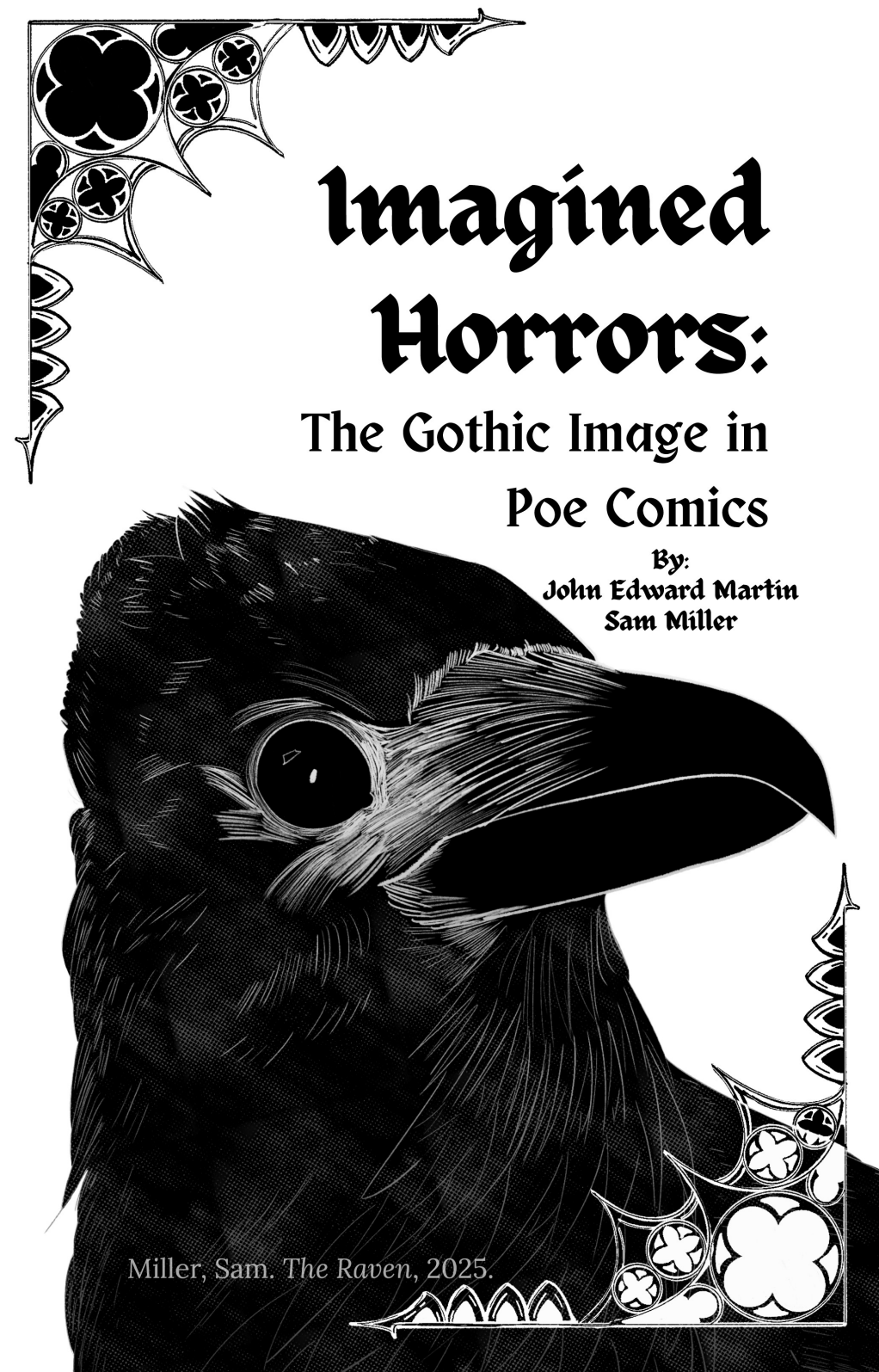


For full text & image citations as well as more analysis of the comic art, follow this QR code:



(Sikoryak, "Poet Poe," 5)



What is "The Gothic"?

The "gothic" is an artistic mode that emerges out of tensions, boundaries, separations, and returns, sometimes desired, often feared, but always the result or cause of traumas or ruptures of meaning and coherence.

Gothic art—whether through language, images, music, or performance—evokes and explores these tensions and traumas.

It is an art of
Anxiety,

SUSPENSE,

Terror,

Horror,

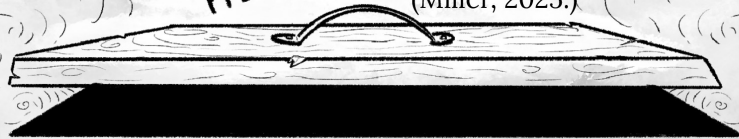
and sometimes, the **sublime.**



(pikomaro, 126)

But how does a writer like Edgar Allan Poe or a comics artist adapting his work convey the gothic through words and images? Let's open the creaky door and find out...

Hssssss... (Miller, 2025.)



"All that we see or seem
Is but a dream within a dream"

(Poe, "A Dream Within A Dream," 97)

You've seen some examples here of how comic art can illustrate gothic themes & ideas in Poe. But how is this different from using words alone?

What do comics as a form offer to representations of the gothic? We've only scratched the surface...

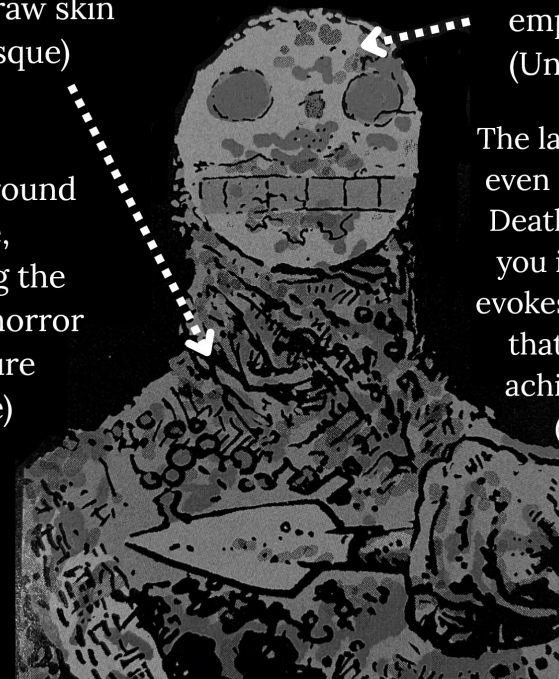
Darkness, implied form, and grotesque imagery add depth & meaning to gothic comic art. Let's break down a panel from Richard Corben's "Masque of the Red Death."

Infected, raw skin
(Grotesque)

Simple faceplate, an
emptiness
(Uncanny)

Black Background
in frame,
emphasizing the
inescapable horror
of the figure
(Sublime)

The lack of speech, or
even onomatopoeia—
Death stands before
you in silence. This
evokes terror in a way
that is difficult to
achieve in writing
(Suspense)



The unknown is a large part of what creates gothic horror. By defying traditional forms of representation, gothic comic art has an independence from 'reality' that makes the audience more engaged in their consumption of/by the work.

The Sublime



“And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all.”

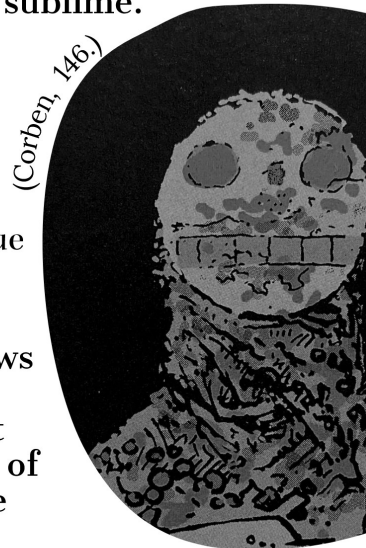
(Poe, “The Masque of the Red Death,” 490)

Somewhere beyond the terror, the madness, the darkness of the unconscious, or even life & death, the gothic may evoke something more profound...

Romantic artists like Poe wanted to use art to evoke beauty, but also “the sublime.”

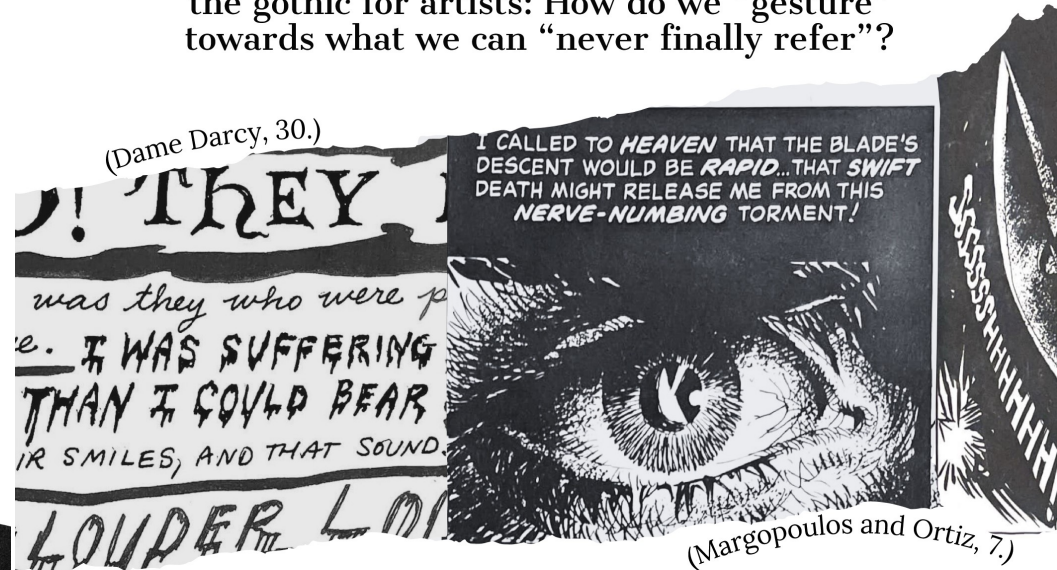
The sublime is a metaphysical, “numinous” experience that evokes both awe & terror, the divine & the demonic, the beautiful & the grotesque (Jones, 8)...

It overwhelms and engulfs us, draws us in even as it destroys us, like a whirlpool in the ocean (“A Descent into the Maelstrom”) or the figure of Death in full regalia (“The Masque of the Red Death”).



“The gothic registers a trauma in the strategies of representation as it brings forward a traumatic history toward which it gestures but can never finally refer.” (Savoy, 11)

Eric Savoy, among others, notes the challenge of the gothic for artists: How do we “gesture” towards what we can “never finally refer”?



The lack of ‘finality’ makes the gothic challenging to illustrate. Techniques such as mark-making, color choices, and panel framing may help gesture towards the reality that is obscured.

But “trauma” exists as much in the mind as in the body or the external, visual world.

So, the mind of the reader is something the gothic inherently manipulates. While visual art is more tangible, there are ways cartoonists may yet communicate the abstract elements central to the genre.

Let’s take a look at some common gothic elements and how comic art represents them...

Mystery and Suspense

While not unique to the gothic, mystery & suspense are essential to setting the scene and the mood of a gothic tale.

Mystery creates the tension, builds anxiety, and creates a boundary between what is known and unknown, visible and invisible.

Suspense holds us in the grip of the mystery—it pushes and pulls us at once—as when we wait, fearful, but expectant, for the terrible knock at the door in Poe’s “Fall of the House of Usher” that heralds the return of the ghastly, unburied Madeline Usher!

(Whitehead and Oakley, 64)



Note how the artists on this page represent feelings of suspense through facial expression, close-ups, line-work, and heavy inks.

MADNESS AND THE PERVERSE

“TRUE! — nervous — very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad?” (Poe, “The Tell-Tale Heart,” 555)

Once we can no longer trust our mind or our perceptions, then how can we trust our actions? Nervous, haunted, terrified, in the grip of our own delusions and unconscious impulses, we may resort to acts of madness or “the perverse”.

The perverse is that “unfathomable longing of the soul to vex itself — to offer violence to its own nature — to do wrong for the wrong's sake only” (Poe, “The Black Cat,” 599) that drives us to our own destruction.

In “The Black Cat,” “The Tell-Tale Heart,” and “The Imp of the Perverse,” among others, Poe’s narrators descend into realms of madness that make us question even our own capacity for the perverse.



The Uncanny



(Margopoulos and Corben, 40.)

"The 'uncanny' is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar." (Freud, "The Uncanny," 60)

Ghosts are not the only thing that can haunt us. Other things, strange, yet hauntingly familiar, may evoke "the uncanny."

The doppelgänger, the reflection in the mirror, the corpse that looks alive, the automaton, the portrait whose eyes seem to follow you...

In tales like "William Wilson", "Ligeia," and "The Oval Portrait," Poe confronts us with uncanny images that make us doubt their reality...or our own sanity.

(Miller, Sam. "Ligeia," 2025.)



The Voice of the Gothic

Uncertainty comes not only from the scene and plot of the tale, but from the voice that tells it.

Can we trust that voice? Are they reliable? Deceptive? Confused? Sane?

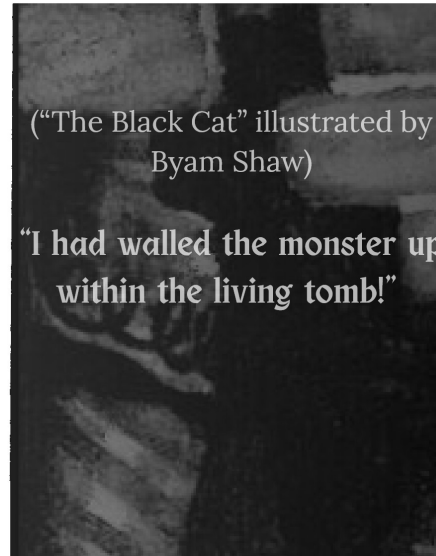
Whether told as a memoir, a confession, a letter, a journal, a monologue, or a poem, the voice of a gothic tale is often as much a mystery as its plot.

And, in Poe's best tales, like "The Black Cat" or "The Cask of Amontillado," they may prove as dangerous and unpredictable as any monster!

Shaw's artwork reveals one monster—the cat—while obscuring the speaker (and his wife).

("The Black Cat" illustrated by Byam Shaw)

"I had walled the monster up within the living tomb!"





The Gothic Mind

If we can't trust the stability of the setting, the plot, or the narrator of our tale, then surely we can trust our own mind, right?

Our thoughts, perceptions, feelings, and reactions belong to us...or do they?

The gothic evokes our deepest fears, anxieties, and insecurities...it breaches the safe boundaries of our minds and bodies...it summons things from the darkest places in our soul...

What horrors may arise from our own mind when given the right nudge...?



(Miller, Sam. 2025)

Haunting

"Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there wondering, fearing,

Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortals ever dared to dream before"

(Poe, "The Raven," 82)

Once we peer into the darkness, we open ourselves to dreams, visions, and sometimes, visitations...

Most often, Poe's narrators are visited by phantoms of their own pasts—lost loves, dead relatives, vengeful spirits, mysterious messengers.

A haunting is, according to psychoanalysis, a "return of the repressed"—something not just forgotten, but hidden, rejected, then suddenly emerging back into consciousness.

(Corben, 188).

Like a ghost...or a raven.

(pikomaro, 127)

(Corben, 188).

