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From Gothic Ruin to Ontological Anxiety: Reimagining Dark Romanticism in Edgar Allan Poe and Brian Evenson

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Abstract

This paper offers a comparative reinterpretation of Edgar Allan Poe and Brian Evenson through the intellectual and aesthetic framework of Dark Romanticism. Although the two writers belong to widely separated historical moments, their fiction shares a sustained distrust of rationality, stable identity, moral certainty, and the reliability of human perception. Poe develops these anxieties through the Gothic vocabulary of decaying houses, doubles, obsessive narrators, buried bodies, hereditary decline, and psychological guilt. Evenson inherits these concerns but transforms them within a contemporary idiom shaped by minimalism, speculative fiction, bodily uncertainty, technological mediation, and existential disorientation. The movement from Poe to Evenson therefore represents more than a change in literary style: it marks a transformation in the location of horror itself. In Poe, terror generally emerges from a disturbed consciousness attempting to resist guilt, repression, and irrational desire. In Evenson, by contrast, the instability of consciousness is inseparable from an unstable world in which bodies, memories, identities, and even physical laws may cease to possess secure boundaries. Drawing on Gothic studies, Freud's theory of the uncanny, Lacanian conceptions of subjectivity, existential philosophy, and Mark Fisher's distinction between the weird and the eerie, this paper examines doubling, bodily transgression, architectural space, narrative unreliability, and moral ambiguity. It argues that Evenson does not abandon Poe's Dark Romantic inheritance but radicalizes it: the Gothic house becomes an impossible space, the double becomes an ontological problem, guilt loses its authority, and psychological terror expands into the possibility that reality itself is empty, unstable, or indifferent.

Keywords: Dark Romanticism, Edgar Allan Poe, Brian Evenson, Gothic fiction, uncanny, existentialism, identity, horror

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1. Introduction

Dark Romanticism developed in nineteenth-century American literature as a skeptical response to the confidence and optimism associated with Transcendentalism. Writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau emphasized the spiritual potential of the individual, the meaningful relationship between humanity and nature, and the possibility of moral and intellectual self-culture. Dark Romantic writers approached the same human subject from the opposite direction. They were less interested in the promise of self-realization than in the instability hidden beneath the idea of a coherent self. Instead of presenting nature as a source of spiritual harmony, they often imagined it as indifferent, mysterious, or threatening. Instead of trusting reason, they exposed the impulses, fears, compulsions, and irrational desires that reason could not fully control.

Edgar Allan Poe occupies a central position in this tradition. His stories repeatedly place apparently rational individuals in circumstances where perception becomes unreliable and the boundary between external reality and internal disturbance begins to disappear. The houses, rooms, crypts, corridors, and landscapes of his fiction are rarely passive settings. They frequently resemble extensions of the minds inhabiting them. A decaying mansion can become a representation of hereditary psychological collapse; a buried corpse can become the return of repressed guilt; and a second self can become the visible form of conscience or forbidden desire.

More than a century later, Brian Evenson revisits many of these same anxieties, but under very different cultural conditions. His fiction belongs to a contemporary field that includes literary horror, weird fiction, speculative fiction, and postmodern narratives of uncertainty. His prose is generally more restrained than Poe's. Instead of surrounding terror with elaborate description, Evenson often removes explanation and leaves the reader with fragments, gaps, repetitions, and disturbing possibilities. The result is a different kind of Gothic experience. Poe's characters frequently fear what their own minds have done; Evenson's characters may not even know what kind of reality they inhabit.

The comparison between the two writers is therefore especially productive. Poe provides a model in which horror is strongly connected to guilt, repression, obsession, and psychological disintegration. Evenson extends this model toward a form of ontological horror in which identity itself becomes questionable. The movement from one writer to the other can consequently be understood as a movement from the Gothic mind toward the unstable world surrounding that mind.

This paper argues that Dark Romanticism remains a flexible literary mode rather than a closed nineteenth-century movement. Its central suspicion—that human beings cannot completely trust reason, morality, identity, or the world they inhabit—continues to resonate in contemporary fiction. Poe dramatizes this suspicion through Gothic excess and psychological intensity; Evenson reconstructs it through minimalism, ambiguity, and metaphysical uncertainty.

2. Dark Romanticism as a Theory of Uncertainty

Dark Romanticism is fundamentally concerned with limits. It questions the limits of knowledge, the limits of moral control, and the limits of individual identity. Gothic literature provides an especially effective form for this questioning because its characteristic spaces and figures are associated with boundaries that have been violated: life and death, sanity and madness, self and other, past and present, reality and illusion.

Fred Botting and David Punter identify many of these features in their discussions of Gothic literature. The Gothic frequently returns to forbidden spaces, ancestral structures, transgression, haunting, decay, and the persistence of the past. In Poe, these elements become intensely psychological. The external Gothic environment often appears to respond to the inner condition of the protagonist. The house is haunted because the mind is haunted; the corpse returns because guilt cannot remain buried; the double appears because the self cannot remain unified.

Freud's theory of the uncanny adds another dimension to this process. The uncanny occurs when something familiar becomes strangely unfamiliar, or when something previously repressed returns in an unsettling form. Poe's fiction repeatedly exploits this transformation. A home becomes a tomb. A beloved animal becomes an object of horror. A familiar face appears as a threatening double. A supposedly dead person returns. Such events disturb the distinction between what is known and what is feared.

Evenson intensifies this disturbance by making the familiar itself structurally unreliable. His characters may enter ordinary rooms that contain impossible openings, encounter bodies whose identities cannot be verified, or discover that their memories cannot establish what actually happened. In this sense, the uncanny moves beyond psychological repression. It becomes a problem of existence.

Existential philosophy provides another useful perspective. Kierkegaard's engagement with anxiety and dread, and Camus's account of the absurd, both emphasize the conflict between the human desire for meaning and the absence of guaranteed meaning. Dark Romantic fiction often stages precisely this conflict. Poe's characters desperately seek

explanations even when their own behavior demonstrates that explanation may be impossible. Evenson's characters frequently inhabit worlds in which explanation itself has become unreliable.

Mark Fisher's distinction between the weird and the eerie is particularly useful for understanding this difference. The weird involves the presence of something that does not belong within an established order, while the eerie often emerges from unexplained absence or uncertainty about agency. Poe frequently produces the weird through supernatural or psychologically grotesque intrusions. Evenson often works through the eerie: someone is missing, something has disappeared, an apparently ordinary space contains an impossible feature, or an event has occurred without a clearly identifiable cause.

Thus, the Dark Romantic framework provides a bridge between the two writers. Its central question is not simply "What is frightening?" but "How secure are the categories through which human beings understand themselves and their world?"

3. Fragmented Identity and the Problem of the Double

One of the strongest connections between Poe and Evenson is their treatment of divided identity. The double is a particularly powerful Dark Romantic device because it converts an abstract psychological conflict into a visible narrative figure. A person who encounters a double encounters an external form of the instability already present within the self.

Poe's "William Wilson" provides a classic example. The narrator meets another person who possesses his name and strikingly resembles him. The second Wilson repeatedly appears when the protagonist is moving toward morally destructive actions. He therefore functions as an embodiment of conscience, restraint, or the part of the self that the narrator wishes to suppress. The narrator attempts to eliminate this rival, but the murder of the double becomes a symbolic act of self-destruction.

The important point is that Poe's double remains connected to moral psychology. The protagonist is divided between desire and conscience. His tragedy results from his inability to acknowledge the part of himself that resists his immoral impulses. The double is frightening because it proves that the self cannot be reduced to the identity the protagonist consciously chooses.

This pattern is related to Poe's larger interest in unreliable consciousness. His protagonists frequently insist that they are rational precisely when their behavior demonstrates the opposite. Their attempts to control the narrative often expose their lack of control. Identity becomes a defensive story told by an unstable subject.

Evenson takes the double into a more radically uncertain territory. In The Warren, identity is no longer simply divided between moral self and immoral self. The protagonist X faces uncertainty about what he actually is. His memories, bodily existence, and relation to other beings cannot be securely separated. The possibility that a personality might be reconstructed, copied, replaced, or technologically reproduced destabilizes the traditional idea of the unique human self.

This is a significant development in Dark Romantic thinking. Poe asks whether a person can escape his own conscience. Evenson asks whether there is a stable person there to begin with. The difference is subtle but profound. In Poe, the self is divided. In Evenson, the self may be constructed from fragments whose authenticity cannot be established.

The contemporary double therefore becomes less a moral warning and more an ontological threat. A duplicate does not merely say, "You have another side." It may ask, "Which of us is the original?" Such a question transforms Gothic doubling into a crisis of existence.

4. Perversity, Violence, and the Unreliable Body

Poe's conception of human perversity is another major point of connection. In "The Imp of the Perverse," Poe imagines an irrational force within human beings that drives them toward actions they know to be dangerous or destructive. Human beings may recognize a precipice and still feel compelled to approach it. Reason warns against the action, but the warning itself can become part of the attraction.

This idea appears dramatically in "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Black Cat." The narrators do not behave according to ordinary calculations of benefit. Their violence is excessive, irrational, and ultimately self-defeating. The narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" murders an old man because of his fixation on the man's eye, then destroys his own ability to remain silent. The narrator of "The Black Cat" moves from affection toward cruelty and murder, even though his actions provide no meaningful advantage.

The Dark Romantic significance of these stories lies in their rejection of the Enlightenment image of the rational individual. Human beings are not always guided by self-interest or moral reasoning. Beneath conscious decision-making there may exist compulsions that are destructive precisely because they resist explanation.

Evenson carries this concern into the body. In The Brotherhood of Mutilation, self-destruction becomes organized through a system in which bodily amputation can be

interpreted as spiritual or ideological practice. Violence is no longer simply an eruption from an individual psyche. It becomes institutionalized.

This shift is important. Poe's violence often produces guilt because the individual knows that a boundary has been crossed. Evenson's violence can be frightening because the boundary itself has been normalized. The body can be cut, altered, replaced, or discarded without necessarily producing a stable moral response.

The body thus becomes another uncertain structure. Poe's characters are terrified by what their minds can make them do to bodies. Evenson's characters inhabit worlds in which the body itself is unstable and vulnerable to external systems of meaning. The Gothic body becomes not merely a site of punishment but a site of ontological uncertainty.

5. Gothic Architecture and Impossible Space

Architecture is one of the most recognizable features of Gothic literature, and Poe makes exceptional use of it. In "The Fall of the House of Usher," the house is inseparable from the history and psychology of the Usher family. Its appearance immediately communicates decay. The windows resemble eyes; the structure contains a visible fissure; the surrounding landscape is lifeless and oppressive.

The house does not simply contain the characters. It participates in their psychological condition. Roderick Usher's extreme sensitivity and anxiety correspond to the oppressive atmosphere of the mansion. His belief in the sentience of inanimate objects further complicates the boundary between living and non-living matter.

The relationship between the family and the building becomes complete at the end. Madeline's return from the crypt coincides with the final collapse of the house. The architecture seems to possess the same fate as the family consciousness. Once the Usher lineage is destroyed, the structure that embodies it also disappears.

Poe's Gothic space therefore preserves history. The house carries memory, inheritance, guilt, and decay. It is frightening because the past remains materially present.

Evenson transforms this model in "Windeye." Instead of an ancient mansion, he uses an ordinary domestic house. The disturbing element is not its visible age or history but an impossible window. The opening appears on the exterior but has no corresponding interior space. It violates the ordinary logic of architecture.

The difference between the two spaces reveals the evolution of Dark Romanticism. Poe's house is frightening because it contains too much history. Evenson's house is frightening because its structure cannot be understood at all.

The disappearance of the child in "Windeye" makes this uncertainty even more disturbing. The horror is not simply that a person vanishes. The surrounding world begins to behave as if the person never existed. Memory, objects, and family history reorganize themselves around absence.

Here Evenson moves beyond Poe's Gothic logic. Poe's buried past returns. Evenson's missing person may be erased so completely that there is no stable past to return to. The horror lies not in remembering the dead but in losing the possibility of proving that someone was ever alive.

6. Narrative Voice: Hysteria and Minimalist Detachment

Poe's narrative technique is inseparable from his representation of madness. His first-person narrators often speak directly to the reader, demanding belief and insisting on their rationality. In "The Tell-Tale Heart," the narrator's defensive opening immediately creates suspicion. His excessive punctuation, repetition, and emotional intensity reveal the instability that he attempts to deny.

The reader is therefore trapped inside the narrator's consciousness. We experience events through a mind that cannot be trusted. The heartbeat at the end may be interpreted as supernatural, psychological, or symbolic, but its central function is clear: the narrator's guilt becomes an auditory reality.

Poe's method is one of rhetorical excess. The narrator talks too much. He explains, repeats, protests, and insists. His language becomes evidence against him.

Evenson generally works in the opposite direction. His prose often avoids emotional explanation. Characters may encounter disturbing events and respond without dramatic outbursts. In "The Dust," for instance, the narrative atmosphere is shaped by contamination, uncertainty, and violence, but the prose remains controlled.

This restraint produces a different readerly experience. Poe's narrator pulls the reader into a feverish mind. Evenson pushes the reader toward a blank space where interpretation must be constructed without sufficient information.

Omission becomes a central technique. Instead of showing every transformation, Evenson may leave the reader to infer what has happened. Instead of explaining an impossible event, he allows its impossibility to remain unresolved.

The result is not less psychological horror but a different form of it. Poe creates claustrophobia through excessive interiority; Evenson creates disorientation through insufficient interiority. One overwhelms the reader with consciousness, while the other withholds the information necessary to understand consciousness.

7. Moral Ambiguity and the Disappearance of Retribution

Poe's Dark Romantic world is morally unstable, but it is not necessarily morally empty. His criminals frequently experience guilt, fear, hallucination, or punishment. In "The Black Cat," the narrator's violence eventually exposes him. The cat becomes associated with the return of the crime, and the hidden corpse is discovered.

This pattern suggests that transgression creates its own punishment. Even when the narrator attempts to suppress evidence, the crime returns through the very structures he has tried to control.

Poe therefore maintains a relationship between evil and consequence. His protagonists may reject morality, but their narratives repeatedly demonstrate that immoral actions cannot be psychologically contained.

Evenson often removes this structure. Violence can occur without producing confession or moral revelation. Characters may mutilate themselves or others because of ideological systems, confusion, necessity, or circumstances that never become fully clear.

This absence of moral closure is one of Evenson's most disturbing contributions to contemporary Dark Romanticism. If no divine order, social order, or psychological conscience guarantees that wrongdoing will be recognized, then horror becomes more absolute.

The frightening question is no longer "Will I be punished?" but "What if nothing cares?"

This is where Evenson's fiction approaches existential horror. The universe does not necessarily provide a moral framework within which human actions acquire meaning. Bodies can be damaged, identities can disappear, and reality can change without producing a final explanation.

8. From Psychological Horror to Ontological Dread

The most important difference between Poe and Evenson can be described as a movement from psychological instability toward ontological instability.

Poe's characters frequently experience uncertainty about perception. They may hallucinate, misunderstand events, or become overwhelmed by guilt. Yet the world usually retains a recognizable structure. The old man exists. The house exists. The crime occurs. The problem lies in the narrator's interpretation of these realities.

Evenson goes further. In his fiction, the structure of reality itself may be uncertain. A person can disappear from the memory of others. A double may be indistinguishable from an original. A body may not guarantee identity. A familiar environment may contain a spatial contradiction.

This distinction changes the nature of horror.

Psychological horror says: "You cannot trust your mind."

Ontological horror asks: "What if there is no stable reality for your mind to trust?"

Poe's Dark Romanticism is therefore a literature of the tortured subject. Evenson's is a literature of the unstable world.

The transition also reflects historical changes. Poe wrote in a period marked by rapid scientific development, religious uncertainty, industrialization, and changing ideas about the human mind. Evenson writes in a cultural environment shaped by biotechnology, digital information, technological mediation, ecological anxiety, posthuman theory, and the fragmentation of traditional systems of authority.

In such a world, the fear of losing one's identity may be connected not only to madness but also to duplication, technological reproduction, institutional control, or the reduction of human experience to information.

Evenson's characters consequently inhabit a world where the human subject may be replaceable. This is a distinctly contemporary version of the Dark Romantic fear. The nineteenth-century question was whether the soul could be corrupted. The contemporary question may be whether the soul, self, or individual identity possesses any stable existence at all.

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9. Comparative Synthesis

The relationship between Poe and Evenson can be summarized through several transformations.

First, the Gothic house changes into the impossible space. Poe's architecture embodies family history and psychological decay; Evenson's spaces expose contradictions in the structure of reality.

Second, the double changes from moral conscience to ontological uncertainty. Poe's second self reminds the protagonist of the ethical identity he tries to suppress. Evenson's doubles challenge the assumption that an original self exists.

Third, guilt changes into indifference. Poe's protagonists are frequently trapped by what they have done. Evenson's characters may inhabit worlds in which violence produces no meaningful moral response.

Fourth, narrative excess changes into narrative absence. Poe's narrators explain themselves with extraordinary intensity. Evenson's prose often refuses to explain, making silence and omission sources of terror.

Finally, psychological horror becomes existential dread. Poe asks what darkness lies inside the human subject. Evenson asks what happens when darkness cannot be located inside the subject because the surrounding reality is equally unstable.

These transformations do not mean that Evenson abandons Poe. On the contrary, Evenson's fiction demonstrates the continuing adaptability of Poe's central concerns. The themes of doubling, bodily violation, unreliable perception, isolation, death, and irrationality remain recognizable, but their meanings change according to contemporary anxieties.

Dark Romanticism therefore functions less as a fixed historical style than as a recurring mode of suspicion. Whenever literature challenges the belief that reason guarantees safety, identity guarantees continuity, or morality guarantees order, the Dark Romantic impulse reappears.

10. Conclusion

Edgar Allan Poe and Brian Evenson belong to different literary moments, yet their fiction can be read as part of the same long history of distrust toward rational certainty. Poe established a powerful form of Dark Romantic writing in which Gothic architecture,

psychological obsession, unreliable narration, doubling, violence, and guilt reveal the fragility of the individual mind.

Evenson inherits these elements but changes their scale and function. His minimal prose removes much of the decorative Gothic apparatus and replaces it with gaps, contradictions, bodily uncertainty, and metaphysical ambiguity. His characters are not simply frightened by what they have done; they are uncertain about what they are, what they remember, and whether the world itself possesses coherent rules.

The comparison consequently reveals a significant evolution in Dark Romanticism. Poe's horror is largely concentrated within the troubled subject. The mind becomes a prison in which guilt, repression, perversity, and fear continually return. Evenson expands this prison until it encompasses reality itself. The individual no longer stands securely within a frightening world; the individual becomes one of the unstable elements of that world.

This transformation explains why Poe remains so relevant to contemporary horror. His fundamental insight was not limited to nineteenth-century Gothic conventions. He recognized that human beings are unable to establish complete control over their own consciousness. Evenson takes this insight further by imagining what happens when the instability of consciousness is matched by the instability of reality.

The movement from Poe's decaying mansion to Evenson's impossible spaces can therefore be understood as a movement from Gothic ruin to existential void. The old house collapses because a family has psychologically and physically disintegrated; the modern space becomes terrifying because it reveals that the categories through which reality is organized may themselves be unreliable.

Dark Romanticism survives because the fears it addresses remain unresolved. Human beings still experience irrational impulses, fractured identities, uncertainty about death, fear of isolation, and anxiety about the limits of knowledge. What changes is the form through which those fears are imagined. Poe gives them the language of Gothic decay, haunted rooms, doubles, blood, confession, and guilt. Evenson gives them the language of absence, duplication, bodily instability, silence, technological possibility, and ontological uncertainty.

Read together, the two writers demonstrate that horror is not merely a literature of monsters or supernatural events. At its deepest level, it is a literature of unstable assumptions. Poe unsettles the assumption that the human mind is rational and morally sovereign. Evenson unsettles the assumption that the world inhabited by that mind is coherent and permanent. Between these two forms of uncertainty lies the enduring power of Dark Romanticism.

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