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Living in the Mystery: Myriad Approaches to Death in Edgar Allan Poe's Tales of Terror

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LIVING IN THE MYSTERY: MYRIAD APPROACHES TO DEATH IN EDGAR
ALLAN POE'S TALES OF TERROR

A thesis submitted to
Regis College
The Honors Program
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for Graduation with Honors

by

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CHAPTER I

Edgar Allan Poe: Death in American Literature

“The Fall of the House of Usher,” “The Tell-Tale Heart,” “Ligeia,” —Edgar

Comment [SD1]: Effective cataloguing?

Allan Poe’s short stories are some of the most well known in America. His gruesome tales entrance readers, not simply because of their skillfully woven plots and sinister details, but because of the level of complexity hidden within them. Throughout the last two hundred years, the value of Poe’s work has been disputed—while some critics find his work to be simply sensational, an attempt at populist appeal through telling gruesome stories with no real literary value, others argue for Poe’s groundbreaking work in American literature, as the founder of the modern detective story and as the author who “led the way into modern literature” (Ziff 80). While there are critics who find Poe’s depressing and gothic stories to be of no value because they focus predominantly on the morose representation of death, it is only through an exploration of this theme that Poe’s artistry can be best understood.

Comment [SD2]: I don’t think the function of a critic is to identify genius.

Poe explored death in a way no other American author did, by not only portraying the ways human perceptions of death can become obsessive entrapments that prevent acceptance of both death and life, but also the ways those perceptions can become transformative and transcendent. It is in his discussion of death—death as an internal battle, an exploration of the self and of how to understand and come to terms with death—of the self, of loved ones, of fear, that Poe breaks from the created American mass needs and develops his own form of art as an exploration of the self. Poe’s ultimate

Comment [dh3]: First, this is a fragment. ☹️ But more important, it’s too loose and list-y to be a good thesis. What we want for the final draft is not a list of what he does but an analytical statement (indeed with elements listed, if appropriate) that spells out what you will be concluding about Poe’s treatment of death.

theory of unity suggests that it is only in death that people can truly be reunited and become unified; if there is to be one point for all of life, perhaps that point can only be reached in death: “The remarkable divisions that abound in the work of Poe all say unity is impossible this side of the grave, and yet for Poe the aesthete repeatedly asserts that the single, most important aspect of art is that it alone can approximate unity on this planet” (Ziff 76). If true unity cannot be established on Earth, then art’s purpose is to bring humanity as close to unity as possible. Life separates humanity from nature, from being part of the ultimate unity: “in death alone is a form of unity possible; there man returns to the sentient wholeness of nature from which living inevitable divided him” (Ziff 76). Poe’s vision for his tales was to approximate the ideal unity possible with death, not only through exploring his own concept of the afterlife in stories like “M.S. Found in a Bottle” and “A Descent into the Maelström,” but also by re-representing unity through the very creation of his stories. Every precise detail, every extra word, was intentionally placed to portray one overall affect on the reader; and usually that effect was to portray the consequences of death.

The Life of a Legend: A Short Biography

Poe’s tragic life, perhaps more notorious than his gruesome work, has often been confused as the motivation for the morose themes he repeatedly wrote about. Readers often think of Poe’s life and his tales as one and the same—“a single impression of eerie melancholy” (Silverman 1). While the personal events in his life surely affected his writing to some degree, to dismiss the literary legitimacy of Poe’s work on the grounds of his troubled character, life, and death would be to underestimate the complexity and

Comment [SD4]: Agreed with what Dr. Hicks says below for that sentence being pulled into the biography. This section really gets to the heart of the thesis, too. Should this be pulled into the opening paragraphs?

Comment [SD5]: Check with Dr. Hicks on this one, but usually for a writing of this length, we tend to deprecate general biographical information in its own section like this in favor of bringing up biographical info where it is relevant to the essay’s claims about the topic. This kind of info can be culled from Wikipedia these days.

intelligence inherent in his work. A brief understanding of Poe's biography can be helpful in analyzing some of his works, although it is important to recognize that the actual events of his life are only a partial source for understanding the focus of his art. Since Poe was impacted by several devastating deaths throughout his life, and since he saw death as the intellectual answer to life, it makes some sort of sense that it would be one of Poe's greatest obsessions throughout his literary career.

Comment [dh6]: You're kind of getting at the big thesis here. Should this be in the beginning?

Born January 19, 1809 to a pair of actors, Poe's life began tragically when his father deserted his mother shortly after his birth. The tragedy was further compounded when his mother died when he was only two years old, an event that would affect him for the rest of his life. Poe was taken care of by a wealthy merchant named John Allan, who became his godfather, but never adopted him (Peithman). Despite Allan's goodwill in raising him, Poe's upbringing focused more on material provisions rather than comfort or warmth—while Mr. Allan provided for Poe's education, food, and living, he failed to be a real father figure (Silverman 1). An ambitious merchant, John did not spend much time at home with Poe, and Poe grew up with no real family connections or friends. Furthermore, the relationship Allan and Poe did develop was stressed and unsatisfying; neither seemed to get along with the other, and they constantly argued, particularly about money. Furthermore, it seems that the tragedy of his early life, the death of his wife at a very young age, and his unpredictable and haphazard relationships with women after her death, all suggest that Poe had a peculiar relationship with women—perhaps the result of his tragic experiences with them. It would not be too much of a stretch, however, to extend this peculiarity to Poe's relationships with many other individuals. He was

constantly at odds with his contemporaries, and often difficult to get along with in general.

One thing John Allan did do for Poe, however, was attempt to educate him well. From 1815-1820, Poe spent time in England with John attending various schools where he excelled in languages. In February of 1826 Poe entered the University of Virginia. While John supported Poe financially at least part of the time, it was at the university that the already troubled relationship between Allan and Poe became more heated. It seems that in 1826 Poe was secretly engaged to a young woman named [redacted], but when her family discovered the situation after intercepting a love note, they quickly married her off to another man instead. To compound matters, Poe and Allan quibbled over money, and Poe, who felt he was not receiving enough financial support from Allan, attempted to make money through gambling, but instead incurred large amounts of debt (Peithman). As a result, Allan removed Poe from the university, and “it was at this point that stories began to circulate about Poe’s drinking problem. While some of these accounts are exaggerated, it seems clear that Poe did have an abnormal reaction to even small amounts of liquor (especially wine)” (Peithman x).

After leaving the University of Virginia, Poe continued to quarrel with his godfather, and their relationship quickly disintegrated after a fiasco at West Point where Poe intentionally got himself expelled (Peithman). When Allan died four years later, he left none of his extensive estate to Poe, instead bequeathing it to his new young wife and the two children he beget by her (Silverman). Needless to say, Poe was quite upset by

Comment [SD7]: This was not set up.

Comment [SD8]: Now *that* is a name!

Comment [dh9]: Peithman is not a good source for Poe bio info. Silverman would be much better.

Comment [SD10]: This word just seems wrong unless he’s running the Kentucky Derby.

this situation, and struck “Allan” from his name, signing thereafter as Edgar A. Poe instead (Silverman).

Comment [SD11]: Which is just as well, as “Allan” is a dumb spelling.

After recovering from his unpleasant experience with the military and his godfather, Poe really began his career. He published his second collection of poetry in 1831, and then began writing some of his tales (he published the first poetry collection while still in school). He also began to write for the *Southern Literary Messenger*, and became the editor in 1835. Poe’s talents could not be mistaken, as the magazine’s readership increased from 500 to 3500 under his guidance. Unfortunately, Poe then began attacking other literary figures of the day, resulting in quarrels with many other writers and a bad reputation, which would work against him for the rest of his life (Silverman).

During this time, Poe lived with his aunt Marie Poe Clemm, whom he fondly called “Muddy” (Silverman). It wasn’t long before Marie arranged a marriage between him and her daughter (Poe’s cousin) Virginia, who was 13 at the time, and referred to by Poe as “Sissy” (Silverman). Because of the large age difference between himself and Virginia, she and Poe pretended to be brother and sister during the first few years of their marriage (Silverman). While Poe was very much in love with his wife, his life during this time was still very stressful. He made little money, and struggled to keep the jobs he did manage to find. Shortly thereafter, Poe had a falling out with the owner of the *Messenger*, and then spent 1837-1840 moving all over New England and working for various publications. Some of his most popular writing was produced during this time, although it was hard for him to make any money to support himself, Muddy, and his

young wife, who moved with him (Silverman). In 1840 Poe published his first volume of tales; it was not well received: “With authorship as a profession just beginning in America, American writers received little for their work. “Ligeia” seems to have earned Poe only ten dollars” (Silverman 4). Despite the economic challenges, Poe was able to keep his drinking in check until Virginia’s health began to decline. In early 1842, “disaster struck: Virginia broke a blood vessel while singing, and her health, which had never been good, declined rapidly, and she contracted tuberculosis” (Peithman xi).

Comment [SD12]: SP.

Virginia’s contraction of tuberculosis had severe effects on Poe. He once again began to struggle with his drinking problem, the quarrels with other literary figures continued, and financial problems escalated. To further complicate the situation, the public began to see Poe as deranged, and his erratic behavior damaged his growing literary popularity, previously established by the publication of “The Raven” and his public lectures on poetry. He was at times depressed and despondent, his wife was dying, he was flirting with a married woman who had two small children (which got him into a fistfight) and gave the public further evidence to consider him crazy (Silverman). At one point, Poe read his poem “Al Aaraaf” publically while clearly drunk, enraging his audience. Further damaging his already fragile reputation, precisely at the moment when he could use the financial support that might accompany literary success, Poe wrote a series of articles called “The Literati of New York City,” where he harshly profiled 38 New York City authors. One author, Thomas Dunn English, was so angry that he wrote Poe a scalding letter in return. Poe sued for libel and won, but the trial, which

Comment [SD13]:

Comment [SD14]: “his public”

Comment [SD15]: “The Literati of New York City”

demonstrated Poe's ungentlemanly behavior, and public interest in his alcoholism, completely destroyed his reputation (Peithman).

Virginia's death in early 1847, after a long and painful battle with tuberculosis, caused Poe to go into a severe depression. He spent the majority of the year being nursed back to health by Mrs. Clemm after he was diagnosed with a "brain lesion": "The lesion was perhaps responsible for Poe's manic-depressive behavior and possibly for his inability to tolerate liquor" (Peithman xii). Whatever the cause of his deranged behavior, it is clear that Virginia's death affected Poe immensely. The year after she died, in an apparent attempt to fill the void left by her death, Poe became engaged to one woman, and then promptly fell in love with another after the first engagement fell through. It is clear from these experiences that death was a huge reality in Poe's life, and this would be reflected in his work. Poe struggled to understand and deal with the tragedy in his own life, sometimes succumbing to insanity, and this lifelong challenge was reflected in the various representations of death in his tales.

The following year, 1849, Poe's mental stability did not return. In Philadelphia he went on one of his "sprees," where he became so intoxicated that he could not control himself. Luckily he was brought back to his adolescent home by some friends, where he recovered. He then became engaged to his childhood sweetheart Elmira Royster Shelton, but once again fell victim to alcoholism and went on yet another spree. It would seem that Poe never recovered from the death of his wife, and in a notorious story, finally came to his own death:

Comment [SD16]: Redundant

In late-September 1849, Poe left Richmond for Baltimore, where, one story has it, he attended a birthday party, was offered a glass of wine in a toast, and once again went on a spree. The next five days are a blank, but on October 3, 1849, he was found wandering the streets of the city. While a widely circulated story has it that he was taken in a drunken stupor from poll to poll by unscrupulous political hacks, this is only a possibility. He was placed in the Washington Hospital, where he died without ever fully regaining consciousness. (Peithman xiii)

Comment [SD17]: Indent block quotes 1"

Unfortunately for his work, Poe had named Rufus Griswold (editor-writer) as the executor of his will, whom he had often quarreled with. Griswold took his opportunity for revenge, and finished destroying Poe's reputation. In the obituary, Griswold accused Poe of being a "writer [who] had no friends and no faith in humanity, that he had been expelled from the University of Virginia, that he had deserted the Army, that he had had an affair with the second Mrs. Allan, that he had been guilty of plagiarisms 'scarcely paralleled for their audacity in all literary history,' that he had had no redeeming virtues, and that he had been a slave to alcohol and possibly opium" (Peithman xiii). Poe's choice of naming Griswold the executor of his will became a disaster for his reputation; his work became even more unpopular. Even today, the reputation further created by Griswold affects critics' perceptions of his work; he is sometimes still not considered one of America's great writers because of the reputation Griswold left behind.

Comment [SD18]: affects

Comment [dh19]: This is the commonly held view, but Silverman (I think) asserts that it was actually a brilliant move on Poe's part. He knew Griswold would write an inflammatory biography; he also knew that such a bio would cause a sensation and considerable controversy. And he knew that controversy made people famous. And it all worked!

While alive, Poe suffered at the hands of the public and the economy. He was not known for being a "gentleman," no matter how hard he tried to portray himself as one.

Furthermore, his personal attacks on many other authors of the time period, and inability to tolerate alcohol, led to a terrible reputation as a low-life, and to his unsavory legacy today. Poe's character was different from his contemporaries —he never truly belonged to a family or a social group: "Notoriously, Edgar Allan Poe was a man without a country. He had no allegiance to the America imagined by his fellow countrymen, and no definite location within any unit of his homeland" (Ziff 67). Poe did not fit into the society he was born into; his "experiences were such as to leave him preoccupied with the past and often at odds with his contemporaries' values and ambitions" (Silverman 1). As with many individuals who thought ahead of – or outside of – their time, exploring new ways of thinking about their world, Poe's creative contributions to literature were not fully recognized until many years after his death.

Poe in Early America

Further upsetting Poe's reputation, and preventing him from being readily accepted into society like other writers of the time, such as Thoreau, Emerson, and Hawthorne, was the way Poe fit within an American identity just beginning to establish itself. Poe lived during the time of American expansion, both in terms of territory (the annexation of Texas, the Mexican-American War) and in population (immigration). Cities were growing and developing, and settled land was being more fully developed (Kennedy 64-65). This expansionist mindset was often captured by writers of the time, who explored the new America's territory through literature, establishing an American literary identity. Poe's themes, however, varied from these expansionist ideas. As a writer who focused on the internal human soul, on mental torment, his ideas didn't quite

Comment [SD20]: Pet peeve: this is a split infinitive. Verboten, unless you are writing the intro to *Star Trek*.

Comment [dh21]: wc

Comment [SD22]: mindset

fit into American expansionist ideals: “Open physical space has no function in the work of Poe because, obviously, mental space, with which he is centrally concerned, is a caged area... Poe was taking a social stand, asserting that art, growing from the imagination, is confined to the pure products of the mind and has no commerce with the collective destiny of the people” (Ziff 70). Poe would battle with this “collective destiny” and the creation of art for the entirety of his career; he saw art as something independent of the mass, as something internal. In the “Philosophy of Composition,” Poe claimed that, “My first object (as usual) was originality... The fact is that originality (unless in minds of very unusual force) is by no means a matter, as some suppose, of impulse or intuition. In general, to be found, it must be elaborately sought, and although a positive merit of the highest class, demands in its attainment less of invention than negation” (Poe 460). Poe identified the beauty in art as something that must be pursued, “elaborately sought”; he wrote internally from his own soul, feeling for the things that affected him most and then complicating them, twisting them, and negating them. Poe sought to explore the most emotionally visceral ideas he could, but through a much deeper level of analysis. Rather than portray the expansion of the mind, branching out from the self or from societal perceptions as transcendental authors of the time discussed, Poe analyzed the internal; he worked within the confines of the human mind.

American attitudes, however, were set on becoming a bigger and better America, an America independent from England and growing exponentially, an America where individuals began to own their own land, live far away from each other, and run farms and ranches. Their minds were focused on growing larger and creating a uniquely

Comment [SD23]: destiny (unless you're making a *Back to the Future* reference)

American identity rather than on exploring what they already possessed. They wanted to become their own individuals, to explore a new way of living, rather than focus on death. As an author, Poe despised the idea of catering to one group of people, of writing for their wants and desires. Poe wrote specifically to create original, precisely planned ideas, with every detail adding up to one major point. He wrote to create literature, to explore the depths of the human mind—not to pen simply what the public wanted to consume (at least for the most part—like many authors, he did succumb and write simply for money rather than creation of art on a few occasions). As can be imagined, writing for the masses is one of the easiest ways to get published, and Poe’s refusal to cooperate with the American expansionist mindset somewhat resulted in his lack of popularity, although it did allow for some fascinating representations of death.

Comment [SD24]: Most writers’ opinion, I would think (except Samuel Johnson, perhaps, but he was too witty by half).

The kind of mass mentality and American character beginning to develop in the early 1800s was a creation; while the true America was in reality full of diverse people with varying opinions and backgrounds, culture was beginning to create one idea of what it meant to be American: “Thus it would be fair to say that in antebellum America, the mass reader was a kind of economic or ideological approximation who was conjured up to serve specific purposes” (Kennedy 78). The publishing industry had its own developed idea of what Americans wanted and needed, politicians had another idea, and so on. The idea of the mass reader may well have been a construct, but to get published without appealing to it would have been nothing short of a miracle.

As could be expected of Poe, whose opinions of what poetry and prose didn’t quite fit into this accepted creation, he often disliked the masses: “Poe adopted a

disdainful attitude toward the mass audience, characterizing it by such terms as the ‘mob, the ‘uncultivated taste,’ the ‘rabble, and the ‘demagogue-ridden public’” (Kennedy 78). Poe criticized the created American reader, suggesting it had no ability to think for itself, or to recognize good literature when it stumbled across it. Furthermore, Poe challenged that audience to re-think the idea of death—even while being a part of an ever expanding American identity, to ignore death is to create room for disaster; is to forget about the hidden challenges of the human mind. Needless to say, “Poe’s maddened position as outsider in an indiscriminate, democratic society fitted him for a life of misery and a posthumous career as the first pioneer into a literary landscape that had to be explored by the artist in flight from a social world that had no place for the imagination” (Ziff 80). This literary landscape Poe was most interested in exploring, that of the mind and the imagination, was new ground for the emerging American literary tradition.

Poe called for “an originality that arises directly from psychic sources. The American artist, preeminently isolated both from an unimaginative society and from a literary tradition, should be preeminently concerned with his own inner depths” (Ziff 70). Unlike the **internal** explorations of Emerson, Poe’s exploration of the self was unique in that it was separated from nature, separated from the reality of the new America. Rather than write tales with moral messages, or which utilized nature as an exploration of the self and an alternative “American” way of living, Poe looked deeply at the self as it existed: “The psychic anguish he depicts is caused not by conflict within an accepted moral code but by recognitions (self-recognition on the part of the narrator, sympathetic recognition on the part of the reader) of division within the self” (Ziff 71). For Poe,

Comment [SD25]: Thoreau? Hmm ...

writing American literature meant writing in an original American style—an American style separate from the accepted ideals of what it meant to be an American author discussing American themes. By focusing on the mind and more specifically on how humanity deals with death, Poe stepped outside of original “American” identity to explore something bigger—and this makes sense. How can we seek to create a new America when we have failed to first look at the most basic struggles every man must face: what it means to die?

Poe’s Changing Portrayals of Death

One of the most interesting and fascinating things about Poe’s portrayal of death through his tales is the number of different interpretations and spins he uses to explore the topic. It is as if Poe himself didn’t know what to think, and decided to try out various ideas through the narrators of his stories. After reading many of his tales of terror, I separated stories into four major groups based on how they portrayed death in order to grasp Poe’s techniques in an organized way. While three of these groups (and the majority of Poe’s tales of terror) focus on obsessive, irrational, and unhealthy ways of thinking (or not thinking) about death, the final group I will explore depicts death as a transcendent and beautiful vision. Poe’s struggle to live with death was a battle he fought for the entirety of his career, and it is clear after reading much of his work that he experienced both sides of the spectrum: from insane obsession with lost love to an ability to look towards death with curiosity rather than fear. These themes, scattered throughout his career from beginning to end (there is no linear progression, but instead a continuous development of all variations of themes), depict an author struggling himself with death,

using art to play out various scenarios and to identify finally his own beliefs about what death means—and subsequently what this means for life.

One group of stories, which I have called, “The Avoidance Technique: Creating an Alternative World,” depicts characters who attempt to create their own alternative worlds—worlds which ignore death. While these worlds at first seem like good alternatives to actual life, they end up causing death itself. Ultimately, of course, nobody can escape their fate, and it is through addressing this theme that Poe begins to deal with human acceptance of death. It is clear that ignoring death and creating a false and irresponsible world—a world which hides from reality rather than facing it—is not a healthy way to deal with the eventuality, but can certainly be a tempting one. For Poe’s narrators in these tales, the mere extension of physical life is prioritized as the most important aspect of existence; any chance at recognizing beauty or value inherent in death is lost in steadfast determination of characters to cling to the only thing they do know, life on earth. Ironically, this desire to cling to life in itself causes the characters to live a life that is un-true to reality; it does not approach the real complications life provides—the very things that make it worth living. While these characters might prolong their lives momentarily, they also destroy their opportunity to truly experience the diversity life can actually offer.

The second group of stories, which I have titled “Reincarnation and Reason: Obsession with Death,” approaches death by appealing to reason, although the appeal becomes completely irrational in itself, focusing entirely on finding an explanation to something that cannot be truly understood. This group of stories, which often focuses on

Comment [SD26]: Speak for yourself! One word ... cryogenics ...

Comment [dh27]: wc

Comment [SD28]: Isn't that most world religions?

Comment [SD29]: This is a lot packed into one paragraph. How about 3 separate ones that are developed a little more fully?

extraordinarily unnatural and fantastic women, depicts narrators who struggle to find some middle ground between reason and knowledge, and the eventuality of death. While they use their reason to learn about death by spending countless hours studying the subject and observing death itself, their focus inevitably falls on the supernatural and unexplainable as a means for understanding it (for example transmigration of souls, witchcraft, Heaven and Hell). This type of knowledge is important to coming to terms with the end of life, however, these narrators become truly obsessed with it, unable to not only contextualize the ideas in reality, but also to fail to explore a variety of views or to really analyze the consequences of their beliefs. The obsessive narrators become crippled by fear, and can no longer live their lives because they are so distracted by the false hope of gaining understanding through reason. As the characters cross the borderline between sanity and madness, their ability to live deteriorates: “A Poe character is never more insane than at the moment he begins to reason with us...[reason is] an alternate form of mania ...the Poe narrator has no self-concept that blends reason and passion, but submits to the insanity of one or the insanity of the other” (Ziff 75). For the obsessive Poe character, reason and knowledge are not contextualized within life—they become a blinding and warping perspective of both life and death.

The third group of stories, which I have called “Murder of the Self: Avoiding Morality by Accepting Hell,” depicts narrators who use death as a means of escape from their immoral actions. These narrators avoid morality by accepting Hell; they refuse to consciously acknowledge their own sinful actions, and instead attempt to kill a part of themselves, which they see in other people, objects, or creatures. Part of any

Comment [dh30]: make that clearer

Comment [SD31]: Where does the “Imp of the Perverse” fit in? Not a lot of morality there, but not a lot of hell, either.

understanding of death is also an understanding of what death means for life, and for these narrators, death is used as a means to negate the meaning of life rather than envision it. These narrators, while acknowledging death, still fail to live life in a healthy manner because of their inability to accept their faults and really deal with their situations. They see death as a terrible escape, rather than a move into understanding. While many of these characters recognize the nature of their crimes, realizing that they have become terrible people who commit terrible actions, they are not ready to admit this or to deal with it. The easy way out, if we can consider death the easy way, is to confess their crimes and accept death (usually by hanging as the result of a trial). These characters seek death not because they (at least consciously) feel they deserve it, but because they don't allow themselves the difficult opportunity of changing, apologizing, or otherwise atoning for their sins.

By closely examining short stories from these three groups, combined with several other more nuanced perspectives, a better understanding of Poe's portrayal of death can be found. This paper will first explore in detail the previous three groups described, and then will closely analyze "The Imp of the Perverse" and "The Premature Burial," and "The Pit and the Pendulum," identifying these stories as transitions in thought and important representations of death throughout Poe's work. Finally, I will scrutinize "M.S. Found in a Bottle" and "Descent into the Maelstrom" as a fourth and final category called "Swallowed Into the Sea: Re-unified Narrators," a group representing Poe's perception of death as beautiful, transcendent, and powerful. I identify this final grouping as an alternate and successful attempt at representing death, describing

Comment [dh32]: wc (we don't make an understanding)

Comment [SD33]: How are you grouping this series?

how it, when compared with the other perspectives of death Poe portrays, can encapsulate Poe's idea of what it means to be human, both during life and death. While this final grouping is not the point or necessarily the culmination of Poe's work, it is an often overlooked and very important depiction of death. This exploration of Edgar Allan Poe's tales of terror reveals that while many of his narrators are obsessed with understanding death, to the extent that it contributes to their downfall, his more complicated tales depict narrators who approach death not with obsessed rationality, but with curiosity and a willingness to negate the self in order to join a greater divine unity. It is Poe's ability to perceive death in so many different ways; his ability to see both the obsessive destruction death can bring, and the enlightenment it can provide, that make this study of death, and of Edgar Allan Poe's work, both important and interesting not only to American literature, but also to humanity itself.

CHAPTER II

The Tales of Terror

In his tales, Edgar Allan Poe turns again and again to the subject of death, representing the theme in many varying ways throughout his work. Poe's narrators habitually attempt to understand death with reason, but fail. They drive themselves mad attempting to understand. They attempt to kill a part of themselves whenever that part fails to serve their perceptions of themselves. The varying perspectives and representations, no matter how absurd, all contribute to Poe's overall depiction of death through his stories, and by coming to an understanding of this, it is possible to come to a better understanding of Poe as a writer. This chapter will explore some of the ways Poe's characters deal with death through the discussion of the first three aforementioned categories (alternate worlds, obsession with death, and avoiding morality), and by analyzing example tales from each category. The first approach to death I will study, comprised of stories that portray main characters/narrators who avoid dealing with death by creating an alternate and un-realistic pseudo world, is represented by many of Poe's short stories. However, this section will focus only on "The Fall of the House of Usher," "The Masque of the Red Death," and "The Oval Portrait" as representative tales because of their popularity, clarity in expression, and uniqueness.

The Avoidance Technique: Creating an Alternative World

One of Poe's most famous stories, "The Fall of the House of Usher," depicts a fascinating narrator and main character, Roderick Usher, who, whether intentionally or

Comment [SD34]: To understand death with

Comment [dh35]: Their perceptions of themselves?

Comment [dh36]: Interesting grouping. I see what you're doing. So these will be stories grouped in the "characters who avoid death" category. So what you need to do is (1) begin this section by clarifying that Poe wrote a bunch of stories in which his main character(s) avoid death; (2) clarify what your focus will be for those "few, very interesting examples." Why are they separated? What will they offer that merits a separate treatment?

Comment [SD37]: Agreed

not, kills his twin sister. This story is a great example of “The Avoidance Technique” because it depicts not only a character who lives in an alternate world allowing himself to avoid his own lifestyle and his sister’s infirmity, but it also portrays how subtle and misleading such a decision can be. This story depicts a character living in his own world, a world entrapped inside his own head. Driven mad by his depression and over-acute sensitivity to any kind of physical stimulus, he writes to his friend, the narrator, to come help alleviate his mental torture.

Comment [dh38]: Not really – there’s no evidence that they know each other well at all.

“The Fall of the House of Usher” begins with the narrator’s arriving at the House of Usher to find Roderick Usher in a state of severe depression, and of extreme nervousness. It soon becomes clear that not only is the narrator failing to cheer up Roderick and ease his condition, but he is falling under Roderick’s spell. Shortly after his arrival Roderick tells the narrator, “I feel that the period will sooner or later arrive when I must abandon life and reason together, in some struggle with the grim phantasm, FEAR” (“Fall” 66). It is not long before the narrator also loses his ability to use reason to understand the strange events at the House of Usher.

Roderick’s twin sister, Madeline, has been sick with a strange cataleptic disease for a long period of time, which has put quite a toll on Usher. As the story progresses, Usher announces that Madeline has passed away and decides to entomb her in the vault below the house for a period of time before burying her in the family plot. After Madeline’s death, things go downhill fast for Roderick, as he seems to become more and more crazed: “His ordinary manner had vanished. His ordinary occupations were neglected or forgotten. He roamed from chamber to chamber with hurried, unequal, and

Comment [dh39]: I don’t think we can assume she passes away. She’s cataleptical before, and she’s cataleptical as they entomb her – moreover, there’s a blush on her cheeks. No evidence that she’s actually dead, in other words.

objectless step. The pallor of his countenance had assumed, if possible, a more ghastly hue—but the luminousness of his eye had utterly gone out” (“Fall” 72). Over the next seven to eight days Roderick is in a strange state of utter nervousness, until one fateful night, during a raging tempest, he and the narrator hear strange sounds echoing around the house. At the climax of the story, Madeline returns from the grave, covered in blood, to die in the doorway on top of her twin brother, bringing him also to his death. As the narrator flees the House of Usher, it splits along a fissure amidst eerie glowing light and falls soundlessly into the black tarn next to it. Not only has the line of Usher perished, but so has the house itself.

Comment [SD40]: Still trippy after all these years ...

The literal house of Usher can be interpreted to symbolically represent the mind of Roderick. Similarly, his twin Madeline can be interpreted as an alternate part of his mind—perhaps they are in fact two parts of the same person. The alternate world Usher creates is one inside his own head, based on his inability to approach life and death. Throughout the story, Usher and his twin seem already almost dead—they are described as pale, ghastly, nervous people, who live in a ghastly, tomb-like world of their own creation. Roderick makes the House of Usher a kind of hide-a-way; he neither leaves it, lets light in, or participates in any way (aside from writing to the narrator) in the outside world. Instead he becomes obsessive-compulsive about reading books whose themes relate to death, returning from death, divination, angels and demons, torture, women as the curse of mankind, and other related themes. Furthermore, after Madeline’s very suspicious death, which Roderick breaks to the narrator in one sentence —“I could not help thinking of the wild ritual of this work, and of its probable influence upon the

Comment [SD41]: obsessive-compulsive?

hypochondriac, when, one evening, having informed me abruptly that the lady Madeline was no more, he stated his intention of preserving her corpse for a fortnight” (“Fall” 71), Usher becomes even more odd and reclusive. During the following week, it is as though Roderick knows that his twin sister (or doppelgänger) is still alive, and cannot bring himself to go down to the crypt to open it up. Stubbornly, he holds onto his created world in the Usher house, refusing to acknowledge truth and deal with the situation. This culminates, naturally, in his death, at the very moment he is re-united with his sister.

Comment [dh42]: Sentence fragment

Comment [SD43]: doppelgänger?

The creation of this alternate world and Roderick’s insistence on avoiding life in the outside world, relying only on his books for information on death in an attempt to explain something unexplainable—the odd circumstances of the Ushers—is Roderick’s way of hiding from life, a life which naturally includes death. He becomes obsessed with death and with “FEAR” (“Fall” 66) to the point that he allows his sister to lie in her grave for seven days while he rationalizes that his senses cannot be right—that she must be dead, despite her known catalepsy. Usher’s unhealthy obsession leads to his death; because he cannot come to terms with death and the end of his family line, he drives himself mad and kills himself, and his twin in the process.

Comment [dh44]: wc

Comment [dh45]: page reference?

Comment [SD46]: AWK

A similar example of a character creating an alternate world because of obsession with fear, which leads to death, occurs in “The Masque of the Red Death.” The perspective offered by this story (May 1842) depicts not only an unreliable and maddened narrator attempting to flee the red plague and death, but also presents death as a form of fate that cannot be escaped; time is continually ticking toward its inevitability. In this story, death is represented as a force that cannot be avoided; to ignore it and to

Comment [SD47]: Are there larger analytic conclusions you can make about this story before you move on? Otherwise, it kind of reads like a plot summary.

create an alternative life, as Prospero does in his castle and the masquerade ball, cannot succeed. In an attempt to ignore the red plague in the outside world, Prospero and his dream-guests celebrate their own lives in an elaborate and materialistic party where the decorations are meant to be so realistic they mimic the world. The party is a dream world, a world of fancy. It is suggested that Prospero is mad, not only in his actions and his rationalization, but also because he is pretending that hiding from death will be successful. Of course, in the end, the Red Death comes to the party anyway, and as the clock in the last (black) room strikes its final note, all the revelers die. It is fitting that “Prospero’s world, created out of chaos, returns to chaos” (Peithman 119).

Like the house of Usher, Prospero’s mansion hideaway is another example of creating an alternate world to avoid impending death. Yet unlike Roderick, Prospero doesn’t seek to do so through any type of knowledge or sensory understanding; instead he fools himself into believing that he can overcome nature if he tries hard enough. Prospero’s castle could also, like Roderick’s house, be interpreted as a symbol for the mind. In this interpretation, Prospero is actually hiding from the Red Death by refusing to believe that it can kill him. He gives up his worldly responsibilities of taking care of his kingdom in order to hide; he lets fear overtake him: “The external world could take care of itself. In the meantime it was folly to grieve, or to think” (“Masque” 114). In Prospero’s world (whether inside his head or inside an actual mansion), he and his companions willfully ignore death. Despite this outrageous decision, the end of the story, and many clues along the way, suggest this method is completely impossible. The ivory clock which counts down to midnight, stopping the revelry every hour with its unearthly

Comment [dh48]: I won’t correct all your parenthetical citations, but just know that all you need is a one-word title with quotation marks.

chimes, continuously reminds Prospero's guests of the reality of what they are doing. The final seventh room, draped in black velvet and lit by eerie blood-red light, is so remarkably terrifying and horrible that no one dares to step within it. Finally, with the approach of the Red Death, the guests realize what they are up against, and can do nothing but shrink out of Death's way in terror as he proceeds through the rooms of the masque. Prospero's fantasy world cannot be successful at hiding from death; in reality, nothing can.

Yet another of Poe's stories, "The Oval Portrait," also suggests a way of creating some form of alternate world. This story, however, utilizes art as its main topic. "The Oval Portrait" depicts a narrator who, "desperately wounded" ("Oval" 110), stumbles upon an abandoned manor where he seeks comfort. The reader is presented with an unreliable narrator, making it easy to interpret what follows in the story as resulting from the narrator's pain and delirium. While this suggests the reader should not believe completely the story about to be told, it also allows for the type of ambiguity present in reality to be represented in Poe's tales. The technique makes sense within the context of Poe's diverse views on death; the idea presented is not meant to be definite, but rather to be interpreted in many ways. The narrator finds a portrait that is incredibly realistic, and, as if by fate, finds a book on his pillow outlining the story behind the portrait. The book tells of a man who paints a portrait of his wife, but makes it so incredibly lifelike that as he paints the final strokes, his wife dies. The doppelganger motif is at work here; when the two representations of the woman are complete, she may no longer live (Peithman). This interpretation of life and death suggests that each person is completely unique, and

Comment [dh49]: I think it would be useful to organize these stories chronologically, or at least to write about them in chronological order, so that we get a sense of how Poe's thinking progressed (or regressed, or developed) over time.

Comment [SD50]: Agreed. Unless Poe doesn't progress, but instead obsessively reworks (sometimes contradictory) ideas & motifs across his career.

Comment [dh51]: Take care to always cite Peithman, even when you're taking from him a very general idea.

Comment [dh52]: wc

that an individual cannot become immortal in the way life exists now. While the woman is preserved forever within the painting, she can no longer exist in real life.

The idea of a portrait being able to take life is not a new invention by Poe; rather it is a superstition fairly common in his age, and still believed by some people today. For Poe, art seeks to be a connection between what is earthly and what is divine—it is the closest way humanity on earth can experience the type of **unity and beauty possible after** death. Thus it makes sense that to be painted in such perfect replica is to take life. No two exact beings may exist simultaneously; that would be attaining immortality on earth, an impossibility. As Stephen Peithman puts it,

One could also point to the tale as another study of the relationship between a person and his double. The artist has created a ‘perfect’ representation of the woman in question, and not only does this perfect twin better represent what the artist worships in her, but once the painting is done, there is no reason for the human twin to exist: the “real” woman is now the painting, as far as he is concerned. **“Life is short, art is long,”** says Seneca. The woman dies, but the painting endures. (112)

That the story is first presented as a love story is important; it helps the reader to understand what follows: if it is true what the story claims, that the artist’s love leads him to paint his wife, why does he not notice the life he is usurping from her? It is as if the artist creates his wife again, except in a more perfect form, a form that also incorporates his representations of her. In “The Oval Portrait,” an attempt to prolong life, or perhaps to represent it—to create it—results in death.

Comment [SD53]: Still vaguely constructed. What’s so disunited about sloppy reality?

The artist's attempts to preserve life, and therefore outlast death, are yet another way of trying to beat nature. The young woman's beauty and perfection cannot last; she will eventually grow old and die; but in the painting, she will last forever as she is, in all her perfection. While this story's theme might not seem as blatant as either "The Fall of the House of Usher" or "The Masque of the Red Death," it is subtly yet another way Poe presents the idea of creating an alternate world to hide from the eventuality of death: the painting is a form of immortality. Death of course, will always overcome in the end—but why does humanity have such trouble understanding this? Poe's choice in depicting death in this way perhaps says something about his observations of humanity. Attempting to outlast death by creating an alternate world fails to solve the characters problems; in every story, the characters who attempt such a life always end up with tragedy. The House of Usher falls, Prospero and his guests die of the Red Death, and the wife of the painter perishes as the last stroke of her portrait is finished. Yet, people are continuously drawn to living this type of lie. Even the narrator of "The Fall of the House of Usher" falls under Roderick's spell and can no longer think reasonably. The plots of these stories seem so believable at their most basic levels—who wouldn't find the prospect of ignoring death delightful? Who wouldn't be drawn to such ignorance, despite its tragic results? Perhaps this confusion and fascination is what Poe is appealing to.

Reincarnation and Reason: Obsession with Death

Creation of an alternate world, however, is only one way Poe tackles the theme of death through his short stories. Obviously, this is only one way humanity attempts to live with its mortality; there are many other bizarre practices and quirks Poe explores

Comment [dh55]: Right. But this may be too brief a consideration of this interesting issue, whether or not an artistic rendering of person is a more desirable thing than mere human life – in the way, for example, a painting of a creek may be a higher achievement than the creek itself. (Emerson ranks the artistic rendering of nature as the highest form of beauty.) After all, art is immortal, whereas the person is not. Think on this a little further perhaps.

Comment [SD56]: And then run it through the postmodern blender to think about it again. What does Emerson mean that the representation can be a higher achievement than reality? Who is achieving? To what end? What is immortality if it is a painting hung in Lord Richey McAlister's bathroom?

Comment [dh57]: It seems blatant to me, even more blatant than the other two.

Comment [dh58]: Explain how painting someone to death is hiding from death. (Jen- Because it creates immortality)

Comment [dh59]: The conclusion of this section could be stronger.

Comment [dh60]: Do you mean mortality?

throughout his work. Two of Poe’s most interesting stories involve the same type of plot, portraying a very different way of dealing with death: “Berenice” and “Morella.” Poe has often been criticized for his treatment of women in these stories, and in the more famous “Ligeia.” One thing they all have in common, however, despite their peculiar female characters, is the idea of transmigration of the soul.

Comment [dh61]: wc

“Berenice” and “Morella” interestingly depict narrators who are obsessed with searching for knowledge—in particular knowledge about what happens after death. This obsessive search is not only unfruitful in that it doesn’t answer the questions the narrators struggle to understand, but causes other problems because the pursuit for knowledge becomes the only thing that concerns them. This results in some awful situations,

Comment [dh62]: I would suggest adding “Ligeia” to this list, because it’s the same theme with another (yet a third) conclusion.

especially in regards to the women the narrators love, who are depicted as very intelligent and as masters of the knowledge the men attempt to pursue. The obsession leads to the madness of the narrators, who then do atrocious things in their search for understanding, especially to the women they supposedly; in reality they are jealous of their intelligence.

Comment [SD63]: Terminal prepositions.

What does Poe’s depiction of this take on death say about his perceptions of the pursuit of knowledge and what it can do to us?

Comment [SD64]:

The narrator of “Berenice” is obsessed with reason and knowledge that he does not possess but desperately wants to—ironically at the cost of what remains of his sanity. The narrator believes that his soul has lived before him and will continue to live after him: “It is mere idleness to say that I had not lived before—that the soul has no previous existence” (2). He spends his days reading and studying texts on Heaven and Hell, obsessively compelled to rationalize faith, which is irrational. While the narrator attempts

to think through reason, it is apparent that he is in fact unreasonable, and his obsession is bordering on madness. The narrator is also unable to love, however, because loving involves more than rationalization. When Berenice, the narrator's cousin, "dies" of a disease which while she is alive, physically alters her once beautiful body into that of a corpse, and is buried, the narrator is driven by an urge to dig her up and remove her teeth. While the symbolism of Berenice's teeth can be understood many different ways, it is perhaps the fact that her teeth, throughout her sickness, remained white and pure—the only reminder of what she once was—that drove the narrator to remove them supposedly posthumously. It is clear from the narrator's description of Berenice in the beginning of the story, whom he compares to himself, that he is at least a little jealous of the type of person she is:

Yet differently we grew—I ill of health, and buried in gloom—she agile, graceful, and overflowing with energy; hers, the ramble on the hill-side—mine the studies of the cloister—I living within my own heart, and addicted body and soul to the most intense and painful meditation—she roaming carelessly through life with no thought of the shadows in her path, or the silent flight of the raven-winged hours. ("Berenice" 32)

The narrator feels that possessing Berenice's teeth, the last remains of her beauty and human perfection will "give him back to reason" (36). If he can have her teeth, perhaps he can finally let go of his obsession and live as she did. In reality, we can't use reason to understand death, or Heaven or Hell, or the idea that the soul will live on after our death.

The narrator's irrational actions and obsessions with knowledge further drive him to the

Comment [dh65]: This seems similar to the narrator of "The Black Cat," since he kills his wife because she reminds him of the person he used to be.

Comment [SD66]: Not saying I disagree, but there are a whole boatload of theologians who would disagree.

edge of insanity, and cause him to put the woman he once “loved” through immense torment.

A similar pattern is continued in “Morella,” although with slight variations. The narrator is obsessed with his wife, and in particular is jealous of her knowledge and her reason. He desperately wants to have the same reason and understanding she does, and thus is unable to love her due to his jealousy. After Morella dies, he feels guilty for not loving and caring for her, and begins to obsess over their daughter, claiming she looks exactly as her mother did, and that she has the same wisdom and says the same things.

His daughter’s existence is a constant reminder of his cruelty to her mother, whom he could not love because of his own jealousy. Interestingly, one of the subjects the narrator is most interested in understanding is the “the notion of that identity which at death is or is not lost forever” (“Morella” 41). The narrator longs to understand through knowledge and reason what happens to the soul after death, but this isn’t possible. Understanding is not accomplished through reason. An example of this is the narrator’s fear that Morella’s soul has come back in their daughter, and thus when he names her, he feels the urge to call her Morella.

Whether this is an “Imp of the Perverse” moment or not is up to speculation, for the narrator knows that by naming his daughter Morella he is disturbing the memory of his wife (who never left him in the first place). It is as if the narrator’s decision to speak his deceased wife’s name makes his daughter truly the mother Morella. Since Morella is dead, the daughter then must die; there cannot be two Morellas. It could also be argued that the narrator kills his daughter after he names her Morella, which would explain his

holding the baptism in the family crypt. The narrator sees his daughter as a reminder of his guilt for mistreating his wife Morella, and rather than deal with his cruelty, he kills her instead. In this story, knowledge and reason are once again overvalued, as the narrator tries fruitlessly to understand the world through them, and in particular the fate of the soul. This results, of course, in death and misery, particularly when he cannot love what he does have due to his obsession, and finally when he cannot resist the attempt to re-create Morella's soul in his daughter.

In both of these stories, it is the narrators' obsession with the study of the supernatural, of "Heaven and of Hell," an obsession that leads them to cloister themselves away and to abuse the women they adore, that drives the plots of the stories. The knowledge they seek through books and other means is an attempt at living life without fear. The narrators try to eradicate their earthly issues with death by studying and understanding it; naturally a plan that will not work. Their obsessions create their very problems because they cannot enjoy life while they struggle to get out of their own heads. The narrator of "Berenice" longs to be like his care-free and beautiful cousin, and the narrator of "Morella" wants to have the knowledge and wisdom of his wife, but cannot love her and treat her as he should because of it.

Since both of these stories are written in such a way as to have multiple interpretations—the reader can identify both a supernatural and a logical explanation for the events—Poe leaves the idea of reincarnation on the table in a creepily understandable way (as he also does with "Ligeia"). If the reader is to understand the child Morella as being the reincarnated soul of her mother, it is most certainly the narrator's fault that it

Comment [SD69]: That's a big "thus."

Comment [dh70]: You could say this of "Ligeia" too. I think you could add "Ligeia" to this mix without altering your statements all that much.

happened that way. The terrifying results of Morella’s death are made horrific by the narrator’s obsession. Similarly, the disturbing mutilation the narrator of “Berenice” performs on his cousin is the result of his belief that he can encapsulate Berenice’s soul in her teeth; yet another form of reincarnation brought on by the narrator’s irrational actions. The story “Ligeia” also can be interpreted in similar ways; in that story the narrator’s love is reincarnated into his second wife upon her death. Once again the supposed reincarnation, however, is caused by the narrator’s obsession, and possible murder of his second wife. This theme comes up again and again in Poe’s stories, and seems to suggest that obsession over death and knowledge leads not only to a miserable life, but also to some ghastly and unholy reincarnations. Narrators are made a symbolic slave to the supernatural, to the reincarnated souls of their loves—to death.

Murder of the Self: Avoiding **Morality** and Mortality

Death in Poe’s tales is presented in a rather fascinating form when it begins to take place not only as a crime one individual commits against another, but when narrators and characters begin to kill themselves, or perhaps more intentionally, a part of themselves. The issue of morality often comes into play in these types of stories: characters who behave badly are ultimately punished—although by what (their conscience, fate, supernatural powers) is left up to interpretation. In Poe’s “terror of the soul” (Peithman) stories characters who murder others typically choose victims who represent what they wish they could be or who are alternate forms of themselves, in an attempt to avoid recognizing who and what they are. Rather than face their imperfections, they attempt to ignore them and eradicate any earthly people or creatures who might

Comment [dh71]: Say a little more about what links this story to the others, as well as what differentiates it.

Comment [dh72]: Yes, and avoid *mortality* too!

remind them of their own faults. As with all of the approaches to Poe's theme of death discussed so far, the idea of killing a part of the self occurs in many of Poe's short stories. "The Black Cat," and "William Wilson," are a few of these more intriguing and well-known examples.

Poe's fascination with murder is a gruesome but somehow appealing way of approaching death. It is notable that many of his murderers, as will shortly be explained, have the option to get away scot-free with their crimes. In one of Poe's most insightful stories, titled "the Imp of the Perverse," the narrator commits his crime, becomes rich because of it, lives for many years enjoying his profits, and then feels the insatiable urge to confess, an action he knows will lead him to the hangman's noose. He is driven by this need, which he calls the "imp of the perverse," to do what he knows he shouldn't do (reveal his crime) until he finally shouts his secret publically and the story ends with his impending death. Although this story will be explored in much more detail later, its premise can be used as a way to understand many of Poe's other stories, in particular "The Black Cat," and "William Wilson." The urge to punish oneself, or to even kill oneself, simply because one shouldn't, reveals the way in which Poe's narrators attempt to experience death. Because they are so obsessed with it, but do not wish to die themselves, they seek to kill others. For Poe, the situation is much more complicated than that, however. The victims of the murders in many of his stories can be read as alter-egos of the narrators themselves, and so the narrators are really committing a form of suicide, especially when considering that they are knowingly condemning their souls to Hell. Rather than change how they behave, the characters seek to eradicate the manifestation of

Comment [SD73]:

this behavior. In reality, however, they can never truly hide from themselves; through the murders they commit, the characters become death itself.

“William Wilson” uses these motifs in perhaps an even more explicit manner than either of the other two stories. The tale begins with the narrator, William Wilson, relating his experiences as a child in a boarding house. He describes himself as a particularly mean child: “I grew self-willed, addicted to the wildest caprices, and a prey to the most ungovernable passions. Weak-minded, and beset with constitutional infirmities akin to my own, my parents could but little to check the evil propensities which distinguished me” (“William” 80). Despite the admission of his terrible character, the narrator does not take responsibility for his actions, instead blaming his genetics: “I gave evidence of having fully inherited the family character” (“William” 80). Throughout the story, as the narrator’s behavior becomes worse and worse, his denial of responsibility continues.

The narrator, however, is not the only character of the story to be named William Wilson. From his childhood, he encounters another individual, of the same physical appearance to the point that they are mistaken for twins, also called William Wilson. This character is constantly a source of anger and agitation for the narrator, because the child continuously offers him advice, in a tone that the narrator feels is “a disgusting air of patronage” (“William” 86). Coincidentally, the narrator’s twin grows more and more physically alike him, and upon his leaving the school, also leaves the same day due to a family emergency. As the story goes on and the narrator’s antics become even more evil, the second Wilson appears multiple times to chastise the narrator for his actions. The story finally culminates when the narrator, after being forced to leave Oxford when his

twin mysteriously shows up and reveals him as a cheat at cards, runs into Wilson at a masquerade. The narrator is enraged upon seeing his twin, and after forcing him into a side room, challenges him to a duel and stabs him multiple times in the chest. Upon killing the twin, however, the narrator realizes that Wilson was actually an extension of himself when he confuses his own bloody body for the twin Wilson's when looking in a mirror (symbolically looking into himself). The narrator has killed a part of himself in an effort to get away from the twin/conscience that tried to correct his horrendous actions, and as a result, destroyed his soul.

It is a common theme throughout Poe's stories that the death of the soul is true death, while the death of the body, although physically terrifying, does not plunge a character into the abyss (Hell). The final line of this story:

It was Wilson; but he spoke no longer in a whisper, and I could have fancied that I myself was speaking while he said: "You have conquered, and I yield. Yet, henceforward art thou also dead—dead to the World, to Heaven and to Hope! In me didst thou exist—and, in my death, see by this image, which is thine own, how utterly thou has murdered thyself.

("Wilson" 95)

In actuality we must always yield to death, but perhaps the point here is more particularly that we must yield to the soul and its needs. While the narrator's physical body is still alive, his chances of ever regaining Heaven, or of having any hope to live a better life or to have redemption, or to live well within the world, are gone. While it is clearly suggested in the tale that the narrator's twin is his conscience, it the savage behavior he

Comment [dh74]: Not always (see "Ligeia")

takes part in that kills the part of himself responsible for leading him to God and to divinity: his conscience, or his soul.

Comment [SD75]: Consciousness? Conscience?

Throughout “William Wilson,” the narrator is never able to take personal responsibility for changing the way he behaves. After blaming his parents for his bad temper and immoral actions, he continues to take advantage of people and to be angry whenever his conscience interferes. While at one point, after the incident at Oxford, the narrator seems humbled and realizes he has gone too far, he never directly admits sorrow for any of the evils he has committed. The narrator is unable to face his own immorality, and unwilling to have any part of himself, be it his soul or conscience, remind him of his actions. The narrator would rather consign himself to Hell by destroying his soul than change his ways and become a better person.

While this character does not seem to obsess about death in the way many of Poe’s other protagonists do, his actual actions, in this case murder, bring him far closer to death than many of the other characters. Poe’s exploration of death in “William Wilson” is about the results of physically taking life, and if that life is a part of the self, the consequences of such actions. For the narrator, living a life of cruelty and frivolity exactly as he wished was far more important than an afterlife; in fact, death was so far from his mind that his conscience was completely ignored. Rather than fear the consequences of murder or of his terrible life, the narrator instead feared public humiliation and lived by personal preference.

“The Black Cat” portrays many of the same themes discussed in “William Wilson,” such as a narrator who refuses to recognize his own imperfections and instead

tries to eradicate any earthly reminders of his faults. The narrator is upset by his own imperfection; he realizes that he is not a completely good individual, and is often subject to a temper after drinking, which he does more and more commonly as his marriage continues. The story begins by depicting the narrator's relationship with the family cat, whom he loves and cares for. However, as the cat grows to love him more and more, and as his drinking grows out of control, in a fit of passion and anger the narrator cuts out one of its eyes (pun on "I"). As the narrator's drinking continues, he finally finishes his crime, killing the cat by hanging it by the neck from a tree, for no reason other than that he knows he should not. Claiming he is possessed by the spirit of the perverse, he immediately feels sorry for the crime, and begins looking for a new cat.

Comment [SD76]: Pun on "I"?

Comment [SD77]:

After finding one in a bar that looks remarkably like the original, complete with only one eye, the narrator is still not satisfied with the cat's love. One evening, he and his wife go down to the basement on some "household errand," and on the way down the cat almost trips the narrator. In a fit of rage, he attempts to kill it with an ax, but his wife stops his hand. This angers the narrator even more, and he instead "buried the ax in her brain" ("Black" 146). Related in two sentences, this shocking admission of murder is followed by the narrator's frenzied action to dispose of the body, by walling it up behind the bricks of his cellar. The crime does not go unnoticed however. When the police search his home a few days later and the narrator raps against the cellar wall, a noise is heard from within. The police tear down the wall and discover the cat, which had accidentally been walled up with the corpse, and arrest the narrator. Far from taking responsibility for his evil actions, however, the narrator blames the cat: "upon its [the

corpse's] head, with red extended mouth and solitary eye of fire, sat the hideous beast whose craft had seduced me into murder, and whose informing voice had consigned me to the hangman" ("Black" 148).

Comment [SD78]: This is a whole lot of plot summary.

The narrator blames his cruel actions on the "spirit of Perverseness" ("Black" 142) and on his alcoholism. He seems to be torn by what he knows he has become, and cannot stand to be loved any longer because he feels he is no longer a worthy man, "even beyond the reach of the infinite mercy of the Most Merciful and Most Terrible God" ("Black" 143). The narrator cannot forgive himself for his anger and alcohol induced crimes, and grows to hate anything that still loves him, as he sees himself as unlovable, even by God. Interestingly the narrator is so obsessed with worry about himself, about his failings as a husband and his inability to bring in money, which he attempts to ignore by drinking, that he does not realize he can be redeemed. God won't really commit him to Hell for cruelty to an animal; the greater sin is in not understanding that both he and God can forgive him. Furthermore, while the narrator recognizes his crimes against his pets, he does not recognize the abuse he inflicts upon his wife. Only some crimes are even admitted, and those minor crimes he does admit he is not able to deal with. The narrator places irrational expectations on himself, and can't stand to be reminded of such expectations. Thus the only solution is to kill, to end the expectations by removing the people and things that remind him of his failings – and then to end his own life through the act of confession.

By committing these actions, the narrator also knowingly commits his own soul to Hell; like the narrator of "William Wilson," he is unwilling to face what he has become

and instead accepts Hell over choosing morality. Murder is used as a way to escape dealing with the reality of morality; death is accepted as a solution to earthly problems, although it provides no real solution. The perspective offered by this portrayal of death adds another complicated dimension to Poe’s discussion of the theme—while in some stories, death becomes an obsession and a fascination, in these two stories, and in the “Tell-Tale Heart,” murder becomes a conscious way for narrators to choose a life on earth full of sin, even if it means an afterlife in Hell. Furthermore, by murdering others, the narrators are in a way murdering parts of themselves. The narrator of “William Wilson” literally kills his own conscience/soul, and the narrator of “The Black Cat” kills any remainder of his good past self by killing what reminds him of it, and thus commits his soul to Hell. These narrators also are obsessed, but instead of obsession with death, they are obsessed with themselves. Through tales of murder, Poe’s death takes on a different and more complex approach—murder of the soul rather than death of the body becomes the ultimate obsession and fear.

Comment [SD80]: Some of this feels redundant.

Comment [dh81]: To this point, your discussions of most of the stories lack any evidence of your engagement with critics. Integrate their comments (as you do from this point on); dialogue with them; disagree with them. But by all means, bring them into the discussion, as you do with Brown in the next paragraph.

CHAPTER III

Unconscious Urges: “The Imp of the Perverse” and “The Premature Burial”

The “Imp of the Perverse” introduces an interesting question of the human psyche: the idea that people do bad things for the sake of doing them, for the experience—almost, it seems, out of a sickened curiosity. Is it right though, to call this obsession with death and committing wrong a sickness? Many of Poe’s critics would say yes, but perhaps the “Imp of the Perverse” is yet another idea of what it means to be human, yet another way to deal with the inescapability of death. Fear and curiosity about death sometimes lead individuals to pursue an understanding through “incomprehensible, meaningless, unreasonable” actions, to explore what it means to die, even to commit murder (Brown). The “Imp of the Perverse” may be one of Poe’s attempts to rationalize humanity’s irrational actions concerning death, or it may be yet another excuse for misbehaving and murder. No matter how an individual interprets the “imp,” the idea of a force motivating people to explore death through experience is a recurrent theme in several of Poe’s short stories.

“The Imp of the Perverse” begins as if it were an essay, as the narrator weaves an elaborate and lengthy “proof” of the existence of the “imp of the perverse.” The story’s first paragraphs introduce the idea by illustrating why it has not been recognized up to this point: namely that the imp is not the result of reason, nor can it be explained through reason or science. Poe explicitly develops the idea by outlining its senselessness: “We saw no need of the impulse—for the propensity. We could not perceive its necessity”

Comment [dh82]: You now dive into an analysis of this story, but in doing so you lose your focus on your thesis.

("Imp" 162). It makes sense that a society reliant on scientific reason, a society obsessed with phrenology, coming out of the Age of Enlightenment, could not identify a human trait if it was not supported through reason. By the third paragraph Poe has identified his mysterious imp as:

A *mobile* without motive, a motive not motivert...Through its promptings we act without comprehensible object; or, if this shall be understood as a contradiction in terms, we may so far modify the proposition as to say, that through its promptings we act, for the reason that we should *not*...With certain minds, under certain conditions, it becomes absolutely irresistible. I am not more certain that I breathe, than that the assurance of the wrong or error of any action is often the one unconquerable *force* which impels us, and alone impels us to its prosecution. ("Imp" 163)

One interesting thing to note is the narrator's sense of certainty apparent with "I am not more certain that I breathe." The narrator obviously feels the need to prove his case to the reader, to assure the reader he is not insane, but rather a rational human being presenting an irrational idea. Furthermore, the claim that "certain minds, under certain conditions" find the imp completely irresistible elaborates on the narrator's attempts to convince the audience of his sanity. If the reader does not personally feel the narrator's mysterious "imp," perhaps it is because the reader is of high moral stature or is not easily persuaded to do things. However, this does not mean a more easily convinced person would not be completely compelled by the *force* of the "imp," to the point of being unable to resist. The implication is that this force would affect anyone given the right time, circumstance,

and motivation. The idea of the “imp of the perverse” is a very fascinating approach to death—and an approach that further perverts death by taking responsibility away from the individual. The most severe application of the “imp” is its ability to force an individual to kill himself (usually by means of confession of a crime), and this is a further development of Poe’s representations of death.

The narrator continues his appeal by suggesting that every individual, if he/she is to look deeply into himself, will recognize the pull of the “imp of the perverse,” no matter how small. He explains the phenomenon by presenting three examples, each progressing in levels of seriousness as they approach the ultimate consequence: death. The narrator begins with a small description of the “imp” at work: an individual tantalizing another person he is conversing with by intentionally angering him, for no other reason than the urge to provoke him. The narrator then moves on to describe another example of the “imp” at work, the human urge to procrastinate. **When faced with deadlines, an individual plagued by the “imp” might wait until the very last minute to begin work, unable to find motivation until the deadline is impending, but of course, it is too late at this time.** The narrator then extends this example into a much scarier depiction of the imp at work: a man driven to contemplate what it would feel like to plunge from a cliff.

“There is no passion in nature so demoniacally impatient, as that of him who, shuddering upon the edge of a precipice, thus meditates a plunge” Poe writes, describing an individual’s urge to experience “this rushing annihilation” (“Imp” 165). It is important to recognize how Poe’s description of falling off a cliff is identified as annihilation. Rather than equate this method of death with the end of physical life, Poe calls it the “the most

Comment [SD83]: Never!

ghastly and loathsome of all the most ghastly and loathsome images of death and suffering which has ever presented themselves to our imagination” (“Imp” 165). To fall off a cliff, or into a pit (“The Pit and the Pendulum”), is to fall metaphorically into hell, to lose one’s soul. Is this the ultimate urge of the imp of the perverse? If the imp’s purpose is to drive individuals to commit sins for the only reason but that they are sins, it seems logical the ultimate sin would be to commit one’s soul to hell through suicide.

The beginning essay-like portion of the “Imp of the Perverse” is written to convince the reader that the narrator is not acting entirely upon his own free will in the events he describes next. The final paragraphs of the story are devoted to the narrator’s description of a murder he committed some years ago, which he was never even suspected of. The narrator describes the way he poisoned another man with a candle, but goes into no detail to describe how he manages to place the poisoned candle next to the victim’s bedside, claiming he “need not vex you [the reader] with impertinent details” (“Imp” 166). As a result of the victim’s death, the narrator inherits his estate, while the coroner declares the cause of death as “the visitation of God,” rather ironically (“Imp” 166). Who is the mysterious victim the narrator does not identify, whose death results in the narrator’s inheritance? Why are we not privy to all the details of the murder, if this very confession is the result of the “imp of the perverse,” which seeks to utterly and completely destroy its victims?

Finally, the narrator is driven by the mysterious “imp” to expel his secret and confess his perfect crime, after realizing that the only way he can ever be discovered is if he gives himself away. Once the thought enters his head, the narrator has no choice but to

follow the idea to his doom. The act of confession in the “Imp of the Perverse” results in not one death, but two: to confess is to kill again. After this realization, the imp of the perverse takes hold, pressing him to do the greatest wrong to himself he can. He fights with the imp, trying impotently to refrain from the urge to expose his secret and thus kill himself (via hangman), describing his torment: “I turned—I gasped for breath. For a moment I experienced all the pangs of suffocation; I became blind, and deaf, and giddy; and then some invisible fiend, I thought, struck me with his broad palm upon the back. The long-imprisoned secret burst forth from my soul” (“Imp” 167). This public confession naturally results in the narrator’s imprisonment, where the reader can assume the narrator is writing this very narrative to tell his story and implicate the “imp of the perverse” as the true murderer.

Comment [SD84]: Good.

The true perversity of this story, and of the narrator, is not the attempt at having the reader believe the imp of the perverse forced the narrator to commit a) the first murder and b) his own murder through confession, but that the narrator cannot admit to his own sin: “The final irony of ‘The Imp of the Perverse’ is that the narrator’s real perversity—morally speaking—is the murder, of which he says very little. By all normal standards, the only just thing he does is to confess, yet the narrator plainly regards the murder as justified and the *confession* as perverse” (Peithman, 167). In a convincingly written introduction, the narrator attempts to entrap the reader into believing it is not his original sin that is perverse, but part of the nature of humanity. The nature of the narrator’s confession reveals an alternative message, however: “the tale is as much about the creative mechanism in man as it is about the destructive—indeed, the tale is typically

Comment [SD85]: Well, it isn’t real, right? Do the critics refer to it as an actual essay?

Romantic in its conception of the paradoxically intertwined relationship of the creative and the destructive (Kanjo 57). This text can be interpreted as the narrator creatively conceiving of the imp of the perverse as a way to make excuses for the murder he has committed. Thus, artistic form and the ability to convince an audience become intertwined in the narrator's life—he uses them as a potential escape from guilt. If the narrator is **to convince** the reader of his sanity, his story will be passed on forever, and he will gain a certain type of immortality. If the reader is to look through the carefully laid argument and see the narrator as a murderer rather than a victim himself, he remains an ordinary human being, and a sinful one at that. According to Kanjo, “the creative and the destructive” are woven together, and this makes sense (57). How else are people to understand the complicated idea of death but to approach it creatively—to attempt to experience it without actually **experiencing it?**

Comment [dh86]: wc

Comment [SD87]:

Comment [SD88]: Cite

Studying the third example the narrator gives in explaining the mysterious and irrational “imp” reveals a little more about Kanjo's connection between the creative and the destructive. To throw oneself into the abyss for the sake of curiosity, for the sake of experiencing death in some way, illustrates how much the narrator is willing to give up, how much destruction he would wreak upon himself, to experience his creative act:

[The narrator] translates the terror of annihilation into an abstract image, “a cloud of unnamable feeling,” one that simultaneously possesses a creative and destructive spirit. As the “cloud” assumes a palpable shape, it “chills” him “with the fierceness of the delight of his horror,” which is, surely, the pleasure principle with a vengeance. The ultimate dread—

death, is at once the ultimate delight—creativity. For to meditate a plunge into nothingness constitutes the very ground of creative power. (Kanjo 61)

This tactic is a common one in many of Poe’s works; he often wavers in the gray area between life (curiosity) and death (destruction). Rather than separate death as something completely apart from life, it becomes something never removed, always present in some form of shadow. There is a certain beauty in destruction, and in the creativity and joy associated with this destruction. Imagine a child’s pleasure at pulling out every tissue from the box, leaving the fine white sheets lying around the house in chaos. Complete joy and creativity are associated with the destruction of the tissue box. The ultimate form of destruction then, the destruction of life, and of one’s own life, could be yet another form of joyful creativity. The experience of death in “the Imp of the Perverse” is both horrifying and joyful, thus the narrator’s urge to sate his curiosity cannot be denied: he must kill and be killed.

Arthur Brown takes a different approach to “the Imp,” noting that the confessional style, apart from serving as the necessary gray area in Poe’s stories, is also a type of performance. Rather than be experienced, death must be performed, up until the final act of death itself. As Brown claims, “What forces us to the brink of the precipice in Poe’s tales is our fascination with death, not only with the disguises of death—the murders and premature burials out of which Poe constructs his most memorable plots—but with the literal performance of death itself. In literature, death becomes an indestructible, if not a living, force.” The challenge Poe addresses through a narrator who lives in and out of death at the same time, always distractedly hovering on the verge

Comment [SD89]: Curious binary.

Comment [SD90]: Just ask my 20-month-old.

Comment [SD91]: Oh, you did!

and yet retaining life, requires at least some sort of performance, but whether or not this performance is of life or of death remains undetermined. The act of confession itself is a performance, and if the reader interprets the narrator's description of the imp as an excuse to justify his murders, this also becomes a performance. The narrator literally performs within the story world, described when he publicly exclaims his crimes:

I bounded like a madman through the crowded thoroughfares. At length, the populace took the alarm, and pursued me...They say that I spoke with a distinct enunciation, but with marked emphasis and passionate hurry, as if in dread of interruption before concluding the brief but pregnant sentences that consigned me to the hangman and to hell. Having related all that was necessary for the fullest judicial conviction, I fell prostrate in a swoon. ("Imp" 167)

These sentences evoke a vivid image for the reader of the narrator's performative confession, complete with a street chase through a marketplace, the internal urgency of the narrator and his confessional manner, and his "swoon" at the end of the public address. The narrator did not have to confess publically, after running through "crowded thoroughfares" to attract attention, yet he makes the confession into a performance. Is this the work of the "imp," or of the narrator's desire to make his death a public scene, a type of immortality passed on by word of mouth, like the story he writes from his cell?

It is interesting in that while the short story's main plot points revolve around murder and confession, Poe's narrator skims over the actual scenes of death; rather, the focus is placed on the gray area between life and death. The narrator is depicted on the

Comment [SD92]: I have to say: Dr. Hicks is very right (of course!). Your argument gets more complex the more you are engaging with scholars and scholarly discourse.

culp of death, yet still alive; as close as he can get without actually getting there. Up until the final disclosure of the narrator, this also is what the “imp” urges him to do by promoting the murder of the narrator’s victim. The closest the narrator can get to experiencing death without experiencing his own is to personally kill another. However, the actual discussion of this murder is minimal, and in fact the narrator leaves out the details, claiming “I need not vex you with impertinent details. I need not describe the easy artifices by which I substituted, in his bed-room candle-stand, a wax-light of my own making for the one which I there found” (“Imp” 166). The reader absolutely wants to hear the details—the narrator is presenting something uncommon, unusual. It would make sense for the narrator to assume this, as he also is tormented by the curiosity of death, yet he keeps the details from the readers in order to focus on his defense, the explanation of the “imp.” Finally, the urge to truly understand culminates in the narrator’s confession, i.e. his suicide. The entire story, told as the confession, is essentially the words of a man on his deathbed. However, despite the allusion to the narrator’s impending encounter with the hangman, this actual death is only discussed in one line: “But while shall I say more? To-day I wear these chains, and am *here!* Tomorrow I shall be fetterless!—*but where?*” (Poe, Peithman, Imp 167) Perhaps the main point of this story is not to focus necessarily on the death, but on the death-life shadow humanity must live in continually—the space between “*here*” and “*but where?*”

Facing Fear: “The Premature Burial”

Much like “the Imp of the Perverse,” “The Premature Burial” is a story also told from an essay-like perspective. The narrator, like that of “The Imp,” begins by relating

Comment [dh93]: A good discussion of death in “Imp” – but now tie it in with the other stories. Always build upon and complicate your thesis. At the beginning and end of each section you should be tying it into your thesis.

Comment [dh94]: wc

many accounts of premature burial in an attempt to prove to the reader that his own personal story, when he gets to it, will be a legitimate occurrence, one that the reader may believe as very plausible. This technique, although not often utilized in Poe's tales of terror, encourages readers to place themselves quite literally into the narrators' positions; the tale seems both factual and like a legitimate threat. If the imp of the perverse is something that can affect everybody, if premature burial is a real concern for the general population, Poe's tales take on an entirely new meaning. Not only does the story urge the reader to think about the fearful deaths described, but it also suggests that the reader himself is in danger, and that they and the narrator have become one entity, fighting for control of their own lives and deaths.

Comment [SD95]:

This technique builds an even closer connection to the reader, who feels as though he or she is reading something from a factual journal rather than a fictional tale, bringing the gap between life and death even closer. For Poe, art is the single most effective way to get close to a divine unity in life. This unity can only actually be achieved through death, when all beings become one and rejoin the natural order of things. Life, for Poe, is a deviation from this nature, and art serves as the connecting point between natural order and life while on earth. Perhaps for Poe, this type of story brings the reader even closer to divine unity; rather than be a separate part of the story, a person reading for entertainment, the reader becomes a part of the story. He or she must battle with the threats Poe and his narrators represent, because the threats have become reputable claims capable of attacking every individual.

Comment [dh96]: You need to find where Poe discusses this idea and quote him on it.

Apart from its **essay-like** presentation, “The Premature Burial” is also a fairly distinctive representation of death because of the way the plot itself approaches the theme of death. The story not only ends without a character’s death, a great rarity for Poe, but the narrator also seems to have learned about himself and his own interpretation of death at the end of the tale. By the conclusion, the main character undergoes an incredibly successful character transformation. Shockingly, the conclusion reads more like a moral lesson than a scary tale of premature burial, suggesting to the reader a way to live life and avoid such horrors as are the main focus of the story: “Alas! the grim legion of sepulchral terrors cannot be regarded as altogether fanciful—but, like the Demons in whose company Afrasiab made his voyage down the Oxus, they must sleep, or they will devour us—they must be suffered to slumber, or we perish” (“Premature” 160). Translated from Poe’s various old world references, this sentence suggests that while we cannot completely ignore our fears or claim that they are unfounded—many of them, such as premature burial in this story, are legitimate—we also cannot allow ourselves to become obsessed by such fears. We will be driven to death if we allow them to consume us and rule our lives; rather, “they must be suffered to slumber” in order for us to live our lives. This passage, echoing the narrator’s experiences in the tale, suggests that the lesson from “the Premature Burial” is precisely that: we must overcome our fears, or they will overcome us. For the majority of Poe’s short stories discussed before, the challenge and downfall of the narrator was in becoming ruled by fear and obsession.

In the beginning of the story the narrator is obsessed by his fear of death, which he sees “of worms, of tombs, and epitaphs” (“Premature” 156). His own obsession places

Comment [dh97]: wc

him in a near death-like state; his mind can only think of one thing: an overwhelming fear of death that causes him to take outstanding measures to prevent it from occurring. Thus, it makes sense that he begins the narration by relating several “true” stories of individuals who have been buried alive and suffered an agonizing death already in the grave. The narrator describes men and women, who after falling sick and adopting the appearance of death: “The lips were of the usual marble pallor. The eyes were lusterless. There was no warmth. Pulsation had ceased,” are buried alive and later found to have either physically moved in their graves, to wake up when unearthed to be cut open for medical experimentation, or to bang on their coffins beneath cemeteries outside church services (“Premature” 151).

After legitimizing the reality of premature burial with such terrifying stories, the narrator admits his own overwhelming fear, urged on by fits of catalepsy he suffers at unpredictable moments, resulting in coma like sedation, sometimes for days. Horrified at the prospect of being buried alive, the narrator refuses to go out or stray away from people he knows so that he does not fall into a fit of catalepsy and be mistaken for dead. In the narrator’s mind, “the boundaries which divide Life from Death are at best shadowy and vague” (“Premature” 150), and thus it could be easy to mistake one for the other or to pass seamlessly from life into death—only to wake up later buried inside a coffin.

For the narrator, terror lies in the recognition that life and death are not always easily separable. While this at first may sound like an absurd claim, it does hold some

truth, especially in the context Poe uses for his tales of terror. The narrator of “The

Comment [SD98]: And respirators. But that comes later.

Premature Burial” lives in a half state between life and death—he is obsessed with his fear:

Fearful indeed the suspicion—but more fearful the doom! It may be asserted, without hesitation, that *no* event is so terribly well adapted to inspire the supremacy of bodily and of mental distress, as in burial before death. The unendurable oppression of the lungs—the stifling fumes of the damp earth—the clinging to the death garments—the rigid embrace of the narrow house... We know of nothing so agonizing upon Earth—we can dream of nothing half so hideous in the realms of the nethermost Hell. (“Premature” 154-5)

For the narrator, the worst possible thing to endure is premature burial, and his hysteria is easily identified from the detailed descriptions he relates of the prospect (I’ve only included part of his tirade above). Clearly, there could be worse events, particularly in other people’s opinions. The narrator is so overtaken by his fears, however, that they become the only thing he can think of. Rather than living his life, he locks himself up in his house, refusing to sleep and making himself miserable. Can this state of “living” really be considered life, or has the narrator already passed into a type of death? While physically the narrator still breathes, his quality of life has deteriorated to the point that he might as well be dead. By living in such a state of obsession, aware of the frailty of human life and of the challenges of separating life from death, the narrator becomes part of the gray zone between the two. We can claim that while he is not really dead, he isn’t really alive either.

Comment [SD99]:

In a more physical way, the narrator's catatonic states can also be seen as a gray area between life and death, and perhaps are a more symbolically powerful example.

Comment [dh100]: wc

While in a catatonic state, the narrator, or any other character in one of Poe's stories, can easily be mistaken for dead because they take on the physical characteristics of death. This death-like state often results in instances of premature burial in Poe's stories, most notably in "The Fall of the House of Usher" when Madeline is entombed before her death. Poe's repeated portrayal of characters mistaken for dead suggest the closeness between the two states of being explicitly described in "The Premature Burial." If we are continuously living so close to death by nature of existence, why do we fear and obsess over it so much? The determination with which we hold onto life simply for the sake of living is fascinating, and our medical insistence that life and death can be separated is not always successful, especially in Poe's work: "then again the duration of the trance [cataleptic state] is for weeks—even for months; while the closest scrutiny, and the most rigorous medical tests, fail to establish any material distinction between the state of the sufferer and what we conceive of absolute death" ("Premature" 155). In some ways, we are already living in a state of death—particularly when we think of medical conditions like comas or catalepsy; perhaps it is logical to think that life and death may not be so different from each other after all. Life must proceed to death; rather than seeing existence as a black and white binary between the two states of being, perhaps Poe is suggesting that we see it as a mixture of gray. Some people are closer to death than others, and it is often up to us how far into the black we travel before finally dying.

Comment [SD101]: awk

At the end of “The Premature Burial,” the narrator is forced to live out his fear when he dreams that he has been buried alive, and must struggle and endure the fear associated with that terrible prospect. It is perhaps at this point that life and death become most merged; the narrator believes that he is about to undergo a slowly agonizing experience, that his death is already determined. It is this experience, however, that allows the narrator to overcome his fear and be able to live life without obsessing over death: “from that memorable night, I dismissed forever my charnel apprehensions, and with them vanished the cataleptic disorder of which, perhaps, they had been less the consequence than the cause” (“Premature” 160). The admission that he might have been driving himself toward his own death by unconsciously creating the catalepsy disorder introduces yet another interesting layer to the theme. Obsession over death, and on remaining separated from it, actually led the narrator to become closer to death. If he is the unconscious creator of his own cataleptic fits, it would make sense that finally succumbing to death may be a better choice than living with an obsession so overpowering that normal life is impossible.

Comment [SD102]:

Comment [SD103]: unconscious

The narrator of this story learns that fearing something as natural and inevitable as death will get him nowhere, and that perhaps the best way to deal with it is to face it, and then move on. Hiding will never be successful, or the fear will lead to death even sooner than it might otherwise occur. As the narrator feels he is already living in a type of Hell, any type of death may be better than being unable to deal with obsession. The idea that the narrator’s subconscious is most definitely at work by the end of the story is further supported by the circumstance of the narrator’s dream and premature burial scare. He

decides, while still awake and with full mental capacity, to crawl into the berth in the boat that he later mistakes for a coffin upon waking: “that which I occupied had no bedding of any kind. Its extreme width was eighteen inches. The distance of its bottom from the deck overhead was precisely the same. I found it a matter of exceeding difficulty to squeeze myself in. Nevertheless, I slept soundly; and the whole of my vision...arose naturally from the circumstances of my position—from my ordinary bias of thought” (“Premature” 159). Once again, it is as if the mysterious imp is at work in the narrator’s mind; what man who claims to have a fear of premature burial so great that he cannot leave the house, would ever crawl into a berth which so resembled a coffin to sleep? It seems the narrator *wanted* to undergo his trial; he *needed* to feel the terror in order to overcome his obsession. Acceptance of death could only occur after the realization that life and death are really not so far apart, and that the scale of grey, apart from being the only choice in existence, is also a choice that when recognized, isn’t as terrifying as it at first seems.

Comment [dh104]: Good

CHAPTER IV

Trial of the Soul: “The Pit and the Pendulum”

In the context of Poe’s exploration of death, “The Pit and the Pendulum” offers a fairly unique presentation of reason, imagination, nothingness, and gothic horror. While the short story is representative of Poe’s terror-driven tales where narrators obsess over a death they cannot change, it also shows another of Poe’s perspectives on death; that we must first accept our mortal fate, and then look upon it as a beautiful path to re-imagining the world. As Peithman suggests in his introduction to this story, “The Pit” is, “a skillful exercise in suspense with an undercurrent of something much more complex than most readers fully understand, although they may sense it” (Peithman 120). The “undercurrent” throughout this tale, at least from my vantage point, has to do with the nature and symbolism of the pit itself, and of its resulting implications for fate and mortality. Commonly represented as a metaphor for Hell, and for nothingness, the pit is an abyss from which there is no return. Unlike other nasty forms of torture in this tale, it is the abyss that scares the narrator the most, and considering what it represents, reasonably so. However, it is not the abyss alone that has made “the Pit and the Pendulum” such a fascinating tale. It is also the narrator’s interplay with both reason and fate, both of which save him at some point. Despite this, their ability to completely rescue him from his terrifying situation is non-existent, and it is only through the miraculous interference of a God-like hand of mercy that the narrator is finally saved at the end of the story.

Comment [SD105]: When you start/finish paragraphs or essays with someone else’s ideas, they take over the argument.

This salvation leads to a rather disturbing idea of what the merciful hand of God is actually like. If a faithful man (and the setting here is the Spanish Inquisition) is put to death and tortured for unmentioned and assumedly unjust reasons, why does the hand of God wait until the narrator has exhausted every possibility for utilizing reason, fate, and good faith before stepping in? Why allow the narrator to be tortured at all? And furthermore, why force the narrator's soul to rest on the very edge of the abyss—the very edge of Hell—before stepping in? This view of God isn't so pretty, and if we are to interpret the final salvation of the narrator as the hand of God, suggests that in order to receive God's mercy we must first grow so close to not only a hideous death, but also to losing our soul, that the divinity and mercy of God is potentially damaged. Perhaps it is this resulting interplay that Peithman hints at in the opening lines of his introduction to the short story, and this odd relationship between the narrator, his battle with Hell, and with his ultimate rescue, that provide the “complex undercurrent.”

Comment [dh106]: Well, if we take into account that this isn't long after the puritans dominated New England, there is the idea that the soul needs to be tested to prove itself worthy of salvation. (Just a thought – don't include this in your thesis.)

Comment [B107]: Perhaps move paragraph to a different location.

“The Pit and the Pendulum” begins with the narrator listening to his death sentence by the Inquisitorial Council, already faint from lack of food and water, and filled with terror at the thought of his impending torture and death. The narrator is placed into a situation where his reason has been disabled through physical torture, and understanding his situation is a challenge. G.R. Thompson suggests this opening is important because it provides “corroborative imagery for the theme of the horrible possibility of Nothingness” (300). Thompson sees the pit as a symbol of nothingness associated with death, and argues that “The Pit and the Pendulum's” narrator is most afraid of this nothingness, perhaps because it is unknowable; there is no assured survival

of the soul. Thompson suggests that Poe's work is "a literature of overwhelming possibility: the possibility that beyond the elaborate art of the game there is Nothing" (299). For "The Pit and the Pendulum," the game is the narrator's torture, and Nothing is death by the pit.

According to Thompson, the first textual comment on Nothingness occurs as the narrator describes his death sentence as read from the silent and white lips of his "black-robed judges" ("Pit" 121), but what is most terrifying is that he can see, but cannot hear his name formed: "I saw them fashion the syllables of my name; and I shuddered because no sound succeeded" ("Pit" 121). Thompson comments on this detail: "the symbolic significance of a death sentence pronounced on a victim the pronunciation of whose name by his judges yields no sound can hardly be other than the theme of Nothingness" (300). Thompson suggests that because the death sentence is only half pronounced, essentially seen but not heard, and yet still effective, this is symbolic of the death in store for the narrator. The narrator's life means nothing; his death isn't even spoken, and in a way he is already in a death-like state from physical abuse, and thus passing into a potential nothingness.

Poe doesn't leave the story as a simple matter of a narrator accepting a fate of Nothingness, however. Later, when the narrator is able to incorporate his rational mind into his situation, he begins to determine the size of his dungeon by pacing around the very edges of it, in hopes of gaining some knowledge of his predicament and escaping:

The narrator has literally circumscribed his world. This is important, for it shows he has both brains and imagination, and that he can combine

“trivial” discoveries with creative thought and come up with solutions to his predicament...he is an example of Poe’s “passive” narrators, whose survival in a hostile environment is based on their willingness to forgo old assumptions and meet a new world on its own terms. (Peithman 124)

In striking contrast to narrators from some of Poe’s other tales, the narrator of “the Pit and the Pendulum” is capable of and willing to use his reason, rather than be completely overrun by terror. He does not simply accept the fate of the pit, or give in to the fear of Nothingness. He instead takes action by logically determining the details of his prison; essentially using old reason in an imaginative application. While the narrator is able to use creative insight to solve this first problem, he is still relying on an old way of looking at the world; he has yet to “meet a new world on its own terms.” It will take more experience to convince the narrator, who by the end of the story will realize that he must give in to the Nothingness of the abyss and accept outside help. His reason, symbolizing a traditional understanding of the world, is incapable of doing so.

After determining the approximate size and shape of his prison, the narrator then decides to walk across the middle in a straight line. Halfway through his journey, however, he trips on the “torn hem of his robe” and falls “violently on my face” (“Pit” 124). What he discovers is rather frightening: “In the confusion attending my fall, I did not immediately apprehend a somewhat startling circumstance, which yet, in a few seconds afterward, and while I still lay prostrate, arrested my attention. It was this—my chin rested upon the floor of the prison, but my lips and the upper portion of my head, although seemingly at a less elevation than the chin, touched nothing” (“Pit” 124). The

narrator has been saved from certain death by a combination of chance and reason—if he had not tripped on the hem of his robe, which he tore earlier to mark his starting location on the wall while determining its circumference, he would surely have fallen into the pit. Once more utilizing reason, the narrator tears of a piece of masonry from the wall and lets it fall, thereby determining the depth of the pit and recognizing its purpose: to unsuspectingly trap prisoners within its walls. Victims would fall into a pit of water in the bottom, where “the *sudden* extinction of life formed no part of their most horrible plan” (“Pit” 125). For the narrator and for Poe, the implications of this type of death are much more terrifying than many other options.

The mathematical reason Poe’s narrator uses to help save himself in this situation, notably the logical measurements he uses to identify the size and shape of his prison, are symbolic of reason. Rochie Lawes discusses the large amount of mathematical diction used throughout the entire story, suggesting that Poe’s narrator must have mathematical training—specifically that of a geometer. Lawes suggests, “Since Poe does not use words carelessly, this proliferation of mathematical terms with which the narrator understands and describes his situation can be interpreted only as an intentional artistic device...For Poe’s purposes, the details of incarceration and release are insignificant; the details of imprisonment are paramount” (151). I would agree with Lawes that Poe, who felt that every detail of a work was significant, certainly used geometric diction intentionally. Poe himself used this type of diction to describe writing in “The Philosophy of Composition”: “It is my design to render it manifest that no one point in its composition is referable either to accident or intuition—that the work proceeded, step by

step, to its completion with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem” (“Philosophy” 454). As evidenced by his use of the term in describing poetry, Poe sees mathematics as the most logical and reason-oriented way of seeing the world, so much so that he integrated it into his own artistic creations. This reason alone, however, cannot save the narrator. While it succeeds in this instance, it will eventually take outside intervention to save him.

For Poe, the eradication of the soul resulting from the abyss was perhaps the worst possible thing the body could endure (apart from maybe being buried alive). Immortality itself—and thus reunion with God, depended on the soul’s survival, “In the deepest slumber—no! In delirium—no! In a swoon—no! In death—no! even in the grave all is not lost. Else there is no immortality for man” (“Pit” 121). The narrator suggests that his soul will continue to exist despite his mental state, no matter what happens to him. Even after death, a small part of him will live on, and this gives him some form of comfort. He knows that he will never fully lose consciousness and be completely lost to his surroundings—except, perhaps, in the case of the threatening abyss. Throughout the story, the narrator is naturally terrified by instances of physical bodily harm, or undergoing a painful and slow death. However, he has some form of comfort in knowing he still has a little bit of his consciousness, his wits, his soul about him: “there stole into my fancy, like a rich musical note, the thought of what sweet rest there must be in the grave” (“Pit” 121). Although this can be misconstrued as a common phrase, “that we may only rest when we are dead,” the implications here are much richer. If there is rest in the grave, and this idea strikes the narrator as a “rich musical note,”

Comment [SD108]: Why is this implied by the pit?

perhaps it is the soul that allows for rest. We could not really consider nonexistence rest, but if the soul still exists in some form of consciousness, to provide man with immortality, death becomes a pleasant goal. It is the abyss that becomes completely and utterly horrifying, for the exact reason that this small comfort, the idea of immortality for man, is there removed. His soul will be lost forever, and symbolically, he will rot in Hell—rather than death serving as an escape from reality, and a reconnection with the divine, it eradicates any opportunity for that ultimate goal to exist.

Peithman provides some clarity on the perilous meaning of the abyss, and on some possible connections between the tale and Poe's major themes of death. He suggests "the image of the pit has, for centuries, been connected with Hell and destruction" (124). A connection can also be made to the Puritan belief of trial by fire:

According to Jonathon Edwards [Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God]...sinners "were always exposed to sudden unexpected destruction. As he that walks in slippery places is every moment liable to fall; he can't foresee one moment whether he shall stand or fall the next; and when he does fall, he falls at once, without warning...Another thing implied is that they are liable to fall of themselves, without being thrown down by the hand of another...the reason why they are not fallen already, and don't fall now, is only that God's appointed time is not come....There is nothing that keeps wicked men, at any one moment, out of Hell, but the mere pleasure of God." (qtd. in Peithman 124-5)

Readers of Poe's time period would certainly have been aware of the Puritan interpretation of this tale, and of the potential meaning of the pit. Is the narrator being tested by God, to determine whether or not he will survive the treacherous footing he has found himself cast upon? It can be interpreted that the reason for his death sentence by the Inquisition may in fact have been because the narrator has acted in some unholy way, and is being tried by God to determine whether the punishment should be carried out. Perhaps his salvation will be determined by his actions during the test.

While Poe certainly wasn't Puritan, it is very logical that he may be using Puritan "trial by fire" stories as a way to explore his own concept of God: "Man, both writers say, is a passive element in the universe, kept from destruction only by the whim of God/Fate. The narrator escapes the pit—this time. But Poe, like Edwards, suggests that there is an appointed time" (Peithman 125). If God/Fate has indeed stepped in to save the narrator's soul from destruction, then the role of reason also plays an interesting part here. It is important to note the detail of the narrator tearing the hem of his gown to use a piece of the cloth when attempting to walk the circumference of his dungeon. This clear use of reason directly leads to the narrator's perhaps fate-driven salvation a few moments later. Poe surely included this information specifically to complicate the Puritan/God/Fate reading provided. If it is the result of the narrator's reason that he trips on the torn hem of his robe and thus does not perish in the Hell-pit, can we really call it fate/God that saved him? Instead, has the narrator's reason saved his life, which it will continue to do until the very end of the story? Perhaps reason is God's way of imparting knowledge to man; if this is the case reason may be a way to get closer to ultimate unity while still on

earth (since this unity can only truly occur in death). Utilizing reason is yet another way

Comment [SD109]: Again, this concept is undertheorized.

Poe's characters can become closer to the Godhead, and still live.

After surviving the near-death of the pit, the narrator is then drugged into sleep and another torturous death is contrived by the Inquisition. The narrator wakes to find himself tied to a board, this time with some light available in his prison, where he immediately perceives that his dungeon is far more like Hell than he previously imagined:

I unclosed my eyes, the objects around me were visible. By a wild sulphurous luster, the origin of which I could not at first determine, I was able to see the extent and aspect of the prison...the entire surface of this metallic enclosure was rudely daubed in all the hideous and repulsive devices to which the charnel superstition of the monks has given rise. The figures of fiends in aspects of menace with skeleton forms, and other more really fearful images, overspread and disfigured the walls. ("Pit" 126)

This description is not only terrifying, but also suggests that the narrator may actually be in Hell. If he can walk out of this situation using his own resources, he may have not only bested the Inquisition, but also the devil. The challenge for the narrator is whether or not he can keep his wits about him despite the intimidating prison—will he be able to hold onto rationality and sanity, unlike so many of Poe's other characters, or will he weaken and be driven into the abyss—will he lose his soul? If this story is indeed a Puritan trial, his ability to remain faithful and hold onto life will determine the state of his soul.

The narrator's new torture is a unique play on time and death. He is tied to a wood block underneath a giant pendulum held by Father Time in place of his scythe. As the narrator watches, the pendulum slowly begins to swing. Each swing becomes wider and wider, and causes the pendulum to descend incrementally. On the bottom edge of the pendulum is attached a crescent-shaped blade, razor sharp, ready to slice the man in half upon its descending far enough to reach him. For the narrator, this new torture almost proves too much. He becomes mesmerized with watching **the slowly descending pendulum**, and at some points, is close to losing his sanity. He begs and prays for the pendulum to descend more swiftly and to end his life, but the torture progresses on. Despite the horror of this new punishment, the narrator still considers it a better end than the pit of before: "My cognizance of the pit had become known to the inquisitorial agents—the pit whose horrors had been destined for so bold a recusant as myself—the pit, typical of hell, and regarded by rumor as the Ultima Thule of all their punishments...it was no part of the demon plan to hurl me into the abyss; and thus a different and a milder destruction awaited me" ("Pit" 127). While the narrator may consider this new torture "milder," it nevertheless succeeds in drawing him even closer to death and insanity than the previous abyss.

It is only as the blade swings within inches of his chest that the narrator is able to recover his senses and thinks of an idea: "For the first time during many hours—or perhaps days—I *thought*" ("Pit" 128). After building the idea in his head for a few minutes, he comes up with a plan to escape this new terror, and utilizes his ability to rationalize and save his life. His ability to think has been crippled by his physical and

Comment [SD110]:

mental suffering, and the effort it takes to fully form the plan are terrific. Rubbing the juices and oils from the piece of meat left him as food all over the cloth tying him down, he allows the rats who have come swarming out of the pit to gnaw through the strap, allowing him time to escape only seconds before the blade would have severed him in half—it has already begun to cut his skin. While the narrator does not escape unscathed, how could he, after lying in near insanity and unable to think for so long—it is both reason and hope that enable him to overcome this challenge: “It was hope that prompted the nerve to quiver—the frame to shrink. It was hope—the hope that triumphs on the rack—that whispers to the death-condemned even in the dungeon of the Inquisition” (“Pit” 128). Able to retain his mental abilities to both hope and think, the narrator still must wait until the kiss of death (literally the scimitar slicing his chest) to be set free. If he had waited just a second longer, the narrator would surely have died. It seems that in order to survive, the narrator has to once again dance so closely to death that he is almost destroyed. In some ways, the narrator’s mental state is much like that of a man already dead; he is so close that the boundaries between the two once again become mixed.

Paradoxically, while the narrator’s hope and reason have saved him yet again, he has merely escaped the frying pan to jump into the fire — quite literally. While the narrator rejoices at his success and freedom, he also immediately realizes that he is still held within the arms of the inquisition, and will have to face yet another torture, and another, until his ultimate death. No matter how smart and hopeful he is, there is no logical way the narrator can actually escape death entirely; instead, he is only prolonging his fate. This begs the question: is it really better that the narrator has managed to escape

Comment [SD111]:

both of his deaths so far? Would it be better if he had already died? The narrator has been tested to the limits of human capacity; and it will take much more than human intervention to save him now.

The next torture the Inquisition has planned for the narrator is a fairly unique one. As the narrator sobs for joy at saving his life, he quickly realizes his new predicament. The walls of the prison heat up, so that he can no longer bear to be near them, forcing him to the center of the dungeon and to the pit, and then begin moving in to the center. The narrator struggles to stay away from the pit desperately, but is physically tortured by the hot walls. It is a battle of will; the narrator may either kill himself by pressing his body against the scalding walls, or succumb to the pit. He stoutly refuses to fall into the abyss: "I could have clasped the red walls to my bosom as a garment of eternal peace. 'Death,' I said, 'any death but that of the pit!' ("Pit" 132). Rather than give up his eternal salvation, the narrator is willing to burn his body to avoid it. But in this situation, there is no avoidance—the walls will push him into the pit, even if he presses against them as much as he wishes. At this point, the narrator's sanity can no longer save him (Peithman 132), he must rely on another force, God/Fate, if he is to survive with his soul intact. At the very last moment of despair, the narrator screams, "the agony of my soul found vent in one loud, long, and final scream of despair" ("Pit" 132). Finally, the narrator has given up on his ability to reason and save himself, hope is gone; there is nothing left. And it is at this exact moment that he is rescued.

Comment [SD113]: Yes, nothing Freudian here...

In an almost nonsensical move, Poe has General Lasalle literally reach into the contraption just as the narrator is tottering on the brink, and physically pull him back to safety:

I tottered upon the brink—I averted my eyes—There was a discordant hum of human voices! There was loud blast as of many trumpets! There was a harsh grating of a thousand thunders! The fiery walls rushed back! An outstretched arm caught my own as I fell, fainting, into the abyss. It was that of General Lasalle. The French army had entered Toledo. The Inquisition was in the hand of its enemies. (“Pit” 132)

It is as if the hand of God has reached in to save the narrator. Not only is the immediate retreat of the walls physically impossible, considering the mechanical makeup of the prison and the heated metal, but it is incredibly improbable as a fictional element (Peithman). The last minute complete salvation of the narrator logically is the result of one thing: the intervention of God/Fate. However, it is only after the narrator has proven himself to the very end, when he has stoutly held onto saving his soul, even at the expense of physical disfigurement and torture, that he is finally saved. The final scream of his soul has seemingly brought on the pity of God, “only when the narrator admits that his predicament is beyond his power to escape, and surrenders himself completely to God, can he be saved” (Peithman 133). It seems that reason and sanity can only get the narrator so far; he must rely on God and completely give himself up to fate in order to achieve immortality.

Comment [dh114]: Well, it's certainly *deus ex machina*.

Comment [SD115]:

Interestingly, it is only in this most extreme state that the narrator can actually be touched by God. So what kind of God is it that requires his subjects to suffer so immensely before being saved? The styling of the tale after a Puritan trial of the soul could perhaps be a criticism of a God that allows those he loves to suffer so immeasurably for faith, or of a people who believe in it. Added to the critique is the theme of the Inquisition itself, yet another misuse and abuse of Christian power and control. If such God-like intervention could save the narrator, it seems that the Inquisitionary forces must be disapproved of by that force. What are we to make of “the Pit and the Pendulum’s” miraculous ending? At the narrator’s closest point to total annihilation, salvation—and relation to the divine—finally comes. Perhaps we are indeed fettered by our own rational minds; after all, there is only so much we can do—and then a more divine being must save our souls from perishing.

Comment [dh116]: I think you may be making too much of the God angle, or of Peithman’s interpretation. Poe seems to end the tale so abruptly and in such a contrived manner as to suggest that he’s far, far more interested in depicting that threshold of death, the agony of being right on the cusp of it, than in the cause of his rescue. Because it’s the Inquisition, he gives the story a God twist, but I’m not sure this aspect of the story is as important to him as the rest of it. (In a very pragmatic way, he needs his narrator to be rescued – else how could he have narrated the story?)

Comment [dh117]: Yeah, I’m not sure I buy that.

CHAPTER V

Swallowed into the Sea: Re-unified Narrators in “M.S Found in a Bottle” and “A Descent into the Maelström”

For Poe, an understanding of death cannot occur without recognition of the struggle between individual identity in life and reunion with the infinite in death. Throughout the majority of his tales of terror, this struggle is seen in narrators who cannot accept their mortality, and thus fight to prolong it through reason, study, and obsession. For Poe, the key to accepting an encounter with death is not to focus on the loss of life or individual identity that may result, but to recognize the potential for understanding the knowledge and mystery surrounding existence. This recognition can only occur through an acceptance of the self as a small part of a greater entity, and a willingness, curiosity, and desire to merge with the infinite itself. Previously discussed short stories have focused on death (of others, or potentially of the self) as the result of immoral behavior, or as a fall into despair. Instead, the next two stories focus on a more mature way of thinking about death by acknowledging the enlightenment death can grant its victims when they approach it with a desire for understanding. As Poe states in his “Philosophy of Composition,” “When, indeed, men speak of Beauty, they mean, precisely, not a quality, as is supposed, but an effect—they refer, in short, just to that intense and pure elevation of *soul*—*not* of intellect, or of heart—upon which I have commented, and which is experienced in consequence of contemplating “the beautiful”

(“Philosophy” 456). The narrators of the following stories recognize just this “elevation of soul,” and choose to follow it rather than preserve their mortal lives.

Curiosity, reason, acceptance, and creativity are the major traits of the narrators of “M.S. Found in a Bottle” and “A Descent into the Maelström.” Similarly to the narrator of “the Pit and the Pendulum,” these men come to terms with their terrifying experiences, but rather than grow terrified of the possibility of a Hell-like abyss or endure physical torment, they accept their challenges with inquiring and open minds. Instead of giving in to circumstances involving assured destruction, namely being sucked into the abyss of a whirlpool, both narrators learn to accept their fates and begin to explore their new worlds. This effectively changes them into new people, and allows them to glimpse the divinity possible in a reunion with a God-like or uniting force, and thus to approach death with a new perspective.

These two stories can be seen as a clear metaphor for Poe’s theory of the universe; his hypothesis suggests that at the beginning of the universe all matter existed as one entity, the Godhead. At some point in time, an explosion occurred, and matter was flung into far parts of the world. Poe suggested that while this matter was moving away from its ultimate source due to the force of the explosion, it would ultimately succumb to the power of attraction and come back together into its original unity (Peithman 11). As Peithman explains,

In Poe’s concept, which predates yet anticipates the modern big-bang theory, there is a paradoxical yearning for unity (the merging with the

Comment [dh118]: Again, at the beginning of each section I’d like to see you tie in what you are about to discuss with what you have already discussed – in other words, start not by introducing the section but by tying us back into the thesis of your thesis – *especially* this section, because the two stories you’re discussing are so clearly different from the others, and represent a new (more mature) way of thinking about death..

Godhead) and a terror of the inevitable annihilation (the destruction of individual matter—and personality). It is this conflict which gives a certain underlying tension to many of Poe’s tales and which represents itself in images of whirlpools and whirlwinds and other symbols of uniting force. (Peithman 11)

The two sea-narratives, as I will call them, are clear examples of Poe’s expansion of these ideas through his tales (Peithman 11). The narrators of these stories, in an improvement from the narratives of Poe’s more gruesome tales of terror, develop a curiosity about their surroundings; they utilize a type of reason, even in terrifying circumstances, to accept their fates. Thus enabled to experience death as merging with divinity, these narrators are empowered with truly transcendent understanding.

Narrators like that of “The Tell-Tale Heart” or “The Black Cat,” fall prey to obsession with death and with their own lives; in contrast, the narrators of “M.S. Found in a Bottle” and “A Descent into the Maelström” maintain their sanity and are able to re-imagine the world. In “A Descent,” the narrator uses his rational powers to survive a whirlpool. In “M.S.,” the narrator’s curiosity overpowers his natural terror of impending death. Both narrators utilize curiosity combined with an ability to rationalize in order to become comfortable with their situations: “To conceive the horror of my sensations is, I presume, utterly impossible; yet a curiosity to penetrate the mysteries of these awful regions, predominates even over my despair, and will reconcile me to the most hideous aspect of death” (“M.S.” 20). For the narrator of “M.S.,” accepting death allows acknowledgement of perhaps more important aspects of existence. By allowing “a

Comment [LU119]: NOTE TO SELF: Ordered article on German Romanticism: See if it can give an alternative understanding of Poe’s views of death. Research only briefly; not main focus

Comment [SD120]: Well, this is really German Romanticism. I don’t know if he read Schopenhauer, but it sure sounds like it.

curiosity” to overcome his fear of physical death, the narrator considers the possibility that the mysteries of the universe, which he cannot know as an individual human being, may be more valuable than his own mortal life. Furthermore, when he accepts his death, the narrator is freed of despair and terror—he is now able to truly devote his mental capacities to learning about an existence that incorporates death rather than separates it from life.

In these stories, unlike many others, there is a way out. Narrators may be able to understand their universe through acceptance and rationality—but while the terror is still present, it is no longer the ultimate overpowering force. Both stories begin in normal situations, and then deteriorate into abnormal, and then deadly, circumstances. “M.S. Found in a Bottle” begins with the narrator separating himself from the rest of society by setting sail on a ship. With no real purpose, the narrator embarks as a way to escape reality: “I went as a passenger—having no other inducement than a kind of nervous restlessness which haunted me as a fiend” (“M.S.” 12). “A Descent” begins with the narrator sharing his terrifying story, as he and his audience sit perched on cliffs during a storm. The old man’s story also begins in a fairly normal situation: he relates how he and his brothers used to fish the bay, venturing into even the dangerous portions of the channel in search of the best fishing grounds. Similarly, this story begins with a separation from the rest of the world: in order to tell the narrative the old man brings the narrator to the cliffs overlooking the setting for dramatic effect. It is as if sharing the story, which speaks so much about separation, also requires physical separation from the world in order to fully comprehend.

Very quickly “M.S. found in a Bottle” begins to waver from reality into uncertainty—as though the narrator is sinking into a dream. Soon, he finds himself weighed down with a feeling of foreboding, even as the rest of the crew settles down for the evening. The narrator records the peculiar and ominous signs he finds onboard the ship, shortly before its destruction in a hurricane force storm: “Although I could distinctly see the bottom, yet, heaving the lead, I found the ship in fifteen fathoms. The air now became intolerably hot, and was loaded with spiral exhalations similar to those arising from heated iron” (“M.S.” 13). This particular description suggests that the ship has become separated from the water; the situation is a surreal blend of reality and fantasy. Furthermore, a difference between sensory perception and reason is beginning to develop; the ship appears to be in shallow water, in other words, still connected to the world in at least a physical sense, but reason proves that the senses are not always correct. As Peithman suggests, “The ship, in the transparent water, suggests an object floating in air. But the fact that the ship is in fairly deep water means that the transparency is abnormal, and therefore ominous” (Peithman 13). Not only is the narrator fully separated from the world on board the ship, but the ship itself has become separated from the water, and confusion has begun to set in. The ship hands do not notice the impending danger, yet the narrator, who is onboard only as a passenger and presumably has no real experience on the ocean, recognizes the subtle clues of the environment, noticing a “full presentiment of evil” (“M.S.” 13). Furthermore, the image of a ship floating in air is reminiscent of a dream—the narrator’s reality and actuality have become confused.

After the narrator's premonitions, a terrible storm hits the ship. He endures many hours of savage beating at sea, and then emerges to find himself and one other inhabitant the only survivors of the powerful storm. Rather than floating in to some distant shore, however, the ship and its two lonely inhabitants are swept along "at a rate defying computation" ("M.S." 14), heading ever southward. After five days of such terrifying and helpless travel, yet more ominous signs are identified:

About noon, as nearly as we could guess, our attention was again arrested by the appearance of the sun. It gave out no light, properly so called, but a dull and sullen glow without reflection, as if all its rays were polarized. Just before sinking within the turgid sea, its central fires suddenly went out, as if hurriedly extinguished by some unaccountable power. It was a dim, silver-like rim, alone, as it rushed down the unfathomable ocean.

("M.S." 14)

Once again, Poe is making the symbolic separation from the natural world clear: the ship and its two inhabitants are departing from the real world and moving towards something else, just as the sun ceases to give light and is consumed by the ocean. The "unaccountable power" that "extinguished" the light of the sun may be a figment of the narrator's imagination, externalizing the emotions he feels at what can only be a certain death. Or the symbolic sun may be representative of the consummation of the individual within the greater. The sun, always giving light and guidance to sailors, has been eaten by the sea, leaving the two stranded humans to fend for themselves in the night air, not yet a part of the greater ocean.

Although the narrator's companion finally succumbs to the powers of the tempest, it is only after he gives in to superstition and fails to keep control of his rational mind that he dies. As the tempest continues to rage, threatening both men, the narrator remarks, "Superstitious terror crept by degrees into the spirit of the old Swede, and my own soul was wrapped up in silent wonder" ("M.S." 15). A few paragraphs later the Swede is cast into the ocean and lost forever, while the narrator continues to survive. It seems no coincidence that the Swede's inability to maintain reason and wonder in the face of such terror plays a part in his death, and in the narrator's survival. In a world of separation, the narrator must adapt a new way of looking at the world in order to live. While he does eventually become overrun by hopelessness, Poe's use of the word "wonder" suggests that the narrator still has some control. He is able to think about the future, and has enough capacity to wonder—to use his imagination—rather than to completely fall prey to emotion.

As the story progresses the narrator becomes bolder in the face of death. Even after recognizing that another gigantic ship is about to bear down upon them, the narrator is able to stand his ground in a peculiar display of courage and curiosity: "At this instant, I know not what sudden self-possession came over my spirit. Staggering as far aft as I could, I awaited fearlessly the ruin that was to overwhelm...the inevitable result was to hurl me, with irresistible violence, upon the rigging of the stranger" ("M.S." 16). The narrator is literally thrown from his ship to another amidst an ethereal storm, and in doing so, is transferred from one place in reality to quite another. The attitude with which the narrator faces this circumstance is particularly essential to Poe's theme of acceptance of

death: it is only after the narrator can await “fearlessly the ruin” of his own demise that he is allowed by circumstance or fate, here represented by the power of the supernatural tempest, to gain knowledge of death by passing into an alternate reality. The new ship is very ghost like and ominous, and the text itself begins to fragment as a representation of the crumbling of the world, taking the visual form of the letter, the M.S. the narrator will leave behind for other readers to discover. At this point, the tale itself has transformed into a literal ghost story. Effectively, the narrator has been transferred to an alternate universe, or perhaps, is already dead.

As the narrator begins to explore his new world, he realizes just how separated he has become. A change begins to overcome him as well; he somehow simultaneously recognizes and does not identify the ship and his surroundings: “I know not how it is, but in scrutinizing her strange model and singular cast of spars ... there will occasionally flash across my mind a sensation of familiar things, and there is always mixed up with such indistinct shadows of recollection, an unaccountable memory of old foreign chronicles and ages long ago” (“M.S” 18). The narrator struggles with his inability to understand the situation, but instead of giving in to terror and confusion, he continues to experiment with his surroundings in an attempt to understand his environment. The narrator’s dream-like circumstances, however, cannot be analyzed through reason. As the ship bears forever south under the influence of an inescapable current, the narrator begins to wonder about the reality of his circumstance rather than fear death. As Peithman suggests, “Even though it means certain death, the narrator would rather know the answer

to the puzzle before him than live on in ignorance” (Peithman 18). Knowledge, rather than fear, has become the major driving force of the narrator’s actions.

This final transformation is apparent in the closing scenes of the tale. As the narrator is rushed on to death at the southernmost pole of the world, he states, “To conceive the horror of my sensations is, I presume, utterly impossible; yet a curiosity to penetrate the mysteries of these awful regions, predominates even over my despair and will reconcile me to the most hideous aspect of death. It is evident that we are hurrying onwards to some exciting knowledge—some never-to-be imparted secret whose attainment is destruction” (“M.S.” 20). Rather than try to avoid death as other characters have, or become so obsessed with prolonging life and beauty that it is perverted into something inhuman and even farther from the reality of nature, the narrator of this story accepts death and looks to it as the next step in his existence. Poe’s theory of the Godhead can clearly be seen in this passage; in order to attain the knowledge and the “never-to-be imparted secret” the narrator must be destroyed. Unity for Poe necessarily means destruction of personal identity, and it is when the narrator ceases to value his self as most important, instead valuing the pursuit of knowledge, that he finally perishes at the end of the tale. The narrator and the ghost ship demise in an appropriately dreamlike and surreal fashion—the ship vanishes, swallowed up by the concentric circles of a whirlpool, yet another symbol of unity.

Throughout this story we can clearly see Poe working out his own philosophical theories; the idea that we can recognize knowledge when we encounter it, because it is part of a greater unity we also will be a part of, is further developed as Poe continued his

Comment [LU121]: NOTE TO SELF: I have looked up an article to address this; hopefully it can give me a better understanding of Poe’s portrayal of the theory rather than relying on Peithman’s summary of it.

Comment [SD122]: I know this is Peithman’s term. Is it Poe’s? It seems rather antiquated.

writing. This early attempt (1833) suggests we must approach such knowledge and recognition with curiosity rather than fear; however it has not yet developed the capability of actually envisioning such divine unity and beauty that “A Descent” (1841) will offer. “A Descent” takes this one step further by portraying a narrator who lives, and is thus able to describe in some manner the beauty, unity, and divinity his experience has allowed him to perceive. Not only is this narrator able to accept his fate and yearn for knowledge with curiosity, but he actively must use his reason to save himself—reason derived from recognizing the nature of beauty in the Maelstöm around him.

For “M.S. Found in a Bottle” and “A Descent into the Maelström,” recognizing this beauty and knowledge made available through death, and thus through reuniting with an ultimate being, is illustrated in part through the art of storytelling. What does it suggest that a narrator overcome by curiosity about the infinite universe must die in order to fully discover it? Knowledge of the afterlife cannot be fully possessed by someone still living, although through curiosity and destruction of fear it appears that we can gain at least some minor understanding. “M.S.” is written as a piece of truth—a memento from an experience we ourselves can’t understand unless we go through it; it is effectively a letter from another side of the universe, from a dream world. Similarly, the narrator from “A Descent” also has undergone a harrowing near-death experience, and utilizes strange means to tell his story. He brings his listener to the edge of a precarious cliff, so that he may effectively see the location of his story, and watch the ocean writhe and turn as it will in the tale. For “A Descent,” power is derived from sensory perception; the listener

can see, feel, hear, and taste the ocean in all its fury, and fears for both his life and that of the storyteller atop the cliffs during the storm, as the old man tells his story.

“A Descent into the Maelström” begins with the old man’s description of how he and his brothers used to fish the most dangerous parts of the bay, going across the Maelström, a giant whirlpool that developed as a result of currents and shallow water in the bay, to fish the best waters and come back with the largest catch. One day, a storm blew in, and the brothers were caught unaware. They tried to cross the channel in time to beat both the storm and the Maelström, but were unsuccessful. Having been caught in the storm, the little ship is buffeted around and nearly wrecked by the massive winds. One brother is thrown overboard with the mast when it is broken from the ship. The other brother and the storyteller manage to hold on for a few hours longer, but eventually their ship is sucked into the abyss of the Maelström.

Fred Madden presents an interesting view of “A Descent into the Maelström” in his article, claiming that the short story can be read as a tall tale discussing “problems of human understanding, possibly with transcendental implications” (128). He begins by addressing the storytelling method Poe uses by portraying the old man as a reliable narrator, when in fact his story is ripe with inconsistencies. The factual probability of the story itself, despite being told as fact, is highly improbable, and Madden suggests Poe uses this technique to draw attention to our struggle with knowledge. Are we to believe that “the ‘old man’ who claims to be ‘frightened at a shadow’ carelessly throws himself down to rest at the edge of this cliff” (Madden 129)? Furthermore, Madden outlines how Poe’s included source information opposes the exaggeration of the narrator himself. He

Comment [B123]: Do I really need all this summary? I’m feeling like I should cut it completely—what do you think?

suggests that these moves are intentional, “Poe is not attempting to convince the reader of ‘false literary intentions’ which will only be understood by ‘a limited coterie of followers.’ Instead the tale depends upon a verisimilitude which leads readers to recognize that they are being ‘sold.’ This recognition is necessary to understand the darker implications Poe had in mind” (Madden 130). By noticing the inconsistencies in the narrator’s story, a reader is led to question what is necessary to gaining knowledge. It is clear from the end of the story that the narrator’s recognition of the beauty and unity within the Maelström save him, and change him completely, hence his hair, “which had been raven-black the day before, was as white as you see it now” (“A Descent” 109).

So what is the true knowledge the old man supposedly gains from his experience? As Madden points out, the very ability of the old man’s hair to “extraordinarily” (129) change weakens the probability of his story, but it highlights something else. Our ability to understand death and divinity are hampered by our earthly minds—reason cannot portray such truth in its entirety, and fact is not capable of representing this type of knowledge. Madden suggests, “Poe asks the reader to examine the verisimilitude and opinions of his narrators in order to come to the conclusion that both are untrustworthy and that ‘true knowledge is dear in acquisition’” (132). Furthermore, perhaps there is no real way to portray such knowledge once you have gained it; it must be understood individually through experience and recognition. The old man is able to supernaturally forestall death through his recognition of divine power and knowledge, and therefore to gain some understanding of the ultimate divine. However, re-representing that truth

becomes problematic, hence the old man's choice to re-tell the story on the cliffs overlooking the scene itself.

Frederick S. Frank adds to this view of "A Descent into the Maelström" by suggesting that the story is not only about the quest for human understanding, but is specifically a representation of "ideal beauty" (138). Frank states that:

The fatal predicament [of the Maelström] becomes an opportunity for visionary enlargement because of the aesthetic view the narrator assumes toward the deadly vortex of rushing water. Indulging fully in that attitude which Poe calls elsewhere "a wild effort to reach the Beauty above," he is an outstanding example of the urge which drives certain Poe protagonists to achieve immortality by an annihilation of mortality. (Frank 138)

Specifically, the old man's efforts to save himself culminate when he stops relying upon reason and begins to admire the vortex around him. The first step is to remove fear and adopt a different way of understanding the situation. Throughout the terrifying experience of being trapped in the Maelström, the old man notes that he is oddly able to compose himself: "Having made up my mind to hope no more, I got rid of a great deal of that terror which unmanned me at first" ("A Descent" 105). This first hint at a change in the storyteller's character eventually leads to his ability to save his own life. Rather than become paralyzed with terror, as his brother is, the storyteller is able to look at his environment and to even appreciate it. His focus changes to "the Beauty above," and he uses "visionary enlargement" to see his world in a new way: an opportunity to find something better than mere mortality.

The old man fully commits to his situation when he becomes completely separated from his own reality and accepts his fate with curiosity rather than despair: “I began to reflect how magnificent a thing it was to die in such a manner, and how foolish it was in me to think of so paltry a consideration as my own individual life, in view of so wonderful a manifestation of God’s power...” (“A Descent” 105). The storyteller sees the Maelström as a representation of God and grandeur—surely an act of imagination must be required for this transformation—and seeks to become a part of it. This selection clearly illustrates Frank’s idea that Poe’s protagonist seeks “to achieve immortality by an annihilation of mortality” (138). The old man values the ideal beauty he has found within the Maelström, even over his own life. Furthermore, the death he accepts will not merely be an ordinary death; his body, and any trace of his connection to this earth, will be utterly destroyed. Thus, throwing himself into the water in an attempt to save himself really can’t end that badly—even if he does die, he will become a part of the “manifestation of God’s power” through the complete destruction of his physical and individual identity.

The old man sees the Maelström as a kind of imaginative heaven, describing its beauty and terror, and using a pseudo rationality to understand it. He is able to save himself while still gaining some tantalizing knowledge of the world through the use of this reason, however his knowledge is gained only after admitting to the grandeur of the world around him. His brother, who remains paralyzed by fear, cannot actually join in unity because he has not yet looked through his mortal danger. Noting what objects float on the sides of the pool longer, and which objects sink to the bottom, the old man is able

to identify how he can save himself: by lashing his body to a round keg instead of staying on the ship. As Madden notes, this logic is actually “patently ridiculous since a person holding onto or being lashed to a barrel in the water ends up under it. Rather than escaping, the old man would have drowned” (135). In a leap of courage, he ties himself to a barrel and supposedly launches himself into the Maelström. While this seems counterintuitive, his reason holds; he is saved from assured death and is spat out later by the whirlpool. His brother, who could not recognize the awe and beauty apparent in the situation, opted to stay with the ship and sank into oblivion.

Madden’s point about the erroneousness of the method of escape is important when considering the greater meaning of the tale. Poe’s story is not built on fact, although it is told in representation of it; instead, the knowledge gained is not through logical reason, but a supernatural awe and recognition. As a result, the non-attentive reader could miss Poe’s not so subtle hints, and assume that in reality the old man’s reasoning is correct. The point is that such reason is incapable of dealing with this type of situation, and we must let go of it in order to move on to a new understanding. Frank proposes that Poe’s suggested view of the world occurs when “Self, God, and Nature cease their struggle with one another and merge into a primal unity in the eye of the aesthetic observer” (139). This is the new way of thinking, and what the old man observes within the vortex. He becomes one with it by jumping in, its Natural relation is apparent in that the Maelström itself is a naturally occurring phenomenon, and the old man recognizes the “grandeur of God” present. The old man is either lying about the reality of the situation with his version of how he survived, or is attempting to explain

something human language by itself is incapable of explaining. The old man's survival is miraculous, and based on his ability to release fear and grasp a new reality where death and life are mixed together, just as the earthly debris is mixed into the waters of the Maelström, and "Self, God, and Nature" become one.

Further evidence to support this claim is found in Madden's suggestion that the final lines of the story, "I told them my story—they did not believe it. I now tell it to you—and I can scarcely expect you to put more faith in it than did the merry fishermen of Lofoden" clearly tell the reader that the old man's story is false (136). This does not mean that the story is valueless because it is factually a lie, but rather that its point is not about reason, but about how we know. Madden claims that "The tall tale questions the reliability of reported experience. Poe uses this form to examine the slippery nature of truth and the elusiveness of knowledge" (137). According to Madden, by utilizing the "tall tale" format, Poe asks his readers to first recognize the inconsistencies in his story, identify the value in this recognition and their inability to really know the true events, and then to rethink the story in a new way—a way that may approach the divine recognition of beauty that Frank proposes.

This recognition can perhaps best be achieved through a focus on imagination. Stephen Peithman notes the similarity of "A Descent" to Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, noting, "both use the storytelling device, both narrators go through horrendous experiences ... both are saved when they acknowledge the beauty and grandeur around them, and both are 'reborn,' pulled from the sea unrecognized by their companions" (Peithman 97). In Romantic tradition, the imagination as a theme throughout this story

(as throughout *The Rime*) can also be applied to better understand Poe's points about life and death, and in particular about unity and our ability to see death. Frank suggests this occurs in "A Descent," identifying the rise of the imagination as "the triumphant soaring of Aquarius's [the old man's] imagination to a point where it beholds the divine order and beauty of the universe" (142). To be "reborn" is to have a better understanding of both the world and of personal identity in relation to it; and this rebirth requires the forces of nature and the imagination as well as recognition of such "divine order and beauty." The old man must accept his fate, use his reason and imagination to understand it to the best of his ability, and then act, in order to be reborn. He is able to overcome the physical with the mental, and thus to come to some sort of understanding: "There can be no merger with primal unity or nothingness or any supreme insight into the beautiful oneness of the universe without the coöperation of the analytic faculty which enables Aquarius to triumph over the phenomenal world and to transcend mortality during the descent" (Frank 144). Reason is joined with imagination to allow the old man to conquer mortality.

Peithman also notes the relevance of the epigraph at the beginning *The Rime*, noting that Poe would have been very interested in its subject matter: "I readily believe that there are more invisible than visible Natures in the universe...The human mind has always sought the knowledge of these things, but never attained it...But at the same time we must be watchful for the truth and keep a sense of proportion, so that we may distinguish the certain from the uncertain, day from night" (qtd. in Peithman 97). Poe's tales, and his narrators' stories, are attempts at working through the very idea of truth

Coleridge speaks to—what is the invisible force of knowledge in the universe, perhaps the same represented by Poe’s Maelström? For Romantic tradition, and for Frank, the answer to this question is found in utilizing imagination to re-see the world as an existence full of divine beauty. This beauty can enable us to overcome mortality—but only through the destruction of our individual selves and joining with the greater divine unity. Poe clearly utilizes both “A Descent” and “M.S.” to work out these Romantic principles; we must stop looking at death as a separation from the divine world, and destruction of the body as horrendous. Instead, a focus on the imaginative envisioning of the world involving reason, beauty, and unity is called for.

Like other Romantic writers of his time period, Poe was interested in identifying the world and the universe around him. Many of his stories focus on themes of obsession, reason, and understanding of death—arguably one of the invisible Natures of the universe Coleridge mentions. Is the dream world, like the world of death, a portal into such knowledge about the invisible Nature of the universe? Does a close brush with death allow an individual to gain more knowledge about nature, or in Poe’s case, the unity of the afterlife and of all things? One thing is certain: the gaining of such knowledge is liable to drive an individual crazy, to strip him from his reason and give him back to the world, if at all, a changed man—in the case of “A Descent,” with hair altered from black to white in the space of a day. Poe’s tales speak directly to the blending between day and night, life and death, understanding and ignorance. The battle for truth can be seen throughout this work, as he struggles to identify the theory of unity and to flesh it out, to understand, or at least to question, the nature of death and truth itself.

CONCLUSION

Death in Life and the Search for Unity

Death is perhaps the only experience every individual on Earth shares—and it is also one of the most mysterious and terrifying prospects we are faced with in life. By utilizing death as such a prevalent theme throughout his short stories, Edgar Allan Poe has attempted to come to a better understanding not only of death itself, but of life. As a Romantic writer, and as a man personally plagued by death in his own life, Poe molded his writing into an exploration of his own mind and of society around him, using his prose (and poetry) to discover a world and a theory where death and individuality meet head on, sometimes leaving no room for the other. A large amount of Poe's tales of terror are based on horrific accounts of obsession—people driven from reason by an urge to know death, to know themselves, or to avoid knowing something they don't wish to think about. These characters use their imagination in torturous ways in efforts to avoid their reality. For Poe, however, it is not the misuse of imagination that makes death an understandable and even acceptable force, but it is the application of imagination to a new way of understanding the world that incorporates death as life, that challenges individuality in the face of equalization.

A large theme throughout Poe's tales is the mixing of life and death into one barely distinguishable idea. For many of Poe's characters, their adventure is in effect an account of a separation from the real world and insertion into a reality where death and life are mixed. Whether this takes place in the form of premature burials, in the midst of

Comment [SD124]: Being born? Breathing?
Eating? Drinking?

raving whirlpools, in the hazy reincarnation of one soul into another body, in holding on to hope and reason in the very clutches of Hell—Poe’s stories take supposed life and convert it into a shadowy world where death and life are never really far from one another. Characters hover in a mixed state where they are neither truly alive, because they are too in contact with the other world, nor truly dead, because they are not yet completely separated from Earth. This other world may be a source of knowledge or wisdom born through a unifying entity, like the whirlpools of the tales of the sea; or it may be a form of Hell, whether mental or physical, such as William Wilson trapped by his own conscience or the narrator of “The Pit and the Pendulum” thrown into a dark cell by the Inquisition. Poe’s purpose in portraying characters that are so ambiguous may be to emphasize that life and death cannot be understood as completely separate forces. To live is to live in death; this is the true reality, and identifying this involves understanding that life is often a mixture of shadow. We are at every second marching towards our deaths, and yet wish to deny it, wish to separate ourselves from it.

This urge for separation is both a natural thing (we don’t like to think about things we don’t understand, or fear), and an urge to be our own selves. Poe’s belief in death by necessity folds all people into one; identity becomes moot. Coming from an American culture that values our own self reliance, a force that unites all people is alarming for more than just the fact that it is not understood and is feared. It makes us indistinguishable from all the trillions of other people who have gone before us. We see ourselves as alive, and others as dead—we are different. But perhaps we exist in the same space, as a continuum, each individual shifting from one side of the scale to the other, but

Comment [SD125]: A lot of Christian traditions have the soul in hell with the same identity as in life (cf. Dante’s *Inferno*, where he sticks friends and associates there and chats with them as he goes by).

always incorporating both parts, rather than a separate entity. Poe reflects this mixing throughout his stories: characters are rarely completely alive or dead. Their obsessions with death, or with other ideas, objects, or people, lead them into death like states where they cannot function as normal people and become like ghosts themselves. Roderick Usher is a shadow of his former self, locked away in the dark of his mansion. Prospero shuts himself up in his castle with dream-guests and creates an alternate world before falling victim to the red death he has worked so hard to avoid. The narrator of “the Imp of the Perverse” confesses his crimes in the form of a tale as he waits for his execution the next morning.

Poe’s theory of unity is another fascinating piece to this puzzle of the life in death state of living. While Poe sees death as a form of separation from the Godhead, and in some ways as an inferior existence because of this separation, his Earthly focus is to explore the differences between life and death. It would make sense that the best way to live then, is to live close to death. By coming into contact with death through exploration and understanding, characters, and assumedly people, can become closer to the ideal state. This is not to suggest, however, that obsession is the answer. Poe’s darker tales of obsession in no way suggest that the choices the characters make are somehow more divine. Instead, they propose that such maniacal obsession with death leads not to the ultimate joy of joining with it, but instead to a loss of the soul. When a soul is lost into the abyss, for example when the narrator of “the Black Cat” kills his cat, and then his wife, or when William Wilson refuses to change his ways and murders a part of himself, they accept Hell and the loss of their soul rather than a union with death.

Reincarnation of souls is another way Poe expresses this idea; the transfer of a soul from one body into another also prevents it from joining in the unity of true death. These situations always end with terror for the main characters—their lives are not made more complete by the eradication of death. In many instances, a successful attempt at reincarnation immediately leads to death rather than extended life; for example “the Oval Portrait” where the wife’s identity cannot be duplicated into the portrait without her physical death, or when the mother Morella’s soul is incarnated into her daughter’s body, thus resulting in her death. For Poe, the soul must transfer into the unity of death rather than cling to the terrestrial world. The greatest crime perhaps, is to prevent such a soul from entering death by chaining it to the world.

While it is true that Poe’s characters seem driven towards death, the ones that face death and come back alive often do so as completely changed characters who have gained insight into existence. These characters, most notably the main characters of “A Descent into the Maelström” and “The Premature Burial,” survive with a new insight into existence. The narrator of “A Descent” feels the urge to tell his story, and does so in a masterful way, departing his understanding of reason and of the way the world works. He has tasted death, and has survived by maintaining his faculties of hope and reason. He has used his imagination to perceive the world in a new way: as a world to be marveled at and understood as God’s work, and as a complete part of it himself. Thus upon his escape, he now must tell his story over and over again earnestly, explaining his own changes in the process. For the narrator of “the Premature Burial,” surviving death is surviving an obsessive dream. Overcoming his fear of premature burial allows this

narrator the chance to have a fuller experience; he recognizes that his terror about death is self-imposed rather than a natural fear. While he doesn't undergo the same level of universal recognition as the narrator of "the Descent," the importance comes in recognizing that the death experience is part of the life experience. Both characters emerge from their tales as more knowledgeable men; they hold on to their capacities to think critically even in the face of paralyzing fear, emerging with a will to live.

Since an individual isn't likely to be swallowed by a whirlpool and magically spat back out, Poe's attempts at living in a death- in-life world are made through his writing. He uses art as a way to become close to the divine, while still living in this world. For Poe, as for any writer, writing is the way to explore the world and come to an understanding of it. A story, which could be so carefully melded together, each word and sentence a carefully chosen part of the whole, all adding up to one ultimate goal, was Poe's example of unity in life. Art in the form of poetry or tales could approximate the unity felt in death because every part contributed towards one overarching message of the work. There are no individual pieces of one of Poe's tales; rather every word contributes to the overall effect, just as in death, every soul contributes to the overall idea of the Godhead. Similarly, an understanding of Poe's work surrounding death leads to an overall idea of life and death as a shared and simultaneously felt force. For Poe, people must live both in life and death, and his work suggests this in its very nature, by forcing its readers to become involved in thought about what it means to really die, and how we should approach this ultimate unity while still alive.

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Comment [dh126]: Have you read Silverman's biography of Poe, *Edgar A. Poe*?