

Susanne Rohr

"Madness as a Liminal State in the American Short Story"

As the fate of Charles Brockden Brown's late 18th century fictional characters Theodore Wieland or Edgar Huntly shows us, the topic of madness has been a prominent theme in American literature from its beginnings. While it is interesting to ask which historical and cultural circumstances may have played a role in granting madness such a prominent position in the emergence of a national literature, in the context of discussions on the short story it is significant that soon after the very topic was also constitutive for the development of the entire genre. As is well known, the format of Edgar Allan Poe's seminal short stories depends on a close interaction between form and content, or, more precisely, between unreliable narrators and the topic of insanity. Thereafter, this theme became ever present in American literature, whether considered in general or the American short story in particular. There were certainly also, however, decades in which the issue was more prominently negotiated than in others.

In my talk I first want to explore this chronology and to investigate the interplay between representations of mental illness in short stories and the historical and cultural contexts that may have fueled an interest in this liminal state. I then want to concentrate on the most recent depictions of mental illness in American short stories that focus on the disease pattern of autism, before probing more deeply into what Tobin Siebers has recently called "disability aesthetics." I will end by posing the question whether so-called "high functioning autism" has become the epitome of America's current cultural condition.