Sometimes fairly simple and straightforward analyses of literature can be good. This study clearly and concisely shows how Edgar Allan Poe’s great 1839 tale “The Fall of the House of Usher” – for many his most completely “Gothic” text -- influences and helps drive, without ever being merely imitated in, several later American Gothic works of major importance. Giving each of these texts its own chapter and linking each one not only to Poe’s tale but also to other texts that illuminate it in additional ways, the authors treat Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892), Henry James’ The Turn of the Screw (1898), H.P. Lovecraft’s most Gothic short stories of the 1920’s and ‘30’s, Shirley Jackson’s The Haunting of Hill House (1959), Robert Bloch’s original novel of Psycho (also 1959), Ira Levin’s Rosemary’s Baby (1967), and Stephen King’s The Shining (1977). Happily, though, this book is in no way a mere influence study, however helpful that dimension is. Perry and Sederholm seek to show how each new work alters and even contorts what it takes from the “House of Usher” and thus how each of these texts conveys a quite distinctive, though always paradoxical, vision that both develops its own context thoroughly and reflects back on Poe’s “Usher” in different ways that extend what we have usually understood about its implications. Easily meeting the high standard that Gothic studies from Palgrave Macmillan have been setting in recent years, the main result is thus a
readable, compelling, and useful contribution to Gothic studies generally and to the history of the American Gothic in particular.

Some of the observations in this book did not surprise me when I first read them, but many others did. Though Perry and Sederholm conscientiously cite previous criticism on the texts they study, and thus recapitulate the best analytical points already made, they still say something new, or at least never so definitely proposed before, about every work they treat. A few such insights are even drawn out of “the House of Usher” itself, only partly as a result of how many later works look back to it. We now learn just how much Charles Brockden Brown’s *Edgar Huntly* (1799) influences “The Fall” (10-11), precisely how Poe’s tale reflects the stages of universal history envisioned in his own *Eureka* (14), and just how much “Usher” pre-figures, and even tacitly acknowledges, some of what Gilman, James, and Jackson later reveal about the subjection of women. In addition, we now understand “The Yellow Wallpaper,” not just as a “rereading” of “Usher” from “Madeline’s” perspective, “but also from the oppressive patriarchal point of view that Poe implicitly exposes” as he also began to do in “Ligeia” and “Morella” (26). *The Turn of the Screw,* so famous for its refusal to distinguish external presence from internal projection, here achieves a “psychological realism” not usually associated with it because “the intersection of desire and imagination” that we see in James’ tormented governess (40) largely re-enacts the interplay between Roderick Usher and the reality of thought in the narrative voice of Poe’s tale. Even the peculiar cosmic vision of Lovecraft’s stories, where “a journey into the unconscious shadow self” leads to horrifically grotesque and “unnatural cosmic forces at the root of our [overall] existence” (73, 81), turns out to both surpass and stem from Poe’s suggestions in
“Usher” of an “unknowable power” behind what the mind perceives, particularly in the realm of the obscure and obscene mixtures that underlie “hereditary degeneration” (67, 69).

This book’s strongest and most original advances in interpretation, though, appear in its readings of some Poe-influenced works that were published from the 1950s through the 1970s. In assessing *The Haunting of Hill House*, Perry and Sederholm show how it exemplifies Jackson’s non-fictional sense of “the ‘absolute reality’ of nuclear families” (82) that nearly all critics of her work have been unable to define precisely. “Absolute reality” turns out to be an “inescapable chaos and evil just below our imagined ‘reality’” (88), especially for women reduced to a “dependent helplessness” by the vestiges of patriarchy even in families with dead fathers (94). The very “architecture” of Hill House, this study shows, draws Jackson’s Eleanor into that deep reality by way of an alignment between Gothic structures and both the personal and the collective unconscious that Poe’s “House of Usher” brought to symbolic fruition from a potential more vaguely lurking in earlier Gothic tales (100). In turn, this book’s reading of *Psycho* the novel draws nicely on C.G. Jung’s sense of the “Terrible Mother archetype” as reworked by Erich Neumann in a book read by Norman Bates himself. Viewing Bates through this archetype, Perry and Sederholm show how the oscillation between hating and needing that *Anima* of the Great Feminine turns Norman’s madness into an extension of Poe’s vision of “Madeline” as “a force in Roderick’s unconscious” – a quite suggestive link never made until now. More links surface in the chapter on Levin’s *Rosemary’s Baby*. Taking as its point of departure the “preapocalyptic gloom of a dying world” so vividly rendered in the “House of Usher” (139), Levin’s novel portrays the declines in postmodern urban and suburban life. Just as Roderick uses Madeline, to begin with, Rosemary’s husband uses her. People in fact use
spouses and others as “consumable artifacts” throughout *Rosemary’s Baby*, by this account, all within a pop culture of sheer economic self-advancement now “as blasted and morally decaying” in its way as the decadence “surrounding the Usher home” and destroying it from within and without (139, 142).

Perry and Sederholm conclude this study with perhaps their most revolutionary contention of all: that the ancient Egyptian rituals of initiation discovered in Poe’s “Fall” by Barton Levi St. Armand shed special light on Stephen King’s *The Shining*. At the same time, King’s allusions to this mythology and to Poe transform the journey taken by Jack Torrance and his son “into the hellish underworld of the mind” at the Overlook Hotel. In light of these allusions, both Jack and Danny are initiated into the “cult” of all that is symbolized by the 1945 masked ball still haunting the hotel with the many kinds of evil unleashed back then by “Horace Derwent – the Bacchus of the Colorado Lounge” (153). His name, the authors note, is a “play on Horus, the ancient Egyptian god with the falcon head” who once symbolized the forces of death underpinning the surface of life, but who also suggests, as *The Shining* finally does, the possibilities of renewal that may emerge from descents into the “mad unconscious self” (154-55). Here as in the other chapters, Perry and Soderholm prove their points by textual evidence that is almost always convincing. Consequently, anyone interested in studying, teaching, or writing about any one of these “American Gothics” should consult the readings in this book.

That is not to say this study is perfect. Its prose can occasionally be pedantic and unnecessarily repetitive, and its many new insights are intermixed with claims that are already well known and commonly taught (although it can be useful to have the new and the old in one place). Moreover, in focusing exclusively on “the House of Usher” and the specific texts it has prompted, the authors largely ignore the nature and development of the American Gothic over
time. In spite of their conscientious citing of scholarship on specific texts, they have not really consulted the books most important to understanding the larger arc of the American Gothic’s development and its many dimensions. Barely using Leslie Fiedler’s *Love and Death in the American Novel*, they make no mention at all of Donald Ringe’s *American Gothic*, Teresa Goddu’s important *Gothic America*, and Robert K. Martin and Eric Savoy’s remarkable collection of essays, also called *American Gothic*. In my view, scholars of the Gothic should do more than Perry and Sederholm have done to situate their admittedly useful readings within these larger critical histories and the concerns they reveal.

To be sure, this book makes no claim to be comprehensive in its treatment of the American Gothic; it aims to track the literary influence of just one story. But even in the range of theories it applies to its specific interpretations, it is sometimes too limited. While it aptly draws insights from American feminism and from both Jungian and Freudian psychoanalysis, it misses other theoretical opportunities that might have strengthened its own claims. In struggling, for example, to define the amorphous and obscure level of “absolute reality” in Lovecraft and Jackson, Perry and Sederholm could have invoked Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Zizek’s theory of “the Real,” which has been especially well applied to the British Gothic by Dale Townshend in *The Orders of Gothic*. Then, too, why do the authors avoid like the plague the film adaptations of the works they analyze? Some canny critical attention to those screen versions would have served to bring out what each original novel does distinctively. While revealing what elements of a novel are excluded from the film made from it, such an analysis could also have shown how the features most effectively translated from fiction to cinema have thereby gained wider cultural resonance in ways that still affect Western culture.
Still, even considering all that it leaves out, this book remains quite valuable for what it includes. I particularly believe that this study can be of great help in teaching American Gothic literature, or certainly in teaching the texts that it treats, since it is organized like a course (I wonder if it was one) with a good progression of major changes in the “Usher” pattern, as well as a sense of ongoing influences. It also effectively balances the close reading of each text with both older and contemporary source materials, yet with due consideration of the better existing scholarship on Poe and each of the works he has most affected for well over a century. Indeed, this study is quite honest about recognizing the American Gothic texts that it could have treated in Poe’s wake but chose not to, briefly noting that what it says about the influence of “Usher” could apply to fictions ranging from Joyce Carol Oates’ *Haunted* and Peter Straub’s *Ghost Story* to Thomas Harris’ *The Silence of the Lambs* (17). Perry and Sederholm thus set the stage for further applications of their study in the classroom as well as in future studies of the American Gothic. Despite this book’s relative simplicity and restricted range, its analytical and interpretive achievement is most impressive. I look forward to using this book in my own work on the Gothic and in courses and independent studies with university students all the way from the freshman to the graduate level.

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