

VEHICLE OF THE BIZARRE: NARRATIVE POWER AND DEPICTION OF LOSS  
OF INNOCENCE IN SELECTED SHORT FICTION OF EDGAR ALLAN POE

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## DEDICATION

To my students, who were patient while their teacher was learning. And to my own “Black Cat,” Ozzy, who was less patient.

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## ABSTRACT

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### VEHICLE OF THE BIZARRE: NARRATIVE POWER AND DEPICTION OF LOSS OF INNOCENCE IN SELECTED SHORT FICTION OF EDGAR ALLAN POE

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The purpose of this study is to identify and articulate a common narrative formula found in a selection of the fictional works of Edgar Allan Poe and to argue its significance in terms of reader influence and reception. The methodology of this study involves systematic analysis of representative works authored by Poe, including short stories and essays, in order to establish the existence and effect of the formula. Its effect is further demonstrated by a subsequent examination of secondary sources, consisting largely of printed works and academic articles, which discuss documented and corroborating elements of Poe's technique, as well as the reception of Poe's work in both French and English cultures over time, in addition to American culture. By way of reviewing the original works and the supporting secondary scholarship in these areas, this thesis endeavors to prove the existence and value of one of Poe's rarely discussed methods of narrative control.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Literature that lasts is, by definition, relevant beyond a single time.

Shakespeare's work, for example, endures; and his works are performed to this day. His plays are frequently set in the past, present, or future at the will and wish of a director. Manipulating the temporal setting of *Hamlet* harms the Prince of Denmark's tale not at all; in fact, often it adds or emphasizes thematic meaning and significance. Likewise, setting *Romeo and Juliet* in a post-modern city named Verona Beach and making the Montagues and Capulets rival gangs tarnishes nothing of the star-crossed lovers' poignant message. Instead, these adjustments resonate with new, contemporary audiences and allow the perpetuation of Shakespeare's literary influence. Literature that lasts is relevant, and it remains so because it resonates with deep truths of the human condition—the state of “being human” which transcends time and place. When readers are drawn to an author's work and when they continue to come back to it decade after decade, it is because that author has found a way to shed some light on what humans are, what they have in common, and how they navigate the good and ill turns of life. It is no surprise, then, that so many have been captivated for so long by the works of Edgar Allan Poe, as his fiction boasts more than the phantasmagoric plots and depth of detail and symbolism for which it became known. Like Shakespeare, Poe has fashioned his tales purposefully around compelling human truths; each reader is given the opportunity to

watch his conflicted characters struggle with their own demons and, through their struggle, reflect upon a peculiarly human contest.

Beneath the shadows of Poe's compelling literary constructions are patterns which aid in making his work familiar in the most uncomfortable of ways. As it is this familiarity—the stain of bitter human truth that looms as readers move along—which has made his stories into enduring successes, it is a worthwhile endeavor to examine the methods through which Poe has achieved such resonance. Discernable more in their effect than their performance, the patterns function as strings to guide independent imaginations toward a destination simultaneously dreaded and expected. This thesis demonstrates how two specific patterns or methodologies directly influenced critical receptions of Poe's work and how responses to his writing continue to be molded by them. By making connections between Poe's methodologies and audience receptions—both historical and current—this thesis illustrates the tying of conscious methodology to demonstrable effect.

The two methodologies of focus, which Poe employs as vehicles to transmit this sense of disturbing familiarity and to comment upon the human condition, include the deliberate shifting of narrative power and the strategic depiction of loss of innocence. Together, these two elements manifest a formula with structural and thematic natures which resonate with innate human understandings and serve to provide readers with a model of how the loss of innocence subsequently robs individuals of their control, both over themselves and their situations.

Here, in brief, is an articulation of the formula. Poe fashions many of his works into literary “cases,” presenting both a guilty and an innocent party—a figure who has been wronged and a figure who has committed the wrong. Frequently, the narrator functions both as the guilty party and as an everyman—a proxy of general humanity who begins as a seemingly respectable and ordinary person, only to experience a moral downfall or decline, which in turn leads to transformation into the guilty party of the case. Once this change occurs, the consequences of moral failure gradually become clear. A loss of self is assured because of whatever depravity and madness the guilty party has perpetuated. Likewise, a loss of control is guaranteed, whether it be over personal actions or overall situation. As to the innocent party, while this figure may retain no control or power of his or her own, he or she most often ends the tale vindicated or on superior moral ground to the guilty party.

Not only does this pattern evince that humankind’s sense of moral innocence is directly tied to the ability to maintain power and control over self and surroundings, it also occurs often enough in Poe’s works that it can clearly be taken as one of his purposeful formulas for engaging audiences. Part of the appeal—and of the horror—of his tales is the sense that moral slippage, so to speak, is common. Scholars such as Joseph R. McElrath have stated that Poe is “keenly conscious” of the “characteristic traits of his own craftsmanship,” a fact which can easily be witnessed in the deliberate structure of his “bizarreries” (38). In fact, Poe has written several satirical pieces of fiction—such as “How to Write a Blackwood Article” and “The Literary Life of Thingum Bob Esq”—

which “successfully ridicule the absurd lengths to which” authors sometimes go “to shock the public’s sensibilities” (38). This evident self-parody indicates that Poe is more than cognizant of his own methods; they are not the happy accident of an unfettered creator blundering about in the realm of his imagination. Through these parodical pieces of fiction, which can be viewed as “extended commentaries on some of the techniques Poe [employs] in his own fiction,” Poe has effectively set the stage for the validation of claims that he knew full well what he was doing when he constructed his narratives (38). His fiction has established lasting methods of reader engagement, built upon structure, narrative power, and keen glimpses of human truth. The purposeful methods therein have contributed not only to his early critical successes in European nations such as England and France, but also to his later strong appreciation in the United States and continued appeal throughout literary periods and media. This thesis investigates and elaborates on Poe’s purposeful formulas in action in select short fiction works in a succeeding chapter.

When discussing narrative shifts, prudence dictates specificity, and in the case of the following arguments concerning Poe’s works the terms “transformation” and “rhetorical transformation” will be utilized. These are lovingly borrowed from literary theorist and rhetorician Kenneth Burke, who discusses the concept of “rhetorical transformation” in his critical work *A Grammar of Motives*. He describes this concept as being essential to the appreciation of a work and details how it can illuminate the intentions of the author or the message and overall effect he hoped to convey. Burke

claims that process itself is equally as important as motivation, because “the position at the start can eventually be seen in terms of the new motivation seen en route” (Burke 422). Although there remains the temptation for critics and general readers alike to view rhetorical transformations as mere jolts in the narrative or the product of inconsistent composition, deeper analysis must needs reveal that these jolts or sudden shifts and inconsistencies serve larger purposes, a fact which ought to be clear once the final aim of the story is revealed to the reader. Because of the beautiful simplicity of Burke’s description of the nature and usage of rhetorical transformations within narratives, this thesis will borrow his terms to describe shifts in narration or narrative focus and tone.

Another piece of evidence in the case for Poe’s purposefulness is his stated views on the concept of literary Truth. Dan Shen writes that Poe indicates that Truth “simply means the inculcation of a moral,” and that it “constitutes the basis for a wide range of modes of thought and expression, including, but not confined to the ethical” (321). Poe believed that the concepts of Beauty and Truth were often entirely separate affairs and that it was generally (or at least *should* generally be) the aim of poetry to focus on Beauty and the goal of prose to portray Truth. If Poe saw Truth as the process of conveying and instilling a moral—or at the very least the idea of a moral—it can readily lead to consideration that he endeavored to develop his own prose works into windows of Truth. With this as his goal, he would then have had to determine the best methods for conveyance. Those methods would lead to the creation of patterns or formulas within his own works.

In “The Philosophy of Composition,” Poe states explicitly that “the object Truth” is akin to the “satisfaction of the intellect” (678). This statement suggests that the average human reader would be best satisfied with the progression of a narrative if it concluded by touching on some element of truth, or if it included such throughout its pages. Poe argues that Truth and Passion—which he terms the “excitement of the heart”—are in fact far more “readily attainable in prose” (678) than in any other written form. He argues that the prose form lends itself to the revelation of Truth or the development and exploration of Passion because “Truth, in fact, demands a precision,” and that the competent author will “always contrive, first, to tone them [objects of Truth] into proper subservience to the predominant aim, and, secondly, to enveil them, as far as possible, in that Beauty which is the atmosphere and essence” of the work (678).

The “predominant aim” of which Poe speaks is a concept essential to this thesis and its examination of Poe’s selected short works. According to Poe, a story fares ill without an “under-current of meaning, however indefinite,” suggestively applied throughout the narrative and leading towards the revelation of a final aim (678). This aim, Poe argues, should be kept in mind by the author from the genesis of the story and should remain in mind throughout the creative process, if any Truth is to be achieved. When speaking about his creation of “The Raven,” for example, Poe says that it was his “design to render it manifest that no one point in its composition [be] referable either to accident or intuition—that the work proceeded step by step, to its completion, with the

precision and rigid consequences of a mathematical problem” and that he “kept steadily in view the design of rendering the work universally appreciable” (677).

Poe’s dedication to precision in the development of his written works is tied to his belief that writing should contain Truth, Beauty, Passion, or some combination thereof, and that a narrative becomes inherently more poignant and full of real purpose if its author is able to “detail, step by step, the processes by which any one of his compositions attained its ultimate point of completion” (683). That “ultimate point,” according to Poe, is the specific effect, chosen ahead of time by the author, that a composition will convey to its reader. Poe goes into detail about this concept by stating that “it is only with the denouement constantly in view that we can give a plot its indispensable air of consequence, or causation, by making the incidents, and especially the tone at all points, tend to the development of the intention” (683). Nothing, he argues, “is more clear than that every plot, worth the name, must be elaborated to its denouement before anything be attempted with the pen,” which is the reason that he himself, as stated in his work on “The Raven,” prefers to begin “with the consideration of an effect” which he desired to convey (681). Poe details this process of consideration in “Philosophy” by saying that he first attempts to decide which “of the innumerable effects, or impressions, of which the heart, the intellect, or (more generally) the soul is susceptible, what one shall [he] on the present occasion select?” (681). Then, once he has chosen a method of conveyance—be it short story, poem, or novel—he selects a “vivid effect” and considers “whether it can be best wrought by incident or tone—whether by ordinary incidents and peculiar tone, or the

converse, or by peculiarity both of incident and tone,” and that afterwards he “[looks] about [him]...for such combinations of event, or tone, as shall best aid [him] in the construction of the effect” (681). Poe believes that the universal concepts of both Beauty and Truth are to be defined as “not a quality, as is supposed, but an effect—they refer, in short, to the “intense and pure elevation of soul...which...is experienced in consequence of contemplating” the beautiful, the truthful, or the passionate (681).

If morals are found in Poe’s short prose works, they tend to be “implicit and inseparable from the structural unity of effect” (Shen 321). Specifically in “The Tell-Tale Heart,” which Shen’s article focuses on, Poe demonstrates his Truth theory by “implicitly and subtly” conveying the moral of the tale by way of a “unified structural design,” which chapter two of this thesis presents (Shen 325). It is enough to acknowledge that, in an attempt to convey the human Truth he desired, Poe established certain structural patterns within his story to ensure that his goal was met. By doing so, he engaged in conscious decision and careful machination, rather than being the victim of any literary or creative accident. The fact remains that Poe has been—in works of both fiction and non-fiction—adamant that there must be some sort of aesthetic structural unity to a tale, or else it cannot hope to touch accurately on the remotest element of Truth which, as he would have it, is the purpose of all prose. Therefore, a piece of prose, which does not succeed in working its design towards the aim of conveying a Truth, can be said to have failed.

That Poe was aware of how to construct a story, or indeed a poem, for a desired effect is indisputable, based on the significant body of proof existent in his own works and commentary on writing. He has left much specific commentary on what constitutes Beauty or Truth in a written work and has stated explicitly that “the prose tale is open to a wide range of thematic materials that have their basis in Truth” (Shen 323). According to this concept, maintaining a structural unity with the aim of conveying a Truth is the responsibility of the writer, who should “preconceive a single effect and then invent and combine events” toward the furthering of his purpose (Shen 323). He adds that “in order to preserve unity of effect, a prose narrative, like a poem, should be fairly short, able to be read at one sitting,” a principle which again emphasizes the importance of purposeful structural design, as opposed to letting a narrative meander to a culmination (Shen 323).

Unfortunately for Poe, this adamancy and advocacy for structural unity, combined with other similar statements which he has made, such as his proclamation of the “consistent aesthetic conception of formal design” (which essentially says that all works of literary art should achieve unity of effect) have been exploited by critics and allowed for the overlooking of the “non-aesthetic and ethically related conception of the subject matter” of his prose works (Shen 325). Scholars such as Vincent Buranelli have argued that “sin and crime are absent from” Poe’s works because he “does not touch on morality,” and that he relegates himself to “matters of psychology, abnormal psychology, not of ethics” (325). It would indeed be quite easy to examine Poe’s works solely as forays into the realm of the psychological and the dark depths of mental abstraction—to

untie his plots and characters from ethics and morality and instead to focus on the aestheticism of the story used in the discussion of said psychological episode alone. But then this rhetorical lens requires readers to ask: is he using aestheticism to convey a picture of some psychological matter, and is that the only aim of his work? This idea seems rather too shallow an interpretation, and not respectful of Poe's capacity for structural ingenuity and his public statements that structure should have an aim, and that that aim should be to convey a Truth grounded in some specific morality or moral notion.

Additionally, there is Poe's statement to consider: that writers are responsible for settling on a single effect which they want to convey before they even begin writing and that each of the constructed events within the work should therefore be constructed with the aim of furthering each other and achieving the chosen effect. If a scholar believes Poe and follows that belief to its logical conclusion, that scholar will necessarily find him or herself approaching an analysis of Poe's works by way of an examination of his content and structure (and subsequently the strategies and techniques used to achieve that structure) in equal measure. He or she will acknowledge that these two components are working together to power a vehicle of narrative towards a predetermined purpose.

Other scholars have argued against Poe's purposefulness—or at least against his seriousness regarding structure and formula. A familiar argument for this view, and one which is suggested in the work of scholars such as Leanne Miller, states that the patterns and supposed formulas found in Poe's short works are more indicative of a pattern of unconscious thought or literary preference than they are of deliberate steps taken to

achieve a desired effect. This argument would imply that “literary analysis based solely on biographical information” is equally “as viable as other methods of analysis,” and that any manipulation of a text enacted by Poe “can yield a deeper understanding of him as a person and a writer” (Miller 2).

While it is intriguing to attempt to match Poe’s personal life and publicly demonstrated opinions to his literary productions and while there is indeed truth in the fact that texts can generally grant deeper understanding of their authors, this thesis contests the implication that Poe’s personal life must by necessity be tied to his work. This view falls in line with the older branches of psychological criticism, which were centered primarily around the author of a work and mostly concerned with establishing an explanation for the text based on either information already established about the author or information that could be inferred about the author based on the content of the text. But given that there is a large existing body of proof that indicates Poe was aware of how to construct a story for a desired effect defies this notion, this thesis argues that the structural design of Poe’s stories is tied to its effect, which is ultimately to make a moral commentary or statement and observation regarding the human condition.

There has been much scholarly debate as to whether Poe’s methods—and the grim content of his stories—are symptomatic of his own firsthand experiences. Previous decades of criticism—especially those with a focus of a psychological lens—have placed much emphasis on Poe’s “dubious metaphysics or even more unfortunate personal pathology;” and some so-inclined scholars have argued that any illumination on Poe’s

part into the “mysteries, process, and terrors of the human personality” is thanks to an attempt to muddle through personal struggles or to wage war against demons of his own (Shulman 245). This thesis, however, argues that while Poe’s personal moral struggles may indeed have had a degree of influence over his work—as authors cannot help but be influenced by their own life and experiences—they are certainly not the sole source of his methods. To assert this argument would be to contradict the statement that Poe has purposefully crafted the aforementioned formulas in order to connect with his audience’s understanding of the human condition. It would imply that Poe himself was at the mercy of his own humanity and incapable of intentionally making any statement regarding it. There is, in short, more value in examining the fact that Poe’s methods exist and are conscious undertakings than there is in attempting to ascribe them to symptoms of any particular mental outlook of their author.

Poe was keenly conscious of literary trends and of the steps an author must take to meet them. As scholar Dan Shen writes, “a close examination of Poe’s relevant essays reveals that Poe, in effect, holds a non-aesthetic view of the subject matter of prose fiction” and that, as such, he “makes an unequivocal distinction between structural design and subject matter” (321). This argument would imply that, no matter what the story, Poe would be able to separate its content from its structure and focus solely on one or the other, in order to develop both towards a common effect. This concept destroys the idea that his stories and techniques were directly and constantly tied to his personal life. Such a broad statement limits Poe’s skill as a writer and suggests that he was unable to

construct any piece that did not in some way directly correlate with his life. When he states that he aims to get at “Truth,” this assertion does not necessarily indicate that he aims to reflect a truth about himself—which would, as mentioned, be exclusionary of his literary abilities and range—but rather it indicates that he is concerned with the truthfulness and united nature inherent in “working...every part of the story—rhythm, plot, character, language, references—towards a denouement which ends the story logically, consistently, and satisfactorily” (Shen 326).

There are, of course, plenty of “psychological revelations” to be found in Poe’s fiction; and, therefore, it is not prudent to abandon the psychological lens all together (Shulman 245). But psychological criticism is broad; and under its umbrella are more useful branches, such as the investigation of characters—of formerly ordinary individuals who have experienced human horrors, succumbed, and gone on by their ruin to illustrate what a loss of innocence and self-control can do to a human and to a society.

“Loss of innocence” is a term that requires clear definition. It is equated to the traditional archetype of the fall and represents gradual and complete moral degradation of an individual’s character, either by his or her own hand or against his or her will, to the extent that he or she is left at the mercy and whim of his or her darkest, most negative and personally destructive innate qualities and is possessed of no means by which to rescue himself or herself from the consequences thereof, despite personal cost or the price paid by loved ones. This thesis argues that Poe’s usage of this familiar, archetypal concept in part accounts for why his work resonates so well with readers. It also argues that loss of

innocence is, in many of Poe's short works, the driving force behind narrative progression, and that its presence reminds readers of the dangers lurking in an absence of moral checks and balances.

This argument is consistent with Burke's concept of rhetorical transformations. The idea that an author can manipulate his narrative towards a pre-designed purpose by way of shifts or transformations in rhetorical tone and focus accurately describes the situations found in much of Poe's work. The concept of loss of innocence is one such rhetorical transformation; it presents itself as a movement from one state to another—both of the individual character and of the path of the narrative. As the unfortunate protagonist succumbs and loses himself, so too does the narrative transform into something other than it was.

Scholar Charles Woodard discusses the usage of archetypes in the context of rhetorical transformations (although he does not use this term) and argues that:

One of the more disappointing features of archetypal criticism has been its failure fully to explore the ways in which various images have taken on sufficient emotional significance to achieve the status of archetypes. The tendency has been to concentrate on the image itself, as it occurs and recurs in myth and literature, rather than on the origin of the image (576).

He suggests here that archetypes common to the branches of literature, religion, and philosophy developed over time through "primitive emotional experiences" and the social and cultural ramifications thereof (Woodard 576). In the case of the concept of

loss of innocence or of the fall of man, this suggestion would indicate that mankind has a strong will to “recapture the lost perfection which he knows through his emotional and neural inheritance to lie somewhere in his past,” as witnessed by “recurrent images, in myth and literature, of Paradise and the Fall” (Woodard 578). In short, throughout recorded history mankind has always seemed to sense not only that a “fall” from a state or place of grace has happened or is at least possible, but also that it is possible to fall on an individual, personal level—from an ideal state to a lesser. Woodard goes as far as to say that “always in the background of man’s consciousness there is an image of himself existing in another, easier, simpler, more idyllic time, unburdened with the knowledge of himself and of the universe which has shattered his being” (578).

This attitude was common in both the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as the world moved out of the Age of Reason. Woodard argues that, as the sense of a loss began to grow, Romanticism became the “product of man’s sense of being a creature fallen from perfection” and that the stereotypical Romantic “finds the present uninhabitable; his chief characteristic is his belief that a more habitable world exists somewhere, either in time or space” (580). Woodard also indicates that, in the face of the “increasing awareness” of being extrinsically dissatisfied, an individual would experience a sense of the “world of the senses and the world of rationality” growing apart around him or her (578). In Woodard’s view, both rationality and the “accumulation of knowledge” can often do more harm than good to mankind (580). This suggestion rings true, for it stands to reason that if one became cognizant of the fact that one had once

existed in a better state—either mentally or spiritually—one would conceivably go mad with the longing to return to such.

Poe's famous quote about becoming insane with long, horrible periods of sanity corroborates this outlook. This quote came from Poe's discussing the depression and misery he fell into both preceding and immediately after the death of his wife. The periods of horrible sanity that plagued him were undoubtedly those times in which his mind was clear enough to be knowledgeable about his own present situation, and in that knowledge he would understandably have found himself pining for his former situation, thus rendering the present—and reality—unbearable. Woodard makes the statement that “man's attainment of knowledge and the resultant punishment” deprive him of his “former happiness” and that his “acquirement of rationality” is thereafter seen as “inimical to his happiness” (576).

The archetype of a fall is not new. Its parameters have long been established and explored throughout disciplines and generations. In fact, as Woodard states, “it is possible to see all literature—and even all art—as the product of man's sense of being fallen from an earlier state of perfection, which he knows through his emotional and neural structure to lie somewhere in the past” (580). It proves almost cathartic for humans to put their malcontent into words, for no matter what medium it takes, the “primeval self” will assert itself “in defense against the corrosive rationality which brought about [man's] fall” (Woodard 580). It is, therefore, explicit that the fall scenario is an innate portion of the human experience—again the reason that Poe's connects so

well with readers. In his tragic and tormented characters readers recognize the deep sense of loss of self that would have driven them—the characters—to desperation and self-destruction. If not applicable to his readers personally, they will at least innately seize upon the sensations experienced by Poe's protagonists as being true human feelings, thus rendering the story accessible and memorable.

Anthony Badalamenti discusses the concept of the fall of man more specifically in his article "Freud and the Fall of Man" and makes the assertion that even though Sigmund Freud was "intellectually honest and enjoyed a highly developed ability to sense the inner workings of another person's psyche," he was largely off-base in other matters, as modern psychology holds (23). Badalamenti acknowledges this assertion and begins his article with a discussion concerning the nature of the fall of man as a concept before applying it to Freud. Badalamenti's observations regarding falls from grace and losses of innocence correlate with those of Woodard. He says that: "As a concept, the Fall of man refers to a specific kind of damage to human nature which affects man's adaptation to himself and to his world, among other things" (Badalamenti 23).

Badalamenti claims that the Fall, as a concept, "has a great deal to say about the state of human nature as it is observed" even outside of a theological context (Badalamenti 23). His primary reason for making this argument resides in his belief that the "conceptual context of the Fall sees man as a psychosomatic being, having both psyche (soul) and a soma (body)," and that therefore the "very definition of man" is "that of a being whose nature is a psychosomatic union" (Badalamenti 25). Carrying on

Woodard's statements that part of the consequences of a fall includes the removal from an ideal state and the awareness of the loss and of the new, worse state, Badalamenti cites the biblical fall and claims that, prior to this biblical event, "man enjoyed an internal state which tradition usually refers to as integrity" (25). He defines "integrity" here as the idea that "all of man's nature was harmoniously one when man chose to pursue the purpose for which he was created" (Badalamenti 25). This position, in effect, argues that one loses integrity when one loses a sense of purpose. The result of this loss, according to Badalamenti, is another concept called "concupiscence," which he defines as "a specific damage to human nature in which man's powers tend to seek their own immediate ends, a state that is something of an inverse to integrity" (25). While in a state on concupiscence, a human suffers what Badalamenti terms an "absence of inner cooperation" and an "insubordination of parts of the self against others," which in effect means that said human is no longer in control of himself—thus a fall from innocence, or a former state in which he was master of his mind, emotions, and self in general. This viewpoint still complements Woodard's, which says that man, "through endless generations," has held close this "central image" of a fall from an "early state of perfection" (576). It is this image, this scenario, which repeats throughout many of Poe's short works and which he uses to comment on the effects of a loss of morality.

Poe has said much regarding morality and the dangers of its absence, some of which is seemingly contradictory. In "Eureka," he argues that the "inevitable annihilation" of self stems from a loss of "personal identity," and likewise that said

identity is lost somewhere in the process of the elevated soul striving for beauty (Shulman 246). He indicates that the search for beauty and loveliness in existence is the utmost aim of man; but this “explicit critical theory does not take account of his major contribution to fiction, his imaginative understanding of the self, creating and suffering under the pressure of obsession, hatred, and dread” (Shulman 247). It seems that, in these contradictory aims, Poe is acknowledging the inherent chaos in life and its capacity for human transformation. It makes a great deal of sense then that he would insert rhetorical transformations into his narrative, triggered often by the transformations and losses taking place within his characters’ lives. The obsessive desire to persevere in moral superiority and beauty, while in reality being endlessly hampered by incessant human failings must necessarily lead to ruin, or at the absolute least to change. From this perspective, the loss of innocence and jarring, tragic transformations demonstrated by many of Poe’s principal characters can be viewed as inevitable consequences; and the transformations again establish themselves as purposeful and significant.

Here once more is a place where psychoanalytic criticism becomes appropriate. In analyzing the loss of innocence within selected works, elements of this critical lens are employed. This school of criticism complements the other reader-oriented ideas contained within this thesis with the attempt to “explain the hows and whys of human actions without developing an aesthetic theory—a systematic, philosophical body of beliefs about how meaning occurs” (Bressler 124). Psychoanalytic criticism is at heart “an approach to literary interpretation rather than a particular school of criticism,” a fact

which renders it an unobtrusive yet elaborative partner in its involvement with the reader-oriented theories (Bressler 124).

The reader-oriented theories contained in this thesis provide general concepts regarding narrative and form a basis for discussion of narrative power and shifts. Scholars such as Wolfgang Iser have indicated through their theories and research into the ways in which readers interact with texts that the human brain comes predisposed to have a reaction and that that reaction can be—to an extent—predicted or manipulated by the purposefulness of an author. In short, just as a reader can in theory learn methods of engaging with a text, so can an author learn methods of how to engage readers with texts. As scholar Patricia Harkin points out, it is possible to “abstract from Iser’s account of what he calls ‘the act of reading’ a set of instructions for producing readings (415). Shen follows this idea of producing readings by emphasizing how consequentially important it is that an author be knowledgeable enough in his or her craft to be able to produce said readings. He says that, “if the skill of the work inhibits readers’ comprehension of the true import of the narrative, then the skill will be regarded as defective” (Shen 324).

Wayne Booth also comments on the interplay between text, reader, and author, adding to the discussion by stating that there are three general sources of criteria required of a work. Booth’s explanation of these three criteria is useful because emphasizes the fact that while different schools of critics impose polarizing requirements upon works of fiction, there are a few—specifically three, as he suggests—qualities which are necessary for a work to function. He points out that while some critics “require the novel to do

justice to reality...others would cleanse it of impurities...of the all-too-human” (37).

There is, according to Booth, a “dialectical warfare between those who think of fiction as something that must above all be real...and those who ask that it be pure—even if the search for artistic purity should lead to unreality and a ‘dehumanization of art’” (38). To dwell too much in one theoretical camp or another is to lose sight of the core of what makes fiction function: the carefully crafted and intricate interplay between the required attitudes of the author, the required attitudes of the reader, and the general qualities required in the work itself (37-8). These three criteria are intimately related, to the extent that it becomes “impossible to deal with any one of them for very long without touching on the others” (39).

This in summation is Booth’s argument: that while there are many branches of literary criticism, each of which imposes its own stipulations and varying emphasis on readers, authors, and texts, there can be no doubt that those three elements (reader, author, text) are each involved in the creation and conveyance of meaning. Booth reiterates that while it might very well be true that “when any good novel is read successfully, the experiences of author and reader are indistinguishable,” but it must be acknowledged that “critical programs still divide easily, if roughly, according to their emphasis on work, author, or reader” (39). Some critics will claim that, “a work should provide the reader with questions rather than answers, and he should be prepared to accept inconclusiveness,” while other critics may plead for a “less cerebral fiction, for more honest confrontation of the basic human emotions” (39).

Undoubtedly, Edgar Allan Poe understood this need for the three essential components to interact—and to do so effectively. He was tasked, according to his own stated theories of literary production, with the development of elements throughout a work towards a common effect. Constructed by interwoven skills and methodical patterns of composition, these elements, and their ultimate effect form what a lay person would refer to as “story,” and what academics often call “narrative.” Within this process of construction (and whether the result is technically categorized as a story, narrative, or something in-between) it would have been necessary for Poe to consider the potential reactions of his readers—not, perhaps, of a specific readership or audience group, but rather of humans in general who would—once exposed to a carefully chosen and developed combination of content and structural elements—find themselves predisposed by way of natural and ingrained interpretative inclinations to react in a particular manner.

The method of reader-response criticism that this thesis employs borrows from the ideas of the scholars mentioned above, but remains focused on Poe’s ability to craft a narrative towards a chosen end goal (which, in the case of the selected short works, is to provide an illumination of a human Truth). While this focus necessarily demands consideration of Poe’s readership, in order to determine the effect his methods are having, it also pairs this reader-orientation with psychological considerations, namely of Poe’s characters and the facets of the human condition which they represent—and the way in which they represent them. An essential component of reader-oriented criticism is the idea of overall textual unity—something which, as mentioned, Poe puts a great deal

of stock in—and which renders a text “autonomous” and states that it must “interpret itself with little or no help from historical, societal, or any other extrinsic factors, with all its parts relating back to its central theme” (Bressler 68).

Booth stands alongside this claim as well and indicates that, “the purposes of the individual work should dictate the standards by which it is judged” (377). He illustrates the validity of this statement through the example of different narrators or narrative structures in fiction, and says that:

If an author wants intense sympathy for characters who do not have strong virtues to recommend them, then the psychic vividness of prolonged and deep inside views will help him. If an author wants to earn the reader’s confusion, then unreliable narration may help him. On the other hand, if a work requires an effect like intense dramatic irony, whether comic or tragic, the author may find new uses for direct reliable narration (378).

The argument which Booth is making here is one for allowing each work to “do what it wants to do,” or in other words to “let its author discover its inherent powers and gauge his techniques to the realization of those powers” (378).

Booth also comments on issues of moral responses to or interpretations of texts and raises a similar point of how an author’s purposeful techniques and literary choices can have vast influence on the other two essential components in fiction-making—namely the reader’s attitude and the general qualities of the text itself. In the five Poe stories chosen for examination in this thesis, each narrator walks on morally unstable

ground. In each story, readers are made to question and to become uncomfortable with issues of morality—both in general and of their own. This thesis argues—and Booth agrees—that such responses within readers are the natural consequence of deliberate choices on the part of the author. As Booth states:

We have seen that inside views can build sympathy even for the most vicious character. When properly used, this effect can be of immeasurable value in forcing us to see the human worth of a character whose actions, objectively considered, we would deplore (378).

This thesis is concerned with investigating the reader, the text, and meaning over all, which is here defined as Bressler defines it, as “how the text and the reader interact or transact so the reader can make sense of the printed text” (75). This particular theory aligns with the statements and assertions contained in this thesis as it operates from the perspective that Poe’s strategies and techniques are purposeful and geared towards the furthering of one cohesive moral statement. The tendency of reader-oriented criticism to focus on the “strategies, devices, and techniques authors use to elicit a particular reaction or interpretation of a text” is appropriate for the purposes of this investigation and easily lends itself to application during the analysis of representative works (Bressler 69). In fact, recent decades of criticism have seen the critical line of thinking come around to the opinion that not only does a text have an effect on its readers, but that the reader is in fact an essential component. Each reader has the ability, through his or her “distinct view,” to

open a window into the interpretation of a text, through which his or her individual impression peers and serves to develop meaning” (Bressler 66).

Because readers do bring these distinct views to a text and thus have a role in its interpretation and the creation of meaning, the task of fashioning a narrative becomes much more of an intricate, difficult, and complex process for its author. As Bressler points out in *Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practice*, even the ancient Greeks were “aware of and concerned about the reader’s (or viewer’s) reactions,” and thus constructed their speeches, plays, and other bodies of literary and philosophical works with the understanding that they needed to be purposeful and ever-cognizant of their central aim (Bressler 69). The human Truths arrived at in the culminating scenes and throughout the duration of famous works such as *Oedipus* or *Antigone*, for example, would likely not have attained their impressive level of resonance if the narratives surrounding them were not purposefully constructed. If Sophocles had told his tragic tales merely for the purpose of shocking his audiences with exaggerated and dramatic displays of cruelty among people or the inescapable persistence of malicious fate, that shock-value motivation would likely have driven audiences away rather than kept them considering his plays for centuries. This—the purposeful conveyance of a Truth—is why great works last, and therefore the reason that much of Poe’s fiction continues to be read, analyzed, and absorbed by generations of readers through their individual lenses.

The problem, of course, remains that, as Bressler indicates, “consciously or unconsciously, each [reader’s] interpretations rest upon different theoretical assumptions

with their corresponding interpretative methodologies” (68). In short, each reader will “Most certainly be reading the same text, but all will gain entrance into the meaning of that text through different apertures and come away with a variety of differing and sometimes contradictory interpretations” (Bressler 66). This assertion acknowledges that, no matter how carefully and specifically a narrative is constructed by its author, it cannot necessarily achieve the same exact effect all of the time, for every reader. Such a fact does not negate the idea that an author may have purposefully attempted to ensure that a specific effect is at least one of the most probable interpretations that a reader will gain. For example, not every critic believes that Hamlet’s reticence to assist or listen to his father’s Ghost is in part due to—or at least influenced by—his reluctance to believe in the existence of Purgatory, or that that in turn is reflective of the religious strife between Catholic and Protestant churches. In fact, not every critic believes Shakespeare intended anything specific at all, or that we should even bother to work out what—if anything—he meant. However, the consensus from many scholars is at least that the Prince of Denmark’s hesitating where the Ghost is concerned is symptomatic of his character trait of overthinking and failing to take timely action, a nature that leads to further complications within the plot of the play. By observing and analyzing the character, an effect is conveyed, and the more common the effect across audiences and time, the more chance that it was intentionally developed by the narrative.

“Narrative,” as it is put forward in this thesis, refers alternately to the amalgamated textual result of authorial structures and techniques, measurable and

discernable on a literal level, as well as to the malleable story established by the combined forces of judgments from audiences across time and place, based on particular interpretations and aesthetic preferences. Similarly, the concept of “rhetorical transformations” refers to significant textual moments, marked by alterations in tone or effect as they are conveyed to the reader, in which a character of focus morally degrades to the point of seemingly losing control over the action and direction of the text. Burke elaborates on this definition when he says that

Tone, in a Poe tale, harbors great significance. From his more satirical works, readers can gain a sense that he considered the success of a narrative to be not so much a question of subject matter as “of the way in which it [is] handled” (McElrath 39). In many of his works, such as “The Tell-Tale Heart,” for example, Poe employs a tone which is unusually laconic, or curt, for his time, especially considering that “most American literati were still employing the sometimes elegant, but usually circumlocutory, euphemistic, and euphuistic prose style of the eighteenth century” (McElrath 39). In cases such as “The Tell-Tale Heart,” this “curt tone” helps to “present an emotional build-up—” a technique that adds emphasis to the gradual unraveling of the central character (McElrath 40). This evolution is demonstrated in this thesis, and the main importance of this fact lies in the observation that “in moving towards an emotional, or bogus-emotional, climax,” Poe is able to “embody a controlled repetition of words that appeal directly to the reader’s audial and visual sense” (McElrath 40).

That tone can hold such significance and sway over a reader's experience of a text is consistent with the thinking upheld by some theories of reader-oriented criticism, which raise questions such as if the reader "manipulates the text," or if it is the text which manipulates the reader in order to create meaning (Bressler 74). The implication of this question is that either "some word, phrase, or image [triggers] in the reader's mind a specific interpretation," or the reader approaches the text "with a conscious or unconscious collection of learned reading strategies that systematically impose an interpretation on the text" (Bressler 74). It is this argument, in part, which allows Poe's "highly self-conscious narrators to relate their intense self-awareness in an interjectional, or parenthetical" manner, with the result that the narrator's "self-consciousness" is spread throughout the narrative (McElrath 41). This device in turn provides an "expansion of the reader's understanding of the narrator's mental state," cementing their exchange with text and narrator.

These reader-oriented theories illustrate the concept that meaning is not attainable without both a text and a reader experiencing an interaction. Although this suggestion does not necessarily provide "a single methodological approach for textual analysis," (which presumably accounts for the umbrella-like nature of reader-oriented criticism), it allows for a definite "concern for the reader;" and this idea—or the idea that a text and a reader are interwoven in the creation of meaning and appreciation of an author's work—in part forms the basis of this thesis (Bressler 73).

For the reader's part, his or her side of the interaction includes his or her "view of the world, background, purpose for reading, knowledge of the world, knowledge of words, and other such facts" (Bressler 75). Structuralist criticism (a branch of reader-oriented criticism) states that "a reader brings to the text a predetermined system for ascertaining meaning (a complex system of signs or codes...) and applies this sign system directly to the text" (Bressler 76). Therefore, the meaning found in a text would in part reside "in the reading community to which an individual reader belongs," or to what contemporary critic Stanley Fish calls the "interpretive community" (82). In this way, for example, it can be said that readers interpret a text based upon their "subjective experience in one or more of these interpretive communities" (Fish 82). This suggestion, again, is an essential thought for this thesis, which demonstrates that critical differences in opinion and outlook between English and French audiences and those in the United States were in part responsible for the varying interpretations and, consequently, receptions of Poe's work. In summation, reader-oriented theories, which in general state that the literary experience is the genesis of meaning and thus responsible for influencing critical reception, are together the most appropriate foundation for the demonstration of Poe's formulas regarding narrative shifts and loss of power, as well as their effects on audiences.

The first step necessary in this demonstration is an analysis of representative key works, which this thesis undertakes so that it may illustrate the deliberate usage of narrative power shifts and the concept of loss of innocence as Poe employs them. For

such purposes, six short stories are selected for close examination and analysis. These samples are clear examples of these formulas in action. These stories include, specifically: “The Black Cat;” “The Cask of Amontillado;” “The Tell-Tale Heart;” “The Pit and the Pendulum;” “The Fall of the House of Usher;” and “The Masque of the Red Death.” Additional supplementary works by Poe are considered as commentary on his purposeful technique, including: “The Literary Life of Thingum Bob Esq.,” as well as his essay titled “The Philosophy of Composition.” This analysis of short stories charts the progression of loss of innocence and the consequences thereof, which subsequently includes a removal of narrative power from the “guilty” party. Through clear textual evidence and illuminating discussion of Poe’s rhetorical techniques, the accumulation of examples builds to develop a substantial body of evidence for the existence of the aforementioned formulas.

Once Poe’s conscious formulas are thoroughly demonstrated within the six short stories, the discussion of this thesis establishes how those formulas affected the critical reception of Poe’s works. The focus is primarily on discrepancies between receptions in England and France and the United States. The assertion proved in the following chapters is that English and French audiences (where Poe’s work gained much of its early attention) were more receptive to his formulas than readers in the United States, partly due to the current state of their own respective schools of thought regarding literary criticism and their overall moral outlook as a culture.

If the characters in Poe's tales were beset by supernatural forces alone, it can be safely said that his work would not have provoked the responses and enduring appeal that it did. By demonstrating the innate terror found in losing one's self to the underlying, darker impulses of human nature, Poe has found the means to horrify beyond the surface of fear. His depictions of loss of innocence and the devastating consequences that follow have fashioned a lasting formula that continues to contribute to literature as a whole. By making connections between Poe's methodologies and audience reception, the chapters that follow illustrate the presence and effect of Poe's conscious pattern. The selected works display how loss of innocence is the driving force behind narrative progression in many of Poe's works, and how its presence reminds readers of the dangers lurking in the absence of moral checks and balances. Through his works, readers see how the universe rewards moral innocence and the upholding of a state of grace, and conversely how the loss of such is punished with severity. Having now established that Poe was not only keenly aware of the value found in the crafting of a story's structure purposefully toward an effect, but that he was also focused on the delivery of Truth, the following chapter will apply these theories and methods to the six selected works.

**CHAPTER 2**  
**EXAMINATION OF SELECTED WORKS OF SHORT FICTION BY**  
**EDGAR ALLAN POE**

Analyzing representative key works from Edgar Allan Poe’s short fiction aids in examining Poe’s deliberate usage of rhetorical transformations and the concept of loss of innocence as he employs it. The focus is on five short stories, supplemented by observations and support from other works such as “Thingum Bob” and “The Philosophy of Composition,” works that provide more insight into Poe’s purposeful procedures regarding the construction and designated purpose of narrative.

As mentioned in the opening chapter of this thesis, reader-response theory indicates that “meaning is not a smorgasbord of infinite interpretations; rather it is a transactional experience in which several different yet probable meanings emerge in a particular social context and thereby create a variety of texts” (Bressler 73). The social contexts of the following texts—both in terms of when they were written and when they are set, as well as the social atmosphere in which they are (and have been) studied or read—are liable to create a myriad of meanings for readers, not all of which will necessarily agree with one another. Although a text “may allow for many interpretations by eliciting and highlighting different experiences of the reader, it simultaneously limits the valid meanings the [story] can acquire” (73). The text functions primarily as a “blue print that selects, limits, and orders those ideas that best conform to the text” and which allow a “transactional experience” between reader and text to produce meaning (72). In

short, it is because of the existence of this transactional experience in the reading process that the acknowledgement of purposeful formulas is necessary. This thesis demonstrates how Poe employs his formulas to lead readers towards valid meanings of his own design. While he could not realistically hope to force *all* readers to *one* exact meaning at *all* times, he could certainly—through the powers inherent in purposeful composition—ensure the likelihood of specific valid and desired interpretations of his work.

Poe indubitably recognized that his audience was a key component in the interpretation of his work; many of his critical articles and lectures restate his affirmation that “a work of art is a rational construct” (Ljungquist 19). These consistent statements, along with further assertions that design in a story is of utmost importance to accommodate “elements into a unity of effect or impression” suggest “an image of Poe as a conscious craftsman,” which have prevailed into recent scholarship (Ljungquist 19). It is true that, in past scholarship, critics have been tempted to cast Poe as an eccentric and sensationalist, in a manner almost dismissive.

As scholar James Gargano writes in his critical piece “The Question of Poe’s Narrators,” found in the Norton Critical Edition of *The Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe*, “the contention that [Poe] is fundamentally a bad or tawdry stylist...is based, ultimately, on the untenable and often unanalyzed” assumptions that come with a more overtly psychological lens of criticism (824). Operating under the faulty supposition that Poe’s troubled narrators are symptomatic of his own mind and mental state—his “literary twins,” so to speak—entirely ignores the fact that Poe’s protagonists are “dupes of their

own passions” (824). Typical Poe tales in which a central character suffers a moral fall from grace are designed to “show [the] narrators’ limited comprehension of their own problems and states of mind,” which Poe achieves by building into his stories an “ironical and comprehensive intelligence” which “critically and artistically [orders] events so as to establish a vision of life and character which the narrator’s very inadequacies help to prove” (824). From this effect, a skilled reader will reach the logical conclusion that Poe’s stories are far too painstakingly structured to be wholly symptomatic of his own mental state. Even recent developments in psychoanalytic criticism have accepted that “the reader plays a major role in interpreting a work” (Bressler 139).

Some critics have “too easily identified Poe with a voice like those of his deranged or vindictive narrators,” and have drawn their support from the sensational attitude that Poe sometimes adopted in his professional life. But even this—the public perception of him as an eccentric who might therefore be given over to mental attitudes akin to those of his fictional characters—was a calculated bit of manipulation on Poe’s part, and must therefore be discounted as evidence against his writing prowess. Poe was infamous for “[attempting] to control what the public saw about him and even how [his] material would be interpreted” (Miller 2). He was keenly conscious of “the public’s perception of him” and used this knowledge to his advantage in forming a “presence” (1).

While no single one of the following works examined is constructed in exactly the same manner as any of the others, all plainly employ similar variations of the formulas for loss of innocence and control, just as they are each carefully constructed examples of

Poe's larger theory of the short story and its purpose as an art form. "The Black Cat" is a prime example of a story of Poe's which serves to "exonerate Poe of the charge of merely sensation writing" and one which establishes him as a "serious artist who explores the neuroses of his characters with probing intelligence" (Gargano 829). The effect of this is the creation of a compelling case study in degradation of self and the consequences thereof. The narrative succinctly models Poe's formula of loss of power and innocence. When analyzed closely, this tale becomes a key piece of evidence in the case for Poe as a serious and purposeful artist rather than an author purely of sensationalism.

A. "The Black Cat"

The narrator of "The Black Cat" begins with a confession and states that he "cannot explain the events which overwhelmed him" (Gargano 828). He says that he "neither expect[s] nor solicit[s] belief" from the reader and adds that his own senses "reject their own evidence" (Poe 223). These statements imply that the reader will be asked to judge for themselves, based chiefly on the narrator's ability to convey the testimony—an ability already somewhat in question by the narrator himself. This fact—that the reader is being told to judge for the self—indicates a deliberate surrender of control over the interpretation of the situation—or at least a willingness on the part of the narrator to submit his tale to the interpretation of an outside observer. It also, by the refutation of his own senses and observations, implies that he admits the loss of control he has

experienced and foreshadows what the reader can expect—that there will, at some point, be a rhetorical transformation.

The starting point in this transformation is the narrator's establishment of himself as an innocent figure. He states that he was known for the "docility and humanity" of his nature, and for his "tenderness of heart" (Poe 223). He was known for being particularly "fond of animals" and by his own admission "never was so happy as when feeding and caressing them," traits which carried into adulthood, where he "derived from it one of [his] principal sources of pleasure" (Poe 223). He prefers the company of animals to that of man, mostly because they are more "unselfish" to a degree, and more "self-sacrificing" (Poe 223).

It is at this point that we are introduced to one of the "innocent" parties in this particular literary case. The narrator's cat, Pluto, is described as a "remarkably large and beautiful animal, entirely black, and sagacious to an astonishing degree" (Poe 223). His wife—another innocent—calls Pluto a witch in disguise, but she is not particularly serious about it; and the narrator adores Pluto. They are the best of companions; Pluto is the narrator's "favorite pet and playmate" and follows him around the house and tries to follow him when he goes out, too (Poe 224).

In this way, cat and master carry on happily for years until the narrator's loss of innocence occurs. Some interpretations of "The Black Cat" argue that the culprit behind this loss is the narrator's vice of alcoholism, or the "Fiend Intemperance" (Poe 224). While this vice does take over the narrator and cause him to experience a "radical

alteration for the worse” as he grows “more moody, more irritable, more regardless of the feelings of others,” the narrator offers no clear explanation as to what made him an alcoholic in the first place (Poe 224). To illuminate the true nature of the narrator’s loss of innocence, we must look past the alcoholism, which is merely a nasty symptom of some darker implication.

As scholar Morgan E. Elswick writes in “The Unspeakable: Fearing Madness in Poe’s “The Black Cat,” published in the *Downton Review*, part of the critical success of Poe’s work is “the fact that he wrote his tales of horror with an emphasis on what everyday people feared” (1). Elswick argues that, in “The Black Cat,” Poe targets a “massive [fear] of his own time,” namely the “fear of madness, or a discernible lack of reason” (1). According to Elswick, this entire story is “about the narrator falling to madness, and while in its clutches, causing chaos to his loved ones” (3). This, as will be shortly demonstrated, offers a much more satisfactory explanation for the narrator’s loss of innocence, as opposed to the weaker supposition of alcoholism is being the culprit. Not only that, it provides a stronger way for readers to connect with the tale. Not every reader is innately terrified of becoming an alcoholic; but it can be safely said that the fear of going mad, or of finding oneself in a sudden and complete absence of functional clarity, is at the very least understandable to most humans.

There is no explanation for the narrator’s drinking problem. Not once does the narrator confess what led him to drink, despite his continued reliance on alcoholism as an excuse for his behavior. After introducing the fiend of intemperance as an explanation

for his behavior, the narrator discusses how he begins to mistreat those around him, although he cannot bring himself to do so to Pluto until the last. In this way, Pluto represents the narrator's last remaining strand of innocence, which is at last entirely destroyed when the narrator returns home one drunken night and feels that the cat is avoiding him. He becomes irate and grabs Pluto, an act that causes the cat to take fright and bite him. This response only serves to aggravate the narrator's less-than-collected mind, and he describes himself as being seized by "the fury of a demon" (Poe 224). His control, his power, is at this point entirely gone, and in consequence he commits a horrible, unspeakable act in the gouging of the cat's eye with a penknife.

In the morning, the narrator feels surface guilt, but his "soul remain[s] untouched" (Poe 224). He continues his drinking, a pattern which is consistent with his irreversible loss of innocence. If his attack on Pluto was the consequence of a temporary slip of morality, it stands to reason that the guilt would have flooded him and he would have enacted certain changes to remedy the perpetual darkening of his nature—in other words, to quit the drinking and make amends. As it is, the formula holds; and though his soul makes a feeble attempt at feeling remorse, the time is past, the innocence lost, and the road only heads further downward. Through the narrator's own admission, the very language—the rhetoric—of his personal tale is undergoing a change for the worse. He ceases to describe himself as a gentle persona, but rather as a victimized one, caught in the grasp of a fiend.

The cat, Pluto, meanwhile, recovers and avoids him. The narrator is “at first grieved” that he has broken the trust and love between them and that the cat now “[flees] in extreme terror” whenever the narrator comes near, but this grief soon gives way to annoyance and irritation (Poe 225). Again, rather than admitting that these dark feelings are being stirred up within him by “his own personality, temperament, or some defective combination of the two that causes tragedy to befall him,” the narrator relies on blaming an outside force (Elswick 2). In this case, he blames the “spirit of perverseness,” which he describes as “one of the primitive impulses of the human heart” (Poe 225) and the “perpetual inclination, in the teeth of our best judgment,” (Poe 225) to do wrong simply because it is wrong” (Poe 225). This is an introspective observation and is quite telling in terms of the argument that a loss of innocence equates a loss of power over self and situation. The idea that something within his nature as a human being is causing him to commit dark deeds and think darker thoughts and that all it takes is the loss of an innocent spirit—as he once happily possessed—to unleash the whims of those awful inclinations is a solid one...if only the narrator were to apply it to himself. As it is, never once does he say that it is his own nature turning against him. By calling perverseness a “spirit,” he shifts the blame to some strange, perhaps even supernatural outside force, refusing to be responsible for his own thoughts or actions, or to acknowledge that his nature has warped on its own.

While the narrator does state that this spirit of perverseness is embodied in the “unfathomable longing of the soul *to vex itself*—to offer violence to its own nature,” and

that it is this impulse that ultimately leads him to hang the cat by its neck from a tree” (Poe 225), he entirely refuses to “acknowledge the possibility that he may be mad, and instead wholeheartedly attributes his downfall to alcohol and events out of his control” (Elswick 1). By claiming that all people know the effects of the spirit of perverseness, the narrator is effectively covering and rationalizing “madness as something experienced by all human beings,” a device which is his attempt at using a “bandwagon effect to make his story believable, strongly reinforcing the idea that he is not mad” (Elswick 2).

He—the narrator—says that this was the sin that jeopardized his “immortal soul” so much that it placed it “even beyond the reach of the infinite mercy of the Most Merciful and Most Terrible God” (225). In losing his innocence—in giving in to the darker and destructive qualities of his personality and thus descending into madness—the narrator has lost control, both over his life (as seen by his progression into alcoholism and personal violence towards wife and animals, both of which are symptomatic) and over his narrative.

It might indeed be possible to argue that once the cat is dead, it ceases to be involved in the narrative in any way other than the narrator’s drink and madness-tinted illusions. The implication here is that the various further manifestations of the murdered cat, such as the silhouette outlined above his bed after the fire and the new cat he finds at the pub, are not in and of themselves the dead cat having any sway, but rather the ineffable result of the narrator’s guilty conscious, alcoholism, and other potent personal demons, all of which fall under the broad umbrella of his madness, which is never in and of itself fully

explained to the audience. This claim fits with the structure of the tale, as Poe seems to have divided it into two “distinct, parallel parts” or sections, the first of which is taken up by Pluto, and the second of which is filled with the seemingly reincarnated version of him—the second black cat. In the first section, “the narrator’s inner moral collapse is presented in largely symbolic narrative,” while in the section part “the consequences of his self-violation precipitate an act of murder, punishable by society” (Gargano 828). Both of these sections serve to provide “an unmistakable clue to [the] protagonist’s psychic deterioration” (828).

As stated, each of Poe’s works deserves to be “analyzed in terms of [his] larger artistic intentions,” so that the inner workings of his purposefully chosen elements can clearly be seen working together (Gargano 824). Poe’s artistic intention in “The Black Cat” is to express, “in ‘charged’ language indicative of [the narrator’s] internal disturbances,” a vision of self and morality that will seem to the “normal” mind “peculiarly nightmarish” (Gargano 829). Poe “permits his narrator to revel and flounder into torment,” to hint to his audience the causes behind that torment—for it is not, in point of fact, the fault of the cats, or the wife, or any supernatural occurrence that the narrator devolved into such a state of guilt and madness (Gargano 829).

The rhetoric employed by the narrator at the beginning, when he claims to have been, “pushed into evil and self-betrayal by the ‘imp of the perverse’ ... is delivered by a man who” provides “pat explanations” for what he claims to be “radical, motiveless, and irresistible [impulses] within the human soul” (Gargano 828). This seemingly

hypocritical inconsistency discounts, automatically, much of what he has to say, and instead of coming across as a victim, this nameless narrator instead sets himself up to be taken as a man who “cherishes the intemperate self-indulgence which blunts his powers of self-analysis” and who is “guided by his delusions to the climax of damnation” (Gargano 828). As Gargano points out, the narrator seems to be most insane and out of control when his feverish rhetoric “most proudly boasts of his self-control,” a fact which hammers a fatal nail in the narrator’s “theory of perverseness” (Gargano 828).

The narrator seems incapable of comprehending that his dark actions have derived from “his own moral sickness and unbalance” (Gargano 828). He seeks for “release and freedom in a crime which completes his torture,” and which renders him the more “incapable of locating the origin of his evil and damnation within himself” (Gargano 828). Although he tries to puzzle through his actions and provide a “rational explanation” for them, he “frequently becomes ‘diffusive’ after the relation of an event that causes a ‘whirl’ of emotional response in himself” (McElrath 41). In many of the narrator’s attempts to re-focus the reader’s attention on himself, he employs the “curt tone” that Poe is so well-known for and which has such a bearing on the conveyance of tone in his stories. Passages, for example, such as that in which the narrator describes the moment in which he cuts out the cat’s eye are geared towards the conveyance of his mental and emotional state. He acknowledges the inhumane nature of his actions, but seems still unconvinced that they are the consequences of his own working:

“My original soul seemed, at once, to take its flight from my body; and a more than fiendish malevolence, gin-nurtured, thrilled every fibre of my frame. I took from my waistcoat a penknife, opened it, grasped the poor beast by the throat, and deliberately cut one of its eyes from the socket! I blush, I burn, I shudder, while I pen the damnable atrocity.” (Norton Critical 350)

This description of the “mental and emotional state that precipitated the sadistic action” removes the blame from himself and places it instead in the hands of some esoteric concept that can function as a reasonable scapegoat (McElrath 42). The narrator fails to make the connection between his current state of lacking control over his life and any particular cause within himself, preferring instead to blame the lack of control on “a list of extraordinary events outside [his] control” (Elswick 1). The narrator professes time and again that he hopes his listeners or readers will conclude that the causes of his tragedy are not outside the realm of natural possibility—a statement which effectively precludes the admittance of any inner fault.

However, throughout the story, and especially towards its culmination, there is ample evidence that sheer madness has brought the narrator to his present sorry state. Insanity, compounded by the consequential moral failures he experiences in the forms of alcoholism and impatience, causes him to, first of all, “[hallucinate] an image of his guilt onto the [second] cat, a seeming twin of his first victim” when he comes across it in a pub” (Elswick 3). The narrator bears no “reasonable excuse” for the murder of this cat, other than that he has a strong desire to destroy it and that he unfailingly follows through

with that desire (Elswick 3). As Elswick states, regarding the narrator's murder of the initial cat and the narrator's wife, the narrator gives no "reasonable account for [these murders] other than he wished" to commit them (3). Elswick goes on to state that:

"The narrator is shown to be completely sober when he ultimately ends his wife's life. He says, 'Uplifting an axe, and forgetting, in my wrath, the childish dread which has hitherto stayed my hand, I aimed a blow at the animal,' and later, 'goaded, by the interference, into a rage more than demonical'. Alcohol is not said to have been in his system at the time of the murder. His madness, goaded into a frenzy by the cat his wife's intrusion in his attempted murder of it, is the true reason behind his actions" (3).

In "The Black Cat," Poe demonstrates his clear understanding of "widely feared topics" from his own time period and "[manipulates] them in his [text] to create [a] horrifying [story] often reflecting similar themes," of "Madness, or the unnamed and avoided likeness of it," which makes the "true terror" of "The Black Cat" the "narrator's madness and his lack of reason" (Elswick 4). The narrator's willingness—and indeed desperation—to claim foul play from supernatural events or even the far more understandable demon of alcoholism is indicative of his absolute terror of being declared mad—of acknowledging that he has suffered a fall from innocence. The utter "illogicality of madness and its ability to override a person's reason, enabling him to commit brutal crimes without guilt, is the true fear being exploited within" this story (Elswick 4). By exploring this fear, Poe is able to hammer home his message of how a

fall from innocence can cause an utter lack of control over self and situation and can bring tragedy to all concerned.

While this message is prevalent in “The Black Cat,” Poe’s other tales, such as “The Cask of Amontillado,” do not necessarily focus on fear. Instead, they fashion their core around human emotions and failings such as jealousy, desperation, and perceived injustice, such as in the case of “The Cask of Amontillado.”

#### B. “The Cask of Amontillado”

In “The Cask of Amontillado,” readers encounter the strange tale of Montresor, the end of a long aristocratic line, and his victim Fortunato, a prominent member of high society. The story is designed as a confession, much like “The Black Cat.” In it, Montresor himself begins by explaining how he walled Fortunato up and left him for dead. What is missing, however, is any motive; and it is this that opens questions of exactly how and why Montresor fell so far from innocence that he could so coldly commit such an unspeakable wrong.

The popular consensus is that Montresor is insane. However, as scholar Elena V. Baraban writes in her article “The Motive for Murder in ‘The Cask of Amontillado’” published by the University of Victoria, “such interpretation...seems to make certain details in the elaborate structure of the story unnecessary and this, in turn, goes against Poe’s approach to composition” (47). Poe’s approach to composition, as mentioned,

states that all parts should be geared toward a singular effect. Operating with this understanding, it is reasonable to infer that the details in “Cask” are “like pieces of a mosaic, each of which serves the purpose of completing the whole,” and that therefore the story “contains all the information necessary for finding an explanation for Montresor’s heinous deed” (Baraban 47).

Another frequent theory surrounding this story is that Montresor himself is a victim of supreme guilt, and that is why he is at last telling his story. While there is an argument that it may indeed be true that guilt, compiled over decades, which has caused him to wish his story known, at least to his “confessor,” guilt alone does not explain the entire story. To begin with, guilt was not the initial reason for the murder, and therefore provides no motive at all. The reader learns through Montresor himself, that it was an insult and a thousand injuries (none of which he specifically names) that caused him to destroy Fortunato. Guilt had no part in it until the end; and even then, its involvement is debatable. As Baraban points out, Montresor’s statement of heart-sickness upon remembering his deed is not symptomatic of a troubled conscience, even fifty years later. Rather, she deems his statement to be “one of the numerous instances of irony in Poe’s texts,” because even though Montresor passes the story off as a confession, his tone and the manner of his confession indicate that he has not atoned at all (Baraban 48).

This indication, she claims, is evident in the structure of Montresor’s dialogue, which indicates how much he truly enjoys himself in the telling of the tale to his confessor. When he mentions his heart is sick, for example, there is an included dash, indicating a

pause, which falls as such: “My heart grew sick—on account of the dampness of the catacombs.” Not only does this indicate that Montresor’s heart is only uneasy and ill-feeling due to the uncomfortable and displeasing nature of the catacombs; it then becomes clear that he is not at all feeling “sorry” for Fortunato, or that he feels anything other than “satisfaction about his monstrous deed even after fifty years,” and it “destroys any hope in Montresor’s humanity and highlights once against that [he] feels no guilt regarding the murder” (Baraban 49).

Between Montresor’s words and tone, readers are left face to face with a protagonist who feels no true guilt, who has “successfully committed a premeditated murder and [escaped] punishment,” and who “perceives his murder...as a successful act of vengeance and punishment rather than crime” (Baraban 49). But if Montresor is not guilt-ridden or simply mad, wherein lies his fall and loss of innocence? Some scholars, Baraban included, offer the explanation that it is a jealous, deep-seated pride that topples Montresor. After all, the very first paragraph in the story “delineates the conflict between the characters as arising from their social roles” and indicates that it is a “story about the characters’ power relations and their social status” (Baraban 51). It is implied that Fortunato is more socially powerful than Montresor, especially because Montresor cannot recognize freemason signs, and because Fortunato cannot remember the Montresor’s crest, which suggests that the later was not an “active participant in the life of local aristocracy” (51). Readers begin to see the picture of a man, from a long-standing line of high social rank, who has somehow been robbed of the social benefits of his class,

whether from time and the dissolution of his line, or from personal qualities and decisions. Regardless of how Montresor came to be the last, feeble branch of a noble estate, he resents Fortunato for presently enjoying all of the social goods, which he (Montresor) feels entitled to. Perhaps Fortunato truly did insult him, perhaps not; but either way Montresor feels socially slighted...and that is enough motivation for him to murder Fortunato.

Is this, then, insanity? This question might present itself as reasonable, were it not for Montresor's behavior throughout the story and then, later, during his final confession.

Baraban writes:

“A careful examination of Montresor's last words, however, provides additional evidence in support of the thesis that the motive for Montresor's murder of Fortunato has been vengeance. The very last words in the story are, "Against the new masonry I re-erected the old rampart of bones. For the half of a century no mortal has disturbed them. In pace requiescat!" The sentence "In pace requiescat!" ("May he rest in peace") refers to Fortunato. The phrase is used in the Requiem Mass and during Last Rites, when, having listened to a dying person's confession, a priest forgives his/her sins. If Montresor's narration is his last confession, he should look forward to being forgiven and to hearing "In pace requiescat!" ("May your soul rest in peace") from his priest. Instead, Montresor maliciously subverts his role as a repentant sinner when he says "In pace requiescat!" in regard with Fortunato. Not only does he deprive the poor man of a Catholic's right to the last confession, he is arrogant enough to abuse the

formulaic expression used by priests to absolve dying sinners. The fact that Montresor uses this expression for finally pardoning Fortunato highlights his conviction that he has merely avenged himself for the wrong that Fortunato afflicted upon him fifty years ago” (56-57).

Montresor, then, is the last of his breed—a lover of tradition and status and a bitter human being with a skewed sense of social entitlement. He acts as if he “had the right to condemn Fortunato to death,” and therefore he plans the later man’s murder “as an act of execution” (Baraban 49). The all-consuming pride that led to this is the catalyst of Montresor’s fall from innocence. When he gives into it and premeditates Fortunato’s murder, he loses himself, thereby forgoing his innocence in the matter, as one who was merely helplessly mad and unable to be held responsible for his own actions would be.

Elena Baraban points out that the “seeming absence of the motive for Montresor’s crime and its atrocity” give rise to “questions about the time of action” in “Cask of Amontillado” (53). Many critics have spent effort in analyzing the story in terms of historical criticism, especially since—as a general rule—Poe’s stories are either excessively vague in their time and geographical setting or entirely lacking in place, the better to reach a variety of audiences and to become more about their overall effect than their literal events. Why, then, is “Cask” more specific in terms of time and place? This question, so Baraban proposes, can be answered by investigating two details in the story which suggest that it takes place in either the eighteenth or nineteenth century. She points out that:

Montresor wears a roquelaire, a cloak named after the Duke of Roquelaure (1656-1738). Roquelaire was a popular piece of clothing during the eighteenth century and the early part of the nineteenth (OED, XIV: 100), which means that the story is set no earlier than the eighteenth century but no later than the first half of the nineteenth century. Another detail that indicates the eighteenth or nineteenth century as the time of action in "The Cask of Amontillado" is a reference to wealthy tourists that visited the town. Montresor calls them "British and Austrian millionaires" (53).

These details indicate the class of "nouveaux riches, of whom Fortunato was probably one, [and who] became socially prominent in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries" (53). But Poe's choice to make Fortunato—new money—pitted against Montresor—old money—is based upon more than the desire to explore class wars of the past. Baraban continues to analyze the significance of "Cask's" time and place and examines the true purposes behind their inclusion. She states that:

In the earlier period, no nobleman would think of exercising "imposture" upon the bourgeoisie. In his study of the cultural and historical backgrounds of Poe's story, Richard P. Benton argues that the crime described by Montresor takes place right before the French Revolution, at the end of the eighteenth century. Since the key point in Benton's article is that the setting of the tale is French, he argues for the dating of the story before the Revolution because "both aristocratic privileges and the carnival had been abolished in France by 1796." Although Benton's

argument regarding the French setting of the story is debatable, his interpretation of the conflict between Montresor, impoverished aristocrat, and "the upstart Fortunato" is convincing. It is definitely a conflict that reflects social tensions of the capitalist period (54).

Another tell-tale detail in "Cask" which indicates the moral themes and Montresor's fall from innocence is the fact that the story takes place during carnival. Baraban has commentary for this assertion as well and states that:

The carnival setting is also important because the traditional carnival symbolism helps Montresor undermine Fortunato's position. The "madness of the carnival season" in Poe's story is "supreme" because carnival is not simply a temporary substitution of normal order by chaos, but its inversion. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin notes that during carnival festivities "the world [is] permitted to emerge from the official routine." Jokes, excessive eating, drinking, and merry-making are tributes to "the honor of the time." During carnival, identities are destabilized and traditional social hierarchy and etiquette collapse; the poor may be elected carnival kings, bishops, and popes, whereas representatives of the upper classes may disguise themselves as peasants, servants, or fools. It is not surprising then that Fortunato, a man of wealth and influence, is wearing a costume of a fool during the carnival: "He had on a tight fitting parti-striped dress, and his head was surmounted by the conical cap and bells." Fortunato's carnival identity is a significant detail in the story, for Montresor's plan is to make a fool of

his enemy, to ensure Fortunato's engagement in "a tragic farce." Hence, Montresor's sarcastic comment about Fortunato's looks: "How remarkably well you are looking to-day!" Further, Montresor makes another pun about Fortunato's "foolish" looks: "And yet some fools will have it that his [Luchesi's] taste is a match of your own." Having chosen the role of a fool, Fortunato becomes socially inferior to Montresor who is wearing a black silk mask and a roquelaire, a costume that makes him resemble an executioner. (54)

The pangs of deep-seated hatred and jealousy have so far driven Montresor from any state resembling innocence by the time of the fateful cellar tour that he planned for the murder of Fortunato has descended beyond pure crime into vicious cruelty. This is the true mark of a fall: that a human could so lose himself in the dark pains of emotion as to become a twisted caricature of himself and his own social role. Montresor is so far gone, in fact, that he becomes "one of the supreme examples in fiction of a deluded rationalist who cannot glimpse the moral implications of his planned folly" (Gargano 827). Poe has used the vehicle of "Cask of Amontillado" to portray in irony the fact that man can be both "compulsive and pursued...for in committing a flawless crime against another human being, he [Montresor] really...commits the worst of crimes against himself" (Gargano 827). This fact leaves "little doubt" that Montresor has indeed "violated his own mind and humanity," and that the "external act has had its destructive inner consequences" (Gargano 827).

### C. “The Tell-Tale Heart”

In “The Tell-Tale Heart,” Poe illustrates loss of innocence and the destruction of self through different means. The grim and gloomy tale showcases the loss of power and control as consequences of loss of innocence through the figures of the nameless narrator and his victim, the old man. According to Dan Shen, while long acknowledged as a crime-and-punishment story and as an up-close examination of how guilt can work upon a mind, this famous story also boasts an “investigation of the connections between implicit morality, structural unity, and historical context” (327). He states that, in previous criticism, little attempt has been made to connect the structural unity of “The Tell-Tale Heart” to an “overall dramatic irony,” the presence of which Shen believes “conveys a moral that goes far beyond the conventional” (327).

At its core, the dramatic irony of “Tell-Tale” lies in the fact that the narrator is forever attempting to “disburden” himself of his tale, while all the while further demonstrating that he “lives in a haunted and eerie world of his own demented making” (Gargano 826). This demonstration of real madness underlying professed sanity is indicated and reinforced throughout the story by a combination of the narrator’s guilt and Poe’s structural choices, including “sharp exclamations, nervous questions, and broken sentences,” all of which almost “too blatantly advertise Poe’s conscious intention: the protagonist’s painful insistence [on] ‘proving’ himself sane only serves to intensify the idea of his madness” (Gargano 825). Through Poe’s structuring of the narrator’s behavior and the concrete wording of the story, it becomes “impossible to believe that

Poe has no serious artistic motive” and that he “merely revels in horror and only inadvertently illuminates the depths of the human soul” (Gargano 826).

While guilt certainly plays a large role in the unraveling of the narrator in “The Tell-Tale Heart,” it is not the only force working on him to cause a fall. After all, the guilt only occurs after the murder. It is not unreasonable, then, to say that the culprit behind the initial fall or transformation (and therefore act of murder) is something closer to irrational fear born of an underlying madness. This, more than guilt, would have caused Poe’s audiences to feel unsettled. As Gargano says, “the murder, instead of freeing the narrator, is shown to heighten his agony and intensify his delusions” (826). The murder sends the narrator’s “vaunted self-control...into a frenzy that leads to self-betrayal” when he gives himself away to the police” (Gargano 826). It is not guilt alone that sends him spiraling, then, but a complete dissolution of reality caused by an over-reliance on his own capacity to fend off madness, and the fear that he will ultimately lose. Which is more frightening to the human mind: the concept of having committed a wrong and suffering the consequential guilt, or the idea of being so overwhelmed by illogical fear that one commits an unspeakable wrong?

The narrator of “Tell-Tale” does not seem to know why the old man and his eye terrify him so—only that they do. While the narrator attempts, rather circuitously, to justify his fears and explain how the man terrifies him, his very attempts to do so come across as frantic and illogical. Audiences do not necessarily feel sympathy for the narrator, but rather experience an embarrassed sense of compassion as they see his own

emotions turning against him and leading ultimately to his own destruction. In this story, as in many of Poe's short works, his techniques serve not to enable readers to lose themselves "in strange or outrageous emotions, but to see these emotions and those obsessed by them from a rich and thoughtful perspective" (Gargano 825).

As mentioned, structurally Poe draws readers toward the final observation of "Tell-Tale's" narrator as a pitiable yet fear-maddened man by way of patterns of composition. Gargano is correct when he states that "the total organization or completed form of a work of art tells more...than does the report or confession of one of its characters" (824). This truth can be clearly seen in "Tell-Tale," since the narrator never backs down from the position that he is not mad, but rather tormented by an external force—namely the old man and his eye. Readers know that this version is not the case; the old man and his eye have done nothing and exert no supernatural force over the narrator. Thus, the narrator's reports and confessions are not worth much, other than to illustrate his delusional nature. Instead, readers look for meaning and significance in the arrangement of the narrator's words and actions—in patterns of behavior and speech, much as a trained psychologist would take proof from a patient's observable behavior over the patient's own insistent views and statements. The narrator's words and actions also feed into—or represent—the idea of unfounded fear, found often in both literature and film.

In "Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography," Arthur Hobson Quinn writes that "Tell-Tale" is in some ways a "companion piece" to "The Pit and the Pendulum" (394). He goes so far to say that:

“It is a study of terror, but this time it is related, partially, in terms of the memory of terror. The madman who tells the story of his murder of the old man whose eye is so repellent to him, paints a remarkable picture of the fright of his victim. But it is vivid because he himself has suffered causeless terrors in the night and he enters, therefore, with sympathy into those of the old man, even as he is preparing to murder him. The transition to the supernatural takes place, also, in the imagination of the narrator...the complete unit of the story disarms the critical faculties until the imagination of the madman seems for the moment reality. It is an almost perfect illustration of Poe’s own theory of the short story, for every word contributes to the central effect” (394).

In this story, readers are able to observe the cataclysmic effects of fear upon a person’s psyche, to the extent that these effects drive him to commit a hideous wrong that not only robs an innocent of life, but also destroys the guilty party’s inner being and innocence. The narrator’s fear, however illogical, causes him to be ruined by the old man—only not in the way he had dreaded. While he remained terrified of the old man and his eye committing some unspeakable supernatural ill against him, the reality was far worse; his fear led to a frantic state of mind tumbled him into sin and madness.

#### D. “The Fall of the House of Usher”

“The Fall of the House of Usher” is widely regarded as one of the most exemplary stories of Poe’s typical fiction-writing style and narrative form. It is consistently taught, performed, and studied in schools and universities and is one of the “go-to” tales when Poe is discussed in literary circles. It is also a fitting demonstration of Poe’s purposeful formulas for loss of innocence and narrative power, due to the mirror-like structures of its plot, characters, and language.

The tale of Roderick Usher and his demented house is, according to Scott Peeples’ article in *The Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allan Poe*, a story “about its own construction” and about control. While Peeples discusses the constructive nature of “Fall” to examine the literary parallels and structuralist qualities of Poe’s work, this thesis employs these discussions to emphasize Poe’s conscious and deliberate implementation of specific textual elements for a pre-designed effect. As Peeples puts it, Poe’s main contribution to literature was this “structural art.” Due to the persistence of scholars such as Peeples and those whom he references in his own article (Pahl and Hustis, for example), the “prevalent popular image of Poe the impoverished, drunken, misunderstood Romantic visionary” is being challenged by the idea of “Poe-the-engineer,” a man capable of supreme verbal manipulation, interested in “intellectual games and detection,” and highly skilled at “putting things together” (178).

Poe himself corroborates this view in “The Philosophy of Composition.” He uses “Philosophy,” which was originally intended as a lecture on writing, to “[claim] that he methodically planned his strategy...choosing the length, originality, effect, tone, refrain, and application [and forcing] the audience...or reader to accept that his genius created the work by logic and craft alone” (Miller 19). He certainly has done little to deter critics from envisioning him as a purposeful wordsmith who crafts his tales toward a precise goal. He consistently “[fosters] the image of himself as a mechanic who, with words, [can] inspire emotion without actually feeling it” (Peeples 178). Through his discussion of the inner-workings of stories, authors, and writing as a process, Poe consistently “emphasizes the high ratio of calculation to inspiration required to create lasting art” (Peeples 173). In “The Fall of the House of Usher,” Poe seems particularly preoccupied with the idea of construction and the developmental process, to the extent that it becomes for him a trope—one into which he often cannot resist inserting himself.

The Poe-proxy, so to speak—or rather, the character that can be most said to echo the author’s voice due to his uncanny observational powers—is the narrator of “Fall” who is summoned to the House of Usher by Roderick’s desperate letter. Almost immediately upon arrival, this narrator is struck by the sensation that all is not well, or at the very least that all is wrong, and upon meeting with Roderick, after so many years apart, he is struck with a similar sensation. Thus begins the pattern of parallels found through “Fall of the House of Usher.”

Another piece of evidence for Poe's purposefulness in the conveyance of his message in "Fall" is the inclusion of the poem "The Haunted Palace," which is "positioned appropriately in the middle to function as a *mise en abyme*, a miniature of the story that contains it" (Peeples 179). Another common interpretation of the inclusion of this poem is that it functions as a dividing tool, separating the story "in two, in keeping with its dominant motif of doubling and reflection," a theme already noted in the setting, characters, and action of the story (Peeples 180).

The tale of the "Mad Trist," which the narrator reads to Roderick towards the end of the story, is another example of this doubling. Both "The Haunted Palace" and "The Mad Trist" are "performed inside a haunted palace where a really mad tryst takes place" (Peeples 183). Likewise, "the painting of the vault is displayed inside a house that is itself sealed up in its own atmosphere; Roderick is inside (and never leaves) the house that reflects his psyche; at the story's end the storm outside reflects the tumult within the house; the house, in turn, is ultimately swallowed by the tarn that reflects it" (Peeples 183).

The question presents itself: what has Roderick done to earn a "fall from grace," so to speak, or to so transform into a state in which he has lost control and innocence? He seems, after all, to be a victim. His line is ending, his sister dead, supposedly, and his mind and emotions collapsing in ruin around him, for seemingly no fault of his own. However, it must be remembered that a "state of innocence" or an "instance of

transformation” can refer to more than simply a time before the individual or character committed some heinous action.

Some interpretations of the situation might also indicate that the “fall from innocence” occurs when Roderick puts his sister prematurely into the tomb. He certainly feels a lot of guilt over this and has the fear of it—or at least of something—nagging at him before she forces her way out of her resting place and comes to find him. But this thesis argues that a fall from innocence necessitates a depraved or immoral action, which Roderick does not commit in burying a sister whom he has every reason to believe is dead.

Throughout “Fall,” Poe’s method of composition remains consistent and deliberate. As E. Arthur Robinson reiterates in his article “Order and Sentience in ‘The Fall of the House of Usher,’” Poe “prescribes only one method of writing the short story, that of selecting a single effect and developing a series of incidents to establish it” (Robinson 68). In doing this, as seen in the previous short stories, Poe is relying on a “combination of elements: of mood welling from the subconscious, of pattern rationally elaborated, and of continued variation wrought by movement of both pattern and observer” (Robinson 69). These elements combined serve to create development within the story. Robinson argues that in “Fall” the central idea “may be defined intellectually as the principle of order and organization, which determines the story’s [design] and binds together even the fantastic elements of the plot” (69).

Robinson supports this argument by connecting the concept of order with concrete examples of instances from the plot:

“Usher’s illness is first introduced, in his letter to the narrator, as ‘mental disorder’—a merely conventional phrase, it may appear, but one receiving literal confirmation when the narrator finds Usher’s nervous condition echoed in his ‘peculiar physical conformation.’ We learn, too, that the baneful influence exercised by the family mansion originates somehow in its physical elements—‘in the order of their arrangement’” (Robinson 69).

In addition to the literal mentions of order throughout the plot, the theme of order and disorder runs through the story, adding layers of meaning and significance, as “Usher, his house, and his sister Madeline [change] from an organized to a disorganized state, until finally all sink together” (Robinson 69). This added significance lifts “Fall” far above the realm of being a tale only about the supernatural, terror, or the negative results of a life spent in isolation.

According to Robinson, the symptoms of disorder are discernable in three distinct areas: the house itself, Madeline, and Roderick. As to the house, Robinson points out that its “inconsistency” is a “first hint of disorder,” referring to the fact that the individual parts of the house are the only things at first “exhibiting decay,” while the house as a whole remains initially intact (Robinson 70). It is this hint of decrepitude that helps to set the tone and to indicate that things are out of order. The narrator can feel this loss for himself from the very moment he arrives, as he notes in his observations and his desire to

look away from the house and into the tarn (which of course only makes his view of the house worse). Robinson uses this example of the decrepitude of the house to suggest that “whatever power inheres in the ‘order’ of the mansion still functions but obviously is threatened with instability and collapse” (Robinson 70).

This threat of collapse becomes vividly evident in both Madeline and Roderick as well, once the narrator reunites with them. He has vague memories of the twins when they were all younger, but even though his memory is not crystal clear the images it contains do not match with the grisly reality with which he is faced upon arrival. Although the narrator is reluctant to accept Roderick’s professions that he has been affected by the house itself, the parallels between the house’s physical decay and Roderick’s dissolution into a moody, anxious, and overtly sensitive being would certainly seem to indicate at least some connection. While the mansion itself likely has “no such intention” of bringing its occupants to ruin, it is implied that the “Ushers have become a portion of the organization of their ‘house,’ in all sense of that term,” which is an issue “of order, and any malfunctioning of the whole will affect each part, including Roderick himself” (Robinson 71). Robinson suggests that the house itself does not necessarily seem to have any ill will of its own, but rather symbolizes ancestry and the crumbling line of the Ushers. This theory is strengthened by Poe’s inclusion of the poem “The Haunted Palace” within the story, which Roderick plays for the narrator as a song. Within “The Haunted Palace” are telling themes of “increasing disorganization and the final collapse of Usher’s personality,” and the choice and organization of this particular

piece “looks symbolically in two directions, towards Usher’s turreted mansion and toward his present condition” and proves “singularly appropriate” for analysis of Usher’s fall from innocence (72). For, although it is not explicitly the house itself lashing out maliciously towards its inhabitants, there is “something innately evil or self-destructive in Usher’s inheritance,” based on the notion that the house stands for his line of origination (71)? This issue becomes a relevant question when considering what causes Roderick’s fall from innocence.

Whatever the cause of Roderick’s mysterious malady, whatever strange disease of familial line or circumstance propels both him and his sister to the grave he is a victim of fear. As Robinson suggests, this nameless fear from which Roderick suffers and which leaves him skittish and paranoid throughout the story is the fear of both death and madness—a similar theme, to the one in “The Black Cat.” One of Gargano’s statements is particularly applicable here. He says that:

“The language of men reaching futilely towards the ineffable always runs the risk of appearing more flatulent than inspired. Indeed, in the very breakdown of their visions into lurid and purple rhetoric, Poe’s characters enforce the message of failure that permeates their aspirations and actions” (825).

Roderick exemplifies this depiction. He waxes poetic and dramatic by turns throughout the story and is portrayed as emptiness behind beautiful art. He has failed to keep his sister well, has failed to carry on the line and uphold the House of Usher, and

has in general suffered a great weakening of being that is reflected not only in his language and behavior, but also in the story's setting itself.

The flaw and moral failing that seems to plague Roderick and lead to his transformation, which takes the form of his visible ruin, is perhaps not merely fear, but a poignant combination of that and a dread of death that turns all-consuming and leads to the premature burial of Madeline. John D. McKee observes in his article "Poe's Use of Live Burial in Three Stories," published by the Rocky Mountain Language Association:

"[Roderick] did not need the juxtaposition of sounds in the reading of the rather silly 'Mad Tryst' with those in the brass-lined tomb. He had heard the sounds the day before. 'Yet I dared not speak!' Dared not, or would not? Considering Roderick's struggle with death, the live burial of Madeline was an attempt to escape death by transferring it to his sister" (1).

It is abundantly clear, throughout the story, that Roderick longs for death. The reader can see that the house, as well, is an inch from crumbling when the narrator arrives, and if the consistent parallelism that Poe employs is of any relevance, this dual decay serves to illustrate further Roderick's attitude of having given up. He lacks energy of any sort, moral or otherwise, and states that he is not long for this world. Yet he is "torn between a desire to escape death—demonstrated by his fear of death—and his desire to escape into death—his withdrawal—into complete dissolution" (McKee 2). This confliction can be said to be responsible, in part, for his premature internment of his

sister, whom he believes has finally achieved—or succumbed—to that which he simultaneously longs for and dreads.

Through Roderick’s behavior, language, and actions, especially in burying his sister and refusing to rescue her when he suspected her of being still alive, the theme or idea of self-destruction is readily evident in “The Fall of the House of Usher.”

#### E. “The Masque of the Red Death”

The theme of self-destruction is also present in “The Masque of the Red Death,” with Poe primarily illustrating the consequences of moral degradation and how the absence of innocence leads individuals to lose control over themselves and their situations. Within this short story, he demonstrates his “insight into that basically irrational strategy by which the mind attempts to preserve itself from its own forces of madness, disease, and disintegration” (Shulman 248). Through the “apparently frolic but actually terrified” figure of Prince Prospero, Poe investigates how an individual mind can “rigidly [isolate] itself and [assume] that the threat is external when in fact it is internal” (Shulman 248). This mental isolation leads to the central character of Prince Prospero losing first his innocence, the illusions of control that he held, and finally his life.

As seen in “The Fall of the House of Usher” through the physical Usher manor and further illustrated in the accompanying poem “The Haunted Palace,” the gaudy palace of Prince Prospero is a metaphorical manifestation of its owner’s mental state.

It reflects Prospero's "eccentric yet august taste" and is "absolutely isolated from the rest of the world" (Shulman 248). This "suggestive atmosphere" combines with a "formal unity" in story-telling to provide compelling evidence that what Prospero deems safe haven—removed and aloof amidst the raging plague outside his doors—is in fact a twisted purgatory of sorts, wherein souls are merely waiting for the inevitable (247). This reality is seen not only through the surreal arrangement and excessive nature of the house, but also through its guests' bizarre appearances.

As evidenced throughout many of his other short stories, his haunting tales stem "in part from a fusion of commonly disparate elements, the union of haunting mood with rational form and style" (Robinson 80). "Masque," in particular, works constantly against "an almost grandiose effort to unite the universe in an ordered sequence," or the "terror of a fathomless void [which] looms about protagonist and reader" (Robinson 80). Readers certainly feel a sense of impending doom or dread as Prospero conducts his revels, and as Gargano says it is in keeping with Poe's patterns of composition that he would use such a tale to "[chronicle]...the Romantic excesses which lead to psychic disorder, pain, and disintegration" (825). For Prospero has so isolated and insulated himself against any part of the outside world, due to a massive sense of bravado and an underlying chord of fear, that he invites the actual thing he dreads—namely, death.

Poe indicates that a mind of the "poetic" persuasion—one "ostensibly given over to pleasure and Beauty—" is more inclined than the average mind to give itself over

inadvertently to “what it fears the most,” whether that be to “impulses of despair or of frenzy from within” or to dark desires that equally destroy any hope the individual had of retaining control of the direction of his or her life (Shulman 248). This tendency can be seen in the character of Prospero who attempts desperately to stave off death and all thought thereof by surrounding himself in beautiful and imaginative things. He barricades himself inside his massive and mysterious home, along with the company he feels inclined to keep. By giving in to his excessive pride and the fear that comes along with it—the fear of losing himself and all he holds dear—he inadvertently dooms innocents and hastens his own destruction.

Another manner of viewing the senses of seclusion and bold defiance of reality contained in “Masque” is enumerated on by Martin Roth. His analysis on the nature of Poe’s story focuses on concepts of “insides” and “outsides,” both of a literal and metaphorical variety. He examines the palace itself, Prospero, the mysterious and deadly figure, and the revelers. As to the mysterious figure, Roth states that he is “not tempted to identify the ghastly masquerader as anything—the plague, death, life, the Philistine world, etc.—other than an ‘outside,’” and that he finds “support for this in the fact that my ordinary notions of how one contracts a fatal illness, dies, or puts the world at defiance are not accommodated by the literal process of the tale” (50). Roth is correct here in not wishing to confine the interpretation of the mysterious figure to anything too literal, since to do so would be to greatly reduce the figure’s symbolic significance.

Instead, it is more productive to view the figure as simply “the outside,” “the unknown,” or the “undesirable” and to examine what this view would then consequently indicate about the people stalked by the figure (namely, Prospero and his revelers). In “Masque,” Prince Prospero secludes himself and his company. They seek to “secure themselves against the Red Death by relocating themselves in a ‘new’ place” (Roth 50). This Red Death from which they hide is “described as an invader from outside: it had ‘long devastated the country;’ ‘it raged most furiously abroad;’ and it ‘had come like a thief in the night’” while its supposed victims are cast out and left to die by Prospero and company (Roth 50). With this wording, it seems to matter less what literal thing the Red Death truly is, and more that it is akin to “the outside—” to the undesirable parts of the world from which man seeks to hide.

But these undesirable parts are not necessarily only outward forces, although they linger without the doors. For although Prospero has chosen a “castellated abbey surrounded by a ‘strong and lofty wall’ with ‘gates of iron’” to shield himself, Poe includes lines which “conclusively assert the separation between outside and inside” while simultaneously presenting an unbalance (Roth 50). The lines read thus, suggesting that “all is now inside, that there is nothing outside, or nothing worth writing about”:

“The external world could take care of itself... There were buffoons, there improvisatori, there were ballet-dancers, there were musicians, there was

Beauty, there was wine. All these and security were within. Without was the 'Red Death'." (51).

It seems then, from these lines, that there is nothing to worry about. This feels contradictory, as Poe spent great effort within the first few paragraphs of the story describing the symptoms and consequences of the Red Death. This construction—of moving from looming dread to full security—is a rhetorical transformation or shift that reflects the confidence of Prospero and his revelers. But it is a misplaced confidence, as evidenced by the existence of the “black room, which is both a center [of the palace] and a periphery...a room which lies at the center and at the end of a labyrinthine path” (Roth 51). Each person to enter this room experiences fear and repulsion, and the room itself is “designed to reproduce symbolically the threatening aspects of the outside,” since it is a “black room illuminated by blood-red light,” evoking images of the sickness of the Red Death (Roth 51).

How can this room—a place so full of repulsion and so similar to the “unknown” lurking outside—exist within Prospero’s supposedly perfect seclusion? While Roth suggests that “the figure who appears at the masquerade as the Red Death represents the outside of the tale” (51) and the “successful penetration of the outside into the impenetrable abbey,” as well as the “emergence of the inside,” readers can perhaps take this observation a step further and discover that the masked figure stands for those destructive, negative qualities which exist innately within us all, no matter how desperately we try to lock them out and barricade ourselves against them (Roth 52).

This theory is corroborated by the fact that “in the last room, [the figure’s] corpse-like mask is violently removed and the company gasp ‘in unutterable horror’ at finding nothing within, nothing beneath—the clothing and mask [being] ‘untenanted by any tangible form’” (Roth 52). Prospero soon after dies, without bloodshed, without any of the so carefully mentioned symptoms of the Red Death. Roth mentions “Masque of the Red Death” as having an “inside and outside [that are] confusable and exchangeable,” which is an apt description of a tale which illustrates the utter futility of hiding from the evils of the world, when mankind carries his own evil with him everywhere (52). With this view in mind, it is not at all surprising that Prospero’s attempts at survival were foiled and that he ultimately succumbed to the very destruction which he sought to prevent. For while you may lock yourself away from the world, it is impossible to entirely eradicate your own ills.

In many of Poe’s short works, control is most often lost by the protagonist or “guilty” party of the story—that character whose faults, fears, or flaws cause suffering for themselves and others. In a Poe narrative, the loss of innocence and its consequences are illustrated by the narrator’s behavior and words, as well as the structure or arrangement of the story itself. Through close analysis of the previously discussed short stories, readers are able to connect with Poe’s work through common fears and sympathies. For example, they (readers) feel for Roderick, as much as they dread the degradation of his mind, not in so much as that it terrifies, but in that it could happen to them. The dread of going mad, or of losing oneself, runs clearly throughout Poe’s works; and he portrays the

consequences thereof with startling clarity, a feat that has allowed his work to carry on in prominence for generations.

### **CHAPTER 3**

#### **CRITICAL RECEPTION: BRITAIN, FRANCE, AND THE UNITED STATES**

Despite his demonstrated skill with prose and poetry alike and his ability to brilliantly illustrate transformations within people through transformations of pure rhetoric, Edgar Allan Poe did not experience an equitable degree of contemporary success, especially in North America. He would struggle for many years in this way, relying mostly on his credentials in the realm of literary criticism for the meager rewards of his writing career. He was frequently misunderstood in American literary circles and in general found to be vulgar. The reasons for the comparative dislike of Poe's work in North America—or at least the reluctance to accept it with enthusiasm—are much debated among scholars; but they can be classified as differences in moral opinion and outlook, literary traditions, and the favored social and cultural shifts of the nation. Due to the social and cultural shifts of the nation at the time, Poe's fictitious and poetic works floundered, whereas in European areas such as Britain and France they gradually gained momentum and aided in establishing him as a literary figure. By comparing the literary "situations" and corresponding moral outlooks of both North America and Britain and France, and by examining how Poe's works fared in these areas, it becomes clear that the main cause in preventing his being accepted as a literary staple early in his career—or

even before his death—has much to do with his portrayal of man and man in the face of moral and social adversity, and how each readership responded to that portrayal. The “loss of innocence” and “loss of self” discussed in the previous chapter gain further literary significance when viewed in the context of Poe’s publishing record and the responses—both critical and general—to his work.

Examining the reception in America—his home country—must necessarily begin with opening a window into the historical-moral context within which Poe was working. During the late 1800s, America was engaged in a period of moral flux, with the large majority of the voting upper-class (and thus the larger reading class) preferring to err on the side of conservatism in many areas, including the literature they favored. While some writers, Poe included, were following what would later be termed traditions of Romanticism and Gothicism, the reading public of America was more likely to find writings of this sort grotesque, lacking purpose, and confusing.

Poe has been described by some critics as unwilling to portray his home country—or its state—directly in his writing. According to Killis Campbell in his article “Poe in Relation to His Times,” the early consensus in the 1920s was that Poe “[betrayed] in his writings little or no touch with his times or with the land of his birth” (293). Indeed, Poe’s tales do read as if they are “out of space” and “out of time,” and therefore are the more easily relatable in their themes and ideas—a concept which was broached in American literary critical circles as early as the mid-1920s (Campbell 293). Even Campbell, in combing through Poe’s poetic works, located “no passage that refers

specifically to America or to the South, no landscape that may be identified as American, no theme that may be said to be distinctively American” (294). Poe seems to have left behind his environment, partially due, perhaps, to an inadvertent and inherent love of “old-world subjects and to other-world settings and situations” (Campbell 293). These predilections seem to have caused him to make “little use of American scenery,” and to “care little for American occasions, and even less for...native legends and traditionary lore” (Campbell 293).

However, despite Poe’s seeming refusal to acknowledge directly his home country and to intimately connect with its readership, his prose works contain Americanism both in tangible mention and in exploration of the fears common to his time. The influence of current events and social well-being (or lack thereof) of Poe’s time is evident firstly in his references to “contemporary American notabilities...and references to American periodicals” (Campbell 297). He also centers his tales around references to ideas and situations feared at the time of his writing, such as—to name but a few—“premature burial...mesmerism...pestilence...and mystification of some sort” (Campbell 296), all of which to varying yet prevalent degrees can be found in “the American newspapers of the thirties and forties” during the nineteenth century (Campbell 296).

Poe’s short works were symptomatic of the Romantic Movement in literary America, even though they contained “a strain of realism here and there” (Campbell 298). In many of his tales, readers can find:

“very nearly all the conventional devices that distinguish the work of the Gothic romancer,—the machinery of trap-doors and subterranean chambers, of secret passages and decayed castles, of ghostly apparitions, of trances, of cataleptic attacks, of life after death...[and the exhibition of] virtually all the abstract qualities that we associate with Romanticism, including the elements of mystery and terror, the morbid, the grotesque, the strange, the remote, and the extravagant” (Campbell 298).

This argument would indicate, despite what evidence to the contrary Poe’s poetic works present, that Poe was “genuinely interested in his age and in what was going on about him,” as much as was “the average American of intelligence in his day” (Campbell 301). It is obvious, too, that he “relied in no small measure on the life and thought of his time for the suggestion of the materials with which he dealt” (Campbell 301). But Poe’s ability to chronicle in bizarre and often supernatural form the anxieties of his time does not explain the success of his works abroad. It also does not account for the continued consumption of his works as time has marched on; and America has transitioned through many a literary, political, and social movement. What does account for all these feats is the fact that in his short works Poe focuses intently on the conveyance of a message surrounding what—while presented as an individual case involving one narrator—is the examination of the consequences of moral and social failure and falling. This theme is by nature capable of transcending time and space, as earlier mentioned of Poe’s works in general.

On the opposite side of the Atlantic during the publication and writing of Poe's works, France had ended the Bourbon Restoration and moved in a more socially liberal direction that would eventually see the full rise of democracy. France's literature during the early nineteenth century was guided by aspects of Romanticism and focused on tales of honor won and lost amongst mankind which bore a sense of sorrow for mankind's moral failings and loss of insight regarding nature—both the world's and man's own. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the Romantic and Gothic traditions in French literature somewhat gave way to French Realism, which focused on accurate portrayals of life and situations therein, without entirely giving up on the moral ideals and sense of nostalgia connected to the earlier trends of Romanticism. This historical transformation meant that Poe's works arrived in France at a time when the literary climate was primed for stories that portrayed man at his worst—man engaging in his own transformation of character and falling dramatically from innocence and losing himself to the natural consequences.

In England, the climate was much the same, with British Romanticism having bled gradually into what became known as Victorian Literature. In similar fashion to French Romanticism, British Romanticism contained a sense of sorrowful nostalgia, largely due to the massive immigration into cities and away from the countryside, which occurred because of the Agricultural and Industrial Revolutions. The idea that man would lose innocence over the attempt to harness nature and its resources—to exploit them—was evidenced in some of the major literary works of this period, including Mary

Shelley's *Frankenstein*. These ideas remained in some part instrumental during the Victorian period, during which British literature continued to show concern with transformations in social climate. At the same time, writers began to craft characters who were full, many-dimensional human beings, playing with and analyzing natural human emotions and the complications that ensue to confound individuals and their lives. Novelists such as Charlotte Bronte and Jane Austen were instrumental in shifting the public opinion into one that was more readily inclined to accept stories which laid bare the nuances of human interaction, emotional and psychological trauma brought about by self and others, and the capacity of mankind for moral failure.

In a literary climate that tales that “ring true,” so to speak, it stands to reason that Poe's curious narratives would be greeted with an enthusiasm and acceptance unprecedented by his contemporary American readership. For while the average American at the time might have felt many of the same anxieties with which Poe was concerned, it is unlikely that critics of the time—being from a necessarily higher socio-economic status and therefore a different social outlook—would have felt the same pangs that other less-privileged readers felt.

This statement is evidenced in the fact that, despite Poe's modern status as “one of the three or four literary geniuses that America has produced, there was a period immediately following his death when few writers in America were willing to concede to him any extraordinary merit beyond that of an exceptionally gifted artist” (Campbell 142). They saw him as a writer skilled, perhaps, in artistic flairs, but without much real

substance or meaning behind anything he did. Killis Campbell writes about this neglect of Poe in his article “Contemporary Opinion of Poe,” and is supported by other critics from past times closer to those in which Poe lived, including Professor Sir Walter Raleigh of Oxford, who stated that “Poe was hardly known as a literary genius,” and by Charles Baudelaire who did his best to establish Poe in some small way, all whilst acknowledging that Poe had been “cruelly neglected by his fellow-countrymen” (142). It was this opinion and observation, in fact, which assisted many more of the French in adopting the same opinion. According to Campbell, Poe was “not held in very high esteem by his contemporaries” and was “virtually ignored by them until after the publication of ‘The Raven’ in 1845” (144).

Instead, Poe was recognized in America, even before his death as a “writer of gruesome and fantastical tales” (Campbell 144), and did in fact achieve some amount of “local fame,” which led to him being somewhat shakily established as “one of the leading writers of short-stories in America” (144). Yet, again, it must be made plain that this establishment was not due to the confirmation of literary genius which later was assigned to Poe, but rather simply to his prowess of phrase and manipulation of the horrible and fantastic. He was always engaging, but only “brilliant” within the past century in the opinion of literary critics.

In his effort to determine whether Poe truly was overlooked during his time, Campbell has “gathered together, in the course of several years’ browsing in the periodicals of Poe’s time, the principal comments of his work that [he] there [came]

across” and has made “note of such contemporary evidence as [he] could find in letters and other manuscript documents belonging to [that] period, and likewise the chief critical judgments called out by Poe’s death and by the publication of his collected works” (143).

Reception of Poe’s poetic works was generally poor, which is mentioned here inasmuch as it is a good indicator of his initial reception, and provides insight into the opinions of critics and their predispositions regarding his talent and character. His first two volumes (1827, 1829) did not receive good notices and did not sell well at all. Only “Fairy-Land” from the 1829 volume earned notices, and these in summation said that Poe’s work was, at best, exquisite nonsense and full of ill rhymes. His third volume (1831) received slightly better reviews, but the general commentary was that it did not contain a unification or clarity of ideas. These factors—poor reviews and low sales—were instrumental in Poe’s being “left out of Cheever’s American Commonplace Book of Poetry in 1831, and also of many American poetry articles published in the eighteenth-thirties” (Campbell 147). It was not truly until the 1840s that he was mentioned as having “genuine gifts as an artist and something of spirituality,” but even then he was thought to be “too obviously imitative” (147).

It was the publication of “The Raven” that turned public opinion and briefly resurrected Poe’s career, giving to him—temporarily—nation-wide notice. According to Campbell, the poem was “copied far and wide in the press of America, and was generously received in England” (148). Even *The Philadelphia Saturday Courier* remarked in July of 1846 that “no American poem, for many years, had attracted, on both

sides of the water, so much attention from the literary, critical, and general reader” (Campbell 149). However, this brief success was not enough “to establish Poe [with] an enduring hold on the poetry-reading public of his time; for when it reappeared in the fall of 1845 as the title-piece in a collective edition of Poe’s poetical works, the reviews of it were prevailingly unsympathetic” (Campbell 149).

Once again, Poe’s career waned and never regained the brief status it had known, despite the slightly more favorable public view of his prose writings. Even his prose writings met with consistent criticism and occasional disgust. This attitude is further evidenced by the public response to Poe’s death, which saw a decade of “numberless articles in the American press,” as well as in “a dozen of the English magazines” varying “widely in their appraisal of his work...[but containing] little whole-hearted commendation” (Campbell 150). Poe had been both overshadowed by his own “regrettable lapses in personal conduct” and the nature and content of his fictions (Campbell 150). He had not managed to succeed with poetry, either at home or abroad, and his fiction was equally unsuccessful in gaining him literary recognition.

Similarly, Poe’s reputation as a critic overwhelmed his reputation as a writer. He was not considered a gentle critic, or even a fair one; but his reviews were the stuff of gossip and intrigue, full of “boldness and the occasional severity” (Campbell 160). The public devoured his critical notices—or was at least entertained by them—since it was often the “controversial and the spectacular that most readily caught the public fancy” (160). However, throughout his critical notices there remains a degree of consistent

calculation. Just as he constructed his works of fiction with a firm goal or outcome in mind, developing every element of the story towards that culmination, so too did he devise his literary criticism. He often “stooped to personalities of various sorts and displayed a spitefulness that cost him the esteem of some of his staunchest admirers and earned for him the disapproval of most of the influential men of the time,” a disapproval which he found difficult to shake towards the end of his life (Campbell 162).

It was only after his death that Poe’s literary reputation began to recover. There were those—including Charles Baudelaire and Washington Irving—who had supported him and believed strongly that he had great skill. In 1856, Baudelaire made comment as to Poe’s “gifts as artist, and in common with French critics of a later period made much of his powers of analysis” (Campbell 158). Likewise, an article published in the *Washington National Intelligencer* in 1845 by Rufus Griswold gave Poe “a place in the forefront of American tale-writers” and was reaffirmed by Nathaniel Hawthorne’s own testament that Poe held “genius” as a writer (Campbell 157-58). Gradually, Poe’s reputation recovered into the largely positive standing it has today. As to the nature of his reputation during his lifetime, Campbell summarizes by saying that it appears “that the tradition that Poe was neglected by his contemporaries is both true and false,” meaning that is it “fairly evident” that “no one in his time believed him the genius that he is now generally reckoned to be” and also that he plainly was not “esteemed in his lifetime at his true worth as a poet,” aside from the one happy year stemming from publication of “The Raven” (Campbell 166). However, though critics and the public

were in no hurry to laud his writings while he was alive, he did manage to achieve some relatively “widespread recognition” before he passed away (Campbell 166). It is perfectly possible, given the attitudes towards both him as a person and his writings, that he might have achieved greater recognition—and faster, too—if not for the barriers of his personal conduct “which many Americans of his time found impossible to ignore when they came to pass judgment on his accomplishments as a writer” (Campbell 166). This fact might also account for the slightly more favourable reception he earned in England and France, given that these audiences would have been farther removed from Poe as a person. They would have potentially heard less of his “weakness for drink” and even perhaps of his “harshness as critic,” and would instead have been left only with his works and reviews thereof, which made their way to publication across the ocean (Campbell 166).

One of the contemporary objections to Poe’s prose writing was that it was consistently similar to something that had been read before. A critic from *the Edinburgh Review* mentioned this fault and claimed that this spoke to Poe’s lack of originality or feeling. Poe’s prose was equally criticized for being extravagant and containing an “excess of the unnatural and the horrible,” as well as of “German enchantment and supernatural imagery” (Campbell 154). However, it was this same sense of familiarity and horribleness that subtly enabled audiences to connect to his tales as much as they eventually did, and which enabled the tales to last and gain proper acceptance and recognition in decades to come.

Part of the familiarity of Poe's works lurked in his portrayal of man's moral inadequacies and failings in the face of moral and social adversities. This aspect was, as previously mentioned, reminiscent of the current social and financial climate in North America during the time of Poe's writing. Indeed, critics have viewed Poe's work as a "barometer of the troubled financial times in which he wrote," both because Poe quite literally was forced to "crank out tales of gothic horror to win prizes and sell magazines in a desperate effort to keep the wolf (or the raven) from his door" and because he portrayed in subtle, supernatural-laced tones the anxiety and despair experienced by those involved in the financial crisis of the times. (Jones 2).

The situation surrounding Poe in North America was one of economic crisis. There were many "falls" and unwanted "transformations" occurring from day to day—many individual situations which saw men and women losing the grace and glory of their former stations. It is reasonable that a citizen of this time, when presented with the possibility of escaping into literature, would not want to see himself mirrored in a dark, supernatural tale, in which the protagonist not only transforms, but does so irreparably, either into the thrall of insanity, disgrace, or death. It is also reasonable that the overall panic surrounding the so-labelled financial Panic of 1837 would have spawned a reading public that was not overly amenable to narratives, which portrayed the defeat and ultimately dissolution of the individual and that individual's life and livelihood. As Jones states, Poe fashioned a "particular kind of aesthetic 'fall' [which became] the compelling embodiment of the concept of failure that [got] hidden in the culture at large" (2). Poe's

tales—from Roderick Usher and the collapse of his lineage to the narrator of “The Black Cat” and the collapse of his reason and morality—echo a sense of “failure and collapse” that place them (the tales) “more truly in the context of the nineteenth century, when market society was inherently unstable and the experience of class identity was ideologically unsure” (Jones 2). In the case of Roderick, for example, readers were given the “story of the decline of an aristocratic family into dilapidation and extinction” which seemed an allegory “of an era when rapid social and economic collapse was becoming the norm” (Jones 4). Roderick presented a “picture of pallid hopelessness, want of moral energy, and paranoid depression that [critics such as] Scott Sandage identified with the ‘broken man’ of mid-nineteenth-century society—the period when financial failure began to emerge as a category of personal identity, and bankruptcy became both a psychological and a social condition” (Jones 4). The metaphor in “Usher” runs deeper than simply Roderick’s character; it lies also in the gothic tropes themselves, which see Usher “paranoid that some fault lies within the very bricks of his own house,” an idea which equates itself to the “horror of social breakdown” (Jones 4).

In a realm such as the state of panic found in North America in the 1830s, in a world where identity and structure themselves are in transition and unfounded as never before, it makes perfect sense that a tale of loss of purpose, self, and reason would unsettle readers. Readers, in reading Poe’s tales, reported “feelings of distress, dizziness, and depression, as well as...disgust, infuriated taste, and confusion, as Poe’s work combined the fear of falling with epistemological and, ultimately, hermeneutic

dilemmas” (Jones 5). There is, in short, something unsettling within Poe’s loss of innocence narratives—something that speaks to a general and deep-seated malcontent the cause of which remained nebulous for many of his North American readers, just as the true cause of their social unease remained obscured. Readers were left to fathom Poe’s tales’ “structural instability” which resisted “final or full meaning,” and which carried an “interpretive uncertainty, which has endeared critics to Poe’s purported modernity” and is “linked to...the horror of looking down toward social immobility, the dizzying terror of a self that is falling apart” (Jones 6).

While in North America Poe’s works were seen to have “[written] into form the horror of the economy, a horror that [forced] subjects to look down toward failure within a structure that [remained] beyond control or understanding,” France and Britain drank in his narratives as delicious examples of the discontent of their own ages (Jones 6). As both countries struggled with reconciling ideals from Romanticism and the new literary era—Victorian in the case of Britain and Realism in the case of France—their readers experienced a sense of disenfranchisement which was compatible with the dread and unease experienced and related by Poe’s narrator’s.

“The Fall of the House of Usher” is a prime example of this concept as well. This story does not follow the typical course of most “literature of panic,” in which the intent is to “[placate] fears of failure by blaming the victim” (Jones 5). Rather, “Fall” spreads those fears throughout its narrator’s “feelings of gloom, depression, and melancholy that cannot be explained according to the usual ‘images of the desolate or terrible...’ [and

makes] these feelings...a dynamic part of the narrative's point of view" (Jones 5). Never is Roderick blamed for his situation, except perhaps by himself in a low moment. Instead, readers experience dread and fear through the unnamed narrator, who looks upon the collapse of his friend and his friend's estate and lineage with horrified awe—understanding neither the true cause of the collapse or its portent.

This sensation of nameless yet unmistakable dread would have resonated with readerships in North America, France, and Britain alike—North America because of the general sense of fear surrounding its economy and the resulting unreliability of social structure at the time, and France and Britain because of their reluctant transition from countryside life and corresponding values to those of city-dwelling. It was, for all concerned, a period of social upheaval, and one that bred discontent and anxiety, the latter of which Poe experienced first-hand in North America as a poor, struggling member of its society, and which he therefore knew well enough to convey its dreadful emotions in no uncertain terms.

In Poe's short works, the fears and anxieties of his home country are reflected through narrators whose loss of innocence—and therefore self—unmistakably resembles a sense of social fall and loss. This sense of social fall and the resulting nostalgia and longing was familiar enough to audiences both American—who were struggling financially at the time and in a period of social upheaval—and British and French—who were each undergoing similar periods of social transition marked by the sudden abandonment of simple, quiet times in favor of the loud, industrial world. Poe's

purposeful formulas of forcing his narrators to undergo a gradual and complete loss of self reflect the larger social falls and failures of his time and resonate on a deep level with readerships both contemporary and removed.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **CONCLUSION**

The writing of Edgar Allan Poe has endured by a seemingly impossible chance, based on the initial literary environment in which it was created. The reaction was at best at best dismissive and at worst blatantly hostile. Although Poe and his works were largely overlooked at the time of original publication, then still in general ignored immediately after his death, and ever afterward consistently pigeon-holed into the narrow description of the creative flights of morbid fantasy of a tortured man with some rhetorical genius but no real substance, both Poe's name and his stories have survived and gone on to influence writers and genres for generations. His works have become "literature that lasts," and they contain poignant messages that continue to resonate with audiences around the world.

Part of the endurance of Poe's work is due to its multi-layered nature and subtle commentary on the fears that plague mankind most. His ability to shed some light on what reflects the potential darkness of the human condition, what humans have in common, and how they work their way through both the good and the bad valleys in life

has aided in the captivation of audiences for centuries. Although initially categorized as overtly phantasmagoric and essentially lacking in substance, Poe's short stories are today often regarded as possessing the capacity for unique presentation of human truths—presentations which enable readers to view the human struggle with inner demons from an unique perspective.

The methods that Poe uses to achieve the introspective and compelling nature of his stories are based on patterns within his literary constructions. His work is subtle, buried beneath showmanship and the supernatural; but its effect is clear, and the patterns within his works serve to guide independent readers along, until they reach the effect which Poe intended. Together, the methodologies of deliberate shifting of narrative power and the strategic depiction of the loss of innocence or rhetorical transformation of a character create a formula with both structural and thematic natures, which resonates innately with human understandings. By creating this resonance through his writing, Poe has ensured that his work will remain relevant.

Poe's formula and methodologies are also successful because of their understanding of how meaning is created within a story through interactions among the three essential components of text, reader, and author. These three elements are ultimately the main components involved in the creation of meaning within a text, a fact that Poe seems to have understood, as evidenced by his purposeful rhetorical decisions and habit of crafting his tales towards a cumulating effect or meaning. Poe clearly understood that readers bring their own ideas and experiences to a text, including

experiences based on previous literature that they have read. His work also indicates, through its purposeful construction, that he understood that most readers—despite their individuality as people—often had several ideas and experiences in common, namely those specific unto humans in general. There are feelings and fears that ring true for all people, and Poe utilizes them within his works to create meaning. Because of the ability to find themselves—or at least their innate fears—reflected in Poe’s works, readers continue to find Poe’s writing relevant and enduring, and even unsettling.

The fact that readers can easily locate communal human fears within Poe’s short stories is no surprise when Poe’s own stated beliefs about the representation and nature of literary “truth” are considered. “The Philosophy of Composition” states quite clearly that searching for and finding truth satisfies the intellect, and that readers are the more satisfied with a story—sometimes merely subconsciously—when that story guides them to some predetermined meaning which is easily discernable in its progression. Poe argues that truth asks for precision and that therefore authors with experience and competence will operate with a vision and predominant aim, so that they may create the meaning at which readers ultimately arrive. According to Poe, the point of a literary work is to convey its specific effect.

Part of the methodology that results in the arrival at truth in Poe’s stories includes his usage of rhetorical transformations, which can be equated to the aforementioned concept of loss of innocence. It is not enough—nor would it be as effective at conveying the intended meaning of the work—for Poe merely to detail by plot and description a

character's transformation from a state of innocence to one of moral ruin. Instead, Poe furthers the predetermined meaning of a work by using the tale's rhetoric itself to mirror the change within its focal character. By shifting his rhetorical tone and focus, Poe manipulates the narrative towards a pre-designed purpose. He presents a movement from one state to another, in the form of a character's loss of innocence. He thereby allows the path of the character to reflect that of the narrative, until neither is what they once were.

The choice to focus on issues of morality and the human fears that accompany them was one that Poe appears to have made based on his profound desire to persevere in the search for truth in art (or more specifically, prose). His works indicate that he viewed humans as being driven to seek superiority in both morals and beauty in its many forms and that he also understood the capacity for reality and the nature of innate human failings to hamper these efforts. The impotent struggle of mankind against itself in a quest for moral superiority is ancient, relatable, and suitably captivating—in the most tragic of manners—for any well-crafted tale centered around it to be successful, or at the very least memorable. The losses of innocence and rhetorical transformations found in Poe's narratives are the unavoidable consequences of the natural world, despite the supernatural trappings of his stories. Both the losses and transformations are undoubtedly fashioned with purpose, to add a relatable level of profound significance.

It is certain, then, that Poe was more than aware of how valuable it is to craft a story's structure purposefully toward an effect. It is equally clear that he was concerned with the conveyance of a Truth in his works, as is evidenced by the analysis of five short

stories included in this thesis. These representative tales demonstrate Poe's deliberate usage of rhetorical transformations, and are in and of themselves poignant case studies in human nature and its futile desire to rid itself of failings.

Of the five short stories, "The Black Cat" has proven to be the clearest example of Poe's conscious methodology. It focuses, through the transformation of the unnamed narrator, on the degradation of self and the consequences of such a loss of innocence. It is a tale that plays on the deep human dread of loss of self-control. The narrator himself admits early on that the events of his tale will show that he lost himself, although he never truly manages to take ownership of the loss or indicate that he has simply gone mad—another human dread that Poe frequently plays upon. The narrator foreshadows that readers can expect a transformation of character as he relates his story, and Poe follows through by mirroring the transformation in his rhetoric.

By aligning the rhetoric of "The Black Cat" to its narrator's descent, Poe makes a strong case for himself as a serious author—one who is not entirely concerned with sensationalism and "pretty" prose. From the very moment that the narrator makes an effort to establish himself as an innocent figure, the transformation of character and tale has begun. It is a transformation involving more than alcoholism—merely a symptom of some darker impulse—or the outside influence of some "fiend," as the narrator would have the reader. Rather, the terror surrounding the inexplicability of the narrator's transformation, and the totality with which it occurs, is the central focus. Poe's formula holds as readers are guided through a progression of degradation, which sees the narrator

making a futile attempt to salvage his innocence. As the narrator's rhetoric changes from describing himself as a gentle person to a victimized one, he clearly demonstrates Poe's method of using rhetorical transformation to convey meaning and a message concerning human nature.

In "The Cask of Amontillado," the character of Montresor illustrates the loss of innocence that comes from a sadistic, all-consuming pride. He is the end of a long aristocratic line and resents people such as Fortunato, who is from essentially "new money." Poe uses the confession style narrative of Montresor to delve into the ways in which pride and social greed transform humans into monsters.

As noted, there is no clear motive for the murder of Fortunato, a fact that leads to questions regarding the nature and cause of Montresor's transformation. His coldness in the crime—and in its later revelation—are unmistakable, much unlike the narrator of "The Black Cat," who regrets his deeds and abhors his new, fallen state. Each and every piece of "Cask" is crafted to bring readers closer to answering the question of what could have so possessed Montresor to do such a foul, heartless deed. To readers his confession is as captivating as any contemporary real-world crime case—viewed perhaps on the internet or news—in which the criminal has done something unspeakable, and in which the authorities are baffled in the attempt to assign any sort of explanation or motive. The inexplicabilities of human nature, especially when they are dark and disturbing, are by default arresting of the mind.

But Poe again lives up to his professed belief that a story must be conceived with an ultimate goal or effect in mind. Montresor's terrible deed is passed off as a confession, but the tone and manner of his rhetoric give him away—he has not atoned at all. Specific dialogue by Montresor, chosen by Poe, indicates this fact, and through its employment readers arrive at the realization that Montresor feels nothing but satisfaction about what he has done. His murder is symptomatic of a deep-seated pride, which has eclipsed murder to make it look like justified vengeance and punishment to its perpetrator, and which has ultimately deceived him into an unmistakable transformation—from the last bitter member of a dying line to a guilty monster devoid of true repentance.

In “The Tell-Tale Heart” Poe creates a droll tale, which illustrates how an individual can transform and fall because of a total loss of self-control. Although this tale was long thought of as little more than a crime narrative, it is also quite clearly a study in morality and in the effect of narrative structure on meaning. The nameless narrator's guilt betrays itself through Poe's usage of rhetorical devices such as exclamations, questions born from nerves, and broken sentences, all of which serve to further the unmistakable impression that the narrator is paranoid and being driven to madness.

What caused the narrator to commit the crime of murder in the first place—from which all of his fatal guilt stems—is not entirely clear, and is the more terrifying for not being so clarified. The readers know, however, that the narrator was possessed of an irrational fear of the old man's eye, and that this fear was the primary catalyst in his

desire to dispatch the old man. This idea, that paranoia and madness can so take hold of someone as to cause him or her to commit murder, is one that Poe uses to great effect. He illustrates the horrible consequences of the failings of the human mind as the narrator unwittingly gives away his terrible deed and thereby betrays himself into imprisonment and possibly death. Fear, in this tale, is the rot which eats away at man's sanity—a fear which all humanity must dread.

“The Fall of the House of Usher” is significant for its mirror-like qualities in many respects, including plot, characters, and language. Through these elements and other rhetorical choices, Poe again illustrates the capacity of man for self-destruction. He especially utilizes Roderick's behavior, language, and actions to convey this theme, demonstrating how Roderick's rapid loss of control mirrors the structural disintegration of narrative and physical house alike. Poe weaves smaller narratives into the main narrative throughout the story, including the poem “The Haunted Palace” and the tale of “The Mad Tryst.” Each smaller narrative mirrors the larger action surrounding it, and through their combined effect, readers are in turn surrounded by a mirror maze of meaning.

Although Roderick, throughout the tale, appears to be its victim and potentially the “innocent” party, he is still the character who undergoes a transformation, as the nameless narrator states from the very beginning of “Fall” when he notes how changed Roderick is from their boyhood. Order and disorder run throughout the story, and the consequences of the later are only too clear. The physical disorder of Madeline causes

fear and anxiety in both narrator and Roderick, Roderick's mental or emotional disorder does the same, and the house itself reflects his unbalanced, crumbling psyche. All three elements (Roderick, Madeline, and the house) transform from a balanced to an unbalanced state over the course of the narrative, leaving little doubt as to Poe's desired meaning. It is fear that swallows Roderick at the end—an overwhelming fear of death and of insanity, just as in "The Black Cat." Roderick's tale illustrates the tragedy of the human failing of dread.

Lastly, in "The Masque of the Red Death" the theme of self-destruction reveals itself through the illustration of the consequences of moral degradation and the demonstration of how the very attempt of the mind to protect itself from its own ills is futile. Much like Roderick, the outwardly nonchalant, but inwardly cowardly figure of Prince Prospero attempts to isolate himself from death. Prospero views the threat as external—the Red Death—when in fact the more deadly threat comes from within himself.

In this final story, Poe uses both a suggestive atmosphere and unified story-telling in order to guide readers to the realization that the supposed sanctuary of Prospero and his revelers is in fact only a waiting room for destruction. Prospero's bravado and confidence are reflected in the construction of the tale, which initially moves from dread of the perceived external situation to a misguided sense of security, once he is isolated away from the world with the people he desires to be surrounded with. He fears the

undesirable parts of the world, to the exclusion and ignorance of the unwanted and destructive parts of himself.

This fact is symbolized by the existence of the mysterious room to which none of the revelers want to go. Its very presence seems contradictory—that something so fearsome could exist within a place supposedly safe. From its inclusion, and from the arrival of the dread figure of Red Death himself, readers can infer that the destructive, negative nature of man is always present, no matter how hard one may remain innocent and safe.

The human fears and anxieties played upon within Poe's short works are captivating in their horror and have helped the author to remain relevant well beyond his time. During his life, Poe was not particularly successful, especially in North America, due in part to moral opinions and outlooks, but also literary traditions and the favored social and cultural shifts of the nation. These same elements were also partially responsible for his contrasting welcome in Britain and France, two countries which were—at the time—in a state of flux that was edging in a more socially liberal direction.

Over time and through scholarship it has become clear that much of Poe's failure to establish himself as a prominent literary figure during his time was due to his portrayal of man as he faces moral and social adversity. Certain climates of readerships—the United States especially—were not, at the time, ready to accept tales which portrayed man at his worst—man undergoing a dark transformation of character and falling from innocence into the natural consequences of a lack thereof. Other climates—including, in

particular, French and British—were interested in or at least concerned with transformations on a social scale; and it was therefore understandable that those cultures would be open to tales of personal transformation, however bleak.

As Poe's short stories bear witness, oftentimes there is no logical or supernatural explanation for tragedy and terror, but for the natural failings of the human spirit. Control, both over self and situation, is an illusion, and often lost by faults, fears, or flaws of an individual. Poe consistently illustrates this loss and its consequences by the behavior and words of his characters, as well as by the structure or arrangement of his stories themselves. Through close reading and analysis, readers are able to realize common fears and anxieties and to therefore find meaning and significance in Poe's work. This thesis demonstrates how Poe's distinct and purposeful methodologies directly influenced critical receptions of Poe's work during and after his lifetime. His methodologies were conscious and were tied to demonstrable effect in their ability to transmit a sensation of disturbing familiarity and to make definite comment upon human nature.

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