

AN EXAMINATION OF EDGAR ALLAN POE'S USE OF THE
CLASSICAL UNITIES IN THE SHORT STORY

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PREFACE

The works of Edgar Allan Poe have been studied biographically and psychologically. He has been said to be a madman, an occultist, and an artist. Later studies have shown that he was a craftsman and an artist who took his work seriously and endeavored to produce a work of fiction which had unity of effect.

As an artist, Poe was conscious of achieving a total effect. Little work has been done to research the idea that Poe made use of the classical unities of drama in achieving that total effect. The classical unities have been effectively employed in some genres, and Poe was very conscious of genre. As a critic he was aware of all types of work, both good and bad.

Many of Poe's stories and most of his famous stories have first person narrators. The nine stories chosen for this paper are some of his most famous, and all nine have the first person narrator. In order to examine the stories systematically to see if Poe observes the unities, I classified the narrators as actors, reactors, or victims. The first chapter of this thesis concerns the classical unities and the short story. The

next chapter examines the short stories with the narrator as the actor. Included in this chapter are "The Black Cat," "The Tell-Tale Heart," and "The Cask of Amontillado." The third chapter deals with the narrator as the reactor to an outside force and to an inner force. Included in this chapter are discussions of "The Oval Portrait," "The Sphinx," and "The Fall of the House of Usher." The fourth chapter includes "MS. Found in a Bottle," "A Descent into the Maelstrom," and "The Pit and the Pendulum." This chapter is concerned with the narrator as victim. An outside force presses him to act. He is not the actor causing his own conflict, nor is he the pathetic character in a mental turmoil performing little or no action. He is forced to act since he is acted upon.

Using the narrator as focal point will provide the link between the dramatically conceived short stories of the nineteenth-century journalist and the ancient unities of the classical stage.

CHAPTER I

AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE
CLASSICAL UNITIES AND THE
SHORT STORY

Although the short story is a relatively new form, the classical unities are very old. The classical unities are the three principles of dramatic structure supposedly taken from Aristotle's Poetics which require a play to have a single action, occurring in one place, and in twenty-four hours. Aristotle wrote the Poetics in the fourth century B. C. as a commentary on drama, and the classical unities are a part of the Poetics. Aristotle did not, of course, discuss short stories when he recorded his critical analysis. Drama was the primary art form of the day. Edgar Allan Poe's short stories, written in a different genre in the 1850s are very dramatic and are written much like one-act plays.

Even though Aristotle recognized Homer's mastery of the epic, the perfect art form, he felt, was tragedy. Everything found in the epic is also found in tragedy,

but not everything in tragedy is found in the epic.¹ Centuries later Poe considered that "epics were the offspring of an imperfect sense of Art, and their reign is no more. . . ."² Poe recognized that the epic and tragedy are both old, perhaps obsolete, forms; and he also further stated that because the novel cannot be read at one sitting it cannot replace the epic and the tragedy. The short story is the art form he wished to perfect.

In the Poetics Aristotle actually explains only one of the unities thoroughly--his theory of the single action. "Character and thought are the two natural causes of action: through actions men succeed or fail. The imitation of the action is the plot, for this is what I mean by plot, namely the arrangement of incidents."³ He goes ahead to state that the first essential ingredient of tragedy is the plot and that it must have a beginning,

¹Marvin Theodore Herrick, The Poetics of Aristotle in England (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1930), p. 3.

²"Review of Twice-Told Tales," included in Walter Blair et al., eds., The Literature of the United States, 2 vols. (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1966), p. 754.

³Aristotle, On Poetry and Style, trans. and ed. G. M. A. Grube (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1958), p. 12.

middle, and end.¹ These three elements of the plot make up the one unity of action:

A story does not achieve unity, as some people think, merely by being about one person In the same way one individual performs many actions which do not combine into one action. . . . As in other kinds of imitative art each imitation must have one object, so with the plot: since it is the imitation of an action, this must be one action, and the whole of it; the various incidents must be so constructed that if any part is displaced or deleted, the whole plot is disturbed and dislocated. For if any part can be inserted or omitted without manifest alteration, it is no true part of the whole.²

Aristotle states that a good plot must be complex, not simple, and must consist of a single story. The story should be designed so that "the events make anyone who hears the story shudder and feel pity. . . ."³ The complex plot should be constructed with each event connected with what has gone before. "It makes all the difference whether one incident is caused by another or merely follows it."⁴ The complex plot is also very effective for the short story.

¹Ibid., p. 16.

²Ibid., p. 17.

³Ibid., p. 26.

⁴Ibid., p. 21.

The second unity, that of time, must have been of much less importance than the unity of action, for Aristotle barely makes mention of time. He states:

" . . . for tragedy tries to confine itself, as much as possible, within one revolution of the sun or a little more. . . ." ¹

The third unity, the unity of place, is not mentioned by Aristotle at all. Castelvetro, in his 1570 edition of the Poetics, added the unity of place because Aristotle had insisted on verisimilitude, and Castelvetro felt this addition was a sensible thing to do. The drama would be more believable if the action took place in one location only. ² The rules of the three unities then became a useful guideline as a means to discipline writers in the ways of the ancients. These rules gave them high standards by which they could judge their works, and by using these rules they were better able to see what they must do to imitate and excel over the literature of the ancient Greeks and Romans. ³

¹Ibid., p. 11.

²Gilbert Highet, The Classical Tradition (London: Oxford University Press, 1949), pp. 142-43.

³L. J. Potts, Foreword to Aristotle, On the Art of Fiction, trans. and ed. L. J. Potts (Cambridge: University Press, 1968), p. 7.

The popularity of the Poetics among poets and scholars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was due to their feeling the need of a tradition to emulate in order to improve the writing of the period. The greater part of the influence of the Poetics has emerged from the belief that Aristotle laid down specific rules of poetry. The three unities constitute the most famous concept of un-Aristotelian philosophy, even though the whole collection of rules from the Poetics set the standards of literature until the end of the eighteenth century.

Toward the end of the eighteenth century the neo-classical heroic tragedy had fallen from favor. Henry Fielding recognized the difference between Aristotle and the critics of the period. Fielding endeavored to create a new type of literature based upon the principles of the Poetics. "The introductory chapter of Book 8 of Tom Jones subscribes to Aristotle's distinction between historical and poetic truth, and even holds to the principle that a likely impossibility is better than an unconvincing possibility."¹ He was more concerned with comedy and satire than tragedy, but in this concern Fielding helped

¹Herrick, p. 115.

contribute to the modern novel. The use of drama as satire instead of as neo-classical tragedy was Fielding's first move away from the writing style of the period.

Next Fielding wrote a novel, Joseph Andrews, to parody Richardson's Pamela. He states the principles for writing a comic epic in prose, and he went to the Poetics for his rules.¹ Fielding's novels contain involved plots that progress up to the dénouement. They are much like the epic that Aristotle describes: "In tragedy it is not possible to imitate several parts of a story as happening at the same time, but only the part played by the actors on the stage; in the epic, because it is a narrative, many simultaneous transactions can be depicted, by which, if they are related to one another, the weight of the poem will be increased."² Joseph Andrews contains involved plots, and discoveries are made throughout the novel. Aristotle states in Book 24 of the Poetics that Homer's epic the Odyssey had a complex plot; and there were disclosures throughout the epic. Fielding developed a new genre of literature in his comic epic in novel form which he based on Aristotle's Poetics. As the novel is

¹Ibid., p. 114.

²Potts, pp. 52-53.

closely related to the epic, so may we consider the short story closely related to the tragedy in drama as defined in Aristotle's Poetics.

At the end of the eighteenth century, the Romantic movement was becoming more popular, overriding the laws set down by Aristotle and the critics. The Poetics was still studied; the unity of action was kept as an important part of poetry and drama, but the less important unities of time and place were considered antique conventions of the Greek stage.¹

The short story as a new genre was also coming into its own at the end of the eighteenth century, even though in some form or other it had existed for centuries. Thrall, Hibbard, and Holman in A Handbook to Literature define a short story as "a relatively brief fictional narrative in prose." Thus, the Old Testament contains short stories; collections of short stories from different countries, such as The Decameron and the Canterbury Tales, were popular during the Middle Ages. The short story type used in this paper is the conte, a one-act play that is narrated, as defined by Robert Wilson Neal in his book Short Stories in the Making. Neal separates the conte

¹Herrick, p. 114.

from the tale, scenario, character sketch, or anecdote. He states that the short story is a drama in narrative form and that the plot is "closely wrought." His definition of a close-wrought plot is one that "depends upon and grows out of the traits of character of the persons involved in it."¹ The plot in the short story or conte must have incidents that progress and are closely knit to the preceding incident. This construction makes a dramatic plot which affects the character or his future in some way. For the conte to be successful it must be like the one-act play and be "judged by the singleness of the effect or impression that it produces."² Neal does not mention Poe in his definition of the conte, but his definition might have been written especially for Poe's stories. Certainly, singleness of effect is the most important quality that Poe worked toward. Neal's definition of the dramatic plot is much like Aristotle's definition of a complex plot. Even though Aristotle was writing about poetry, Potts states: "It seems clear that for him all poetry was essentially a kind of fiction; and

¹Robert Wilson Neal, Short Stories in the Making (New York: Oxford University Press, 1914), p. 13.

²Ibid., p. 19.

the Poetics is best understood as a treatise on fiction."¹
 The Neo-classical and Restoration dramatists used the Poetics as guidelines in the writing of drama. Henry Fielding in developing a different genre, the novel, referred to the Poetics, and in describing the structure of the short story Baker states: "Frequently the short story fulfills the three unities of the drama--those of time, place, and action."²

Edgar Allan Poe, as one of America's earliest writers, helped develop the art of the short story. He was an artist who worked to develop the short story into a very precise art form in the United States. He was also a perceptive critic of the poems, plays, novels, and short stories of other writers. In his criticism of these works he states his own philosophy of writing. As a conscious artist, Poe felt qualified to criticize the works of others, and he did just that in many articles written for the various magazines for which he worked. He even anticipated his own magazine, the Stylus, to be a monthly journal of literature of fine art and drama.

¹Potts, p. 9.

²Harry T. Baker, The Contemporary Short Story (New York: D. C. Heath and Co., 1916), p. 88.

Poe thought the novel was not a true art form;¹ he was more interested in developing the American public's taste for a new more worthwhile art form: the short story. He wrote: "Deeply lamenting this unjustifiable state of public feeling [a coarse taste], it has been our constant endeavor, since assuming the Editorial duties of this Journal, to stem, with what little abilities we possess, a current so disastrously undermining the health and prosperity of our literature."² A gentleman and a scholar who had the taste to set standards of literary taste for others, Poe stated his ideals and philosophy of composition. It must be assumed that he would have designed his own work to meet these criteria. His contemporary critics of fiction expected unity of action in works of literature, but Poe's unity of effect in the short story was a new concept.³ It did not, for example, accord with Coleridge's philosophy of unity. Coleridge felt that the unity was within the work; "the artist did not merely achieve rhetorical unity but communicated an intuition of the

¹Robert D. Jacobs, Poe: Journalist and Critic (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969), p. 319.

²Ibid., p. 136.

³Ibid., p. 101.

essence. . . ." Poe did not agree. His ideas are summed up by Jacobs:

His criterion of unity tended to vary depending upon the nature of the work he was reviewing. In a true poem, which had to be tested by emotional response, it was the unity of effect that he emphasized. In a short narrative he required an Aristotelian formal unity, in which no part might be removed or transposed without dislocation of the whole. In a poem which had a cognitive import, a logical meaning, Poe looked for conceptual unity, the unity of idea.¹

Poe does adhere to the Aristotelian philosophy of unity of action, as this paper will show; but the unity of time and place is not especially important to Poe, as might be predicted for a nineteenth-century writer.

The Poetics as a set of rules is useful for types of literature other than the drama, as Fielding's work indicates. The statements from Robert Neal's book on the short story make further applications. Neal states that a conte is a one-act play that is narrated, not acted. The principles of dramatic plot are equally useful as a guide for the short story. His essentials of a dramatic plot are:

- A. Persons acting.
- B. Persons acting in accordance with, or else contrary to their previous character.

¹Ibid., p. 245.

- C. Things happening or done, these things constituting an interlocking series ending in a conclusive outcome.
- D. The things that are done resulting from the character of the persons plus the situation.
- E. These things reacting on the persons in some way as to seem likely to affect their future.
- F. A set of conditions or influences that affect the persons and are in opposition some to the others.¹

The principle in C above is the same Aristotle stated in his requirement for a complex plot: "An action is complex when the catastrophe involves Disclosure, or Irony, or both. But these complications should develop out of the very structure of the fable, so that they fit what has gone before, either necessarily or probably. To happen after something is by no means the same as to happen because of it."² Poe emphatically follows these essentials of a dramatic plot. The connection between the classical dramatic unities and Poe's short stories becomes more and more apparent.

Poe wrote two types of short stories: the tales of horror and tales of ratiocination, or the detective story. The tales of ratiocination do not adhere to the principles of the conte type short story or the one-act

¹Neal, pp. 71-72.

²Potts, p. 31.

play. "This tale serves as a sort of textbook in logic and composition or as an essay on the reporter's craft. . . . and so produces a tale almost totally devoid of action."¹ The ratiocination tale is closer to Neal's definition of the tale, which may lack dramatic plot and action. The tale does not leave the reader with one impression as does the conte.²

Edgar Allan Poe's short stories of horror do leave the reader with one impression. He has appealed to the imagination of the reader more than any other American writer, and his tales and logical criticisms demonstrate an extraordinary mind that deliberately calculated every work he wrote.³ Poe carefully considered the form and the content in relation to its contact with the reader. He felt the effect upon the reader to be the most important quality sought by the writer as he states in his essay

¹Stuart Levine and Susan Levine, eds., The Short Fiction of Edgar Allan Poe (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1976), p. 154. All the short stories examined for this paper are included in this collection of short stories. Hereafter all citations refer to this collection.

²Neal, p. 9.

³Blair et al., eds., p. 746.

"The Philosophy of Composition." Two ingredients account for the success of Poe's own works: the arrangement of happenings in a climactic order, and his poetic style very appropriately used.¹

Poe would have known the works of Aristotle, since he was enrolled in the Schools of Ancient and Modern Languages as a student at the University of Virginia. He attended courses of lectures in Latin, Greek, French, Spanish, and Italian. The records show that he excelled in Latin and French.² He mentions Aristotle in his "Letter to B_____" when he states, "Aristotle, with singular assurance, has declared poetry the most philosophical of all writing--but it required a Wordsworth to pronounce it the most metaphysical."³ Poe used many Greek quotations in his writings, and he used them with few errors. In fact, in one quotation from Callimachus which he may have taken from Bulwer, he

¹Ibid., p. 747.

²Life and Letters of Edgar Allan Poe, vol. 1, p. 38, quoted in Hervey Allen, Israfel: The Life and Times of Edgar Allan Poe (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, Inc., 1934), pp. 127-28.

³Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe, 17 vols., quoted in Blair et al., eds., p. 750.

expands a contraction to make his text simpler. This change in the Greek quotation would show that "Poe had not only a little Greek, but a respectable command of it."¹ Poe must have known the works of Aristotle and he more than likely knew the Poetics. It must be assumed that Poe knew the classical unities. Any student of classical languages and any drama critic would certainly know the unities of time, place, and action.

Aristotle had made the distinction between historical and poetical truth. The historian tells what has happened, but in poetical truth, the poet tells "the kind of things that would happen--what is possible according to probability or necessity."² If the events are so well constructed, anyone who hears the story will "shudder and feel pity. . . ."³ In Poe's "The Philosophy of Composition" he states: "Now the object, Truth, or the satisfaction of the intellect, and the object, Passion, or the excitement of the heart, are although attainable to a certain extent in poetry, far more readily attainable in prose."

¹Thomas Ollive Mabbott, "Evidence That Poe Knew Greek," Notes and Queries 185 (July 1943): 39-40.

²Potts, p. 29.

³Ibid., p. 34.

Poe writes in his "Review of Twice-Told Tales"

his own method of constructing a story:

A skillful literary artist has constructed a tale. If wise, he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents; but having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single effect to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents--he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect. If his very initial sentence tend not to the out-bringing of this effect, then he has failed in his first step. In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one preestablished design. And by such means, with such care and skill, a picture is at length painted which leaves in the mind of him who contemplates it with a kindred art, a sense of the fullest satisfaction.

Poe again states how much he feels the importance of the effect in the composition of a story in his "The Philosophy of Composition":

I prefer commencing with the consideration of an effect. Keeping originality always in view--for his is false to himself who ventures to dispense with so obvious and so easily attainable a source of interest--I say to myself, in the first place,--"Of the innumerable effects, or impressions, of which the heart, the intellect, or (more generally) the soul is susceptible, what one shall I, on the present occasion, select?" Having chosen a novel, first, and secondly a vivid effect, I consider 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--afterward looking about me (or rather within) for such combinations of event, or tone, as shall best aid me in the construction of the effect.

Poe states in "Review of Twice-Told Tales" that his own aim in the tale is to achieve Truth, and through the arrangement of events cause an effect which will arouse horror or passion in the reader. He then states:

". . . Beauty can be better treated in a poem. Not so with terror, or passion, or horror, or a multitude of such other points." Fielding in his attempt at explaining Truth in fiction had stated that a likely impossibility is better than an unconvincing possibility.¹ This is close to Aristotle's view of the difference between the poet and the historian: The historian reports what has happened, but the poet tells the things that would happen--what is possible in the circumstances. Poe, the artist, chooses the path of the poet in his construction of the tale.

Poe writes of unity of action even though he is writing a different genre, and he does not call his plot action. In "The Philosophy of Composition" he states:

Nothing is more clear than that every plot, worth the name, must be elaborated to its dénouement before anything be attempted with the pen. It is only with the dénouement constantly in view that we can give a plot

¹Tom Jones, Book 8, quoted in Herrick, p. 113.

its indispensable air of consequence, or causation, by making the incidents, and especially the tone of all points, tend to the development of the intention.

Aristotle stated that the complex plot was better than the simple plot; each event must be connected with what has gone before. Poe agrees with this view as he states in "The Philosophy of Composition": ". . . it is an obvious rule of Art that effects should be made to spring from direct causes. . . ."

Aristotle in his Poetics stated that one day was an acceptable time length for the plot of the tragedy. Castelvetro, the Italian who in 1570 added the unity of place to Aristotle's Poetics, stated "that since an audience knows that it has been in the theatre for only a few hours, an author cannot convince it that several days or years have passed. Therefore, the time which has passed in the play should be equal to the time the audience has spent in the theatre, but in no case should it exceed twenty-four hours."¹ Poe did state that the short story should have a time length that was acceptable for reading and could be read at one sitting. In "Review of Twice-Told Tales" he states: "We allude to the short

¹Oscar G. Brockett, The Theatre: An Introduction (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1964), p. 170.

prose narrative requiring from a half-hour to one or two hours in its perusal. The ordinary novel is objectionable, from its length, for reasons already stated in substance. As it cannot be read at one sitting, it deprives itself, of course, of the immense force derivable from totality."

Poe knew that unity was necessary to achieve the effect he so desired. He states in "Review of Twice-Told Tales": "Without unity of impression, the deepest effects cannot be brought about. Epics were the off-spring of an imperfect sense of Art, and their reign is no more. . . . Without a certain continuity of effort. . . . the soul is never deeply moved." Aristotle stated that a person need only hear the story to feel pity and shudder. The spectacle of the drama was not the important part; the plot with the unified action would arouse the soul. Poe states the aim of the author: "In the brief tale . . . the author is enabled to carry out the fullness of his intention. . . . During the hour of perusal the soul of the reader is at the writer's control."¹ Poe knew that emotions could be sustained for only a short period of time.

¹"Review of Twice-Told Tales" in Blair et al., eds., p. 75⁴.

The Greeks realized the emotional power of the theater; indeed, they used the drama as a religious experience. The actors spoke for the audience, and together they realized the suffering in human life. At the end of the tragedy, everyone had been purified through the emotional release of "pity and awe."¹ The time spent in viewing a Greek tragedy would correspond to the time Poe specified for the reading of the short story. The subjects and events in Poe's short stories are strangely similar in emotional force to the Greek tragedy, even though he made no religious connections in his writing.

It would seem that tragedy is a strange matter. There is indeed none stranger. A tragedy shows us pain and gives us pleasure thereby. The greater the suffering depicted, the more terrible the events, the more intense our pleasure. The most monstrous and appalling deeds life can show are those the tragedian chooses, and by the spectacle he thus offers us, we are moved to a very passion of enjoyment.²

Poe used "monstrous and appalling deeds" to create short stories that could be read in a very brief period of time. In the short story, he maintains unity of action in order to achieve unity of effect. Through the unity of effect he is able to control the soul of the reader; and

¹Edith Hamilton, The Greek Way (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1964), p. 180.

²Ibid., p. 139.

through the monstrous events he depicts, the reader is "moved to a very passion of enjoyment."

Poe does not tell us that he consciously obeyed the limitations of the classical unities. Nevertheless, his practice reflects a modern application of principles ancient when Aristotle first recorded them. Indeed, in his occasional failures to observe time and place, he echoes Aristotle's neglect of the lesser unities to concentrate on the one that really mattered--the unity of action.

CHAPTER II

THE NARRATOR AS THE ACTOR

This chapter deals with the narrator as actor, the one who performs the actions. He is the force that controls himself. Each step he takes leads to the next action. Each of his actions is a result of the preceding action, which impels the plot to a climax and dénouement. Three stories, "The Black Cat," "The Tell-Tale Heart," and "The Cask of Amontillado," were chosen for this chapter because the narrator, in the first person, recounts each step of the plot and each action that he performs. The movements to impel the plot can be stated in terms of dramatic action: the exposition, the rising action, the falling action, and the outcome or dénouement. Many critics believe that the use of falling action has almost become obsolete in the more recent modern drama, as the rising action up to the climax is closely followed by the outcome. In the short story, with its different requirements, falling action has never been as important as rising action. Poe followed the steps of exposition, rising action, and outcome, usually omitting falling

action, so that the reader would feel the full impact of the effect Poe had so artistically created. The climax and the outcome are almost synonymous, the very end of the story.

"The Black Cat" is a story of the mental change that overcomes a good man who loves animals and spends his time feeding and caring for them. He and his wife have different kinds of animals, including a black cat, called Pluto, although the wife holds the superstition that all black cats are witches in disguise. The man and the cat, however, keep a close relationship over the years even though the man becomes more and more moody because of his constant drinking. He finally begins to misuse his wife and the animals. One night when he comes home he tries to seize the cat. Since he is intoxicated, he becomes furious when the cat evades him. He then takes a pen-knife and cuts the cat's eye out.

The next morning he is filled with remorse when he realizes what he has done in his drunkenness. The cat, of course, keeps away from the man from then on. After the man sees that the cat dislikes him so much, he begins in turn to dislike the cat. His attitude has changed from loving the cat very much to hating the cat so much that he eventually hangs it. The night following the hanging of

the cat the man's house burns. He is left with nothing. All of the house has burned except one wall. The figure of a hanging cat is left on that wall to remind him of his cruelty.

After the death of the cat Pluto, the man goes in search of another cat of the same kind to take Pluto's place. As he is drinking one night, he sees another cat like the one he had before except that this cat has a white spot on the throat. His wife likes the new cat. They discover that the cat has only one eye. The man now begins to dislike this cat, but the cat seems to like him all the more. He finally dreads seeing the animal, even longing to destroy it. As the rational character of the man is changing, he sees the white spot on the cat's throat changing into the shape of the gallows. Overcome with moodiness, he begins to hate all living things, even his wife, a very kind person who becomes the object of his fury. In the basement one day, the cat nearly causes him to fall. When in his fury he raises an axe to kill the cat, he kills his wife instead. Her body has to be concealed, so he hides it in the wall of the basement of the old building where they live, carefully concealing any disturbance of the bricks. After he has completed his work, he tries unsuccessfully to find the cat so he can

kill it, too. When the cat does not return for three days, the man feels, much to his relief, that he is rid of it. On the fourth day the police come to inspect the house. He is so satisfied with the way he has covered his crime that he calls the attention of the police to the construction of the house. He knocks on the walls of the basement to show how sturdily the house is built. A sound answers his tappings on the wall. The police immediately tear down the wall to find the body of the dead wife; sitting upon the head of the corpse is the black cat.

The story has been recounted in some detail to show that each item is necessary to fulfill the plot of the story. Poe is very concise; he wastes no words on trivial details. The story is approximately four thousand words in length, and each word adds to the unity of effect.

Poe does not observe the unity of time in "The Black Cat." This short story or conte takes place over a period of time, maybe several weeks, and is not limited to a space of twenty-four hours. He does not state how many days or weeks pass in this story because time is not the important factor. Since time is unclear to the diseased mind of an alcoholic, Poe blurs the sense of time passing.

The narrator states at the beginning of the story that he is not mad, and that he wishes to relate "a series of mere household events." He insists that as a child he had many animals that he loved. For several years he and his wife kept the black cat, Pluto, until the habit of drinking affected the man's moods and temperament. He did at the same time mistreat the rabbits, the monkey, and the dog. He states that the "disease Alcohol" is beginning to grow upon him. By stating at the beginning of the story that he is not mad, he shows that this fear of madness is growing along with his drinking problem. In this expository section of the story many years pass; the real action of the story, which begins only when the disease has a firm control over the narrator, covers a much shorter passage of time. The time factor is not clear, as would be expected in the case of a story from the diseased mind of an alcoholic.

Place is also unimportant in "The Black Cat." Most of the action takes place in the home of the narrator; though the narrator has two different homes during the course of the story. The settings of many of Poe's stories seem to reflect the mind or inner person of the people who live in these places. The first home is not described.

Even the saloon where he found the second cat is not described. The murder of his wife takes place in the basement of an old building, and even the section which he uses for her tomb is described only briefly. Place is not the important element in "The Black Cat." The action that takes place in this story does not depend upon place or time. Neither is important in "The Black Cat."

Action is the necessary ingredient in "The Black Cat," as Poe is able to achieve the unity of effect through action in this story. Because setting is not needed to aid in the unity of effect, there is very little description of place. Not only is there little atmosphere in this story, but the sense of time passing is not developed to hold the reader's attention. After the exposition at the beginning of the story, the rising action begins. The narrator has stated his love for animals and also his love of alcohol. After he has changed, the rising action begins with his cutting the eye of the cat from its socket. He next hangs the cat; this action is a result of the preceding action--the mutilation of the cat. Each action leads to the next, and each is a result of the preceding. Since he has hanged the cat, the next thing the narrator does is to find a cat like the one he had before. The

narrator does state that he is dealing with "a chain of facts," and that he is telling everything so as not to leave one link missing. Poe, by means of narrator, is stating the theory of dramatic action; each action is a result of the preceding action which presses to the climax and dénouement. If any one action is omitted, then the chain of action is broken. Since the narrator has found a cat to take the place of the cat he killed, he begins to hate this animal also. The new cat has a place on its throat that resembles a hangman's noose. These facts are part of the plot, but they are not part of the action because the narrator is not doing anything except observing. The narrator states that he hates the cat and tries to avoid it as much as possible, but the cat will not leave him alone. The next action of the narrator is his tripping over the cat on the way down the stairs into the basement. This action could hardly have taken place if he had not brought the cat home. In anger, the narrator lifts an axe to kill the cat; but instead he kills his wife. Having killed his wife, he must hide the body. He hides the body in the wall of the basement and does an excellent clean-up job. As the result of his careful brick work he feels he can tap on the walls to show the policemen how well constructed the house is. The decisive moment is coming when

the sound is heard inside the walls. The decisive moment is reached in the climax or height of the plot or dramatic action when the corpse is uncovered with the cat sitting upon the head. Neal states that the climax is the end of the developing action with its outcome certain because of the previous action.¹ The outcome of "The Black Cat" is that the cat has unwittingly caused the narrator to murder his wife; and since he walled the cat up inside the tomb, the cat's cry has given the murderer away.

Poe does not observe all three unities in his short story "The Black Cat," but he does observe the unity of action. In controlling the unity of action, Poe is able to achieve the unity of effect which he felt to be the necessary ingredient in short-story writing.

The second story in the narrator-actor group is "The Tell-Tale Heart." All of the action takes place one night, beginning around midnight and ending in the early morning hours. The exposition sets the mood of the story. Here, too, the narrator states that he is not mad; in fact, a disease has sharpened his senses and his hearing is very acute. He has arrived at an idea of how he can murder an old man, an old man who has never done him any

¹Neal, p. 74.

harm but who has a bad eye which offends his morbid aesthetic sense. He makes up his mind to kill the old man, and every night around midnight he checks on him. He places a closed lantern inside the old man's bedroom door and then very carefully opens it so that a single ray of light shines upon the bad eye. The narrator does this for seven nights. Upon the eighth night the old man awakens when the lantern is placed inside the door. The narrator stands still for an hour, without moving a muscle, knowing the old man is scared, afraid for his life. He finally opens the lantern to allow a tiny thread of light to fall upon the old man's eye. The narrator hears the beating of the old man's heart and kills him. Then he cuts up the body and places it under the floor boards. He has been very careful to clean up after himself, and the time is now four o'clock in the morning. At this point the police come because the neighbors have reported they heard a scream in the night. The police search the house but find that all is in order; none of the old man's things have been taken. The narrator is now so sure of himself that he asks the policemen to pull up their chairs and sit above the place where the body is hidden. The narrator talks on and on with the officers, and then he begins to hear a low muffled sound.

This sound increases in volume until he can stand it no longer. He jumps up and admits what he has done because he hears the beating of the old man's heart.

The exposition in "The Tell-Tale Heart" sets the mood of this short story by giving the background of the narrator's feelings. He says that he is not mad, and he has no ill will toward the old man he wishes to murder. He explains the method of watching the old man's eye that he has used for seven nights before he begins the action of the story. Even though the story is related conventionally, in the past tense, the introductory material serves to set the stage for the real action that takes place the night of the murder. All of the action in each of the nine stories being considered here is told in the past tense, as is usual in fiction, by a first-person narrator. The seven nights that the murderer spends getting ready for the murder is merely background material and not part of the action of this story. The inciting incident begins the action when, on the eighth night, the murderer opens the door and laughs at his own cunning plan. The old man awakens because of some noise. This is the first action that will make the next action dependent upon the preceding one. As the murderer puts his head into the room his hand slips on the lantern. The old

man's heart begins to beat loudly because he hears the noise and is afraid. The murderer's third action is to spring into the room and murder the old man. The reactions of the old man are part of the plot, but the narrator is the one doing the acting. As the result of killing the old man, the murderer is forced to conceal the body. He cuts up the body and places it under the floor. The police come to check the report of a scream in the night, and the murderer is so self-satisfied with his crime and the method with which he has handled it that he brings chairs into the room where the body is placed for the officers. He even places his own chair above the place where the boards had been removed. Sitting there the narrator begins to hear a "low, dull, quick sound," and this sound gets louder and louder. The climax of the story comes when the murderer jumps up and yells, "I admit the deed!--tear up the planks!"¹ Each action has led up to this climactic point, and the outcome is now very clear. Since he has admitted his deed in the presence of the police, he must pay the penalty for murder. The heartbeat that increased his fury to murder the old man has also forced him to admit what he has done.

¹"Heart," p. 262.

All the action takes place in the home of the old man. The setting is not the important element in "The Tell-Tale Heart." The only description of the room in which the murder is committed is the mention of darkness. This is in keeping with the observation that the setting of Poe's stories is the reflection of the inner person. Poe does keep the unity of place in "The Tell-Tale Heart," and even though the place does not seem to be the important factor, unity of place helps to hold the reader's attention to the unity of effect that Poe required of his work.

The time that passes in "The Tell-Tale Heart" is eight days, but seven of these days are covered in the introductory material before the action of the story begins. The action of the story covers only a few hours beginning at midnight of the eighth day. Time is an important element in Poe's achievement of unity of effect. The reader feels complete horror and some fear that this same thing could happen to him at the hands of some madman because the old man in the story did not suspect anything until the hour that the murderer stands in the dark waiting to jump upon him. For the murderer to stand one hour without moving a muscle adds to the horror in the unity of effect. The reader reads over this fact

quite rapidly; but he must consider that the madman felt he waited an hour when in reality it may have only seemed that long. All of the contemplation time spent listening to the old man's terror, the murder, the clean-up, and the confession cover only a little over four hours. "The Tell-Tale Heart" is one of Poe's shorter stories, a little over two thousand words, and the time covered in the story is very brief. Time is an important element in developing the unity of effect, horror, in "The Tell-Tale Heart."

The all-important unity of action is kept in "The Tell-Tale Heart." The narrator does not tell of anything he does or has done that does not point to the climax and outcome of the story. Poe makes use of unity of action to achieve the unity of effect in "The Tell-Tale Heart."

Both of the narrators in "The Black Cat" and "The Tell-Tale Heart" are clearly mad. Each one moves methodically to cover up the murder he has committed. Each feels so satisfied with himself that he is guilty of hubris, or overconfidence. The tragic hero in Greek drama suffers misfortune and a fall as the result of excessive pride or overconfidence. The tragic hero is the force behind his own actions, causing each action. The narrators in these two stories although not heroic

in caliber are much like the tragic hero in that they bring about their own downfall through overconfidence.

A third story presenting the narrator as the actor is "The Cask of Amontillado." The narrator tells his own story in the first person and in the past tense. There is a short exposition as the narrator states that he has been wronged by Fortunato. He does not elaborate as to the type of insult, but he does say that he will have his revenge.

One evening during carnival time Montresor, the narrator, meets Fortunato and through flattery entices Fortunato to the catacombs beneath his house. Fortunato believes himself to be a connoisseur of fine wine, and Montresor tells Fortunato that he needs an expert's opinion on whether a new cask of wine is genuine. Entrapped by devious protesting, Fortunato is anxious to go into the vaults, insisting that he will make the expert test.

Poe's Montresor makes use of reverse psychology in this short story to show how a murderer is able to accomplish what he has set out to do. He is already assured that no witnesses would be around his home when he is enticing Fortunato to his death. Montresor explains that he has instructed his servants not to leave,

at the same time saying he would not be back until morning. This instruction has assured him that his house would be empty. Reverse psychology is used on Fortunato to make him insist upon going into the damp cold of the catacombs. Fortunato is easily flattered, and he does not suspect anything malicious from Montresor.

The two men go to Montresor's home, and taking two torches, go down into the catacombs under the house. Montresor entices Fortunato farther into the vaults, giving him several bottles of wine to keep him intoxicated. After the two men have traveled some distance into the vaults, they come to a recess in one of the walls. Montresor tells Fortunato that the Amontillado is inside, Fortunato steps in, and Montresor places a chain around his waist to secure him to the wall. Montresor has brought along his trowel and he sets to work, using bricks and mortar hidden in the vault to wall Fortunato inside. When he has nearly completed his chore, he checks to make sure that Fortunato is still chained inside, because there had been no noise from within. Fortunato begs Montresor to free him: "'For the love of God, Montresor!'" and Montresor says: "'Yes . . . for the love of God!'" Montresor continues to place each stone in the wall until it is completed. He then places bones against the new wall; for fifty years the vault has

remained the same. The last line of the story informs us that the wall has not been disturbed--In pace requiescat!

The ironic ending to this tale shows more of the reverse thinking of the narrator. In pace requiescat means "Rest in peace!"¹ In pace is a Latin phrase which translated means "in peace." The meaning of pacem is a "very secure prison in which the monks formerly put those of their brethern who had committed some grand fault."² The narrator is still as filled with hatred for his victim fifty years after he has killed him as he was the night of the murder. He was seeking revenge for some "grand fault," and in his psychotic mind he took it upon himself to murder Fortunato. Poe is able to achieve the unity of effect in this story as the reader is filled with terror to think that someone would feel that he had the right to avenge a wrong even unto death. The terrifying fact is that Fortunato does not even suspect that he had done anything to Montresor, but Montresor must feel righteous as he answers, "' . . . for the love of God!'"³

¹Levine and Levine, p. 470.

²Burton R. Pollin, Discoveries in Poe (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1970), p. 32.

³"Amontillado," p. 468.

Poe retains the unity of place in "The Cask of Amontillado." The action begins when Montresor meets Fortunato, but then all the other action takes place in the catacombs. In the Neo-classical age it was considered that place could be extended to more than one location without sacrificing unity if that place could be reached within the twenty-four hours.¹ The home of Montresor must have been within walking distance of the street where they met, because Fortunato is intoxicated when they meet, and he remains intoxicated as they descend into the catacombs.

"The Cask of Amontillado" has a short exposition at the beginning of the story. The dramatic or narrative interest does not begin until the action begins. Everything that is written before the movement of the plot is merely a prelude.² In the prelude or exposition of "The Cask of Amontillado" the narrator states that he is seeking revenge for something that Fortunato has done. Fortunato is a vain man who can be flattered, but he does not know that Montresor has a grudge against him.

The action begins one evening when Montresor meets his friend and tells him that he has some Amontillado wine

¹Brockett, p. 170.

²Neal, p. 81.

to be tested. Since Fortunato is vain enough to think that he is the only man capable of testing the Amontillado, Montresor is able to persuade Fortunato to go to his home. ". . . I suffered him to hurry me to my palazzo."¹ Throughout the first part of the story, everything that Montresor says is false or is said only to coax Fortunato to his death. Montresor does not really have any Amontillado wine, and he means the opposite when he calls Fortunato "friend." Over the protests of Montresor for the health of his friend, the two men go down into the vaults. Montresor gives Fortunato wine to drink along the way. Getting Fortunato into the catacombs involves many lines of deception, which constitute one action. After Fortunato has had two bottles of wine to drink, the two men banter in dialogue, similar to stichomythia, an old stage convention. Finally, they reach the place where Montresor says the Amontillado is, and Montresor moves to his second major action: he chains Fortunato to the wall. The next action is the result of the preceding because Montresor now bricks up the wall with Fortunato chained inside. He moves up to the climax brick by brick, and the outcome is known when he places

¹"Amontillado," p. 465.

the last brick in place. The narrator states that this happened fifty years before, and then he adds the chilling last line, In pace requiescat! The action stops when the last brick is in place; all the rest of the story, told in past tense, is outcome.

In "The Cask of Amontillado" Poe observes the unity of time as well as the unity of place. The story begins one evening about dusk and the action stops around midnight. Even though there is exposition at the beginning of the story and the story is told in the past tense, all the action takes place in a space of a few hours. The narrator could have stated at the beginning that the story happened a half century before the telling. The action of the story is kept to the twenty-four hour limit required by the Neo-classicists. Poe, in order to achieve the unity of effect, placed the fact that the action took place fifty years before at the end of the story. The narrator's being able to tell the story with as much hatred for his victim and as much self-satisfaction fifty years after the deed is the chilling part of the story.

Poe keeps all the unities in "The Cask of Amontillado." Time and place are essential elements in the unity of effect. The unity of effect would not have been kept

if the story had taken place over a longer period of time or if the action had moved from place to place. In maintaining all of the classical unities, time, place, and action, Poe is able to achieve the unity of effect, terror.

All the narrators in this narrator/actor section are mad. Poe has each one perform his crime very methodically, telling each step as he goes. Each action interlinked with the next constitutes dramatic action. "The Cask of Amontillado" even has dialogue so that it could be acted upon the stage with little difficulty. Too, the fact that Fortunato and Montresor are given names helps add to the setting of the story. The names seem to be Italian. The other narrators do not have names nor dialogue, making the setting be anywhere, even upon a bare stage. The use of only two actors in "The Cask of Amontillado" allows face to face conflict. The early Greek drama had only one actor and the chorus; "The Black Cat" and "The Tell-Tale Heart" are similar to the early drama with one actor while "The Cask of Amontillado" is closer to the tragedy of Aeschylus with two actors in face-to-face conflict.¹

¹Brockett, p. 53.

The unities of time and place are not essential controlling forces for Poe in "The Black Cat," "The Tell-Tale Heart," and "The Cask of Amontillado." The control is in the action. The unity of action is so controlled that all three stories could be acted upon the stage as one-act plays.

CHAPTER III

THE NARRATOR AS REACTOR

"The Oval Portrait" is a frame story; that is, a story within a story. This is one of Poe's brief tales, having fewer than two thousand words, that does not seem to be as closely controlled as some of his better stories. The narrator of the story begins by stating that he has been wounded in a battle with some bandits and that he has had an excessive fever for quite some time. He has tried all remedies to no avail, and so he finally swallows some opium. He feels that the opium will enable him to sleep, as he has not done for a week. Also the narcotic will stop the fever. The narrator and his servant forcibly enter a chateau which is located in the Appennine region, a mountain range in Italy. They settle in a small area of the chateau in a room decorated with many paintings. Since it is night, the servant closes the shutters and lights a candelabrum at the head of the bed. The narrator, already in an opiate state, begins to scan the pictures and read in a small book the description of the pictures. After the narrator has read past midnight, he shifts the candelabrum

so that he might see the book in a better light. As he moves the light, the rays fall upon a portrait that has been hidden in the shadows. The portrait is painted in such a manner as to give the narrator the initial feeling that the portrait is a living woman's head. After looking at the portrait for about an hour, the narrator begins to read the history of the painting.

A young woman fell in love with a painter and married him. He loved his art and his work more than he did his young bride. The young woman felt his work to be her rival; and so when he asked her to sit for him so that he could paint her portrait, she sadly agreed. The painter worked on the portrait for many weeks while the health of his bride faded. He was so involved in his work that he did not notice that his bride was weakening. The closer the portrait came to being finished, the weaker the lady became. The day the portrait was to be finished he lacked only two strokes of the brush for the painting to be perfection. After he had placed these strokes, he was so amazed that he cried, "This is indeed Life itself." He turned to look at the lady, his wife, and she was dead.

The main action of the story takes place in one evening's time. The narrator swallows the opium and spends the evening looking at the pictures and reading.

The story that the narrator reads continues over many weeks, but the events that happen to the narrator all take place within a few hours.

All the action of the story takes place in one location, the chateau in the Appennines. The frame-story is in the turret chamber; whether it is in this same chateau is not stated. The location is not as important as what happens in the story. Any location, so long as it is strange and romantic, previously unknown to the narrator will do. For Poe to achieve unity of effect in "The Oval Portrait" he has to keep the narrator in one place. The narrator is in a drugged state, and it would not seem likely that he would be moving about. The narrator is able to stay in the velvet black-curtained bed and maintain unity of place.

The narrator is the only actor in "The Oval Portrait," but he is also the reactor. A reactor responds to a stimulus; in this case the narrator responds to the portrait and the story concerning the portrait. At the beginning of the story, the narrator swallows some opium. The first paragraph, in which the narrator swallows the opium, was deleted from a later publication of the story, and in publications after 1845 Poe describes the narrator

only as wounded and feverish.¹ The condition of the narrator does not change the story in any way. The paragraph later deleted only serves as expository material; the more recent version has him breaking into the house in the first sentence. After he and the servant are in the house, he chooses a room in which to spend the night. Finding a book that describes the pictures that line the walls of the room, he reads for many hours. There is little action in this story, and the plot is not complicated. The drowsy, delirious tone is maintained throughout, whether it be caused by opium or illness. As a result of this stupor, the narrator sits and contemplates a portrait. He reacts to the portrait, and is shaken by the lifelike expression. The story that the narrator reads adds to the unity of effect. The narrator has already stated that neither the beauty of the woman, the quality of the artistry, nor his semi-conscious state had moved him to react to the painting. It is after an hour's contemplation that he feels he knows the true secret of the portrait. The framed-story only confirms what the narrator already knew.

¹Levine and Levine, p. 99.

"The Oval Portrait" is difficult to compare to a one-act play because the essentials of the story are not dramatic. Only the stories that have dramatic plot can be adequately compared. "The Oval Portrait" is closer to Neal's description of the tale. The tale lacks dramatic plot, may lack dramatic action, and leaves the reader with more than one impression.¹ Neal's requirements of the essentials for dramatic plot are listed on pages 11 and 12 of Chapter I. The most notable requirements are that the action should interlock and that this series of happenings end in a conclusive outcome. The narrator in "The Oval Portrait" is a reactor more than an actor. He does not perform a series of interlocking actions that end in a conclusive outcome. He sits and looks at the portrait; no climax builds, as there is no action.

The narrator does not arouse any emotion on the part of the reader because he has no qualities worthy of sympathy. It makes no difference whether he is drugged or merely feverish; he only reports what he sees and reads, not in a reliable fashion either, as he is very heavily sedated.

¹Neal, p. 9.

"The Oval Portrait" is not one of Poe's most successful stories. He does not structurally control the story as he has controlled in his more successful ones. The story is more like the tale than it is like the conte, the more successful type for Poe. The use of dramatic plot adds to unity of effect; without unity of plot, unity of effect must be achieved in another way.

"The Sphinx" is another very brief short story. There is little action in the story, and most of the details concern the reaction of the narrator to a monster he thinks he has seen. The narrator begins the story by stating that he has gone to spend some time in the country with a friend. The necessity for leaving the city is a cholera epidemic which has left the narrator in a depressed mood. To make matters worse, he has been reading books about omens; and he truly believes in them since he has a superstitious nature. One day as he is sitting at the window reading, he looks up and notices the hill outside. Crawling down the hill is a terrible monster which he judges to be larger than a warship. The monster has a huge proboscis, and the body is as large around as an elephant is. The monster has two sets of wings and an outline of the death's head on its breast. Upon seeing this creature the narrator is filled with a sense of

impending doom. As he continues to stare at this monster, it opens its mouth and such a loud noise comes out that the narrator falls to the floor in a faint.

A few days after the narrator has seen the monster, he tells his friend what he has seen. The friend laughs, and then the narrator again sees the giant creature. His friend looks and sees nothing. The narrator becomes alarmed and buries his face in his hands. When he looks up, the creature is gone. His friend tells him that the true reason for error is the inability to check out an object adequately. He then takes a book of natural history from the bookcase and reads an account of the Sphinx, an insect with wings. He then closes the book and looks out the window toward the hill. He tells the narrator that he sees what he had seen before, but that it is not so large or distant as he had said. The Sphinx is only a sixteenth of an inch from the eye of the observer.

The narrator is actor and reactor in "The Sphinx." Through his actions and reactions the reader is led to believe that something ominous is about to happen. The narrator says that he is overcome with a depressed feeling because of the cholera epidemic. He also is very superstitious; the mental depression and superstition lead to

his acceptance of an optical illusion without adequate investigation.

All the action of the story takes place in the cottage of the friend. Unity of place is necessary in this story. The Sphinx can be seen in only one window; it would not seem as ominous to have the Sphinx seen at other places. For the monster to be an omen of impending danger to the narrator, he must see the insect in the same area and from the same window. For the friend not to see the creature adds to the superstitious fear of the narrator.

Unity of time is not observed in this short story. A period of three or four days passes between the first sighting of the monster and the second sighting. For the monster to have any impact, it has to be observed over a period of days. Unity of time is not as useful in this story as it is in others.

"The Sphinx" is not as successful as some of Poe's other stories. The narrator is more of a reactor than he is a performer of an action. His actions are not interlocked, nor do they point to a conclusive outcome. "The Sphinx" may have been written out of necessity as Poe was a journalist and he lived by his pen. He wrote a satiric article, "How to Write a Blackwood Article," in which he

states how to write a short story. "The Sphinx" more than likely is a story that he wrote in haste in order to meet a publisher's deadline. He may have used the requisites that he mentions in "How to Write a Blackwood Article." He states: "The first thing requisite is to get yourself into such a scrape as no one ever got into before."¹ The narrator in "The Sphinx" has himself in such a situation, but he is not a protagonist that arouses any sympathy from the reader. "The Sphinx" is not one of "those with the most spectacular theatrical effects and the most macabre subjects. . . . It is impossible to tell when Poe is playing games with us and when he is being serious."² "The Sphinx" is not a story to be taken seriously, as the narrator only reacts to what he thinks he sees. Poe did not control this story by use of the classical unities; the story takes place in one setting, it covers several days, and there is little believable action.

"The Fall of the House of Usher" is one of Poe's most successful short stories. The story contains very little action or conflict. The narrator is an observer, but he is not the main character of the story. Roderick

¹"Blackwood," p. 360.

²Levine and Levine, p. xix.

Usher is the main character, and he is the actor; the narrator is reactor to Usher and to Usher's superstitions. The narrator is necessary to relate the story and make it plausible, but his reactions do not make the plot move along. He is confused and alarmed at Usher's mental state. He says: "It is no wonder that his condition terrified--that it infected me. I felt creeping upon me, by slow yet certain degrees, the wild influences of his own fantastic yet impressive superstitions."¹ The feelings of the narrator are not action, but these feelings are what shape the mood of the story and give the story unity of effect. Carrie Sue Woods states: ". . . Poe skillfully and objectively used the narrator as a literary device to produce the desired effect upon the reader. . . . In 'The Fall of the House of Usher,' he uses the narrator to make unbelievable events intelligible to the reader."²

The narrator begins the story by setting the mood. He states: "insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit."³ He has been in good spirits and has shown "the cheerfulness

¹"Usher," p. 95.

²Carrie Sue Woods, "The Narrator in Poe's Tales of Horror" (Master of Arts thesis, The Texas Woman's University, 1965), p. iii.

³"Usher," p. 88.

of my society" until he comes within view of the Usher house. From the first glimpse of the house the narrator begins to have the feeling of impending doom. He knows that his imagination is the force within him that causes this conflict. Usher himself does nothing to the narrator; the superstition within the narrator reacts to Usher.

The narrator is coming to see his boyhood friend. He had received a letter from Usher stating his illness and mental disorder and requesting a personal visit. Usher is the last of his family, and the people who live around equate the man and the house as Usher. Extremely old and discolored, the house as a whole seems to be in good condition, but close inspection of the stones shows they are deteriorating. There is a crack down through the house from the roof to the bottom.

Going inside the dark house, the narrator finds the studio of Usher filled with books and musical instruments. Usher has changed in appearance, and his attitude alternates between surliness and cheerfulness. He tells the narrator that he has the family malady, a nervous affliction, which has caused an acuteness of the senses. He is filled with fear, and dreads that something horrible is going to happen. He has a superstition that his life is connected to that of the impression of his house. He

admits that part of his depression is connected to the fact that his sister, his only living relative, is very ill. Lady Madeline, his sister, has an illness that the doctors cannot explain, and she takes to her bed the night that the narrator arrives. The acute senses of Usher allow no noise nor music except the guitar music of Usher himself. He sings a song with accompaniment of his guitar about "The Haunted Palace." Usher reads books of mysticism and evil which add to the fear and illness.

Lady Madeline soon dies, and Usher asks the narrator to help preserve her corpse in the family vault until a time when he can place her body in the family burial ground. The two carry her coffin inside the vault, fasten down the lid, and then close the iron door to the vault. Days after the death of Madeline, Usher appears to become in a worse state. His condition terrifies the narrator.

A week after the death of Madeline, the narrator is kept awake by the nervousness that has taken over his senses. He has begun to pace the floor when Usher comes in to show him a storm that has come up. Usher is in such a state that the narrator volunteers to read him a story. During the reading of the story the narrator hears a grating sound. He knows that Usher hears the sound also. He continues to read until he hears the sound again.

Usher, in a low murmur, says that he has heard the sound for days since his hearing is so acute. He knows that they have buried Madeline alive. The wind blows open the door, and there stands the Lady Madeline. She falls into the room and onto her brother, who falls to the floor dead. He is the recipient of his own fear. This is the horror that he had so dreaded.

The narrator is so shocked that he dashes out of the house into the storm. As he is running across the causeway, a light comes from behind him. He knows the house is all that is there, but he turns around to see the moonlight coming toward him through the crack in the house. As he watches, the house breaks and crumbles, sinking into the lake that surrounds it.

The narrator is an observer in "The Fall of the House of Usher." He has the power to act; and even though he is influenced by Usher's insanity, he still acts in time to save himself. Usher is a pathetic character who does nothing to overcome his illness. He even adds to his superstitions by reading books that influence his mental state. He is convinced that he is the last of his family, and the condition of the house is part of his mental state. The protagonist in a drama has some chance of winning against an adversary, but a pathetic character

has no chance because he has accepted his fate. The narrator is almost overcome by the house of Usher and by Usher himself, but he saves himself in time.

The action that takes place in "The Fall of the House of Usher" is reported by the narrator as if he were watching a drama unfold before his eyes. He reports what he sees as Usher performs the action. The narrator reports what Usher tells him, but he gives no opinion concerning his belief or disbelief. He states that Usher said he was the result of the terrible influences of his family, and then reports: "Such opinions need no comment, and I will make none."¹ The narrator is not the controlling force in the story. He reports the terrible happenings and the progressive madness of Usher, but he remains only a reporter of the action. He is affected by Usher's madness, but he stays with his friend. He even tries to protect Usher by concealing his reactions to the sounds in the house.

Oppressed, as I certainly was, upon the occurrence of the second and most extraordinary coincidence, by a thousand conflicting sensations, in which wonder and extreme terror were predominant, I still retained sufficient

¹Ibid., p. 94.

presence of mind to avoid exciting, by any observation, the sensitive nervousness of my companion.¹

No action that the narrator performs is necessary to the plot of the story. He is needed only to tell the story as he observed it. His observation is the ingredient that makes the story believable, since he witnesses it as it happens. Usher is the actor in the story, and the narrator only reacts to him and his house.

The unity of time is not kept in "The Fall of the House of Usher." Many days pass during the story. Lady Madeline is ill several days before Usher states that she is dead. She is within the family vault for a week before she manages to get out. Time is not kept to the twenty-four hour period, but this construction is intentional, to allow the narrator time to react to Usher and his madness.

Unity of place is maintained. The man Usher and the house Usher are one and the same thing. Usher states that he has not dared to leave his house for several years. In keeping the focus of the reader on one place, Poe is able to make Usher synonymous with his house. The reader anticipates the outcome of the story after the narrator describes the house. The decline of Usher after the

¹Ibid., p. 97.

burial of his twin sister leads to the climax of the story, his death. The story begins when the narrator rides up and views the house; the story ends when the narrator runs away horrified and the house crumbles down after him.

"The Fall of the House of Usher" is different in many respects from the other eight stories examined. The classical unities are not the unifying force that make the story successful, but the unity of place is one means by which Poe achieved unity of effect.

CHAPTER IV

THE NARRATOR AS VICTIM

This chapter includes the nondramatic but effective stories, "MS. Found in a Bottle," "A Descent into the Maelstrom," and "The Pit and the Pendulum." The narrator in these three stories does not perform the action; he is acted upon. "MS. Found in a Bottle" and "A Descent into the Maelstrom" are examples of the sea-adventure stories which were so popular in the early nineteenth century. Nature is the force that causes all the upheaval; the narrator then is acted upon. He feels terror and horror, but his actions are in response to the actions of nature.

"The Pit and the Pendulum" is another story of the response of the narrator to the actions of others. He is the victim of the inquisition who receives the actions of his captors. The tormentors do the actions that cause the narrator to make a move. His actions are not tied dramatically to what he has done before, nor are they the result of his previous deeds. His actions are necessitated because he is acted upon.

"MS. Found in a Bottle" is one of Poe's earliest works. The money Poe received for this story is the first

pay that he received as a writer.¹ In comparing "MS. Found in a Bottle" and "A Descent into the Maelstrom," we recognize the latter as structurally the better story. Poe had stated that it was hastily written,² but the use of the narrator to relate the frame-story and the keeping of the unities of time and place show the improvement of the artistry of Poe. "MS. Found in a Bottle" is a story of about four thousand words; to nearly twice that many words compare "A Descent into the Maelstrom." Even though the second story is longer, it seems to move faster; the unity of time may help speed the story to the dénouement. Many days pass in the first story, and the story seems to drag. The narrator, in the first person, tells his predicament, but there is no definite outcome in the story. The reader is left not knowing whether the narrator dies or goes on to ride the ghost ship into the hole in the earth.

Poe's narrator in "MS. Found in a Bottle" is an educated man who is a world traveler. He is not the actor in the story; he is the character acted upon. Nature and the elements are the actors who force the narrator to

¹Levine and Levine, p. 630.

²Ibid., p. 60.

perform as a result of their doing. "MS. Found in a Bottle" and "A Descent into the Maelstrom" are stories in which the narrator is acted upon by the elements of the sea. The sea has a terrible strength that forces man to fight for his life.

At the beginning of "MS. Found in a Bottle" the narrator states that he has sailed on a beautiful ship from a port in Java. After days of uneventful weather a storm comes upon them. He is standing on the deck when the large wave covers the deck and washes almost everyone and everything out to sea. He and an old Swede are the only men left alive, as the ones below are drowned when the water fills their cabins. For five days the two men sail whichever way the wind blows them. On the fifth day a swell comes up and the ship rides high and low on the waves. At one time when the ship is down, the narrator looks up and sees a ghost ship. When his ship collides with the ghost ship, the narrator is thrown on board. The old Swede goes down with the original ship. The narrator hides in the hatchway of the ghost ship so the crew members will not see him. They are old men who speak in a language he cannot understand. He goes into the captain's cabin and takes the paper and pen on which he writes the manuscript.

At the last minute he will place the paper in a bottle and throw it out to sea. He goes around all over the ship, but no one sees him. The men move as if they were ghosts. The ship moves as if it is in some current. Darkness and water surround the ship. As the ship is moving up and down, ice opens and the ship begins to fall. The ship begins to quiver as they are caught in a whirlpool. He closes the manuscript: "Oh God! and --going down!"¹

The ghost ship that appears in this story is based on the Flying Dutchman of legend. The captain and his crew are destined to sail forever, and the ghost ship appears when a ship is going down.² The whirlpool is the same terrible force that Poe uses in "A Descent into the Maelstrom." The "Note" at the end of the story states that a map found in 1831 shows the four waters of the oceans rushing into the earth at the Polar Gulf. This note implies that the manuscript is true because the author could not have seen the map before this story was written.

¹"MS.," p. 629.

²Levine and Levine, p. 631.

The narrator in this story has many things happen to him. He is acted upon by the hurricane and the ocean. As a result of the weather, he is left adrift on a sinking ship. He writes the manuscript and throws it into the water as his ship goes into the hole inside the earth. Since the narrator performs little action and he reports only what he sees, the "MS. Found in a Bottle" has little dramatic action.

The narrator begins on one ship, and then is tossed onto another. The ships drift for many miles: "We were, however, well aware of having made farther to the southward than any previous navigators. . . ." ¹ The first ship drifts for five days, and then the narrator finishes the manuscript awaiting the sixth day. The unities of time and place are not employed in this story. Since the unity of time is not observed, the story does not move as rapidly for the reader as "A Descent into the Maelstrom." The unity of place is not maintained either. The reader has no definite picture in his mind of the place where the story occurs. The slow movement of the story and the indefinite place were, of course, intended by Poe. The

¹"MS.," p. 625.

story tells of a lost ship that sails from now on; not keeping the unities of place and time adds to the unity of effect.

"A Descent into the Maelstrom" is another sea story. Because sea stories were popular at this time, Poe may have tried to write what he thought the public would buy. The great American novel Moby Dick was published in 1851, two years after Poe's death. The narrator in "A Descent into the Maelstrom" relates the story as told to him by a fisherman, creating a story within a story.

The introductory material is necessary to give the background of the area in which the story takes place. The fisherman and the narrator are seated on a high cliff overlooking the water off the northwest coast of Norway. After they have been sitting looking out into the sea, they hear a loud noise. The water begins to change, and it rushes then into a whirlpool. This is the Maelstrom. The old man describes the terror and savagery of the Maelstrom, and the narrator states scientific facts that he has read so that the reader is partially prepared for the adventurous tale that is to follow.

The frame-story that the old fisherman tells to the narrator explains that the old man and his two

brothers were fishermen. They used to cross the stream above the whirlpool to fish. The danger was greater, but so was the catch. One day after finishing their catch, when according to the fisherman's watch, they have just enough time to cross the slack water before the whirlpool forms, they start for home as usual. Strange things begin happening. In a minute the storm is upon them. The first wind takes the sails, mast, and the youngest brother. The narrator of the frame-story grabs hold of a ring near the bottom of the mast. His brother holds onto a water-cask. They realize that they are in the full fury of the storm. The watch had run down, and they had not crossed in time to avoid the whirlpool.

As the boat begins to go around the outer edge of the whirlpool, the older brother, overcome with fear, forces the hands of the narrator from the ring-bolt. The narrator then clings to the water-cask that his brother has had. The boat begins to go around and around in the vortex of the Maelstrom. After seeing that larger objects are going down and smaller objects were staying toward the top, the fisherman cuts the water-cask loose and jumps into the sea. After a while the sides of the vortex become less steep and the water begins to get smoother.

The waves from the hurricane take the fisherman downstream, where other fishermen take him aboard. His facial features have changed, and his hair is now white.

The unity of time is maintained in "A Descent into the Maelstrom." The frame occurs in a short length of time. The two men climb to the top of a cliff to look at the sea, they observe the Maelstrom, and then the fisherman tells his story. The frame-story also happens in a very short period of time. The fishermen make their catch, start for home, and go through the storm, and the survivor is picked up by fishermen still out to sea. The story covers a short time, just as the storm or whirlpool is over in a relatively short time for the upheaval it creates.

All of the action in this tale occurs on the sea in a very small area. Because the Maelstrom is the main idea and central point, the action could not move very far from it. The fishermen go out to sea to fish, but they return home each evening passing close to the whirlpool. Even though the area covered in this story is more than a few miles, the distance is still within the unity of place.

The sea is a unifying force in both "MS. Found in a Bottle" and in "A Descent into the Maelstrom." There is no definite place name in the first story as the ship

continues to sail on the endless sea; in the other story, conversely, the reader is constantly aware of the place of terror, the Maelstrom.

"A Descent into the Maelstrom" is a narrative that does not have a dramatic plot in that each action does not connect to the next action, nor is each action a result of the preceding one. Nature is the actor that acts upon the narrator. Because nature is erratic, the narrator must perform his actions as a result of nature. The hurricane causes the boat to go into the area of the Maelstrom. The Maelstrom is a daily occurrence that runs its course and then subsides. The area is calm again after the Maelstrom. In these three short acts of nature the narrator is acted upon.

Poe observes the unities of time and place in "A Descent into the Maelstrom." There is only one line of action in the story and there is no subplot, but the narrator is not acting contrary to his previous character. He is staying in his same character and performing because he is acted upon. The unity of action of a dramatic plot is not kept in "A Descent into the Maelstrom," but the unity of effect is achieved through the unities of time and place.

The narrator of "The Pit and the Pendulum" begins his story with the initial sentence pointing to the effect of the story: "I was sick--sick unto death with that long agony. . . . I felt that my senses were leaving me."¹ The year before this story was published Poe had written his philosophy of writing a story. He had written that every word must be designed to achieve the unity of effect. The reader is prepared by the first sentence for the horror that Poe has in store throughout "The Pit and the Pendulum."

The narrator is not the actor in the sense of the dramatic plot. This man is acted upon by the inquisition, its victim. He is not as troubled mentally as the narrators who react to some stimuli. He sleeps and faints from weakness, but he regains the senses he was so afraid of losing; and he has better control of his mind at the end of the story than at the beginning. The narrators in "The Oval Portrait," "The Sphinx," and "The Fall of the House of Usher" reverse this inclination and become less stable when they react to the actions of others. Their mental faculties deteriorate as they react in a negative way to the actions of other people or things. The

¹"Pit," p. 50.

narrators in "MS. Found in a Bottle," "A Descent into the Maelstrom," and "The Pit and the Pendulum" make positive decisions and mental calculations in order to present their stories intelligently.

"The Pit and the Pendulum" is one of Poe's most famous short stories. This tale is one of his most horrifying because he incorporates into it many of the basic fears of man. The narrator is the hero of the story and even though the inquisition tortures him in the most severe way, the narrator remains alive to tell his story in all its brutal detail.

The narrator is the main character, and although the men of the inquisition are performing the atrocities, the narrator is the one who is acted upon. He acts as a result of their cruelties. Mentally he is at a very low point in his life. He even smiles into the face of death before he realizes that there may be hope.

At the beginning of the story, the narrator is taken before the judges at the inquisition and sentenced. He faints after the sentence of death is handed down and then awakens after he has been taken to some damp and dark place. He is so afraid of what he will see that he does not open his eyes. He also is afraid that there will be

nothing to see; he even considers the fact that he can be dead or buried alive. When he opens his eyes, he is in total darkness. He knows the sentence is death, but he is now awaiting the type of death. Is he to starve in this underground tomb or is the fate worse? He decides to find out the size of his dungeon by walking around the perimeter, staying close to the walls. In order to know when he has made the complete circuit, he places on the floor a rag torn from the hem of his robe. He moves very slowly over the slippery floor. He is weak and is forced to rest and sleep before he makes the complete circuit. After he awakens, he moves all the way around the cell and estimates it to be fairly large in size. He then decides to walk across what he judges to be the center. He is walking with more courage, and he trips on the torn hem of the robe, falling face down. He realizes that his body is on solid ground, but his head is hanging over a deep pit. This pit is one of the terrors of the inquisition. The choice of death in the sentence of the inquisition is physical agony or moral horror. He has been given a sentence of death by the most horrible means, the moral horror.

He moves back to the wall and sits for hours, finally falling asleep. When he awakens he finds bread

and water, and he can see his cell from the light of a faint glow. He is tied to a low bench by means of a strap that encircles his body. Overhead he sees a huge pendulum that moves slowly from side to side and downward. He then notices that rats have come up from the pit summoned by the smell of meat. After some time has passed, he notices the pendulum is razor sharp. He now knows the horror planned for him by the inquisition. He says that days have passed, and the pendulum slowly has descended with the path of the sweep to cut directly over his heart. He has been so terrified and so weak that he has fainted and come to many times with the pendulum swinging closer. He goes through a period of madness after which he becomes calm and waits for death. He then becomes hungry and reaches for what food the rats have left him. He gets an idea and from the idea he has hope, hope that he may escape the pendulum as it slices within inches of his heart. He takes the scraps of food left in the platter and rubs them on the strap. The rats begin to gnaw on the band, and finally he is free as the pendulum is cutting into his chest. The pendulum is then pulled upward to the ceiling. He knows that he is watched, so that when he escapes one form of death, the watchers begin another.

The glow about the walls that enables him to see now takes on meaning. He notices the smell of heated iron. He notices also the shape of his cell has changed; the walls are moving toward each other, making the cell into a diamond shape. The floor becomes smaller and smaller forcing him to the pit. He anticipates the death of burning against the walls and knows the inquisition is taking vengeance for the two previous escapes and is pushing him to the pit. Knowing the pit to be the worst death, he hugs to the walls with the last inch of footing. As he is fainting into the chasm, he is rescued by General Lasalle and the French army.

The unity of place is observed in "The Pit and the Pendulum." Poe keeps the narrator so close to the pit that the pit becomes a symbol. The pit is itself and it is also the most horrible of deaths. The repetition of the word "pit" keeps the reader aware of the pit and the closeness of death. In keeping the unity of place, Poe adds to the total effect of terror.

Unity of time is not maintained in "The Pit and the Pendulum." The narrator states that days pass, even many days pass. He is unclear about time as well he might be in this condition of torment. He feels that a long period of time has passed from the sentencing until he

awakens. Since he is in total darkness, time passes much more slowly. The slow passage of time in the darkness and in watching the pendulum is deliberate on the part of Poe as he is writing for the total effect of terror of having the narrator await his death of slow torture.

The narrators in "A Descent into the Maelstrom," "MS. Found in a Bottle," and "The Pit and the Pendulum" are all protagonists. Each one is struggling against an antagonist. In the first two stories the antagonist is nature; in the last story the antagonist is the inquisition or society. Each narrator is struggling against a conflict or opposing force that would lead to his death. Poe is concerned with death, both the physical and the mental death; but the struggle of the narrator against the conflicting force leading to death is a unity of action. Poe writes of no other person, place, or thing save the narrator, his antagonist, and the place of the conflict. Through these unities Poe is able to achieve the unity of effect.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Edgar Allan Poe wrote sixty-eight short stories, nine of which have been examined here. These stories include some of the longest, "The Fall of the House of Usher," having about eight thousand words, and some of the shortest, "The Oval Portrait," about eighteen-hundred words. An early story, "MS. Found in a Bottle," and a later work, "The Cask of Amontillado," are included. The merit of Poe's stories is not in the length of the tale nor in the chronological order of the stories. Poe's stories should be judged on the singleness of effect.

Poe wrote with a tight control. The very first sentence in his stories sets the stage for the mood and the events to come. There is no excess; each word is needed to complete the effect he wished to create. Keeping unity of effect in mind when he began a story, Poe did not allow the mind of the reader to wander by using a subplot. Poe wanted to control the soul of the reader and not to tire the mind with nonessentials that

would deprive the reader of pleasure. In his duties as a critic, Poe criticized plays for having irrelevant incidents that had nothing to do with the plot.¹ In criticizing other genres at a time he was developing his own theory of composition, Poe consciously and/or unconsciously applied a structural unity to his work.

Since Poe was a journalist and a critic, he was forced to write with a deadline in view. The works that he perfected show his artistry, but the ones he hurriedly wrote for money are not always successfully done. He wrote "The Sphinx," published in 1846, when he was in desperate need of money. He wrote that he was "ground into the very dust with poverty" and had not been able to write for more than five months. The articles which he did write later had been paid for months earlier.²

The second group of stories that were examined for use of the classical unities includes "The Oval Portrait," "The Sphinx," and "The Fall of the House of Usher." These stories do not contain dramatic plot. The narrator himself performs very little action; he

¹Jacobs, p. 385.

²The Letters of Edgar Allan Poe, Vol. 2, cited by Jacobs, p. 393.

only mentally reacts to stimuli. The narrator in "The Fall of the House of Usher" is the only narrator of the three to make any physical response as well as mental reaction.

The third group of narrators, including narrators in "MS. Found in a Bottle," "A Descent into the Maelstrom," and "The Pit and the Pendulum," are acted upon. They are like the protagonist of the early Greek drama in that each is the first actor or chief player in the story. For a story to have a protagonist there must be a conflict or opposing force. This opposing force commits the actions against the narrators; they are acted upon.

The second and third group of stories with the narrators as reactors and as the victim do not contain dramatic plot. The stories are not controlled by the ancient conventions of the drama, the classical unities. Poe controlled these stories by a method other than the classical unities.

Poe does adhere to the classical unities in the first group of short stories where the narrator is the actor himself. This section includes "The Black Cat," "The Tell-Tale Heart," and "The Cask of Amontillado." The unities of time and place are not maintained in "The Black Cat," but the unity of action is controlled exactly

as Aristotle had specified. These three stories contain dramatic plot; each event is connected with what has gone before.

Poe's best short stories are written with a tight structural control. His stories of ratiocination are tightly planned, but the stories contain little action and are not dramatically structured. Some of the tales of horror are structured dramatically; they are meant to be read, not acted. The classical unities are a device of drama, and they can carry over into another genre, as Poe has shown in the short story. The classical unities can be a unifying force, but Poe did not use them as his only control. The unity of place and the unity of time are not as important to Poe nor were they as important to Aristotle. The important factor to both men was unity of action. Poe does adhere to the classical unity of action but not necessarily as his only structural control.

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